

Seek first the kingdom

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[0 : 0 0] of Haggai, chapter 2, verses 1 through to 9. While you're turning there, you'll remember that we were in Haggai chapter 1 last week, which was all about seeking first the kingdom of God. And so we pick it up in chapter 2 with the second message that is brought. I mean, if you cast your eyes briefly before we read over verse 15 of chapter 1 and then verse 1 of chapter 2, you begin to see that there's about a month in between the first message and then now this second message that comes. So now hear God's word. In the seventh month, on the 21st day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai, a prophet.

Speak now to Zerubbabel, the son of Shittai, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?

Yet, now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit remains in your midst, fear not. For thus says the Lord of hosts, yet once more, in a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land, and I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts.

The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts. Well, may God bless his word to us this evening. We're going to pray, then we're going to come back to God's. Let's open them again to Haggai chapter 2. As you're making your way there, let me remind you that last time we saw that Haggai, or his message, was the Old Testament version of Seek First the Kingdom of God. A very straightforward, easy-to-understand message, nothing complicated there whatsoever. But a message that brings home, really, brings home, really, the very focus that God's people are to have, and the very priorities that they are to have. And what that means, very simply, is this, that even the very job you choose should be chosen, keeping in mind that you're to seek first the Kingdom of God.

Everything that you do is to keep in mind the very focus that God wants you to have. Now, the issue in Haggai's day was very simple, that if the temple was built and wonderful, then that was a reflection of the relationship with, between the people and God. The trouble was, the temple laid in ruins, and so that reflected their relationship perfectly. Because, like anything, if something lays in ruins, it identifies where your priorities are. You know, a marriage that lays in ruins is a pretty good indication that the two people in that marriage, or maybe just one, are not putting the marriage before themselves as an individual, which is the very thing that is meant to happen in a marriage.

[4 : 2 9] You know, over the years, when I've done a few sort of premarital classes, I stopped them and did post-marital ones, because I realized that the premarital ones were, well, not a waste of time, but it's hard to prepare someone for marriage until they're actually married. Everything changes.

Everything that you thought you knew disappears very, very quickly. But there's one very, very simple role, and that is that, you know, it's no longer two, but one. When you become a Christian, it's exactly the same. It's no longer you on your own, but now you're with God, it's two. God does consider you in everything that he does. The question is, is do we consider God in everything that we do? I mean, that's the very binding of a happy relationship. Seek first the kingdom, Haggai says, and Jesus says the very same thing in the Sermon of the Mount. But the temple laid in ruins, and it was a good indication of their relationship with God. They didn't seek first the kingdom, and they didn't consider their relationship with God to be all that important, or at least they took it for granted.

And I guess sometimes relationships can get like that, even with the church. That, you know, you've been in it long enough now. You're allowed to take a few liberties. But why?

I don't know why, but it happens. So as a summary of chapter two, we come to another message that Haggai brings, and it's a month later. And this time it's a message about focusing on the future. The trouble is, as it comes to people who are looking back at the past. You know, most people are reluctant to change, and it seems that Christians, believers, are even more reluctant to change. One of the reasons for this here in Haggai's day was that the people of God decided that they wanted to look backward rather than forward. One of the reasons for this is because the new temple that they were building was not as impressive as the temple that Solomon built. And that's a bit sort of disheartening for them, that this isn't as good as the one back in the day. There is a bit of an issue there which we can address in a minute, but God reminds his people that despite what the temple looks like, yes, it's an indication of their relationship. The most important thing is this, that God is with them.

God is with them. And it's better to have God than nothing, than to have everything and not have God. That's the very basis of the math of the Christian life. Better to have God with nothing, than have everything without God. So God says to them, I will provide materially for you, I will provide for the temple, and I will make the former glory, this latter glory, greater than the former glory. And he bases this on a promise that he made to his people when he brought them out of Egypt.

[7 : 41] And we are part of that promise. I mean, that's encouraging, that we are part of a promise that God made to Abraham, and we're part of a lot of other promises that God made after the promise he made to Abraham. In other words, you're part of something that God has always been involved in.

