

A Fearless Forecast

by Steve Zeisler

"Trust and Obey " the title of a well known hymn highlights the essential business and great challenge of what it means to be a Christian. Those words also summarize the message of the prophet Haggai whose book we began to study last week. I have a friend who thinks that one of the great challenges of the Christian life is to be able to find the book of Haggai in the Bible. If you are like him you will want to turn to the first book in the New Testament and go back three books. There it is the third to last book in the Old Testament the book of Haggai.

In Hag.1 we learned of Haggai's call to the exiles who had returned from the seventy years of captivity in Babylon. There the prophet directed them to obey to begin to do the thing that God had clearly indicated they ought to do- which was to rebuild the temple which had lain desolate and in ruins for decades. They had procrastinated for eighteen years until Haggai's word finally galvanized them to action. They repented of seeking first their own interests and began as they ought to have done in the first place to seek first the things of God: the kingdom of God, and his righteousness. So we could say that the theme of Hag.1 is obedience. The exiles were called to obey the Lord and do the work he had called them to do.

Chapter 2 of the book highlights the exiles' need to trust God even though trusting him may seem foolish even though all the visible evidence might make such trust in God seem frightening. They were to stretch themselves out on the promises of God and deny the gainsayers the whisperings and the pressure to trust someone else. The theme of Hag.2 therefore is trust, having faith in God, believing his word. Here we will see that God looks realistically at the difficulty we have in trusting him. He knows our weakness in this area our to go it alone yet he encourages us to move forward and trust him anyway. Hag.2:1:

On the twenty-first of the seventh month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet saying, "Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people saying, 'Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison? But now take courage.' "Zerubbabel," declares the Lord, "take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage," declares the Lord, "work; for I am with you," says the Lord of hosts. "As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!" For thus says the Lord of hosts, "Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. And I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations; and I will fill this house with glory," says the Lord hosts. "The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine," declares the Lord of hosts. "The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former," says the Lord of hosts, "and in this place I shall give peace," declares the Lord of hosts.

The question God raises in Hag.2:3 recognizes one of the main problems that confronted the exiles. They were about to begin rebuilding the temple but they had to work with inferior materials, including broken rocks, scarred timber, and other leftovers from the previous temple. A group of old-timers who had seen the glory of Solomon's temple before the exile to Babylon were questioned "Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison?" Evidently these old-timers were kibitzing as the work began commenting on how ordinary dull and inadequate was the new temple by comparison. If the returned exiles could only have seen Solomon's temple, they said, built by the finest craftsmen of his day, built with the great wealth that Solomon controlled they would be ashamed of the current version they were trying to erect.

That is one of the problems that assails the life of faith and the Lord is very realistic about it. Every generation feels the weight of the success of previous generations of their fathers and their leaders and those who taught them. Every generation struggles with this.

An example in our day of this phenomenon (young people sensing their own failure when compared to previous generations) would be the experience of parenting. You may have taken out the old family photo albums at Christmas and were challenged by the snapshots of the great extended families of a generation or two ago of the greybearded grandfathers, the grandmothers, parents, children and grandchildren of another era. You looked at pictures of mothers who stayed home with their children because they took parenting very seriously mothers who did not have to face the tremendous pressure this generation faces to not give the job of parenting top priority in their lives. Their success as parents puts a tremendous weight on today's parents who live in a world of extraordinary economic and cultural pressures such as the pressure to place children in day-care centers, etc. It would seem that their successes belittle the work of today's parents. We are afraid that our children will turn out to be emotionally stunted, that they will miss out on opportunity, that this generation's inadequate parenting will be our greatest shame. I talk to people of my age all the time who battle that feeling. Whether it be the economics of the day the feminist movement or for whatever constellation of reasons, today's parents fear failure; they look at other generations and feel weighed down. They are constantly reminded by the old people kibitzing from the sidelines "We never did it that way; parenting wasn't like that in our age." All of us in every generation hear voices from the past which make us feel inadequate, discouraged, failures.

