

Help For The Dry And Hungry Heart

by Steve Zeisler

I am going to suggest a New Year's resolution for us. This resolution is even more important than the diet you are planning to go on, or the hard financial decisions you will have to make in order to pay off your credit card bills. I am suggesting that we in our generation resolve to become Qoheleths. If you have been part of this church family in recent weeks you will recognize that that was the name Solomon adopted when he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth means "Searcher." In that book, Solomon reflected on his life's work. He sought to understand the way life really is, to make right choices and to gain insight that would enable him to plant his feet firmly in reality and not be subject to the whims of the moment, to not be dashed from one side to the other by circumstances, new fads, etc. Solomon determined to be a mature man, a grown-up son, for his own sake; and he wrote down his findings so that he could be a blessing to others.

In Ephesians, the apostle Paul describes what maturity is. This description sounds like what Solomon discovered when he became the Searcher, the Qoheleth. Here are Paul's words (Eph. 4:14-15):

...we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ.

Our world needs mature Christians who have that kind of insight, people who can bring wisdom and insight to the dark and foolish circumstances of our contemporaries.

Our age has been described by some as the post-Christian era. Western culture no longer feels required to pay lip service to God's law; it no longer feels any responsibility to even appear to agree that there are moral absolutes, that God does exist, that there is spiritual reality. It did once. There was a time when non-Christians could not cavalierly disregard those truths, but no longer.

An apt illustration of the fact that we live in the post-Christian era is the recent legislative debate in San Francisco over live-in lovers. The Mayor of San Francisco was called politically naive and anachronistic because she insisted that there is a difference between marriage and casual sexual liaison between roommates. She was accused of being out of touch, of being behind the times. There is evidence that our society no longer feels the need to even pay lip service to the Scriptures and to the law of God. In this post-Christian era the world needs people like you and me to be Qoheleths, people who know what is really true, who are thoughtful and outspoken, who bring "a word in season" to those who are defenseless in the face of the threshing waves of change.

The church in this age also is more immature than it has been in the past. The church, fighting God's battle with worldly weapons, also needs Qoheleths. The church has adopted political strategies, media manipulation, Madison Avenue-style fund raising to replace prayer and confidence in Christ. In this sense the church is no different than worldly organizations. The church, as well as the world, needs men and women who see life as it really is, people who look at things from a godly perspective, men and women who are able to offer a word of help.

That is the challenge, the New Year's resolution I offer to all of us this morning. To help in this task we will study together for a period of weeks three of the Old Testament prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These men prophesied to the nation Judah during a period when the circumstances of the people of God were very much like ours today. They spoke to God's remnant who were attempting to be faithful while facing the sort of pressures, fears and temptations that you and I face. The message of these prophets will, I believe, greatly strengthen us to have something to say to the age in which we live.

During the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel reached the height of her power. Solomon was renowned all over the world as a spokesman of wise and deep insight. Israel had a worldwide influence at that time, but that influence steadily declined. By 587 B.C., the awful day of Israel's darkest hour had arrived. Jerusalem, which had been held as a vassal for decades, was surrounded, besieged and sacked, and the temple destroyed. Worst of all, the God of Israel was held up to public ridicule for his seeming inability to protect his people. Those who were not starved to death were deported to exile in Babylon. Following the seventy years of exile, only a comparative handful were allowed to return to a land that had been laid waste and had lain barren for all those years. Jerusalem was a blackened ruin; the temple destroyed. This handful of God's people went back to create a presence again in the Promised Land.

Two things characterized the experience of the early returned exiles. These prophets preached again and again about two kinds of problems, the same kinds of problems that we see around us, I believe. First, there was a widespread fear among the returned exiles. If our age is labeled post-Christian, theirs might well be called post-Yahweh. Their world was frightening to them. They were afraid of failure, of persecution, of economic deprivation, of ridicule. They were a benighted people who lived in a world over which they had very little control. And because they were afraid they gave in to the temptation that fear always brings, the temptation to hold to themselves, to think of their own security above any other consideration. Rather than being a blessing to others they hid and cowered, thinking only of themselves. That temptation is natural in times of anxiety and fear. We are also subject to the same temptation today because we too live in a hostile world. We are tempted to think only of ourselves, to hang out with our own kind, to lose sight of God's purpose and of our opportunity to be a blessing to the world.