In other words, the very future that Haggai looks forward to is you. Whether he can understand it in all of its glory, God understood it, and the former glory, the latter glory, is you. And we'll get to that in a minute. But before we do so, we have to deal with some of the issues that Haggai has to deal with. And one of those issues is the danger of creating fair-weather believers. Fair-weather believers, what are they? Well, they're believers who find it easy to believe and follow Jesus when the conditions are right. Some people find it easy to follow Jesus. Some people find it very difficult because the ways of the world means that we lose our sort of rigorousness of following Christ. And what that means is this, that God is the same God throughout all the ages, but the ages themselves are not the same. Sometimes it's easy to live a Christian life in one age, and very difficult to live a Christian life in the age that is to come. Solomon's temple in the past was luxurious, glorious. It had every kind of trapping, you could say, but this latter temple seems to be nothing in comparison. The danger was that in

Solomon's day, as is the danger even now, is that you end up creating fair-weather believers. Believers that just cruise along because it's almost easy to live a believing life. The reason, though, that God's people went from having the land and the temple was because of that very reason. One of my favorite statements is by Codd and Mather, and it explains perfectly why they went from having the land and the temple to having neither very, very quickly. Now, it is true that God took both away, but why did God take both away? Here's the statement by Codd and Mather. He says that faithfulness begat prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother. Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. What does it mean? It means this, that a Christian who gets to enjoy all the faithfulness of God and all the blessings of God can end up enjoying it to such an extent where they do not have the spiritual strength to be able to enjoy it properly. They end up then loving the blessings more than they love God, and those blessings destroy their own faithfulness to

God. Is that a danger of Christianity? Yeah, it's a massive danger because of the blessings. God can pour abundant blessings on a church, and churches can go downhill as they receive the abundant blessings. Why?

Because the blessings, if not handled with spiritual maturity, can end up destroying the very faithfulness that they had in the beginning that gave rise to the blessings from God. So, faithfulness begat prosperity.

[11 : 03] It gave birth to all this prosperity, but then the prosperity, the daughter, devoured the mother. Dangerous. Some blessings can only be handled with a level of spirituality.

Some blessings can only be handled with a strong praying life. And so, as Christians, we may miss out on very many blessings because our faithfulness or our spiritual rigor has diminished because we are cruising along in a time when Christianity is fairly easy to live. I'll give you a couple examples of this. Here's the first one. Constantine. Constantine was the first Christian emperor or so-called. I do believe he was converted, though I think you have to take his conversion and what he did seriously and with a few questions. But one of the things that happened when Constantine became a Christian, and he changed all the battle symbols on the armor from what it was to the Christian cross, was that when Rome became, let's say, a Christian nation, and the governance in the land was Christian, it then became socially advantageous to become a Christian. In other words, it was good for business. It was good for politics. It was good for all these other type of things. In other words, that when Christianity prospers in the land, it doesn't necessarily produce the kind of good results that you think it would.

A modern-day example of this, or at least in the last hundred years, would be Americans in America. It is socially advantageous to be a Christian, a so-called Christian. It's good for business.

It's good for politics. Because America, though changing very, very quickly, is still very much a nation based on its Christianity. And so to be a Christian, to be tied in with that, it's socially advantageous. So just because a nation can be Christian at the very top does not necessarily mean that it will produce the kind of rigorous Christianity that you actually need to be faithful and make it through the difficult times. That's why it's much harder to live a Christian life in countries like China or Butan or other countries where Christians are persecuted, to give an example.

So the Christians that live in Constantine's day, only a few hundred years after the early church, did not have to live by the same rigorous standards that the early church did because they were persecuted because of their faith. Now that makes a big difference because it shapes Christianity, and not necessarily for the better. Not necessarily for the better. Now the point of this observation is that those who remember how good the past was back in the day when it was easy to live as a Christianity, Christianity. I would say that was probably about the 80s in the UK, in Scotland. That was the sort of tide of Christianity, I would say. I think the tide has turned massively. But I think you had, you know, the Billy Graham evangelism, and I think there was an influx of conversions, and rightly or wrongly, how you measure that is difficult. But nevertheless, you got to see a nation, even to the point where it was being reported on national news under the influence of Christianity.

[14 : 45] You go back even several hundred years more, and the country clearly wars under the influence of Christianity a lot more. But we've lost it. Faithfulness begat prosperity, and the daughters devoured the mother. We've lived out history all over again. And so the trouble is, is that believers in a new generation can fail to commit to the work today, because it isn't quite as good as the work in the past. In fact, it really is a test to your Christianity, whether or not you can cope with it in the difficult times. You know, not the easy times when things are going well. How do you cope with the problems and the difficulties? How do you cope when people in their thousands across the world are in fact leaving the church? How do you cope when the young people are not holding to the same rigorous standards of Christianity that those of the generation before them did? It's deeply worrying that they cruise by with a kind of Christianity that's barely Christian in some cases? How do you deal with those type of things? Well, the issue is this, that God is with us. Whatever it looks like today, God is with us. That's the point of this message. And that's why Haggai says this in verse three. Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? In other words, he knows that some people considered the past better than the future, which is a mistake, because God is working towards a better future. Now, there is a reason to question this question itself. Think of it this way. How old are the people that he's speaking to? Well, let's say for a minute that they're 70 years old.

