

Conscionable Hearing of the Word

Haggai

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Bible Text: Haggai 1:12-15; 1 Samuel 3:1-21

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There was a time in the history of the children of Israel when God's judgment had fallen heavily upon them and they were taken off into captivity. Of course, the time of the captivity is well known to those who have any knowledge of their Old Testament Scriptures. In God's providence one called Cyrus was raised up and the Lord in whose hands, according to the book of Proverbs,¹ are the hearts of kings and of princes, was moved by the Spirit of the Lord to allow certain of God's people to return to Jerusalem. And their task, as assigned by this pagan king, was to rebuild the temple so that the worship of the living God should be established once more in Jerusalem.

When they returned there were those who had never left and evidently were not of the same heart even though they requested that they might be engaged in the task of rebuilding the temple. And when those who had returned declined that offer, the others sought to make trouble and they did so by writing to the king. The work stopped for a period of some 16 to 18 years. Nothing happened in the rebuilding of the temple until God graciously raised up Haggai and he challenges the people of God.

Well, as we examined that portion of God's Word last Lord's Day the question that was presented to us out of the Word of God was: If not now, when? If we are not engaged in the building up of the kingdom of God now, when are we actually going to do it?

God is graciously dealing with his people. If God had come in judgment upon that particular generation and had brought upon them some great catastrophe, then we would have to say that God would have been just in dealing with them in that way. After all, they had not done what God had called them to do. They were not outwardly, notoriously wicked in that generation and yet they were somewhat lethargic. They were apathetic about the work of the kingdom and were not busily engaged in the work which God had called them to undertake. But God is gracious to his people, slow to anger and abounding in loving kindness.² We see that here in the book of the prophet Haggai.

Anyone who tells you that we have a fierce God in the Old Testament and a loving God in the New Testament clearly hasn't read the Old Testament. We see God here presented to us in the pages of the book of the prophet Haggai. He is one who is gracious and who

¹ Proverbs 21:1.

² Psalm 103:8.

is kind towards his people. He doesn't come with great judgment upon the people, but raises up Haggai in order to challenge them.

What are you doing? Or why are you not engaged in the building up of the temple? The first thing as we consider this particular portion of God's Word is the humble acceptance of the people of God.

Boys and girls, I want you to think about how you might react when somebody challenges you about something that you have done wrong. How easy it is, not only for you as children, but for us as adults also, to give in to temptation; to get terribly defensive, to find excuses for why we haven't done what we should have done. "Well, it is not really quite as bad as you think it is!" "This is why I was right to do it this way!" Instead of just, "Well, you are right. I was wrong!" How hard that is so often for us to admit.

But here, you see how the people of God respond in a humble and submissive way. There are three elements that I want to bring out of this passage that we should ponder as we reflect on how the people of God respond to Haggai. First of all, they recognize who the source is ultimately. God is not come, at least in this particular point, with a mighty show of his power with some tremendous miracle that grabs the attention of all the people. He raises up a man who comes and preaches to them. That is effectively what God is doing. And one of the things that we are told here in this portion of God's Word is to recognize that Haggai was God's man to preach to them. Haggai was the messenger from God. He had a word from the Lord. And when they recognized that it wasn't just Haggai speaking to them, but it was the Lord who had sent Haggai to speak to them, then they paid attention.

It is really not so very different with what we read of in 1 Samuel. The humble response of the young Samuel was simply, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."³ So the servants of God recognize that when Haggai brought this message that they were not engaged in the work that it was a message from the Lord. They should have been engaged in the work, but they weren't! Rather they had built their own houses and they were quite comfortable and started to say, "Well, this is not a good time to building up the temple. Let's do it later. It is not that we are not willing to do it. Just not now."

The response of the people of God as Haggai is standing among them to preach God's Word is this: God is speaking to us. He is God's messenger and, therefore, we are willing to sit under the ministry of God's Word.

But there is a submission that is shown towards Haggai. First of all, in the listening. Or, as the writers of the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechism, the Confession of Faith the, Westminster divines, as they are known, describe it as the "conscionable hearing of God's Word."⁴

³ 1 Samuel 3:9.

⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith 21:5. "The reading of Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence;

Boys and girls, we don't usually or often use that word "conscionable". It means to have an effect upon our consciences. When the Word of God is being read and the Word of God is being accurately explained, it is meant to touch our consciences. God is speaking to us and so we as the people of God first of all must recognize who the source is. And that has an implication for us in the conscionable hearing of the Word.

And so they listened to what God's servant is saying. But it is more than merely listening to the Word of God. We are also told the people of God obeyed. They obeyed the Word. They didn't look for excuses for why 16 or 18 years had passed by and nothing had been accomplished regarding the temple. They heard the Word of God given to them through God's prophet. They listened and they obeyed. There was a humble acceptance of the Word of God.

Now the second thing that I want us to see in this portion of God's Word is this: how God graciously deals with his people. If we had read and gone over in greater detail the first part of Haggai, we would have seen how God begins to address the people. These people, not my people. In other words, God is, as it were, putting something of a distance between Himself and His people. He is withdrawing himself from his people to say, "These people they busy themselves about making sure their own houses are comfortable, but they have done nothing about the temple."

But by the end of the chapter we have God speaking words of grace and of comfort to "these people". He raises up Haggai a second time and sends him out to the people and what is the message now? "I am with you."⁵

I want us just to reflect for a moment on how gracious God is in dealing with his people. What had he accomplished? Had they then suddenly with feverish activities completed the work that had been assigned them? There was only the first stirrings of a response to the preaching of the Word. They were engaged in the conscionable hearing of the Word and straight away God shows his gentleness and his kindness. He turns towards his people and here is another message.

Haggai, go and tell them this: I am with them!

From time to time in Scripture we do see God's anger stirred up, but there are few places in Scripture which show us so quickly and so clearly how God turns from his anger to gentleness and grace, from addressing the children of Israel as "these people" to this firm declaration, "I am with them. They are still my people and I am their God."

How ready God is to show grace and mercy! And this is no small blessing which God confers upon his people. "I am with you." No situation is hopeless when God is with us. No need to fear the enemy. No need to fear those who had arisen in fierce opposition. No

singing of Psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God. . ."

⁵ Haggai 1:13.

need fear those who had been engaged in their letter writing campaigns. No need to fear those in authority who had used that authority to undermine the work of the kingdom. No need to fear them at all. Why not? Well, here it is. Here is a declaration of God. “I am with you.” There is nothing to fear from the face of man. Here is an assurance that their labor will not be in vain.

If God, himself, has assigned this work to the hands of his people, how can it possibly fail? Do you see? Do you begin to see how important it is to have this word spoken directly to the people of God at this time?

They might have thought, “Well, we have failed in the task. Perhaps God has departed from us. But here is the word of assurance to the hearts of those who are weak. It is a word of comfort to those who have stumbled; to those who have failed. God’s grace is being shown to them through his prophet. Haggai has come to them with a challenging word, perhaps even a word of rebuke, “What are you doing? Why are you not about the work assigned to you here?” As they begin to sit under the conscionable hearing of God’s Word they respond. They obey the Word. They are about the work of the kingdom and Haggai is raised up to tell them, “For I am with you.”

Their confidence is renewed in God and in God’s grace and mercy to them.

But there is a third element that I wish to bring out from the Word of God. God is working in us both to will and to do.⁶ Now that, of course, is a quote from Paul from the letter to the Philippians.

I want you to understand something about the situation which the children of Israel were facing and ask yourself a question. Imagine yourself as one of the children of Israel so long ago when Haggai was preaching. Perhaps you returned from exile the best part of a couple of decades ago. You return with great enthusiasm for the building of the temple, but now two decades later on not a whole lot has happened. And life has become really quite routine and quite comfortable. And there is that sort of nagging thought at the back of you mind that really there is something else that you have to do. But you have rationalized it. “Yes, we are going to do it. It is just now is not the right time.” That is until Haggai steps forward and challenges your conscience.

