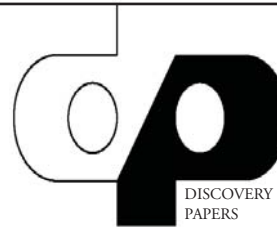


DON'T BELIEVE IN YESTERDAY

SERIES: A REALLY REAL GOD



Catalog No. 5236
Haggai 2:1-9
Second Message
Paul Taylor
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Yesterday: what does that word evoke in you? Fond memories? Painful times? Relief that a difficult season is past? Excitement about today? Sadness that what you once had was lost? In this message we're going to be talking about yesterday. Remember the Beatles' song that went, "Oh, I believe in yesterday." (1) I'm sure you have a lot of different emotions about your past, but you probably feel that in some way the past was better.

We're continuing our series in Haggai. We'll be talking about how the remnant of Israelites who were supposed to be rebuilding the temple got paralyzed in their attitude toward today because of their nostalgia for yesterday. We'll see how God reminds them about how to think about today in light of yesterday and tomorrow.

I would suggest that God is telling us we shouldn't believe in yesterday. There is a way of thinking about the past that poisons the present. I'm going to call that nostalgia. Now, remembering the past isn't wrong. In fact, we're going to see that God reminds his people of the past as a way of encouraging them in the present. But nostalgia, that deep longing for the past that prefers the past over the present, is what makes you unable to engage with what is going on here and now. Let's look at Haggai 2:1-9.

The poison of nostalgia

In our last study (Discovery Paper 5235) we learned that Haggai is a series of four messages from God to a remnant of Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from exile in order to rebuild the temple and resettle their land. We looked at the first message in which God encouraged them to get back to work after they had stopped their efforts. They quickly responded in obedience. The second message comes about seven weeks after the first message, about a month after the remnant resumed work on the temple. Verses 1-3:

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?'"

God asks his people a question. They were trying to rebuild the temple Solomon had built originally, which was glorious, unparalleled in beauty and extravagance. God asks them whether any of them actually remember the glory of Solomon's temple. Now that temple had been

destroyed about sixty-six years earlier. So there were probably some people who did remember it, but they would have been few. Most of them grew up in exile hearing stories and legends about the grandeur of the temple without having seen it. But it was clear to these people that what they were building now would not compare to the former temple. So they got discouraged and lost motivation to work on it.

A similar scene had taken place seventeen years before Haggai's messages and before the people's loss of motivation to work on the temple. They had just returned from exile and had begun the rebuilding of the temple. On the occasion of the completion of the foundation, there was a dramatically mixed response from the people, recorded in Ezra 3:12-13:

"But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away."

Some people were completely discouraged because the temple didn't look like the former temple, and right alongside them, other people were excited because they had just completed a major victory for God's people—the temple foundation had been rebuilt. That was probably similar to what was happening when Haggai's second message came.

The language here is very strong. God compares three things: the current temple they're working on, the former temple, and nothingness. He says that these people thought the current temple had more in common with nothingness than it did with the temple of Solomon's day. In their eyes, God's work in the present looked more like emptiness, a void, failure, nothing. It wasn't the presence of God that they remembered.

We talked in our last study about how the temple was the physical, visible manifestation of the presence of God for his people. The temple made God real. What the people were saying now was that this new temple wasn't the presence of God—it was the absence of God. And God has a problem with that. He doesn't like being overlooked while he's standing right there.

When I was in college I had long hair—past my shoulders. I was known by my long hair. But the day that I first got it cut, when I walked around campus, I could walk by people I had known for years and they didn't recognize me. They didn't even turn to look at me. I felt

completely invisible. It was amazing. And that is how the people were treating God here. They were saying he was nowhere to be found, but he was standing right there. So he gets upset about it.

Now what God does acknowledge is that things change, and that there are different seasons in the ways he works. The physical, visible manifestation of the presence of God on earth has pretty frequently changed in form and details. When God led his people out of Egypt, he did so as a pillar of cloud and a pillar of flame (Exodus 13:21-22). And in the new heavens and new earth, his presence will fill the earth: the earth will be his temple (Revelation 21). The form of God's presence changes.

