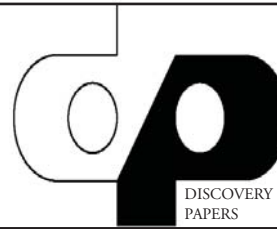


# REMODEL YOUR REALITY



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Haggai 1:1-15  
First Message  
Paul Taylor  
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**SERIES: A REALLY REAL GOD**

If God is real, then why doesn't he seem real all the time? Why do people write books like *The God Delusion* (1) and *god Is Not Great* (2)? If God is real, then why do people deny that he even exists? Why is it hard for Christians who profess to follow Christ to live as if he were real?

We're starting a four-week examination of the Old-Testament book of Haggai. The main theme woven through this entire book is the reality of the presence of God. Haggai deals with four different reasons that God often doesn't seem real to his people. And he reminds us that God is real. In fact, God is actually more real than those things around us that do seem real. True reality is often difficult to perceive. But God is a really real God!

Perhaps you've seen the *Star Wars* movies. In these stories there is a power called the Force. Now, the Force isn't God. Sometimes we can be tempted to think that way. But the Force reminds us of God in different ways. First, although the Force doesn't seem real to everyone in these stories, it is very real. And there are times when the Force suddenly seems more real than anything else. This is like God. Often God doesn't seem real, and yet we know and believe that he is real. In addition, there are times in our lives when we recognize the reality of God in new ways—he seems powerfully, unavoidably real.

So let's look at Haggai and see why God's people had a hard time remembering God was real and what we can learn about recognizing God's reality from them. In this message we'll be looking at Haggai 1:1-15.

## What distracts you from the reality of God

Let me briefly give you the historical context. Solomon the son of David was the third king of Israel. His greatest accomplishment was building a temple for God. Built to communicate God's majesty, power, and glory, the temple hummed with beauty. Solomon's temple invited the God of Israel to live in their midst. And he came. For a time, they seemed complete: a nation chosen by God, living in the land given by God, blessed with the very presence of God among them.

But one bad decision later, Solomon's son Rehoboam had split the kingdom: two kings, two nations, but one people of God. Successive kings only occasionally followed the God of their fathers. Their disobedience eventually caught up with them—first with those in the north. Assyria overtook the northern kingdom, and years later the Babylonians finished Israel off in the south. In a final crushing blow, the temple fell and the people were dispersed.

God's work in his people continued, but he was working in darkness now. The people lived in exile. The land God had given them had been taken; foreigners carried away the wealth of the temple that once celebrated the awesome presence of God. Israel remained the people of God, but they had lost every tangible reminder of their identity.

But as he had many times before, God chose someone to save them: the Persian king Cyrus. He released the Jews to return to their land. Only a remnant decided that leaving their relatively comfortable life in Persia and resettling Jerusalem sounded like a good idea. Cyrus gave the settlers permission to rebuild their temple. Soon they set out to re-invite their God to live among them, and the walls of the temple grew from the ground.

But after starting off well, they got distracted and stopped. So God chose a man to deliver a message to his people, to remind them of the importance of his presence. God spoke through Haggai. God gave Haggai four messages to motivate them to get back to work on the temple. These four messages were preached over the space of a few months during the year 520 BC, about sixteen years after they returned to the land.

Now, the book of Haggai is all about the temple. A lot of people downplay the book because it seems to be only about constructing a building. It tends to get preached at the start of church building programs. Well, that's not why we're looking at Haggai. But we have to ask, why was the temple so important for these people? Wasn't it just a building? And isn't God bigger than a building? Why all this fuss over the temple?

One of the answers to this question has to do with a phrase that occurs repeatedly in the book. It's a title for God that the NIV translates "LORD Almighty." Other versions usually translate it "LORD of hosts." One of the interesting things about this title is that it always seems to be used in passages of the Bible that talk about the temple. So it must have something to do with the temple.

This title is made up of the personal name for God, YHWH, and the word Sabaoth, which means hosts and often refers to armies: "YHWH of hosts." Who are these hosts? Well, in the ancient Near East, you would never think of a king alone. A king was always surrounded by his court and his military might. The king ruled, but the power of the king was dependent on those who made up his court, his hosts. So perhaps this title has to do with God as King, surrounded in heaven by his heavenly court and heavenly armies.