That means they would have only have been four when they saw the temple, because for the last 66 years, or 66 years ago, the temple was destroyed. And so, the memory that they would have been drawing on, well, let's say they were 70, they would have been four years old. Let's say they were 80, they would have been 14 years old. That's not right, is it? But it is for my mathematical reasoning.

That's not right at all. They would have been eight years old. Is that right? That's not right. How old? I was right the first time. Of course I was. I was just testing you. Imagine it like this. Have you ever grown up somewhere as a child, visiting a certain place, and you thought it was amazing? And you have memories that it's just brilliant. And then you go back to that very same place when you're 20 years older, or even 30 years older. And you look at it and go, it's not much, is it? Now, how well can we actually trust the memories of a four-year-old?

Or a 14-year-old? How well can we actually trust them? Well, let's say that they're right, and this new temple isn't as good as the old temple. Or let's say that we don't trust them that much.

Either way, it doesn't matter. Whether they imagine it better than what it really was, or it really was better than what it is now. God's saying that that doesn't matter. This is a new era, a new age, and new age in which I am working. Notice the message, verse 4. Be strong.

[18 : 24] Be strong, all you people. Be strong, O Zerubbabel. Be strong, Joshua. Be strong, all you people, declares the Lord. I am with you. Verse 5. According to the promise I made with you, my spirit is in your midst. Fear not. Verse 6. Yet once more I will bless you and fill this house with glory. Verse 8. All the silver and gold is mine. Verse 9. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. Here's the point. Anybody who thinks that the past is better than the present or the future could not have read to the end of the Bible.

Now, you must be forgetting everything that's promised and everything that's going to be true. Now, it may not be in your future. You may not get to enjoy the type of future that God is promising us in his word in your lifetime. But nevertheless, 5,000 years from now when Christians are living on the earth, they may be enjoying the very thing that God is promising here in all of its fullness and in all of its glory. Now, you may be shocked that I think that Christians are still going to be on the earth 5,000 years from now. I think so. Why? Because I think that Scripture unwinds very, very slowly and the pattern is that the future is always going to be better than the present. You know, the tide goes in and out.

Some days, you know, it's choppy. Some days, it's calm. But it follows a pattern. And Scripture follows the same kind of pattern. That throughout history, you have high spots and you have low spots. But overall, it's moving to a future that is better than the present. And the future glory will always be better than the present glory. Now, just to show that the people of Haggai's day haven't learned their lesson, by the time we get to Jesus, Jesus enters a new temple, the temple that's been built, then, in his day. And sure enough, he walks in and the temple has become a den of robbers.

And what does he say? Well, I'll have to destroy this one as well. And he destroys the temple, just as he promised that he would. But then, as Haggai's message here, it points forward in verse 9 to a temple, So, he certainly can't be referring to the temple that Jesus destroyed. He has to be referring to something even beyond that. Well, when Jesus destroyed the temple, he created a brand new temple, and it's you, the church. How important is that? That's really important.

You are the temple that this latter glory speaks of, where all the surrounding nations are brought in, that have been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ. You are the glory that God is speaking about here, a great people that will be brought together from every tribe and tongue and from every nation. You are that people according to all the promises of the Old Testament. You are the very promise of God, and this is why Paul says in Corinth, that you should be careful, very careful, not to do anything that would destroy the temple. If anyone destroys the temple, God will destroy him, for God's temple is holy. You are that temple. You are that temple. You are the very place where God dwells.

[22 : 19] Not bricks and mortar, but you are that very place. But here's another thing to consider then, that believers today have to move from reflection to action.

And this was part of Haggai's problem. He had to deal with the people who spent more time looking backward than they did forward. You know, it's very hard to work with people when they're looking over your shoulders and go, well, it's not as good as it used to be. Okay, but it's not like it used to be.

Well, the previous one was better than this one. Okay, but that was then and this is now. You see, Haggai understands the issue. Haggai understands what people are like. People are very reluctant to change. It's very easy to hold on to what was, even at the expense of mortgaging your own future.

Well, God reminds his people that he is with them. All the silver and gold is his, so seek first the kingdom. Stop reflecting and get on with it. Stop looking backwards and rather look forward.

Now, before we get to any kind of action, even in this church today, we have to be convinced of a couple of things, and that is, firstly, your whole life has to be orientated towards the future.

[23 : 48] Not towards tomorrow, but towards the future. You know, and I imagine a future, as Scripture proclaims, that does have more Christians on the earth than unbelievers before the Lord returns.