The second thing that was characteristic of these returning exiles, and about which the prophets preached, was religious hypocrisy. The exiles faithfully maintained the routines of feasts and fasts and festivals, but it was all sham; it was all outward in its expression. Their religion, basically, was an attempt to cover over their personal immorality and faithlessness. Again, we can see how this corresponds to our day. Much of our religious trappings, the Christian engine that chugs along our tracks, is outward; it is an attempt to cover over personal immorality and separation from God—much show, but not a lot of substance. We will benefit by looking at the words of these prophets and by hearing their message. If we learn what they had to say, if we understand the points they were trying to make we will have a great deal to offer our world; we will be able to be Searchers, wise counselors to an age that desperately needs such counsel. Solomon's inadequacy stemmed from the fact that he sought to understand life as it exists, "under the sun." We can do better than that. We can hear the voice of God from the heavenly places and understand reality by hearing and believing God's word. We can offer much more than Solomon. Malachi, whom we will look at in weeks to come, spoke of the day when "the sun of righteousness would rise with healing in its wings." We can fix our hope on that day and have a word to offer that is not confined to the natural world, "under the sun." That is our challenge.

Haggai, the first of these post-exilic prophets whom we will be studying, spoke these words in the year 520 B.C., a time when the people of God living in Judah, in Jerusalem and its environs faced a drought. Their world was shaken by economic hardship. The message of Haggai is set against this backdrop of physical drought, famine and crop failure. It is important to see, however, that though he speaks clearly in this account about failed crops, his emphasis is on a different, a more profound kind of drought, a spiritual drought, a famine of heart that had existed for some time among the people. To Haggai, this clearly was a much bigger problem. It is this aspect which will be of most help to us in our generation.

The first chapter divides easily into three sections: Hag.1:1-4 announce the problem about which this prophet will preach; Hag.1:5-11 analyze the problem; and Hag.1:12-15 answer it. Let us consider first the announcement of what was the nation's problem in Haggai's day. Hag.1:1:

In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, "The people says, 'The time has not come, even the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt.' " Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet saying, "Is it time for you yourselves

to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?"

Haggai's preaching takes the form of a dialogue. First, the people of God say, "It's not time yet for us to be about the business of rebuilding the temple." They had so many other things to do first. They were saying, in effect, "We are not opposed in principle to the idea of building the temple—we think it is probably a good project—it's just that we don't quite have time for it yet. There are so many other things to do."

Then God asks of them the penetrating question, "What do you have to do? What are you spending your time on? What are your priorities? Your own homes? Your own affairs? Do you have time for those?" Many in the group of returned exiles had been in Jerusalem for eighteen years at this point. They had begun early to try and reconstruct the temple but then, because of opposition from their enemies and other pressures, they had quit. For eighteen years they had drawn their security blankets tight around them; they did everything they could to provide for themselves, to think of themselves and be concerned for their own safety, their own needs, although God's clear word to them was that they were to build the temple.

If we are going to translate that into our experience we know that God's priority today is not buildings. However, like these exiles, none of us has been left in the dark about God's priorities. What exactly does the Lord intend for us to do? What are his concerns? What matters most to him? What should Christians be doing and thinking? Not many of us are totally in the dark concerning those issues. Consider these words from Peter's letter. There are hundreds of other such paragraphs in Scripture setting out some of the things that God is concerned that we be doing and thinking. (1 Peter 4:7-10)

The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

Peter lists four of the things that concern God. First, there is fervent, serious prayer; then, fervent love for one another; then, hospitality, concern for those who are in need; and lastly, using the spiritual gifts that God has given us. James asks, "What is true religion?" He answers his question: "Visiting orphans and widows in their distress and keeping oneself unstained by the world." (James 1:27) You can hardly glance at a page of Scripture without finding the things that matter to God.

Like the people in Haggai's day, I imagine that many of us say to ourselves (even if we don't say it out loud), "Well, it's great of God to have these concerns. I'm really delighted that he feels the way he does; I wouldn't try to talk him out of it for a minute. But I just don't have time. It's really not the right time for me to fit it all in yet." Have you ever said, "I have to get my house in order first"? These exiles were probably saying just that.