They set about the work. They listen and they obey. What has changed? Have the difficulties that they have been facing in any sense different? Has God removed the obstacles? Have those that were opposed to the building of the temple moved away. Have those who were seeking to undermine that work been removed from the scene? Is it only now that those who are enthusiastic about the work are present?

No. Nothing in the population has changed. Have they suddenly been augmented by an influx of skilled laborers who are able to undertake the work for them? Has some windfall of wealth been showered upon them so that they have the resources to be able to do it? Have any of the surrounding kings given a large donation of lumber or of precious

⁶ Philippians 2:13.

metals to be able to accomplish the work? Is there anything in their circumstances that really has changed at all? Well, the answer is no. They are still facing exactly the same difficulties that they faced a day before Haggai was raised up as a prophet. They are still possessed of the same resources. Nothing has changed. None of the obstacles have changed and there is no increase in their resources. But what *has* changed is *their heart*. Their hearts have been changed. The Word of God has been received and their hearts have been changed.

But I want you to see how the Word of God describes this, because we see that it is God that is at work in the lives of those to whom he sends Haggai.

I am going to read the last few verses of chapter one.

“I am with you, declares the LORD.”

And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God.⁷

Who is it that is stirring up the people? The Word of God makes it absolutely explicit. We get here something of the pattern of God’s work of grace in the lives of his people. He raises up one to preach and those who sit under the ministry of Haggai the prophet respond with a conscionable hearing of God’s Word. They recognize the source, then listen to that Word. They respond in faith and then God does works of great grace and mercy to stir up the hearts of those to whom Haggai is sent. He stirs up the hearts of the leaders of the people. He stirs up the hearts of those who are in political control. He stirs up the hearts of those who are that is in spiritual control. But he also stirs up the remnant of the people, God’s people. Their hearts are stirred up by the preaching of God’s Word.

Is that so different to what we look for and expect and pray for Lord’s Day by Lord’s Day?

The Westminster divines laid upon us as those who come and sit under the ministry of the Word of God to be conscionable hearers. How should we pray for the preaching of God’s Word?

We stand now at the end of 2010. What has 2011 in store for us for good or for ill? Neither you nor I know. But we do know this, that even at this time of year when we would sing hymns that speak of Emmanuel, God with us, our God remains the same.

There is a word of comfort not only for the people of God in Haggai’s day, but for us today. But he is still the God who is with us. What do we desire, therefore, in the year 2011? That God would raise up men to preach his Word, the unsearchable riches of Christ, men who are even now in preparation at seminary that their preparation would not

⁷ Haggai 1:13-14.

be in any sense in vain, but that they are truly prepared in heart as well as in mind to preach Christ and that the people of God would come to sit under the ministry of God, of God's Word as conscionable hearers, recognize, where is the source? Is this just an individual, a mere man giving us the benefit of his thinking on a matter? Or is it the exposition of God's Word?

So when God says to Haggai the prophet, "Tell the people this, I am with them," that that is the same message which God's servants have preached down through the generations. And though much is unknown to us for 2011, this much is known to us. That God is with us. And that is better than a known way.

We desire, therefore, that the preaching of God's Word would result in the people of God recognizing its source, submitting by hearing it, conscionable listening to the Word of God and by obeying it. God has graciously promised to us this day if we listen even as Samuel in the temple and say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," God will continue to show Himself gracious to us.

Our circumstances may not miraculously change over night. The difficulties which we face may still be there for us tomorrow. We may not suddenly inherit that windfall that will wipe away all our concerns. Our circumstances may be identical tomorrow to what they were yesterday. But when God is at work in our hearts we have this assurance, that no enemies can withstand the people of God, not even the gates of hell shall prevail against Christ's Church.⁸ And those who labor in the Lord do not labor in vain.⁹

And so the word of Haggai spoken so long ago can be preached in our hearing this day on the last Lord's Day of the year. Tell my people this. "I am with you."¹⁰

⁸ Matthew 16:18.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:58.

¹⁰ Haggai 1:13.