You know, a place where Christianity is not only rigorous, but where it is triumphantly successful in many areas of life. Hard to believe, yeah, but not that hard, when you consider that God is always moving to a future that is better than the present or the past. So, our whole life has to be orientated towards the future, and whatever you think that future is, you will determine whether or not you're going to save for it or build up your own earthly treasure now. Isn't that Jesus' point in the Sermon on the Mount? Lay up treasures in heaven. In other words, base what you're doing now on your view and understanding of the future. You know, enjoy the things that God has given you today, but orientate your life around the future. Here's the second reason why you should do it. Because there's going to be an evaluation, Paul says. In the same chapter that he mentions about not destroying the temple, he mentions about the future evaluation that we're all going to face. Now, the judgment that we face as Christians is not whether or not we're saved. We're saved. The judgment is not whether we have done good works or not done good works. The judgment is actually, or the evaluation, is much more direct.

It's actually between the type of works that we have done. Will they make it through the fire, or will they be burned up? You know, I listen to some hymns, and I've listened to a lot over the years, probably as you have in the church. I think some hymns are going to make it into the new heavens and the new earth. I think some aren't. I think they're going to be burnt up through the fire. I don't think they're going to make it through. You know, I think some of the work that I've done in my Christian life might make it through. I certainly hope that it does. But I know that a lot of other stuff, when I really think about it hard, it's just not even going to get close. It'll disappear even before it gets to the fire. You know, that's the type of evaluation that Paul asks us to bear in mind, that whatever you do in this life, make sure it's the type of work that's going to make it through the fire. Lest you make it through, and only you, alone with nothing to show for it.

So the issue here is not on what you do, or really how you do it, but actually on your focus, on what it is that you're actually going to do for the Lord, your attitude and focus to the work.

Now, I know many of us have to do lots of other things, and believe it or not, before I came into the ministry, I had a normal job. I had to, just like you, go out and earn money. I had to get up when my boss told me to get up. I had to go to work wherever he sent me, and I was on day rate, and I was on price rate. I had bills to pay. I understand, you know, unless you think, well, the pastor doesn't understand he lives in a different world. No, I truly do understand what it is to do something else and live with the tension of always having to put the kingdom first. It is difficult, but it is the very thing that God calls us to. You know, I've got very good friends who are talented, gifted in many ways, who've not followed through their talents and gifts because they are convinced that they are best suited to seek first the kingdom of God in other areas. They've turned down high-flying jobs so that they could seek first the kingdom. In some cases, they have even taken their jobs down to a four-day week so that they can serve in the church the fifth day. Are they special? No, they're not. Rather, they're focused. Are they better than us? No, not better, but rather something's captured them, and I've always said that the difference between a conviction and a commitment is this, that a commitment you can pick up and put down whenever you choose. But when you're grabbed by conviction, like Jeremiah, you remember the story of Jeremiah? Downbeat preacher. Doesn't want to do it anymore. Kind of like what I feel on a Sunday evening when I get back to the man's.

[28 : 31] And yet, what does he say? I have to continue because it burns within me. I can't do nothing else but this. That's conviction. That's not commitment. That's conviction when it's got you, not when you've got it. So here's the exhortation. Be assured that whatever generation we live in, God is with us because he is working us towards his future. Whether we get to enjoy all of the good things that the future has, whether we make it that far, we don't know. But we ought to know that we have no reason to be pessimistic because God is with us in the work. Even if it's a small work, even if it is a long and tiring work, even if it's a work that doesn't seem to produce any kind of fruit in the short term, God is with us in the work.

Also, remember this, that if the first message of Haggai is a reordering of priorities, then Haggai's second message is a refocusing or a redirecting of our focus. So number one, get our priorities straight.

Number two, redirect your focus on the things of God. Now here's the thing. Even when people get their priorities right and even are looking in the right direction, as Steve Jobs once put it, brilliant statement, it's no good to ask me to come in and take over a company and point it in the right direction when you've got a hole in the bottom of the boat. It's a very clear statement that he felt that he was being asked to take over a company, a bit like taking over a ship with a hole in the boat, and all that they wanted him to do was point it in the right direction. That's not the problem. You've got to deal with the priority first before the direction, because all you will do is sink in the right direction.

So deal with the priority first. So the challenge this evening is one of focus and direction. Now I've been in the ministry for a while, and I understand that there's a big difference between looking at a map and knowing where to go and deciding where to go and then actually going. Haggai understands the very same thing.

But even though he has said everything that the future holds, the one thing that matters is they stop reflecting and they start doing. We should know the fullness of 2 verse 9. That the latter glory of this house, we are the temple, shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And I, and in this place, I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts. It couldn't be any clearer that God is with us.

[31 : 46] And it couldn't be any clearer that from God's point of view, that we are that latter glory that he promised. What do we see? Downbeat people? Where's the church heading?

Look at it from God's point of view, that the future is always going to be better than the present. So we all have other things to do, but the one thing that we should do is this.

Let's not worry about the speed in which we change. Let's first sort out our direction and the priority. Get those two things right, and then we can move along quite happily.

God is with us, and be strong. Amen. Amen. Amen.