

Procrastination

Tell God He Can Wait!

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Heavenly Father, as we turn now to the Scriptures we ask for your blessing. We need the help of the Holy Spirit to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest. We ask that you would bring the word of God to bear upon our hearts, our consciences, our wills, our affections and help us not just to be hearers but to be doers also. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now turn with me to the book of Haggai. Haggai is the third from the end of the Old Testament. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Last week we were in Nehemiah 8 and Nehemiah comes, I would say, 50-60 years after Haggai. We'll get into the chronology of events but we are after the return from the exile and we have a very specific date, it's 520 BC. I'm going to read the first two verses only.

1 In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 2 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD."

So far God's holy and inerrant word. May he add his blessing to it.

Now sometime ago I was drawn, my attention was drawn to a Welsh evangelist of the 19th century. He lived almost the complete beginning and end of the 19th century. He grew up and lived for most of his life in Cardigan which is just a few miles from my alma mater, Aberystwyth, on the west coast of Wales. He had virtually no education. As probably a young teenager, he went into the craftsmanship of a joiner or carpenter with his father, but did have a faith in Jesus Christ. He joined as a young man, he joined what were called in Wales in the 19th century the Calvinistic Methodists, a throwback to the time of George Whitefield, these days they're called Presbyterians but in the 19th century they were called Calvinistic Methodists, and in 1859 there was a revival in Wales, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It happened in Scotland and Ireland and here in the United States, and especially in New York there's a very famous revival that took place in New

York in 1859. It was a moment in history when the Holy Spirit was poured out and through various preachers, tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of people came to saving faith all at once. And it all happened in 1859 and in David Morgan's diary he wrote at the beginning of 1859, "I went to bed as a lamb and woke as a lion." And about a year later in his diary he wrote, "I went to bed as a lion and woke as a lamb." God used him just for a small period of time, for a year or so, and that leads me into Haggai because everything that we read of here in these two chapters of the prophecy of Haggai takes place in the space of four months from mid-August to early December in the year 520 BC.

And we know almost nothing about the rest of his life, and I was imagining this week if somebody were to write a biography of you and merely include four months of your life, I'm pretty sure you'd feel shortchanged. But there's another point of view here. It's not that God didn't use Haggai for great good throughout the whole course of his life but there was a special season where God brought him to the forefront, where God had something for him to do, and when that happens, we need to be ready. There's a season in your life and maybe you're elevated to a certain position and there are considerable issues and trials and difficulties and you are the person for that hour. It may be on a small scale. It may be in ministering in your family, or teaching something to your teenage children, or it may be something much bigger and grander than that, and if there's a lesson here in Haggai, an overall lesson, it's the need to be ready when that season comes and when God, as it were, shines the spotlight on a particular season of life and he says to you, "I need you now to do this for me."

Well, let's rehearse the chronology. The exile into Babylon came beginning in 605. By 587 BC, the city of Jerusalem had been overthrown and the temple had been destroyed and the last king of Israel had been taken into captivity in Babylon. His two children were murdered. It was the last thing that he ever saw and they put out his eyes and took him to Babylon. We don't know what happened to him after that. And then in 538, Cyrus the Persian, just as Isaiah the prophet had prophesied 150, almost 200 years in the past, Cyrus the Persian issued a decree that they could return from Babylon and that initial return in 538 BC was under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest. And some 18 years later in 520 BC, that's where we are now with Haggai, and another 60 years will be the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The point at issue in Haggai, among other things, is that God's house, God's temple was still in ruins and they'd been back 18 years.

Now in the weeks to come as we navigate our way through this little prophecy, we'll see that the people of God had actually built for themselves houses and not just houses but fancy houses with wooden paneling and so on. So they hadn't been idle, they had been building things for themselves, but they hadn't done what was the most important thing and that is rebuild the temple of the Lord. Now there were perhaps reasons and one of the reasons Ezra refers to in his book in chapters 3 and 4, that the people of the land, the Samaritans and we'll say something more about them later, but the Samaritans were discouraging them. These were not friends of the Jews. They were half Jewish and half something else and they were basically worshiping all kinds of idols and so on, and they

had long since departed from orthodoxy and they were discouraging the people of God. It reminds me of C. S. Lewis' Screwtape and he's trying to teach one of his little underlings and he's not making a great job of it and so Screwtape says to him, "Try discouragement because it always works." If you give in to discouragement, there are days when you just give in to discouragement. Everything seems to be against you and there seems to be a little of that here in the return from exile and things are not, well, things are not as they were. I hope these patriotic tunes brought a measure of normalcy and a little bit of joy and seeing other people is good, but we're not back to normal yet and we long for it. If only we could push a button and get rid of 2020 altogether and just find ourselves in another age, another year when all this is in the rearview mirror. So there's a relevance here, I think, to Haggai and where we are right now.

