

Awakened out of Apathy

Text: Ezra 5:1-5

Introduction:

1. In the last chapter (Ezra 4), we studied the fierce resistance and opposition that came against the people of God as they began construction upon the foundation that had been laid. First the enemy tried the subtle approach and extended an invitation to “work together” on the temple. Of course, the real motive of the enemy was to “creep in unawares” (Jude 1:4; 2 Tim. 3:6) and damage the work of God from within. That having failed due to the spiritual vigilance of the leaders of the remnant, the enemy throws the mask off, shows his true colours and commences a full, frontal assault against the work.
2. The enemy tried multiple tactics to stop the work but finally it was the weapon of accusation and slander against the remnant that achieved the diabolical objective.
3. Ezra 5 is a wonderful encouragement that setbacks in the Christian walk do not have to remain permanent if we will but submit to a fresh, reviving move of the Spirit of God in our lives. Ezra 5 is the record of how God reversed the damage of the enemy and the work was resumed.
4. Our outline for the chapter will be:
 - The Apathy of the People of God (Vs. 1; 4:24)
 - The Awakening of the People of God (Vs. 1-2)
 - The Antagonism to the People of God (Vs. 3-5)
 - The Appeal against the People of God (Vs. 6-17)

I. **THE APATHY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD (VS. 1; 4:24)**

Let’s briefly refresh our minds on how the people of God came to this state of apathy. The people of God had become:

A. Discouraged in the Work

1. Clearly the people, including the leadership, became disheartened on account of the relentless attacks of the enemy. The stinging accusations of the enemy were the knockout blow that brought the work to a grinding halt.
2. It is easy to get discouraged, despondent and downcast when faced with the constant battles that come to a revived, returned and rebuilding remnant.

B. Distracted from the Work

1. Haggai 1 points out that the people had given up on working on the house of God and instead put their time and attention into their own houses. We will talk more about that under the next point.
2. When discouraged, it is so easy to divert our energies into things that brings us personal satisfaction but which count little to nothing for eternity.

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C. Delayed in the Work (4:24)

1. Their discouragement and distraction lead to the work being delayed for approximately 15 years. For 15 years, the temple construction site lay dormant!
2. The people of God were still in the right position in the land of promise but there was a loss of power and a loss of zeal for the work of God. To their credit, the returned remnant didn't go back to Babylon. Their position was still right but they needed a fresh reviving from the Lord.
3. How true this is for so many who may occupy a sound doctrinal position, which is right and commendable, but who have forsaken their first love or become lukewarm in their zeal for the Lord.

II. THE AWAKENING OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD (VS. 1-2)

God's answer to this sad state of affairs was to do a fresh work of revival in the returned remnant. The nature of revival is that we need it more than once in our lives. It is a repeated work – Psalm 85:6 “Wilt thou not **revive us again**: that thy people may rejoice in thee?” God had done a work of revival in the remnant to bring them back to the land eighteen years before in 538 B.C. but now fresh revival is needed in the returned remnant to stir them afresh to refocus on what was important to the Lord. To that end, God raised up two prophets to preach His Word to the people and through their ministry, the work was resumed. Never underestimate the power of the Word of God to stir and revive a discouraged, distracted people!

A. The Men used for the Preaching (Vs. 1a)

God used two men named Haggai and Zechariah to prophesy to the people. What was it that made these men vessels God could use in this way? The answer is found in the fact that these men were:

1. Submitted Men
 - a. Little is known about these men and their background. They appear abruptly in the Biblical record with a message stamped with the authority and unction of heaven. Whoever they were, it is clear they were available to God for Him to use as His mouthpiece and messengers to deliver His Word.
 - b. How we need men in our day who will be available for God to take and use to declare His Word, not only to a church that is in desperate need of revival, but also to a lost and dying world that desperately needs the life giving, life transforming power of the Gospel.
2. Set Apart Men (Vs. 1a). These men are referred to as ‘prophets’. The thought behind the word is “one who speaks the mind of God”. The first time the word occurs is in Genesis 20:7 where God tells Abimelech that Abraham is a prophet and that he will pray for him.