To be perfectly candid, my house is never in order. I have an endless list of projects, family events, hobbies, books, lists, phone calls, meetings, classes, planning, procrastinating, arguing, moaning, blaming, coveting, worrying, all kinds of things to do, all kinds of unfinished enterprises. My house is not in order. There are so many demands being made of me all the time that I find myself saying to God exactly what these people were saying to him, "I'd love to, you understand, but I don't have the time to be devoted to your priorities."

That is a serious problem, as we will see in a minute. In response to the exiles' statement, "It's not time," God asks the penetrating question, "Well, what do you have time for? What are you spending yourself on?" Beginning with Hag.1:5 we have Haggai's analysis of these things:

Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, "Consider your ways!"

That, by the way, is a good command for Qoheleth's. Think about things, is what Haggai is saying. In fact, he says it twice in this paragraph. "Consider, look closely, pay attention."

Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, "Consider your ways! You have sown much, but

harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes." Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Consider your ways! Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified," says the Lord. "You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?" declares the Lord of hosts, "Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house. Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands.

The Lord is saying, "I called for a drought, I determined that a dryness, a famine, a failure would occur." Notice, this description of a drought is out of the ordinary. In other places in Scriptures where droughts are reported we read that people made the ordinary choices of migrating, gleaned, doing what they could to get by. But here Haggai is talking about something that transcends the physical deprivation that occurs in periods of failed crops. In Hag.1:9 he says, "You bring it home and I blow it away." They were actually carrying produce in from the fields, yet somehow it sifted through their fingers. In Hag.1:11 he talks about a drought that affected not only the growing of things but a drought that was evident even in finished products, new wine, oil, etc. After the product had already been manufactured it somehow was yet subject to drought. "The work of your hands," the very enterprises they were engaged in were subject to drought, to failure and dryness.

The litany in Hag.1:6 is devastating: "You've sown much and harvest little; you eat but there's not enough to be satisfied; you drink but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes." There is a description of boring lives, of ennui, of suffering, of dryness, of famine in hearts. Haggai is saying, "However much you have is not enough; whatever you do turns to dust; however hard you try you are not satisfied; whatever you accomplish tastes like ashes in your mouths." A socialite in San Francisco was recently granted \$20,000 a month in alimony payments following her divorce. The newspapers later reported on her moanings and cries of sorrow over the hardship she was caused to endure on \$240,000 a year. How could anybody be expected to make it under those circumstances? However much you are given will not be enough, the prophet says. Life will not work no matter how much is poured into one's experience. The purse, and life too, has holes in it. That is what Haggai is describing.

You probably had a chance during the Christmas season to see one of Charles Dickens' most famous characters, Scrooge, from his book, "A Christmas Carol." There is something universally recognizable about Scrooge. We all see it; we all recognize it. In his youth, Scrooge had love and friendship, in his old age he had uncounted riches, but he was the most wizened, hardened old man imaginable; his life was a living famine. We recognize him because we see smaller scale evidence of the same traits in ourselves. Our nation has more opportunity, more abundance, more potential than any nation in the history of the world, yet we are beset with a sense of inability to function. Economic theories don't work; political choices let us down; people are hungry. Despite all our possessions the social fabric is coming apart. Why is there such drought in our experience? Haggai's analysis fits us too. However much we have, life does not seem to work. The very use of our hands, the very accomplishments of our life, on those God has declared a drought, and his declaration is certain.

Haggai 1:12-15 describe the outcome of this preaching, where an answer is given and hope is restored. If you and I are going to be Qoheleths we need to be able, like Haggai, to analyze what are the world's problems and we also need to have an answer. Let us consider these words, then. Hag.1:12:

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him. And the people showed reverence for the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke by the commission of the Lord to the people saying, "I am with you," declares the Lord." So 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, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth

month in the second year of Darius the king.

Verse 12 describes the necessary first step to being restored from famine and drought in our hearts, and that first step is repentance. Nothing else can happen until repentance takes place.

Although the word repentance is not actually used here, nevertheless this is a brilliant description of real repentance. First, we read that the people obeyed the voice of God. It does not say that they actually obeyed in terms of starting work immediately. Theirs was an interior obedience, an obedience from the heart to what they had heard about their condition and about who their Lord was. They changed their minds; they stopped rationalizing; they stopped offering excuses for why they had not done what they ought to have done. They stopped blaming others; they stopped pointing the finger; they stopped adding up all the difficulties; they stopped feeling sorry for themselves. They finally agreed with God that yes, in fact, they had failed, that they had responsibility which they had ignored, that God was right all along. You can almost see their change of mind taking place. They obeyed the voice of the Lord. They stopped defending themselves. They stopped saying, "I don't have time. I've got so many other things to do." They stopped all that and they agreed with God that he was right.