So the date is August and it's late August, mid, late August in 520 BC and the spotlight falls on Haggai the prophet. Ezra is there. Zerubbabel is there. Joshua is there. But the spotlight now falls on Haggai the prophet and I just want to say two things this morning. The first thing is this, that Haggai's ministry is characterized by a profound sense of urgency and gravity. He's a prophet. He's not a great prophet like Jeremiah or Ezekiel or Isaiah, he's what we call a minor prophet. His book is only two chapters long and his ministry only lasts for four months, whereas the ministry of Jeremiah or Ezekiel or Isaiah lasted for the entirety of their lives, spanning decades and more. But when Haggai speaks, God speaks. I mean literally God speaks when Haggai speaks.

Notice the language here and it gives you a little glimpse into how Scripture came to be. "The word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet." It's a small sentence but it's actually a very profound sentence. When Haggai spoke, God spoke. The product of Haggai's speaking was nothing less than the word of God. Peter writes, "Holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit," and the verb that Peter employs is the same verb that Luke employs at the end of the Acts of the Apostles when Paul and others were in that shipwreck at sea, and there was a storm and they hauled down the sails and Luke says "the boat was driven along, driven along by the wind," and that's the verb that Peter uses. "Holy men of old were driven along by the Holy Spirit." Paul writing to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3 says the same thing, that all Scripture is "breathed out by God." God breathes out and the product, the product is Scripture. Just like on a cold day when you breathe out and you can see your breath as it crystallizes in the cold air, God breathes out, he exhales. We talk of inspiration but actually it would be more accurate to say expiration. God exhales and what you have is Scripture.

Well, that has a lot of implications. If this is the word of God, then it cannot be in error. If everything the prophets and apostles wrote was the word of God, there cannot be any error because God cannot breathe out error, he cannot lie, and therefore Scripture cannot lie and we talk about the infallibility or the inerrancy of Holy Scripture. You notice how we're given an emphasis here not just on the word of the Lord but it came by the hand of Haggai. You can detect in Scripture human personality. When you read the Apostle Paul, you can often see the characteristic way in which he thinks logically and his sentences have all kinds of subordinate clauses and so on, and it can get kind of intense and it's very Paul. When you read Mark's Gospel, you're immediately aware that Mark has a hastiness.

He wants to, he can't stop. He says, he uses that little expression "and immediately, and immediately, and immediately" all over the place. He's in a hurry. You can read Jeremiah and when you read Jeremiah you're aware that here is a man who is often the victim of his own personality and he can get easily depressed and down. And you'll remember we were looking at it sometime in the last few months, we were looking at Jeremiah 19 and 20 and how Jeremiah repeats the third chapter of Job. And so on and so forth. My point is that you can often in Scripture detect those human qualities. Luke says that he did, he's an historian and he's done his research and he's consulted documents and papyri, and he's taken eyewitness accounts, and he's got notes and so on, and he's done it very carefully. But over and above all of that, yes, there is what we call the organic nature of inspiration, using different men with different personalities, but at the end of the day, what we have is nothing less than the word of the living God. God's words in men's mouths, and therefore it cannot err. There cannot be any mistakes. There cannot be any errors.

John Wesley famously said, "If there is one error in the Bible, then there might as well be 10,000. If there is one error in the Bible, it is not the word of God." And he was correct. Now in the 19th century, late 19th century, German rationalism and the enlightenment and other things brought about a great deal of skepticism. It was fueled by a belief that science was in some way in opposition to the Bible, Darwinianism and other things, and therefore there were those in the church and in seminaries who began to doubt the veracity, the truthfulness, the inerrancy of Scripture. There was skepticism about the supernatural, and there was skepticism about miracles, and so on and so forth, and so people began to remove all of these things from the Bible and what you had left was indecipherable.