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This conveys the thought that a prophet is in touch with God and has power with God. (M.K. Hall)

3. Spirit anointed Men (Zech. 4:1-14)
 - a. Zechariah 4 presents a powerful picture of the ministry of the Word that was taking place at that time. The passage has both a near and far fulfillment. The immediate reference is to the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah but it also looks forward to the ministry of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 who will prophesy during the first 3 ½ years of the tribulation.
 - b. The picture is of two olive trees from which golden oil is flowing through two golden pipes into a bowl atop the seven-branch candlestick. From that bowl, the oil flows through a further seven pipes to the seven lamps, keeping them alight and shining brightly.
 - c. The pure, golden olive oil is a clear picture of the Holy Spirit. Verse makes it clear that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is in view. The two prophets are described here as the “two anointed ones” and are pictured in the two olive trees and the two golden pipes through which the golden oil was flowing unhindered.
 - d. What a picture of men who were full of the Holy Spirit and clean channels (pipes) through which the Spirit of God could work in might, power and blessing. May the Lord give us such men for the work of God today!
4. Scriptural Men (Vs. 1b)
 - a. These men preached with authority “in the name of the God of Israel”. They were there to deliver heaven’s message to the remnant! They spoke God’s mind with God’s authority on God’s behalf.
 - b. The phrase “thus saith the LORD” or “saith the LORD” appears no less than 19 times in the small, two-chapter Book of Haggai.
 - c. The same phrases occur 42 times in the Book of Zechariah (14 chapters).
 - d. Haggai and Zechariah were not there to deliver their own ideas and opinions but the pure, unadulterated, unmodified Word of the Living God. How we need men of God like that today who will shun their own opinions and the powerless philosophies and ideas of the world and simply declare the Word of God in the power of the Spirit of God.

B. The Message of the Preaching (Vs. 1b; Hag. 1)

Haggai was the first one to preach and it appears that it was his message of rebuke that commenced the stirring in God’s people.

Haggai commenced preaching “in the sixth month, in the first day of the month” (Hag. 1:1) whereas Zechariah commenced approximately two months later “in the eighth month” (Zec. 1:1). We do not have time

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to review all the messages of Haggai and Zechariah at this point but we let's consider that first sermon of Haggai that was used of God to begin the work of revival in the people.

1. The Rebuke of the People (Vs. 1-4)

They were rebuked for their:

- a. Excuses (Vs. 2). The Spirit of God strikes right at the heart of their problem. Their excuse was that it wasn't the right time for the house of God to be built.
 - i. Fifteen years had passed and they were still using the excuse that it wasn't the right time to build God's house. How often we are guilty of using the same excuse today! We excuse ourselves for our disengagement from the things of God by claiming it isn't the right time.
 - ii. It's not the right time to come on church membership. It's not the right time to be involved in a church ministry. It's not a convenient time to be involved in soul winning. It's not the time to start giving yet. And on and on the excuses come!
 - iii. Evangelist Billy Sunday called an excuse "the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie," and Benjamin Franklin wrote, "I never met a man who was good at making excuses who was good at anything else."
- b. Priorities (Vs. 3-4). Instead of building the house of God, they had turned their attention to their own houses (See Vs. 9). How inconsistent! It wasn't time to build the house of God, but it was time to build their own houses. It wasn't that they couldn't afford to contribute their time and treasure to the building up of God's house. It was just so much easier to put their time and resources into their own interests. The returned remnant had become distracted, discouraged and diverted from God's will. They needed to urgently re-evaluate their priorities.
 - i. The word 'cieled' according to the Jamieson-Fausset-Brown commentary means, "'wainscoted,' or 'panelled,' referring to the walls as well as the ceilings; furnished not only with comfort but luxury, in sad contrast to God's house not merely unadorned, but the very walls not raised above the foundations. How different David's feelings (2 Sam. 7:2)!" These were the kind of houses kings built for themselves (1 Kings 7:3, 7; Jer. 22:14).
 - ii. John Gill writes, "They could not only find time, leisure, and convenience to build houses to dwell in; but to wainscot them, and line them with boards of cedar, as the Targum; as bad as the times were complained of; and could sit in them, indulging themselves in luxury,

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ease, and sloth; and why then was it not a fit and convenient time as well to build the house of the Lord in?”

