

If God is With Us

Tell God He Can Wait!

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Bible Text: Haggai 2:1-5
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Gracious God, as we turn now to the Scriptures mindful once again that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, we ask that you would open up the Scriptures and apply them like medicine to our hearts and souls. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now our Scripture is found in the prophet Haggai. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, the third from the end of the Old Testament and we're in the second chapter verses 1 through 5. Haggai 2:1-5.

1 In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet: 2 "Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, 3 '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? 4 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, 5 according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not.

Well, so far God's holy and inerrant word.

The theme of this passage this morning is discouragement, or perhaps more accurately how to get rid of discouragement, how to deal with discouragement. Many of you, perhaps most of you, are discouraged in some form or fashion. You want this season to go by as quickly as possible. You're fed up with it. Teachers are stressed out, I was told this morning. Marriages are under strain. You love your partner, you just don't want them there 24 hours a day. There are all kinds of issues, concerns for our seniors, mothers at home with little children, and a host of other things. We're discouraged. We're

discouraged about church. We can't see the day when we'll be back to where we were. Lots of reasons to be discouraged and that's the theme of this passage.

We are on a very specific day, the seventh month, the twenty-first day of the month. In the Hebrew calendar that would put it around October. We're seven weeks in from verse 1 of chapter 1 and you'll remember that the entire ministry of Haggai spans four months, from August to December in the year 520 BC. They have been back in Jerusalem for 16-17 years, 537 was the date of the return, and they have begun finally to rebuild the temple. Barely 3 ½ weeks have passed since the end of chapter 2, so not much has been done and they are discouraged. You'll remember it's an illustration that's frequently cited, that in C. S. Lewis' "Screwtape Letters," the apprentice is attempting to do something to cause a Christian to stumble and he suggests various things and Screwtape just shakes his head and then the apprentice says, "How about discouragement?" And Screwtape says, "Yes, that's perfect. Discouragement always works."

This is the seventh month. It's October. It's a busy month in the Hebrew liturgical calendar. There's the Feast of Trumpets, Rosh Hashanah, and then there's the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, and then there's Succoth, the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles, a week long celebration ending with a high holy day in which no work would be done. Half of this month they would not have been doing any work. No progress would be taking place in the building of the temple. And more than that, there are those among them who could remember, they would be in their late 70s and 80s, it's 66 years since the destruction of the temple in 587 by the Babylonians, and so there would be those that would be in their 70s, 80s, maybe 90s, who had been in exile and some of them perhaps not in exile, they had remained in Jerusalem, and they could remember the glory of the former temple. They could remember it in all of its details and now they're looking at this temple and they're discouraged.

In January of this year, David Marks, he's a man now in his 90s, went with 200 others, this is before the Covid thing, went with 200 others to Auschwitz in Poland. He was captured by the Nazis along with his family in the 1940s, and taken from Hungary where he was born to Auschwitz in Poland. This was the first time he had been back. On the day that he arrived, 35 members of his family were taken and burnt, cremated by the Nazis. And in an interview with David Marks in the newspapers, his children, his grandchildren said he had never once spoken about it, not one time had he ever spoken about his experience in Auschwitz. He was asked, there was nothing left in Auschwitz except the bricks of the ovens, and some of us have been there and seen it and it's a terribly terribly moving emotional thing to walk through it, and he was asked about the rise in antisemitism and he said, "Yes, it's very discouraging."

He was discouraged and the people of God, the remnant here are discouraged and I want to ask, first of all, why? Why were they discouraged? And there are several reasons. First of all, the building of the temple was hard, it was difficult. Those of you who have seen pictures of Solomon's temple or you've been in Jerusalem to the Wailing Wall and then you've walked to the left and you look down and you can actually see some of the original stones of not the second temple but the first temple, Solomon's temple, and

they're massive, unbelievable how big those stones are. They would have been brought from many many miles away and, of course, the temple is on Mount Zion so it would be uphill and the sheer difficulty involved in the construction of this temple. It was difficult with none of the modern machinery and equipment to build it. So they were discouraged.

