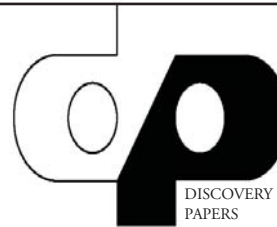


# THE DEMAND OF DISAPPOINTMENT

*SERIES: A REALLY REAL GOD*



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Haggai 2:10-19  
Third Message  
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When I was little I loved watermelon. It seemed like the coolest fruit. I think it may have been spitting the seeds that I really loved. My kids also love watermelon, only they don't call it watermelon, they call it juicy-melon. Every time we try to correct them and say it's actually called watermelon, we get corrected instead: "No, Mommy, no Daddy—it's juicy-melon." I actually like their name better, because it's more like juice than water inside anyway.

One time when I was a kid my parents agreed to let me plant my very own watermelons in a little garden that we had on the side of our house. So we bought some watermelon plants at the nursery and planted them. And I took care of those plants. I watched them, I watered them, I waited for them to grow. And soon enough I did get to see some growth: the plants grew larger and finally some fruit starting to appear—little tiny green balls. I waited for the little tiny green balls to become great big green watermelons. But they never did. They stayed tiny and green and there got to be more and more of them. Finally, my parents realized what was going on and had to break the news to me: somehow I had actually planted Brussels sprouts instead of watermelons! Nobody in my family even liked Brussels sprouts. Man, was I disappointed!

In this message we're going to talk about disappointment. We've all had to deal with disappointment in different situations: our jobs, our relationships, unforeseen circumstances. I think if we are honest with ourselves, we might admit that we can allow our disappointment to turn into demanding that we be treated better. Our hearts feel cheated and we insist that we deserve something more. This is what happened to the remnant of Israelites living in Jerusalem. We're going to discover how God responded to the demand of their disappointment and what he might be saying to us about our own hearts today.

You will recall that the book of Haggai is a collection of four sermons that the prophet Haggai preaches to a group of Jews who have returned from exile to resettle Jerusalem. The task before them is to rebuild the temple of their God, which we've been talking about as the physical, visible manifestation of God's presence with them. The temple makes God real to them. God has called them to rebuild the temple so they can experience more fully the reality of his presence in their midst. But they have faltered, gotten frustrated, and stopped working on the temple. So God gives Haggai these four messages to motivate them to finish what they've started. Today we're looking at the third message, found in Haggai 2:10-19.

Obedience doesn't guarantee blessing

I have to say at the outset that this is hands-down the

most difficult passage in Haggai to study. There are several places in the text where the Hebrew is very difficult to translate, there are some awkward phrases that don't seem to fit in, and there are some places where it is not clear exactly to whom he is referring. Various scholars have come up with theories to explain some of these problems. The most radical theory says that most of this section actually comes immediately after chapter 1 but was put in the wrong place in a very early copy of the Bible, and that error has never been fixed. There's no physical evidence to support this, but the theory caught on in academic circles, and a lot of people still believe this to be the case. I don't agree, but this is a hard passage. So I'll share with you what I've become convinced of after studying the passage, but there are other ways to interpret it that are certainly viable.

The passage begins with a legal quiz from God. He asks the people in Jerusalem some basic questions about the way the Mosaic Law works. Let's begin with Haggai 2:10-14:

On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Haggai: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?'"

The priests answered, "No."

Then Haggai said, "If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?"

"Yes," the priests replied, "it becomes defiled."

Then Haggai said, "'So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,' declares the LORD. 'Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.'"

The first legal test has to do with whether when something clean touches something unclean, the unclean thing becomes clean. The obvious answer is no. This is like asking, if I'm sick and you're healthy and you cough on me, do I get healthy? I'd love for this to be the case, but it isn't. Health isn't contagious.

The second legal test is basically the inverse of the first: if you become unclean by touching a dead body and then you touch something else, does what you touch become unclean? The answer is yes, absolutely. This is the way the world works: disease spreads, not health. Sickness is contagious. Dirtiness wins. In the game of life, dirt, disease,

and disorder don't play fair. They always win.

What immediately strikes me about this passage is the way that God is interacting with his people. This is God, the King of the universe, the creator of heaven and earth. He has asked his people to rebuild the temple, the earthly outpost of his rule from heaven. And here he is humoring them by engaging with them in a legal dispute. He doesn't just rebuke them, he explains himself to them in a way they would understand.

This makes me think of my four-year-old daughter and how often she corrects me. What is amazing to me is that she started correcting me before she turned three. I'd say something and she would say, "No, Daddy—that isn't the way it is," and would proceed to tell me how I was wrong. At this point everything she knew about the world had originated from me. She had no other source of knowledge apart from me. So how could she correct me? And yet I listened to her. I sat down on her level and listened to why she thought I was mistaken, and I explained whatever it was we were talking about to her in the best terms that I could so that she would understand. And I love talking through something with her on that level. I love her audacity!

This is what God is doing here. He is coming down and interacting with his people by giving them an example that they can understand. Everybody knows this: in a fight between dirty and clean, dirty wins. No question about it.

Then God concludes that his people are unclean. You see, they are a mix of obedience and disobedience. They feel as if they've been obedient to him because they've gotten back to work on the temple. But God says to them, "Don't think that your obedience to me wipes out your disobedience. Don't think that the clean thing of getting back to work erases the unclean thing of your heart. Don't think that your obedience guarantees blessing."