- iii. The real issue is not whether we have the time but that we have chosen to wrongly prioritize our time towards our own interests rather than God’s interests. We say we can’t contribute financially to God’s work but we manage to spend thousands on our homes. We say we can’t show up for church more than once a week but we can faithfully show up to work five days a week without fail, work overtime and bend our backs over for an earthly boss to make money. We say we can’t come out for soul-winning on a Saturday morning but we can hook the trailer on Saturday morning and do a run to the dump or to pick something up. We somehow find the time to meticulously clean and renovate our homes and manicure our gardens! We are too tired to come out for a Wednesday night prayer meeting but not too tired to burn the midnight oil up the ladder with paintbrush in hand. Our issue is not that we don’t have the time. The real issue is that our hearts are backslidden and in the wrong place!
 - iv. Wiersbe writes, “During nearly fifty years of ministry, I’ve noted that some professed Christians buy the best for themselves and give to the Lord whatever is left over. Worn-out furniture is given to the church and worn-out clothing is sent to the missionaries. Like the priests in Malachi’s day, we bring to the Lord gifts we’d be embarrassed to give to our family and friends (Mal. 1:6-8).”
 - v. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said it well in a sermon he preached on Haggai 1:4 many years ago: “Whereas the house of God today is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at a low ebb.”
2. The Re-evaluation for the People (Vs. 5-7, 9-11)
 - a. Twice the prophet Haggai calls upon the people to “consider” their ways (Vs. 5, 7). The word ‘consider’ literally means “set your heart upon; i.e., consider your conduct and lay it to heart” (Preacher’s Homiletical) They were to “lay to heart their previous conduct, and choose the way that is well-pleasing to God...direct your heart upon your ways.” (Keil and Delitzsch)

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They were to do some heart searching, self-examination and re-evaluation of their ways. How we need to pause at times and re-evaluate our priorities in the light of what really counts for eternity and the Judgment Seat of Christ.

- b. They might have been enjoying success with their house upgrades but the prophet points out that they were missing out on the blessings of God. For the Jewish people, God had given very specific promises regarding the fruitfulness of the land connected with their obedience (See Lev. 26:18-20; Deut. 28:38-40). Their disobedience and neglect of the house of God had led to a withdrawal of God's blessing. We could summarize their condition as one of:
 - i. Dryness (Vs. 6a, 9-11) – there was little water and therefore little fruit. Some believers are out there who are enjoying some success so far as the world is concerned but they are dry as dust in the inner man!
 - ii. Dissatisfaction – they were no longer a fed and satisfied people (Vs. 6b). This is the experience of the believer who has drifted from the separated, victorious life of service. They are sustained but not satisfied.
 3. The Remedy for the People (Vs. 8)
 - a. The remedy was very simple. Get back to the work on the house of God! Put God first in your life again! Return to your first love!
 - b. It is interesting that they would need to go and get wood from the forest to build the house of God. According to Ezra 3:7 the Jews had purchased wood from Tyre and Sidon just as Solomon had done when he built the original temple (1 Kings 5:6-12). What happened to the original supply of wood? Did the people use it to line their own houses instead of God's house? We wonder where the people got the wood for their panelled houses when no wood was available for God's house.
 - c. The ultimate end would be the glory of God. They were not constructing something for their own glory but for the glory and honour of God.
 4. The Response of the People (Vs. 12-15)
 - a. They obeyed God (Vs. 12a).
 - b. They feared God (Vs. 12b)
 - c. They served God (Vs. 14-15)
 5. The Re-assurance of the People (Vs. 13) In response to their obedience, God assures them that He is with them in the work.
- C. The Moving from the Preaching (Vs. 2)**
1. The leaders responded (Vs. 2a)