Secondly, they showed reverence, or perhaps even better, they feared before the Lord. Repentance is made up of both of these things, a change of mind, a reverence for God; a genuine outpouring of hearts that feel awestruck before the Lord. We have repented in fact when our thinking changes and we are genuinely overcome by the Person, the magnificence, the holiness and the presence of God.

I tried to think of an example of what it means to feel reverence for God, to fear before him, and all I could think of was a crude illustration. I hope you will pardon me. About December 15th every year young children are reminded that Santa Claus is watching them: "He sees you when you are sleeping; he knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good; so be good for goodness sake." Their little minds realize that somebody is paying attention to them all the time, that they live in the sight of this watcher, so their behavior changes for the better; they tread more softly. They are caught up with an awareness that somebody not only pays attention to them, but that their choices matter; that this individual is in a position to affect their future, and they had better treat him with seriousness and respect. (They ignore this, of course, the rest of the year!) That is something like what it means to fear before the Lord. All of a sudden we are reminded, and we cannot forget, that God is present, that he is holy, that he is Master of the universe; that our future is intimately tied up with his choices for us; that he deserves nothing but our respect; and that our walk through life ought to be dominated by him, what he thinks and who he is. So the necessary first step in answering the problem of the exiles was repentance. And real repentance, as in this case, includes a changed mind, obedience from the heart, and a reverence for God so that we never take him lightly.

The second thing recorded here of the answer to the problem described is the word which God spoke to them following their repentance, Hag.1:13: "Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke by the commission of the Lord to the people saying, "I am with you,' declares the Lord." My experience of repenting from sin has always been followed by some sort of communication from the Spirit of God that he loves me, some statement of God that he is with me, that he is my intimate, that he will sustain me, that he cares for me. Real repentance, I believe, brings the voice of God in response, caring for us, building us up, giving us a sense of the rightness of what we have done and of his power to sustain. It is very much like Jesus' last statement to his disciples in Matthew 28. Having commissioned them, he said to them, "Do not forget that I am with you always, even to the end of the age." There is that great statement of God that it is not up to us to bring it off, that he is there in our midst and that he cares about us.

Then finally, repentance and the word of comfort from the Lord results in action. The people met, they brought their tools and they began the project they should have begun eighteen years earlier. We can almost sense the camaraderie among the people whose names are listed. We can sense that the boredom, the dryness and self-centeredness, the fear and security-mindedness that has characterized the people being replaced by a sense of doing something important and having brothers and sisters involved together in it. All of the valuable things in life

take place under those circumstances. You are together with people you care about; you are doing something that is worth doing; you have a sense of God's approval; you are shoulder-to-shoulder with others. I look back on such times in my own life with fondness and delight.

Haggai's announcement, analysis and answer of the problems of his age have application to our time. The end of the year is when our people are most emotionally and spiritually sensitive, when their own failures stand out more starkly as they review the year just past. Their attempts to live up to the light of Christmas have often ended in failure; they see themselves as they really are, and they look at the future and wonder what it holds for them. This is a time of year when there is a heightened sense of what it means to be human, and a heightened sense of our inadequate efforts. Thus the message of Haggai speaks to our circumstances.

We have the opportunity to determine to become wise enough to live life in a way that reflects the truth of God, and to offer help to the people around us. The world needs Qoheleths, people who can speak as he spoke, who can offer help, who can be there to provide direction, supply, encouragement and insight. Our own lives need that kind of examination and those who depend on us need it. I hope we will take up the challenge. I hope we will be the kind of people who will shine as lights in a world where the darkness seems darker than ever, a world where there is less lip service paid to Christianity and, therefore, more need for real Christianity.

Lord, we do not know how to thank you as we should. We realize that though the world often feels that it has left behind its Christian period, we recognize, as the prophet has taught, that it is in the most desperate need of spiritual reality, of the wisdom and knowledge of God. We pray, Lord, that you will use us to live and speak as we ought, and to minister to others. In Jesus' name. Amen

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