You remember Hilton Garden Inn down here on Gervais, how long were they constructing, reconstructing that hotel? Five years? Six years? I would drive by it almost every day and have a look and sometimes your heart would be lifted because there would be a construction truck outside, and then three days later it was gone and weeks and months would go by and nothing would happen, and it just opened the end of last year and then Covid came. They must be terribly discouraged, don't you think?

The work was hard and the work was delayed and they'd barely begun, they'd been at it for just a few weeks, probably all they'd done is clear away some of the rubble, and now it's a holy month. The seventh month is a holy month and nobody's doing any work and so they're discouraged because it's demanding and they're discouraged because it's delayed, and they're probably discouraged because it was despised. There were detractors. Later, we're talking 60 years later in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, you remember there are figures by the name of Tobiah and Sanballat and others who are mocking the Jews for trying to reconstruct the temple. But we are given a clue here as to where these detractors might come from, not from outside but from within. They are the seniors and they're looking at this temple and they're saying, "You know," and I'm right in this circle, I'm at that age and you can speak to millennials and 20-somethings and you can say, "You know, back in my day..." And that conversation is never good. It never ends well. That trajectory is always downhill. Whatever message that you're trying to give is not going to be received well and you can imagine these older folks as they look at the rubble and even if they managed to reconstruct this temple, there's no Solomon here to direct it, there's no wealth of Solomon here to direct it, and they were perhaps ridiculing it.

I remember when I was first ordained in 1978. The church that I was in in Stranmillis in Belfast in Northern Ireland, we had four elders and the four elders, one of whom was still working, he was in his early 60s, I was 26. The other three elders were long since retired. They were in their mid to late 70s, and one I think was in his 80s, I could easily have been a grandson. Never once did those elders ever say to me, "You know," my predecessor had been the minister there for over 70 years. Amazing. He went to seminary in Princeton and studied under Gresham Machen in the 1920s and he'd been there ever since. But never once did those elders say to me, and they could have done and they probably should have done, but they never once said, "You know, 20 years ago things were so much better. Or 50 years ago things were so much better."

They were discouraged and I think that the seniors among us are probably discouraged in this season, and it's so easy to adopt the attitude of the seniors here in this passage and bring just discouragement, almost a desire for failure on the part of this construction process. Well, those are some of the reasons why they were discouraged but I want us to ask, secondly, how were they to resist this discouragement and three imperatives come up

to the surface. Three imperatives. Now the first in verse 4 is "be strong," and it's repeated three times. The governor, welcome, governor. The governor is told to be strong. He needs to be strong. This governor needs to be strong. The high priest is told to be strong. The remnant of the people is told to be strong. You know, when Hebrew repeats something three times in the same verse, it's not a happenstance. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts." There's something about it that is emphatic. It's like the Hebrew way of using a highlighter pen. Be strong. You need to be strong right now.

It's a term that is used when Joshua takes over for Moses in the first chapter of Joshua. "Be strong and courageous," God says to Joshua. In Ephesians 6, the passage of the Christian in complete armor that Dr. Fluhrer just preached on recently in the evenings so wonderfully. There again Paul says that we are to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Paul writes to Timothy in his swansong, 2 Timothy 2, the final letter that he wrote, and he says, "You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Be strengthened. Be strong.

It's an imperative. He's not saying and, you know, we have a tendency to say because we don't want to appear as though we're encouraging a sort of works righteousness, that what you need to do is realize your union with Christ and let God do all the work. That's not what the text is saying. Now there's an aspect of that which is true and we'll see it in a minute, but that's not what the text is saying. This is an imperative. This is something that you and I need to do, we need to be strong.