That was how the exiles felt as Haggai preached to them. The problem was that in their case it was not merely a psychological trip, it was true: the temple they were building was crummy compared to Solomon's. The building materials were less expensive; the workmanship was shoddy by comparison. This could not be shrugged off as some kind of psychological trauma; it was a fact. They somehow had to be able to deal with that and still be faithful to the Lord, still be able to trust the Lord, given the fact that their work was less than the work of an earlier age. So the Lord said some exciting things to minister to them in this time of seeming failure. I hope that God's encouraging words will be exciting for us too, that they will strengthen us for the task of trusting him in the midst of our circumstances.

Having perceived their problem, God's word to the exiles was, "Take courage and work; for I am with you," says the Lord of hosts. "As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!" "God harkens back to the time of the Exodus, the time of the birth of Israel as a nation, when he promised that he would be with his people. He goes all the way back to the earliest generation, and says, in effect, "I am with you in your age, fighting your battles as surely as I ever was with Moses in the Exodus, or Solomon in building his temple. However far back you want to go, I am with you as completely now as I ever was in the past. I am committed to you. I know what you are going through. I know that this age has different pressures, fears and demands than past ages. But take courage. Don't be afraid. I'm with you just as I was with the spiritual giants of yesterday. Do what I tell you to do; accept the priorities that I am giving you at this time; work on the work that I have called you to because I am with you."

Secondly, God reminds the exiles, as they are hearing of the glories of Solomon's temple, that our God is a world shaker. He makes things happen in dramatic, unexpected ways. Merely because things appear to be in a particular way at the moment is no guarantee that they will remain that way. Haggai 2:6:

For thus says the Lord, "Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens, the earth, the sea, the dry land. And I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of nations; and I will fill this house [the one they were working on] with glory," says the Lord of hosts.

This promise was fulfilled in a remarkable way a few years before the birth of Christ. Then, a violent, evil man, Herod the Great, spent a small fortune expanding, refurbishing and making beautiful again the work that they had begun in 520 BC. Herod fulfilled the promise of Hag.2:7, that "the wealth of all nations" would be brought to the temple. Herod was the son of Arabian and Edomite people. He ruled at the behest of the power of Rome. His wealth came in part from taxes raised in Egypt, Syria, and the nations surrounding Israel, so he represented the wealth of the nations of his day. God led Herod, an unrighteous man, to expand on the work of the exiles so that what they began did in fact later result in a magnificent building.

The most penetrating statement of that section is the last phrase in Hag.2:9. Not only will the house itself be beautiful again, but "in this place I shall give peace," declares the Lord of hosts. "In that temple, made beautiful by Herod, the curtain that forever stood between God and man, between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, was torn asunder by the death of Christ. Every obstacle that had ever existed between God and the sons and daughters of Adam was taken away the day Christ was crucified. Our Lord shakes things, changes things, overturns powers and rattles the most secure foundations of our behalf. If you feel that the enterprise given to you is small compared to that given the spiritual giants who went before you, if you find it hard to believe that the work you have been called to do is important compared to great ones in other ages and other areas, then this message is for you. "Take courage for I am with you." And God is with his people in every age. He is a world shaker. Who can know the outcome of choices we are making? How can we possibly guess at what he will do, how he will take what we have accomplished as he has directed us and what he might make of it? There is no way to anticipate that.

Next, Haggai goes on to speak of other discouraging pressures that bear on us because we are required to trust God. Hag.2:10:

On the twenty-fourth of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Haggai the prophet saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Ask now the priests for a ruling: If a man carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and touches bread with this fold, or cooked food, wine, oil, or any other food, will it become holy?'" And the priests answered and said, "No." Then Haggai said, "If one who is unclean from a corpse touches any of these, will the latter become unclean?" And the priests answered and said, "It will become unclean." Then Haggai answered and said, "'So is this people. And so is this nation before Me," declares the Lord, "and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean. But now, do consider from this day onward: before one stone was placed on another in the temple of the Lord, from that time when one came to a grain heap of twenty measures, there would be only ten; and when one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there would be only twenty. I smote you and every work of your hands with blasting wind, mildew, and hail; yet you did not come back to me," declares the Lord. "Do consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month; from the day when the temple of the Lord was founded, consider: Is the seed still in the barn? Even including the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree, it has not borne fruit. Yet from this day on I will bless you."

Here the prophet highlights two things in this somewhat obscure (to us) language. First, he asks for a theological ruling from the priests. He says, "Suppose a priest is carrying holy meat in the fold of his garment and brushes against oil or wine or some other thing, can holiness be transmitted?" The priests respond, "No, it cannot." "What about defilement, then?" asks Haggai. "Suppose one who is unclean from a corpse touches these things, can defilement be transmitted?" They answer, "Yes. Defilement is easily transmitted."