My dear friend, if, you know, they used the common adage "to err is human," and because the Bible is human, therefore we should expect errors, and they use that little phrase, "to err is human," with such dogmatism that some even believed that the term was in the Bible. Of course, it's not in the Bible. It comes from Alexander Pope. But you see, that dictum proves too much because everything in the Bible is human. Every word of it is human. There is human instrumentality in every word from Genesis to Revelation, so if to err is human, you cannot trust any of the Bible. The entire Bible goes out the window.

Well, what is the answer? And the answer for me is always to go back to Jesus. What did Jesus believe about the Bible? He believed the Bible to be infallible and inerrant. "Thus it is written," he would say. You remember the time of the temptations, what did he do to respond to the devil? He simply quoted from Deuteronomy 6 and Deuteronomy 8. "Thus it is written." That was the end of the argument. He had an argument with the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin over marriage and what did he do? He simply quoted from the book of Genesis, "Thus it is written." "Thus it is written" ended all argumentation for Jesus. Well, there's no point in worshiping Jesus as the Son of God and as our Savior if he was wrong, fundamentally wrong about his position and his belief in the authority of Scripture because if this is the word of God in the mouths of prophets but the end result is the word of God, what does this mean? It means that this is the final basis of all authority in faith and practice. What am I supposed to believe? How am I supposed to live? What am I

supposed to do with my life? Well, the answer is in the Bible. The Bible is the final authority for all that we believe and all that we do.

My dear friends, let's take this moment and underline once again our fundamental belief in the authority of Scripture. The world is coming apart. Every morning I just read headlines. I can't read the content of it. It's just too depressing. But just reading the headlines and our society is coming apart. I don't think I've ever witnessed anything quite like it. It's the culmination of a number of things. Everything that we count dear is now cast to the wind. Everything that we thought were true and certain and absolute have been tossed aside. But there is one thing that never changes, the word of God. God never changes. His word never changes. No matter how bad it gets, no matter how difficult it gets, no matter how far from Judeo-Christian principles our society moves away from, as Christians we have a fundamental and assuring thing here, that when you open the Bible, wherever you open it, you are reading the word of God. You are reading God's word that will never change. That will endure forever.

You want to hear God's voice this morning? Then just open the Bible and read it. That's God's voice. Read the Bible. Let us be a church where historians will look back on this age and say, "Yes, amidst all of that chaos, there were men and women who believed in the authority and infallibility and inerrancy of Holy Scripture as the final authority for all of faith and practice." Let us be that kind of people.

Well, in the first place, the ministry of Haggai is characterized by a sense of urgency and authority, but secondly and in complete contrast, the people are marked with an indulgent sense of hesitancy. Now note in verse 2, "Thus says the LORD of hosts," and notice that expression. By the way, the Lord of hosts, the Lord of armies, it signals his majesty, it signals his authority. He comes with an army. He comes with a mighty force of angels and archangels to back him.

"Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD." You notice that way in which he refers to the people of God? He calls them "these people." Now what is the familiar way by which God would refer to his people? And it's "my people. I will be your God and you will be my people." It's at the heart of God's covenant relationship with his people. My God, my people. But something is wrong here. Something is not right here. There's tension here. I'm not saying that God has cast these people aside but there's something about the relationship that isn't right, the very term "these people." And what isn't right, of course, is explained because they "say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD." They'd been back 17-18 years but the project of rebuilding the temple has been set aside.

Now there are some possible explanations. One is that when Persia took over from Babylon, Egypt to the southwest began to throw their weight around once again. There are stories in history in this period that Egypt would march their forces across the Nile delta and up the coast, the Mediterranean coast, and so on. So they were uncertain times. Perhaps some conjecture that the people of God in 520 BC thought that maybe they would be taken into exile once again, not this time to Babylon but to Egypt. It was a

possibility and I think if you'd have lived in that period, you might have thought that on a day or two. Then I was referring earlier and Ezra refers to it in Ezra 3 and 4, there were the Samaritans. Now the Samaritans descend from the time of Jeroboam, and when Jeroboam in the north set temples in Dan and Bethel and set up idols, the Samaritans came out of that movement and they were half Jewish and half something else, and they were idolaters, and Ezra tells us and we needn't go into it now, that they had sowed seeds of discouragement among the people of God. Perhaps they were threatening them, threatening them with their livelihood. Many of these people in Jerusalem didn't live in the city, they lived in villages and towns and so on, and maybe the Samaritans were threatening them, threatening them in their livelihood and threatening them in their businesses and threatening them perhaps with some measure of armed hostility. We don't know.