Well, what does it mean to be strong? Well, let's take the example of Paul in 2 Timothy 2. He uses two illustrations to help us understand what it means to be strong. The first illustration is that of an athlete. Well, what do athletes do? Well, they get up early in the morning and they exercise. They go to a gymnasium, at least they used to go to a gym. They run. They lift weights. They repeat things over and over and over so that these actions become instincts. They strengthen their muscles. They watch what they're eating and so on. An athlete, and then the second illustration is a farmer. How does a farmer reap his crop? He doesn't just sit at home and say, "God has this." No, he goes out into the field and he plows the field, and he sows the seed, and he removes the weeds, and he makes sure that the carrion don't come and steal those seeds. There's work to do. My dear friend, there's a need for us to be strong in this season. We need to be strong. We need to develop spiritual muscles. We need to be strong by being much in the word and much in prayer. To be strong, this is not a time to be weak. This season will mow down the weak. It's a season to stand up and to be strong, to be strong for Christ and to be strong for the Gospel.

Then secondly, you'll notice the second imperative at the end of verse 4, work. Again, it's an imperative. Work. There's work to be done. Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God that works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." That's not a commandment to passivity. That's not a commandment to say sit and realize your union with Christ. No, it's an imperative. Work out your own salvation. What work do we have to do? There are people to call and maybe visit. There are letters to be written. Let me encourage you, wouldn't it be wonderful this week if every one of

us called someone, a member of our congregation that you haven't seen in five months. Call them. Some of you are capable. I've never understood this, some of you are capable of being on the telephone for hours. I'm very pragmatic when it comes to phone calls. As soon as I've said what I've said, I want to finish the conversation and turn off the phone, but some of you can have these lengthy conversations and I'm sure that our members would be greatly encouraged.

There's work to be done. There are Scriptures to be read. There are prayers to be prayed. There are Christians to encourage and perhaps there are some that need to be chastised. You remember in Proverbs 26, Solomon talks about the sluggard. I love that word. The sluggard. Little folding of the hands, a little more nap time, enslaved to laziness. Sloth is another wonderful word. Sloth, one of the seven deadly sins. Too much time, way too much time on social media. Social media is a poison and if you spend too much time on there, you will never grow in grace. You will never become Christ-like. Too much time. Well, I don't want to guilt you out now but too much time on Netflix. There's work to be done. Work for the Lord.

Well, be strong, work, and then at the very end of verse 5, do not be afraid. That little phrase "fear not or do not be afraid" occurs in the Bible over 100 times. Isn't that amazing? Over 100 times, don't be afraid, and what does that say? Well, it says that we have a tendency to become afraid. Some of us are prone to being fearful. You remember the words of Kipling, if you can keep your head while all around men are losing theirs and blaming you, then you will be a man if you can keep your head. Well, in an altogether more profound sense, God wants you to keep your head right now.

You know, what are you afraid of? Let me address this issue, this season that we are in. What are you afraid of? Let me talk to those of you who are watching at home. You know, we've done everything that we can to make sure that this environment is safer than Publix right now. This is a very safe environment. Very very safe. Now some of you have issues, I understand that, but some of you perhaps are just afraid and Christians shouldn't live in fear. We need to be strong in the Lord. That's not a call to doing stupid things, it's not a call to being rash, it's not a call to say all of this is bogus. I'm not saying anything like that but I'm saying sometimes we have to take a step of faith with all of the precautions under the sun, to be sure, but our church needs to get back to some order. We need to get back to where we were and it's going to be a long and difficult track, I think, and I think this text this morning is so appropriate. We will need all the strength that is available, we'll need all the courage available against detractors very much like the context of this passage. Don't be afraid. Don't live your life in fear. There are folks in our congregation right now facing cancer with such poise and faith and courage that it puts me to shame. It puts me to shame. So hear the call of this passage. Do not be afraid.

What does God promise those who resist discouragement? And there are some beautiful things in this passage that God promises those who resist discouragement. The first thing he tells us in verse 4, "I am with you. Work, for I am with you." This is the God that we have. This is the God we love. He's with us. Didn't Jesus say in the Great Commission, "Lo, I am with you always to the end of the ages. Through every trial, through every

circumstance, I am with you in this season. I am with you every day. I'm with you in the lonely hours of the night." God never asks you to do anything but he promises that he'll be with you. He'll be right there, right beside you. His presence, the felt presence of God to help and encourage and motivate and challenge his people.