Here the Lord is recognizing that one of the great difficulties for us as we are called to trust him, to live the life of faith, is that the momentum is all downhill. Wickedness seems to spread like wildfire. Temptation grows at a touch. It is very easy to learn evil from someone, to respond to the influence of others to do wrong. The human race is prone to this. Righteousness, however, requires that a battle be fought every time. Every act of trust in God must be made on an individual basis. Every choice to believe him results from an act of the will, and that choice must be repeated again and again. You can catch disease from someone but you cannot catch health from him. You cannot hitchhike on somebody else's righteous behavior. Romans 1 traces the terrible decline and fall of Adam's

race. What began with ingratitude ended up with perversity, violence and defilement on every side. And it comes so easily, so naturally. God recognizes very clearly that he is calling us to trust him and to believe his word in an age when all the momentum would seek to easily sweep us downhill, away from God. The race of man, begun so gloriously in a garden, will end in a bloodbath on the plain of Armageddon. Everything points downhill, to decline. This flies in the face of our ability to trust God. How easy it would be for us to follow the declining slope and go with the momentum.

Next, in analyzing the situation, Haggai asks some questions about the resources which the builders had on hand. The voices from the past belittle and discourage them; the momentum toward the future thrusts them to where they do not want to go; and by measuring the current and present resources they are also discouraged. Haggai says, "You go to take twenty measures of grain and you find only ten; you go to take fifty measures of wine and there is only twenty. You survey the fields, hoping that the new crop will sustain you, and you discover that the seed is still in the barn. When you measure the resources on hand there is nothing to encourage you." You may feel that way about your life. You may have looked at your resources—your finances, your social ability, your charisma, your background, your education—and measured all that you possess against the tasks set before you by God and felt the same lack. "The seed is still in the barn." Haggai's analysis is very realistic. God is not fooled. God is not asking us to trust him, not knowing what we are up against.

Yet all through this passage the statement is repeated, "But consider from today onward" Finally, in Hag.2:19, God completes the sentence, "Consider from this day on, I will bless you." Not because they could expect it, not because they had any right to it, not because they had earned it, but because God said so. In his irresistible grace, God determined to bless us, not because the circumstances would indicate that it ought to happen, but purely because he determined to bring life where there was death, to bring hope where there was hopelessness, to give where there was lack. There was only one condition that God determined to do it. He is calling us to trust him because he will act to bless us in spite of what our measurements would indicate the future holds for us.

Let us summarize what Haggai is getting at in these verses. He has heard the voices from the past commenting on the current situation. But God knows that it is discouraging to measure ourselves against the great, faithful ones who have gone before. What about the present then? Was there any hope as they measured their present resources? No, there was no hope there either. Then he asks, "What about the momentum for the future?" That's no good either; it is discouraging when we "look at how easily defilement is transmitted." Yet, in the midst of all this realism, God says, "Trust me anyway. Trust me because I am with you. Don't be afraid. Trust me because I'm a world shaker. You can never anticipate my actions. Trust me, because when I determine to bless there will be blessing." "Trust me," is the heart of this message.

The most remarkable section in the whole book comes at the end. Here again the theme is trust in God. Hag.2:20:

Then the word of the Lord came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month saying, "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah saying, 'I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. And I will overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the power of the kingdoms of the nations; and I will overthrow the chariots and their riders, and the horses and their riders will go down, every one by the sword of another. On that day,' declares the Lord of hosts, 'I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, my servant,' declares the Lord, 'and I will make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you,' declares the Lord of hosts.

This last message of the prophet does not come to the people as a whole; it comes to one man only. Here God has a word for one individual, Zerubbabel, the political leader of his people at this time, who was charged with the responsibility to lead them in the difficult work God had called them to do.