So the new temple didn't look as nice as the old one. It was okay to acknowledge that this temple looked different from the previous temple, and that in certain ways it was inferior to the previous temple. But it was not okay to deny that God was present in this new temple, and it was not okay to poison the effort on the present temple through nostalgia for what was past. The poison of nostalgia is allowing a preference for the past to ruin your experience of the present.

Let's think about what this has to do with us. I think there are some very clear ways that we can see this happening in our lives, first as individuals, and then in the life of our church. As individuals, we live through different seasons, and things in our lives change. I remember the time when I stopped wanting to look older and starting wanting to look younger. Why do we never want to look our age, but always younger or older? There is a time when the past becomes more attractive to us than the present or the future. And that often happens because of realities that are painful and difficult to handle. Our health declines as we get older. Our physical appearance declines. Life often gets more painful as we live longer and experience more hard times of our own and see those we love go through hard times. And so as we age, we can look wistfully at the past because it seems as if things were better then.

In college I remembered how easy high school was. Right after college I got married and remembered how much freedom I had in college. A few years into marriage we started having kids, and then I remembered how much freedom we had as a married couple without kids. So sometimes I look at young couples without kids and wish for those days again. But think about how that nostalgia could poison my children. How would they feel to know that Daddy wished for the days when they weren't around?

What are you nostalgic for? A time when you sensed God's presence more than you do now? Before you had kids? Before your kids left home? Before you lost your spouse? Before your best friend died? It's okay to acknowledge painful losses. We need to grieve as we go through transitions. But don't let nostalgia poison your ability to enter into the present.

This type of nostalgia can also poison us as a church. We have the privilege of being part of a church with a rich

heritage. God has used Peninsula Bible Church powerfully in the history of the Bay Area and the world. This church was part of a dynamic movement of God's Spirit and a redefinition of what it meant to be a church. There was a time when the world looked at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, CA and wanted to know what we were doing that God was using so powerfully. But things change. It's not that God isn't working powerfully through this church anymore. But this church isn't drawing the attention it used to. How do we deal with that? That's a hard thing for a church to go through. Does that mean we're doing something wrong? It could mean that, but it doesn't have to. The answer is not to try to replicate the past, but to ask what God is doing in the present. Maybe it's not God's will for this church to draw others' attention now. Maybe he has something different for us.

But there can sometimes be a discouragement among us, a feeling that God isn't working here anymore. And that is poisonous. It mirrors what the remnant felt in Haggai's day. Because God's presence here today doesn't look like his presence in some earlier time, people can draw the conclusion that God is no longer present. They may feel that what is happening now bears more resemblance to God's absence than to his earlier presence. Today is like nothing in their sight. Some people say this using very strong language: "It feels like the Spirit of God has left." Well, Haggai tells us that's not true. The Spirit of God hasn't gone anywhere.

Now at the same time that some people in this church feel nostalgic for the way things used to be, others who are newer here are just excited for what God is doing. It's like the picture in Ezra of the ones who remembered the former temple weeping and others celebrating the work of God. For those who are just thrilled to be here and can hardly believe the powerful ways that God is moving in this church and in their lives, praise God! They have come to a church with a history to share, and what we need to learn as a church is how to share that history in such a way that we can celebrate what God is doing now in light of what he has done in the past. That's exactly where Haggai goes next.

Remember the past to motivate the present

We've been talking about a type of nostalgia that poisons the present. So you may be thinking, "Here's a young pastor telling us that we should forget the past and just look to the future, that there's nothing worth remembering." That's the attitude that some young people have, but it's not what Haggai teaches, and it's not what I'm advocating. Instead, in Haggai God teaches his people to remember the past in a way that motivates them in the present. Verses 4-5:

“But 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, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD

Almighty. ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’”

In the midst of their discouragement, God commands his people to be strong and continue to work building the temple in the knowledge that his presence is still among them. And because God affirms that he is present, they are able to work on the physical, visible manifestation of his presence among them.