Now, what does this have to do with the temple? Well,

if you are familiar with the layout of the temple, you know that in the center of the temple was the holy of holies where the ark of the covenant was kept. On top of this ark were two cherubim with their wings stretched out. Archaeologists have discovered a fairly common representation of an ancient Near-Eastern throne consisting of two cherubim with their wings stretched out to form the back and seat of the throne. So it's likely that this is what the cherubim on the ark were. Consider how God is described in Isaiah 37:16: "O LORD Almighty [YHWH Sabaoth], God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth." If the cherubim formed a throne for God, then the holy of holies was the throne room of the Lord of hosts. That means that the temple was the place that made God's heavenly rule real on earth. The temple made God real to his people. It was a unique place on earth where the reality of God's spiritual kingdom intersected with the reality of the earth—two dimensions, if you will, intersecting in one place. Simply put, the temple was where heaven met earth.

That is why the temple was so important for Israel as the people of God. The temple was the physical, visible manifestation of God's presence. (This phrase is going to come up frequently throughout this series.) This is how Trygve Mettinger puts it:

*"To the Israelites, the temple was the place where the boundaries were surpassed, that is, where the dimensions of space were transcended. At one point in all existence, heaven and earth intersected. In the space of the temple, there was no absolute 'either-or.' Rather, in the temple heaven and earth were thought to be one. The temple was the earthly part of the heavenly reality." (3)*

The temple was a gift from God that made his reality and presence known to his people in a unique and powerful way. That's not to say God wasn't present everywhere, just that he was uniquely present in the temple.

We should be familiar with the idea that something can be more real at a given time. For instance, a professional football player is always a professional football player no matter where he is. But in the middle of a game, just as a play starts, he is a football player in a uniquely real way. In the same way, a husband and wife are always married, no matter where they are. But when they are engaging in sexual intimacy together, their marriage is made physically real in a unique way. If you are a follower of Christ, then you are a Christian no matter where you are, but when you gather together with a local body of believers, you are a Christian in a uniquely real way. In that sense the temple was the physical, visible manifestation of God's presence. It made God seem real to his people.

Now, the problem that Haggai addresses is that God's people didn't have the temple among them. God didn't seem real to them, and they were so distracted by other things in their lives that they didn't care. Let's read Haggai 1:1-5:

**In the second year of King Darius, on the**

**first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest:**

**This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'"**

**Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"**

**Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways."**

God criticizes his people because instead of working on rebuilding the temple, they were remodeling their own houses. They were distracted by other concerns that made God's presence seem unimportant. He tells them, "Give careful thought to your ways." This phrase is literally translated, "Set your heart on your ways." Look at how you're living and see if it corresponds to what you know to be real in your heart. You see, the earthly reality of their houses and how comfortable they were seemed more real to them than the heavenly reality of having God's presence among them. Haggai tells them, "It's not time to build your houses; it's time to build the house of God. It's not time to remodel your houses; it's time to remodel your reality."

Does this seem relevant to you at all? Do you ever feel this way? What things in your life distract you from the reality of God? Maybe it's remodeling your house, just as it was for the Israelites here. I've done some remodeling myself in the last couple of years. It's not that remodeling your house is wrong. But it is certainly one of the things that can distract you from God. There are plenty of others, too. Maybe it's the frantic schedule of activities and relationships that you are trying to maintain. Maybe it's hard times that you are going through that make God seem very unreal to you. Maybe you just don't see what difference God makes to your daily life.

I can get distracted from God's presence when I feel insecure or alone. Since I came on staff as the College Pastor at PBC in January, I've been trying to get up to speed on what it means to minister to college students in this area. So I've been spending some time on Stanford campus trying to connect with people there. And for me, being on the Stanford campus is a great experience. I graduated from there in 1999 and have a lot of good memories. So it's fun to be back on campus as a pastor now, and I'm really thrilled to be able to work in that environment. But it can also be a challenging place for me to be. I'm amazed at how only eight years (and three kids) after graduating, I already feel so much older and less connected with student life. So I feel insecure on campus about whether I'm connecting with students. I can become jealous of other campus ministers. Sometimes I feel they are making more connections than I am. So I just feel alone, and those feelings distract me from the reality of the presence of God.

But then I remember God. I get a glimpse of that really real God, and my reality gets remodeled. I still might feel alone and insecure, but I remember that there is a really real God who is directing my steps. And he might just be asking me to feel those things for the sake of ministering to students and connecting with people whom he loves. All of a sudden God seems really real to me.