You may have noticed a curious literary feature about this book as we read through it: every time this man, Zerubbabel is mentioned, except once, he is given a title. You would think that in a short two-chapter book that once he had been identified the writer would have proceeded to call Zerubbabel by his proper name, or even by a shortened version. Haggai did not need to keep retitling him all the time. But the prophet insists on giving this man a title each time he mentions him. In Hag.2:21, God says, "Speak, Zerubbabel governor of Judah" (that is the first of his titles); then in Hag.2, God says, "On that day I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel (that is his other title) my servant, and make you like a signet ring." What is happening in this last paragraph is that God is taking the man, Zerubbabel, of the first title and changing his name to the man, Zerubbabel, of the second title. God is saying, "I will take you, governor of Judah, and make you Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel."

Zerubbabel was the governor of Judah in that he was the servant of Darius, emperor of Persia. As such, he was a Persian vassal. He held his position tenuously, and had to perform successfully to keep it; he had to answer to the big boss back in the capital. Zerubbabel could not afford to fail. His title was derived from who the world said he was, in essence. The name, "son of Shealtiel," however, was the name which God had given him at birth, the one which God reiterates in this prophecy. If we investigate Zerubbabel's ancestry we find that he was a descendant of David. Therefore, in fact, Zerubbabel ought to have been king in Jerusalem, not the vassal governor of the Persian emperor. He ought to have been the most important man in the world in his day, because, as a descendent of David, the progenitor of the Messiah, he ought to have been king of the nation which pointed the rest of the world toward righteousness. He ought to have received all the glory and honor that went with being son of David, son of Shealtiel.

The problem which Zerubbabel faced as a leaderthe problem which most of us face as wellwas to determine what was his real identity. That is why this prophecy is so important. God was saying to Zerubbabel, in effect, "I am going to strike out the name the world has given you. I am going to make sure you are known only by the name I give you. Your identity is based on who I say you are, not on who the world says you are."

Think for a moment about having to derive your identity from your performance in the world. Your identity is given you because of some combination of physical beauty, social charm, job status, personal wealth, level of education, etc. The most successful person in this room is ranked below somebody else, however, while all of us have people ranked below us, some of them lean and hungry, anxious to claw their way to the top. We are always in danger of losing status, of falling further behind. We have to fight to get ahead, or even maintain, our position; we have to earn it day in and day out, we have to perform slavishly to retain the identity which the world has given us.

We can get even more personal. Maybe you are the son or daughter who was always less favored by your parents; some of you have had to live with that. Maybe you are the husband or wife who was rejected in a marriage; someone with whom you had been intimate set you aside. Maybe you are the ex-jock who never quite made it. Perhaps you are the slave of alcohol, of lust or of prejudice, and the world knows you by that title. Perhaps you are the employee who was passed over for promotion and are branded by those around you as such. Perhaps you are the physical body that used to be beautiful, or healthy; perhaps you are the physical body that never was either of those things. Perhaps you are a longstanding member of the "out" crowd, one who has always looked longingly at the inner circle of popular people but never could join. Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, Zerubbabel, the vassal of Darius, Zerubbabel, the servant of men: place your own name there and give yourself the title which the world has given you.

Yet, Haggai's word to Zerubbabel was that God would shake everything that required shaking, would burst apart every power structure, would overthrow every hand raised against him in order to insist that Zerubbabel realize

and believe just who he was in God's eyes. Zerubbabel and we too are God's servants, his sons and daughters, fellow-heirs with Christ, a holy priesthood, a royal nation, the light of the world. That is who God says we are; those are the titles by which he knows us.

The critical issue here is one of identity. Who do you believe you are? How do you react to circumstances in life? Do you believe you are the sons and daughters of God? Do you believe you are the younger brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ? Or do you wear the label the world gives you, the one you have to earn every day, the one you have to puff up and promote to sustain? The issue is, do we trust God? God is saying that he has a name, a title, for us, but we have got to believe him when he says who we are in fact. We have got to resist believing what the world says about us. This is critical. If we can believe that our identity is in Jesus Christ, in the righteousness of God in Christ, then we can believe God for everything else too; we can trust him for all the other things he has called us to trust him for. But it is crucial for us to realize that God is bound and determined to shake and overcome every power that would keep us from realizing, believing and living on the basis of the identity that he has given to us in our Lord.

The book of Haggai talks about obeying and trusting God. The critical thing we have to believe is what God says not merely about our past, present or future measurable resources, but what he says about us and who we are.

Catalog No. 3820

Haggai 2: 1-23

Second message

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Updated August 28, 2000.

[Back to Index Page](#)

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