To encourage them, God reminds them of his presence with them in the past. This passage is soaked with references to past times in the life of the nation of Israel. He reminds them that he is with them now in the same way that he was with them when he led them out of Egypt. He reminds them that he made a covenant with them at that time promising his continued presence among them. The language of these verses would also take the Israelites immediately back to God’s promise to Joshua forty years after the exodus when they were finally taking possession of the land God had given them. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9.) God speaks the same words here that he spoke to Joshua back then. And it is no coincidence that the high priest here is named Joshua. Do you see what God is doing? He is telling them that he is with them now as he was then. He is teaching them to look back at the past, not with a wistful sort of nostalgia that prefers the past and poisons the present, but with a memory of God’s faithful acts in the past that will motivate their work in the present.

Perhaps we can think of our lives as a journey through time. We start off in one place and we gradually move from that place to other places. Parts of the journey seem fast and exciting, like driving down winding roads from the foothills into the valley. Other parts seem like driving through the interstates of west Texas where you can drive for twelve straight hours and still be in the same state. (I’ve done it—it’s a very boring ride.) But each new part of our journey is built on the last part. To look backward and wish for the part that was past is to travel in circles. It doesn’t lead anywhere. We are where we are today only because of where we’ve been. Wishing for a previous part of the path does violence to the journey for today.

How can we live this way individually and as a church? How can we remember the past in a way that motivates the present? We need to remember that it won’t look the same, and it might be so different that we don’t even recognize it as the work of God. But he is present among us. He is working in and through our church. For those who are discouraged because things at Peninsula Bible Church don’t look the way they used to, that is a hard thing to feel. I know that feeling. And it’s okay to acknowledge that God is working in a different way today than he has in the past. But don’t fall into the trap of thinking that God isn’t working here, that his Spirit has left. He hasn’t.

The Spirit of God is here in this place today, just as he was when this church was founded as Peninsula Bible Fel-

lowship in 1948. The Spirit of God is among us today, just as he was when Ray Stedman came to pastor this church in 1950. The Spirit of God is here today, just as he was when Body Life thrived in the 1960’s. The Spirit of God is with us today, just as he was when John Fischer and Ron Ritchie and Dave Roper and Glen Pickett came to this church. The Spirit of God is in our midst today, just as he was when Ray Stedman retired in 1990 and passed away in 1992. The Spirit of God is here with us today, just as he was when Doug Goins preached in this pulpit. The Spirit of God is here in this place today, just as he was when Danny Hall preached in this pulpit.

So the question for us is twofold. First, what does it look like to talk about God’s faithfulness in a way that assumes that he will continue to be present among us and faithful in our midst just as he has throughout the history of his people? I would suggest that it has a lot to do with the way we talk about the past and the way we look at the present. If the present looks like nothing in your sight, then you need to rethink how you look at the present, because God’s Spirit is here. And if you talk about the past in a way that makes it clear you’d rather be living then than now, then you need to rethink how you talk about the past. Can you talk about what God has done in a way that celebrates what he is doing? Can you remember the past in a way that motivates us in the present? This isn’t just a word for people who were there. It can also be a temptation for those of us who came after the “glory days” of this church to wish things were still like that. But we need to overcome that. We as a church need to talk about the past in a way that motivates us for today.

The second question to ask is, what is the work that God is calling us to do in the present? We talked about this in our previous study, but it is worth bringing up again. What does it mean for us to have courage, not fear, and work? How do we work on the physical, visible, manifestation of God’s presence in our world? How do we make God real in a church where he doesn’t always feel real? How do we make God real in a world where he rarely feels real?

Last week I asked folks to write reflections on what has been the manifestation of God in their lives. I’d like to share some of these so we can see how God has made himself real in our midst. Perhaps they might give us some insight into what it means for us to “work on the temple.”

“My wonderful wife. She’s a reminder to me every day of God’s amazing love and that he is the giver of all good things.”

“God’s sustaining me through divorce and being a single parent. He pulls me from depression.”

“When I am preaching God to the people, God is really real to me, especially when people accept Jesus as their Savior. It’s the work of the Holy Spirit—God is present!”