Now of course, in the context of Haggai there's also the idea that God was present in the temple and since the temple was now destroyed, he's reassuring them that he's with them even though the temple is destroyed. Now once the temple was erected again, there was in the old covenant a sense in which the people of God would go to the temple in order to find God but actually that's not the case. You know, Alec Motyer says on this passage the tabernacle and temple were not primarily places to which the Lord's people went to be with him but places where he came to be with them. That's a very different idea, isn't it? When they went to the temple, God came to be with them. That's the kind of God he is. He's always coming to be with his people. He's not moving away, he's coming towards us. What an encouragement that is. What a motivation that is to know and to have the assurance that God is here, God is present.

What is the term that is used here, "the LORD of hosts," at the end of verse 4. The LORD of hosts. The LORD, his name, God's name that he gave to Moses in Exodus 3 and elaborates on it in Exodus 6, "I am that I am," the God who is present with his people. That's his name. But he's the LORD of hosts, sabaoth. You remember in Luther's "Mighty Fortress is Our God," second verse,

"Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his name,
From age to age the same;
And he must win the battle."

Lord Sabaoth. Sabaoth means armies. He's the God of armies, the heavenly armies. Who is it who is against you? And God says, "The God of armies, the LORD of hosts is with you." With God, with this God, with this battle-winning God on your side, why would you ever need to be discouraged?

And you notice again in verse 5, what else does he promise? He promises the Holy Spirit. Yes, this is the Old Testament. This is half a millennium away from Pentecost and yet here it is just as another symbol of promise in the second chapter of Joel that Peter cites on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit. The Spirit remains in your midst. This is the Holy Spirit. This is the third person of the Trinity. This is the one whom Jesus refers to in the Upper Room, that he will go again, "but I will come to you," and he's talking about the Holy Spirit, "I will give to you another comforter," another paraclete, another advocate,

another counselor, another strengthener. Jesus' personal representative agent is among you.

You remember what Jesus told the disciples, "Stay in the city until you receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." When the Holy Spirit comes, he brings power. You need power, you need strength to work. You need strength to resist discouragement. You need power not to be afraid. Well, the Holy Spirit dwells in your hearts, the Holy Spirit witnesses with your spirit that you're a child of God and if a child, an heir, an heir of God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ.

But then you notice not only does he promise his presence and not only does he promise the Holy Spirit, but you notice the reference in verse 5 to the "covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt." He's referring to a verse in Exodus 29 and what God told the people in the wilderness, the church in the wilderness, "I will dwell among the people of Israel and be their God." That was the promise, "I will dwell among the people of Israel and be their God." God is a covenant-keeper. A covenant is a promise. It's an oath. "I will be your God and you will be my people." That's his promise. God keeps his promises.

When Campbell Morgan, who was the predecessor of Martyn Lloyd-Jones in London, this would have been in the 1920s, early 1930s, and Campbell Morgan as a young man visited two elderly ladies every week in order to read the Scriptures to them, and when he came to read Matthew 28, the Great Commission, "Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the world," he said, "Isn't that a wonderful promise?" And one of the ladies quickly replied, "Young man, that is not a promise, it's a fact. It's a fact." Well, this is what Haggai is saying. Well, this is what God is saying through Haggai. It's not just a promise. When God enters into a covenant, it's a fact. It's as solid as the rock beneath our feet and we're to trust him.

Well, there's God's word of encouragement. As I looked at this passage yesterday, I thought isn't this the very passage that we need right now in this season? We need to be strong and courageous as the people of God and we need to trust him, and we need to know that roundabout and underneath are the everlasting arms of our sovereign and gracious God.

Well, may the Lord bless us.

Father, we thank you, thank you for your word, thank you that it's always relevant. Thank you for these wonderful promises. Thank you that they are facts and we ask that we might be given the strength now to live in the light of these facts. Help us to be a church that isn't afraid. Help us to be a church that is strong and courageous. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.