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- a. The two primary leaders of the work, Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest held some responsibility for the state of affairs. Clearly it wasn't just the people who had become discouraged in the work. Leaders can get discouraged and disheartened just as much as those who are under their care. In fact, sometimes they are more prone to discouragement on account of the fact they tend to bear the brunt of the enemy's attacks.
 - b. It is interesting that Haggai's prophecy is directed first to Zerubbabel and Joshua – "...in the first day of the month, came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet unto Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest..." (Hag. 1:1) This makes sense. If the leaders of God's people won't submit to reviving work of the Spirit of God, then it will be very hard for the people who follow them to be revived.
2. The prophets helped (Vs. 2b)
 - a. They helped with their preaching primarily (Ez. 6:14). The work 'prospered' through the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah. The only way a work will prosper is if it is built on the Word of God.
 - b. They helped with their hands practically. These men of God were not afraid to roll their sleeves up and get involved in the work!
 3. The people followed (Hag. 1:12, 14)

III. THE ANTAGONISM TOWARDS THE PEOPLE OF GOD (VS. 3-5)

Concerning this section, Bible commentator M.K. Hall writes, "The section of the book from 5:3 to 6:13 could well be entitled the "Tatnai Parenthesis" as it details the opposition which arose from Tatnai, the governor of the Trans-Euphrates province, and his associates, as soon as the building was resumed in 520 BC."

A. The Timing of the Attack (Vs. 3a)

1. Notice the phrase "At the same time". As soon as the work recommenced, the devil got busy again! H.A. Ironside writes, "And, as might have been expected, their insolent adversaries are once more immediately active. Hardly have trowel and hammer begun to be used in the work of rebuilding or completing the house, when Tatnai, the Samaritan governor, and Shethar-boznai (new names to us), and their companions appear, and indignantly enquire, "Who had commanded you to build this house?"
2. For 15 years, the enemy had largely left them alone while they were defeated and distracted with their own selfish pursuits. That's

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because a defeated, distracted, discouraged believer poses little threat to the devil!

3. But just as soon as they got revived and then reorientated towards the things of God, the enemy was stirred to renew his opposition. This is how the Christian life works. Those who do little to nothing for God have very little understanding of the battle that is faced by those who seek to do something for the cause of Christ.

B. The Tactic of the Attack (Vs. 3b-4)

1. The question (Vs. 3b)
 - a. The tactic of the enemy this time was to question who had given them the authority to undertake the work.
 - b. The people of God wisely appealed to the decree of king Cyrus as the authorization for the work. They appealed to the higher authority.
 - c. In like manner, when the world tries to stop us from carrying out the Great Commission and bring us under their authority, we stand under the authority of the King of kings and His command to preach the Gospel to every creature.

C. The Triumph over the Attack (Vs. 5)

1. The work was able to continue because it was under the watchful eye and Divine protection of God Almighty.
2. The thought of God's eye being upon His people is both comforting and convicting.
 - a. Comforting in the sense that it brings assurance to us that we are under God's gracious care and protection as we labour for Him.
 - b. Convicting in the sense that it makes us think about the spirit in which we approach our service. Do we serve with a consciousness that we are serving under the eye of our Heavenly Master and Lord?
3. "Oh, they had an earthly eye on them, but they had an eternal eye on them, they had a human eye on them but they had a heavenly eye on them, they had a wicked eye on them, but they had a watchful eye on them, they had a deadly eye on them, but hallelujah they had a divine eye on them." (Pastor Denis Lyle)

Conclusion:

1. Are you in the right position but with the wrong priorities?
2. Was there ever a time in your Christian life when you had greater passion for God and God's work than you do now?
3. Will you pause, consider your ways and allow the Spirit of God to stir you afresh for His service?