“The way he led me to the church, how I met people who helped me.”

“My rheumatoid arthritis—it makes me aware of the

need to slow down, and of God's sustaining me when I think I can't keep up."

"The durability of hope. I can't give up belief and obedience even when the habits of Christian living seem hollow."

Our story moves forward

Now, God doesn't stop with just remembering the past to motivate the present. He also looks toward the future. Verses 6-9:

"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."

First God criticized the remnant of Israel for looking at his present work in a way that compared it to nothing. Then he reminded them that he is with them in the present in the same way that he was with them in the past. Now finally, he tells them they are part of a story that is moving forward, not backward, and that the best part of the story is still ahead.

If you think about your life as a journey, maybe the problem is that you don't know where you are going. Maybe you're not a follower of Christ and you don't know where your journey will end. Or maybe you are a follower of Christ, but the idea of heaven or some type of eternal future seems so abstract and far-off that it doesn't affect your mindset today. But as followers of Christ, our journey does have an ultimate destination, and it is worth moving toward. Our story moves forward. We have the promise of new heavens and a new earth. Let's allow that to draw us forward into the story.

God tells the Israelites that he will overcome the foreign powers they are living under. The riches of the world belong to him, and they will be brought into this temple that they are building. The glory of this temple will be greater, not less than that of the former temple.

What's interesting about this is that the temple that this remnant was building would never compare with the temple that Solomon had built. King Herod's remodeling of this temple five centuries later would be magnificent, but would last only a short time. That can't be what God is talking about here. So what does he mean when he says, "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house"? Well, there's a clue in the translation that might help us. The NIV makes it sound as if there are two houses, "this present house" and "the former house." But other translations read the Hebrew more accurately in pointing out that there is one house but two glories. For instance, the NASB reads, "The lat-

ter glory of this house will be greater than the former...." There is really only one house, one presence of God.

I think God is pointing out that the physical effort they were undertaking was part of his overall work of making his presence known in the world. The walls of that inferior temple were part of the manifestation of God's presence in Jesus that no one ever even considered (John 1:18; 2:18-22; 14:7-11). Those walls were part of the church as the temple of God that makes God real to each of us and to the world (Matthew 18:20; John 17:20-23; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Those walls were part of the new heavens and the new earth when there will be no need for a temple because the presence of God will fill the earth (Revelation 21). God is saying that their work is part of a larger story that is moving toward a dramatic climax that we haven't reached yet.

For us, our work today is part of that same story, moving forward toward a climax that we can only begin to imagine. Our work today is part of the temple of God's presence that will lead to the ultimate unveiling of God's presence in the new Jerusalem—the new heavens and the new earth. So we are motivated to work in the present because we are looking forward with hope to what God will do in the future.

But that doesn't necessarily mean that God will work in the future in the way we expect him to. The physical temple the Israelites were building never matched up to the glory of the former temple. The individual works that we are a part of may not match up with what we want them to be. Some ministry you are working in may die out. The small group that is the primary way you experience the presence of God may stop meeting. This church may someday not even exist. So I'm not promising you that God has great things in store for PBC and that we should all rally together to make them happen. But I am promising you that God has great things in store for the universal church, his work in the world, of which this church is a part. And so we should all rally together to take part in the work. That ministry or program or outreach that you participate in, this church that you attend, is part of a larger story. We don't know the shape of the hope, but we know to be hopeful. Even if the individual elements don't measure up to our expectations, we know that the big story is moving toward the presence of God in a new and powerful way. And as Haggai puts it in verse 9, it is moving toward peace.

Conclusion

We are called to work on the temple of God. We are called to take courage, to be strong, to not fear. We are called to not believe in yesterday. We do not let our memory of the movement of God in the past poison the present. Rather, we remember that the Spirit of God is here with us today. We remember God's faithfulness in the past, and we look forward to what he is doing in the future, and so we work—here, now, today. What does that mean for you? What does it mean for this church?

Notes

1. The Beatles, Yesterday, © 1965.

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