## Pain reminds us of the reality of God

Now, the great thing about God is that he doesn't just criticize his people for forgetting him. He gives them reminders. Sometimes they aren't the type of reminders we want, but they serve the purpose nonetheless. In the midst of the people's distractedness, let's see what God does to get their attention in Haggai 1:6-11:

**“You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”**

**This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD. “You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands.”**

God's people were experiencing some difficult circumstances. They didn't have enough food to feel full or enough to drink to stop being thirsty, and their purses seemed to be full of holes. Then we find out that those hard times weren't just happening, but God himself was causing them. In fact, he was causing them in some pretty direct and possibly offensive ways. He tells them that what they brought home he blew away. He called for the drought. He caused the painful circumstance that they were facing. Why? Because they had forgotten him. So we see that God caused his people pain to remind them of his reality.

Now this may make you a little uncomfortable. It does me. The image of God actively working against me to cause me pain is disturbing. I can understand that this world is filled with pain, that pain is the effect of a fallen world. But the idea that God intentionally brings pain on his people in order that they might remember him, that he blows away the work of their hands, is a bit tricky to take in. But it's true. Pain reminds us of the reality of God.

Pain reminds us of what we're missing. I recently went on a backpacking trip for four days in western Arkansas, which turned out to be one of the most beautiful trails

I'd ever been on. One part in particular was exceptionally steep. So I noticed something interesting. On the steepest part of the trail, nothing in my body hurt. My feet felt fine, my ankles weren't sore. All I could focus on was my muscles straining and working hard. But after the steep part was an easy, flat section the next day. And all day, I was noticing hot spots on my feet, blisters forming, parts of my back that were sore. During the tough part, those things didn't seem to matter. But in the easy part, I couldn't help but notice them. They reminded me that I was still working. I might not have been working as hard as I had been, but I was still hiking through the woods with forty pounds on my back. That pain reminded me that I was doing something other than just sitting on my couch watching TV.

This is the way pain often works in our lives: it reminds us of something that we're missing. But let's be careful about attributing reasons for bad things in our lives. These people in Israel had a prophet from God to verify that their drought was caused by their disobedience in failing to rebuild the temple. Unless you are a recognized prophet of God, avoid attributing any of your pain or someone else's pain to a particular sin. We can't know the specifics of why certain things happen to us. But at the same time, all pain can remind us that in this world, we are missing something of the presence of God that we all earnestly long for. So whether God has directly caused our pain or not, it can remind us that we need the presence of God in our lives. Pain can help us ask, what would it look like to remodel our reality? We need to keep in mind that remembering God's presence rarely takes away our pain, but that he is our Companion in the midst of it.

I've been suggesting that pain reminds us of what is incomplete in our experience. That's what the drought did for the Israelites. But they also had another reminder that there was something about the presence of God that they were missing: the unfinished walls of the temple. Something in the world is “off” when things are left undone. Unfinished work should make us a bit uncomfortable. It reminds us that something in our experience of God's presence is incomplete. May we long for its ultimate completion.

## Let's get to work

We've seen God criticize his people for being distracted from the reality of his presence. And we've seen that pain can be something that reminds us of the importance of God's presence. Now we'll see how the people responded to Haggai. Let's read verses 12-15:

**Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.**

**Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: “I am with**



**you,' declares the LORD." So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius.**

Twenty-three days after hearing Haggai's message, the remnant in Israel responded by obeying the voice of the Lord. The Lord stirred up their spirits, and they got up to do the work he had commanded. And in the midst of their response God's voice came crashing through again, this time not with a rebuke, but with a simple reminder: "I am with you." God was present among his people. Building the temple was the way that the remnant recognized his presence, what made him real in their midst.

What does it mean for us to build the temple, for us to get to work? If the temple was the physical, visible manifestation of God's presence for his people, what is that today? Where do heaven and earth meet in our experience? What does it look like for us to remodel our reality?

I want to answer those questions on three levels. The first level is the one where we tend to start, although it may be the least significant for Biblical writers: How do we respond individually? I suggest that it means thinking carefully about the ways we live our life, about what reminders we have of God's presence in our life, and cultivating those reminders. In what situations do you tend to forget that God is present? Is it at work? When you are busy? When you are tired? When things get really tough in your marriage? The sad truth is that I think we tend to forget God's presence when we need him the most. So what are the things in your life that tend to remind you of God's presence? What is the temple for you? Is it a place, a spiritual practice, a relationship? What does it look like for you to focus on that? What does it look like for you to get to work remodeling your reality?