But there's more to it than that. Look at the term again, "These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD." They are purporting to be those who can read the times. You remember that expression in the book of Chronicles about the men of Issachar, that they could discern, they had an understanding of the times. I was texting Gabe this morning and I'd just been reading Al Mohler's new book, "The Gathering Storm," published about a month ago, and Al Mohler has preached here, of course, a number of times, President of Southern Seminary, and so on, and a dear friend of mine, and some of you listen to his podcast. I have to say that some of his podcasts leave me completely depressed. He's accurate, of course, but I just sometimes wish he'd have something positive to say about our culture and society. But "The Gathering Storm" is a book that reminds me of the men of Issachar who have an understanding of the times. There are a number of factors that have led to where we are right now both in the culture but also in the church. And these people in Haggai's time are claiming to have that kind of insight, spiritual insight. They can read the mind of God. Of course, they can't read the mind of God more than they could read something in English.

There's something pretentious about what it is that they're saying and what it is and, of course, what they're saying is God can wait, and somehow or other they've managed to convince themselves that this is God's plan, that this is God's will, that he can wait. It is procrastination that is their sin, putting off to tomorrow what needs to be done today. It was vitally important. As soon as the people of God came out of Babylon, it was vitally important that worship, collective worship, in person worship be restored. It's what we long for here in this strange season in which we find ourselves. They'd been giving themselves to building their own houses, fine houses with wooden paneling and so on, and we'll see it in the coming weeks, but as far as they were concerned, God, they could read into the mind of God, such was their pomposity, such was their arrogance that they could claim that the worship of God in the house of God was secondary to everything else.

What they're saying is God can wait. It reminds me of that prayer of Augustine, "Give me chastity but not yet." He had a profligate upbringing and struggled with sexual sin. I think he struggled with it all of his life. It led him, in part, in the wrong direction entirely,

influenced the Roman Catholic Church on the issue for a thousand years. "Give me chastity but not yet."

"Boast not thyself of tomorrow," Solomon says, "because you do not know what tomorrow may bring forth." If you put it off to tomorrow, you may never do it. You may never have the opportunity to do it. Solomon says elsewhere, "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands and poverty will come on you like a thief." He was a man who was procrastinating. Here is a man who is sitting on his hands. Here's a man who's putting off to tomorrow or next week or next year what needs to be done right now, and then tomorrow comes and there's poverty and he hasn't done what he needs to do. It's the sin of procrastination.

Well, there's an incident which seems relevant just now from the American Revolution tragedy that resulted from procrastination. It's reported that Colonel Rall, Commander of the British troops at Trenton in New Jersey, was playing cards with his men and a messenger came stating in the message which he didn't read that General George Washington was crossing the Delaware River. Rall put the message in his pocket, continued with the game. It was only after the game was over that he read the message and by that time, of course, it was too late. It cost him his life. It cost him the lives of many of his men. It cost him the war. Procrastination, putting off to tomorrow what needs to be done today.

Now my dear friend, is there something in your life right now that you need to do and you know you need to do it? You've been telling yourself for months and years that you need to do this but you've not done it, you have put it off. You've procrastinated and maybe it'll be too late. I know there's one thing that I need to do and I won't tell you what that is but it's been giving me conscience ever since I started studying this passage and I'm guilty, guilty as charged of procrastination. Well, whatever that thing is, make a promise to the Lord that you'll get on it right away. It may be something in your home and family. It may be something in your personal life. It may be some project that you just need to do, a talk that you need to have. It could be a thousand things. Whatever it is, if it's that important, don't put off to tomorrow what can be done today.

Father, we thank you, thank you for your word, thank you for Haggai, thank you for this man who you raised up to do this ministry just for four months. Thank you for his willingness and sense of urgency and his desire and his complete submission to you. We pray, Lord, that you'd hide this word now in our hearts. For Jesus' sake. Amen.