The second level on which to answer that question comes directly out of the first. Part of what the church is for, part of why we gather together for worship services and gather together in small fellowship groups, is precisely to do this for each other—to remind each other that God is real, to speak into each other's lives about the reality of God. This is not just a side function of the church. This is part and parcel with the very heart of God as to what it means to be the church.

You see, for the Israelites, the temple was the physical, visible manifestation of God's presence. But the temple is part of a history of things that God has used to make himself seem real. When the Israelites left Egypt, God made himself real to them through the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21-22). And then in the New Testament Jesus referred to himself as the temple (John 2:18-22). Jesus, walking around as a man, fully God but fully human, became the temple of

God—the physical, visible manifestation of God's presence to his people (John 1:18; 14:7-11). God made himself real so that people on earth could know him. Jesus came to earth, made God known, and then sacrificed himself so that all people could know God. Jesus came to earth as the completion of the temple that we've been talking about. He made God known. Now, when Jesus ascended into heaven after his death and resurrection, did the presence of God leave with him? No, it expanded.

With the coming of the Holy Spirit, the church became the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). We as the gathered people of God are the physical, visible manifestation of God's presence (Matthew 18:20; John 17:20-23). There's a children's song that goes,

*"The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple,*

*The church is not a resting place, the church is the people!" (4)*

The Spirit of God indwells the church and we make God real.

Finally, in heaven, in the new Jerusalem, God's presence will ultimately fill the earth without need for a temple (Revelation 21). We'll talk more about that as we progress through the book of Haggai.

For now let's talk a bit more about how we as the church make God seem real. As I mentioned, we make God's presence real to each other. We remind one other of God in the midst of a world that tempts us at every turn to forget that he is with us. We see each other and speak into each other's lives, to say as Haggai said, "I am with you,' declares the LORD." And so we are the physical, visible manifestation of God's presence to each other.

But the third level of application has to do with how we as the church interact with the world. As the church, we're not just the presence of God to each other, we're the presence of God to the world. We make God real to world. We remind the world that God exists. The question for us as a church is, how are we making God's presence real in this world? Don't misunderstand: the church *is* making God real to the world.

For instance, PBC's church-wide commitment to putting together a thousand AIDS caregiver kits for World Vision's AIDS ministry in Africa makes God's presence real to those people. This is the heart of the vision behind that effort: the whole church's coming together to make God's presence real amidst the AIDS crisis where God seems very distant. Another example is our recovery ministry. It makes God's presence real in the midst of life circumstances that make God seem very unreal. Our short-term missions trips take the reality of God to other parts of the world. Our youth ministries dive into a life stage in which God doesn't seem real and reminds our young folks that he is real. We need to do some more thinking as a church about how we connect families and youth to make God seem real amidst all the pressures of this culture in which God seems so far away.

But what else is there for us as a church? How else

are we called to make God's presence real? Who are the people in our community for whom God seems very unreal, very distant? How do we come alongside them to remind them of God's reality? How do we become a physical, visible manifestation of God's loving presence in their lives? What does that look like for us a church? Do we speak about God's presence in a language that people understand? What do people feel when they come here? Are they made aware of the presence of God? What can we do to make that more the case? I'm excited to say that those in leadership at PBC have been thinking and praying and wrestling through various forms of these questions, and we will keep doing it. But you're a part of that. What are the specific ways that you think God might be calling the church to make God real to the world?

In Haggai's first message we learn that God doesn't always seem real, but he is real. And there are things in our lives that break through our normal experience to make God seem unavoidably real at a given moment. We've seen how God's people can be distracted by what seems more real than God, and how God can use pain in our lives to remind us of what we've forgotten: his presence in our lives. We've asked what it means for us to get up and work—to make God real in our own lives, to each other as a church, and to the world. We can block out the distractions of what seems real in order to focus on what is real. We remodel our reality in hopes that we would say together and lead others in the world to say, "I *did* experience God, he *is* real."

### Notes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, © 2006, Bantam Books, New York, NY.
2. Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, © 2007, Warner Books, New York, NY.
3. Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, *In Search of God*, © 1988, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA. P. 131.
4. Richard Avery and Donald Marsh, *We Are the Church*, © 1972, Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL.

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