One of the reasons this passage of Haggai is so difficult is that in verse 14 he uses a word to refer to Israel that almost always refers to Gentiles in the Hebrew Scriptures. When God calls his people "this nation," he uses a word that immediately puts them in the category of the pagan nations around them. It's like a child's painting on the wall, and the mother's saying when the father comes home, "Look at what your son did today." He's no longer "our son"; he's "your son." God isn't referring to his people as his people here. He calls them "this people and this nation." Therefore, many scholars have concluded he can't possibly be talking about the faithful remnant of Israel, and they find ways to solve that problem. But I think God is referring to Israel using strong language to make a point: "Don't think, just because you've started to get back to work on the temple, that I owe you anything. On the whole, your disobedience still trumps your obedience. On the whole, you are still unclean to me."

Relationships aren't fair; they are free

Let's think back to what has been going on with these people. They are back in Jerusalem, and God has asked

them to rebuild the temple. They started and then they stopped. Four months earlier Haggai told them that the drought they were experiencing was directly caused by their disobedience in stopping the work of rebuilding the temple. A month after that, they responded by getting back to work. So presumably for the past three months they have been working on the temple. But what we learn from the next section of the passage is that things didn't change when they started working again. Let's read verses 15-19a:

"Now give careful thought to this from this day on—consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the LORD's temple. When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty. I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not turn to me," declares the LORD. 'From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid. Give careful thought: Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit.'"

Now we get to the heart of the disappointment that is driving the remnant in Jerusalem. They have gotten back to work on the temple, but there is still a drought. They have done what God asked them to; why hasn't he responded the way they thought he would? If their disobedience caused the drought, why hasn't their obedience stopped it?

I think we can understand their frustration. In that circumstance we would probably feel the same thing. I know I would. I think that is because of the way we tend to look at relationships, particularly our relationship with God. We tend to want our relationships to be fair. We tend to want equality on all sides. But what Haggai teaches us is a simple lesson, yet incredibly complex to learn: relationships aren't fair, they are free.

This is the lesson that the remnant has to learn, and this is the lesson that we have to learn. What's amazing is that even in the midst of learning this lesson myself, I'm responsible for teaching it to my kids. This comes up when my kids want something. Their natural response is to demand it. So it might go something like this: "Daddy, give me a cookie now!" And I might say something like this: "You can't have a cookie because you didn't ask nicely." I'm trying to teach my children that they can't demand something that they want. So the next day they might come to me and try to ask nicely: "Father, would you in your abundant kindness please grant my request for a delicious cookie?" And I might say, "Thank you so much for asking nicely, but I'm afraid that the answer is no, because we've already had enough dessert today." And their response will inevitably go something like this: "But I asked nicely!"

They understood that they didn't get what they wanted if they didn't ask nicely. So they assumed that the way to get

what they wanted was to ask nicely. And if they ask nicely and don't get it, then this relationship isn't fair. They have played by the rules—why haven't they gotten what they wanted? And the truth is that the relationship isn't fair. As a parent, I'm tasked with making decisions that frequently don't grant them what they want. And that isn't fair. But they are learning the lesson that relationships aren't fair, they are free. Not asking nicely guarantees that they won't get what they want. But asking nicely doesn't guarantee that they will get what they want. It only allows for the possibility. I as their parent have the freedom to respond to their request as I see fit. But often, when they ask nicely, they aren't really giving me that freedom. They are asking nicely thinking that it will force me to give them what they want. But it doesn't work that way.

This demand of disappointment that lives deep within the hearts of the remnant in Jerusalem is the issue that Haggai addresses. It is this insistence that God respond to them the way that they want him to, the demand that he treat them the way they think they deserve to be treated based on their obedience to his command.

Disappointment is one of the things that we inevitably have to feel in life. And disappointment is a painful thing—it hurts to hope for something and have that hope unmet. What is it for you? Maybe you've been wanting to have a child for a long time and that hasn't happened. Maybe you wanted to get accepted into a certain college or program, or get chosen for a particular job, and it didn't come through. Maybe it's losing a match in sports, or not making the team. Maybe you've been fighting poor health. Maybe you're disappointed with your relationships: your husband or wife didn't turn out to be quite what you expected when you got married. Or your children have made choices that you know to be destructive, and you're terribly disappointed.

I had to face a big disappointment in the middle of seminary. Rachel and I realized that my working from home while I went to school was putting a strain on our marriage. We decided that my being gone when I was gone and home when I was home would be a better pattern. So I looked around for a different job, and found an opportunity to work for a company in the area with the same software product that I was currently working on. They were going to let me work half-time, their office was a few miles from my house, and they were going to pay me almost twice what I was currently making. Everything was going to work out perfectly. One of the managers told me that I basically had the job as soon as they got the final approval. But then the approval process dragged out longer and longer and longer. Finally after several months of waiting, I received a phone call that the approval for the position came in—and they hired someone else for the job. I remember I was out having lunch with a friend when I got the call, and didn't react too much. But when I got home I just cried and cried with disappointment. What was I to do now? Could I survive working from home for the rest of seminary? Could my marriage?

The danger of disappointment is that it can turn into demanding that God treat us a certain way because we deserve it. And then because of the pain of disappointment, we no longer entrust ourselves to God. Since our demand was denied, we declare our indifference, and either we walk away from God, or our hearts grow cold and hard toward him.

But the truth is that we are learning a lesson. We are learning about relationship. We are learning that if we are going to be in an ongoing relationship with a really real God, then we have to get over the idea that relationships are fair, that they are built on compromise, on give and take. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. If we just live up to our end of the bargain, then God will live up to his end of the bargain. But that isn't a relationship, it's a business arrangement. Relationships aren't built on equal opportunity and fair play. They are built on love and grace. Relationships aren't fair, they are free. Love isn't fair, it is free.

When we began this series on Haggai, I asked folks to reflect on ways that God had made himself real to them. I noticed a theme of relationship in the responses they wrote. Let me share some more of these:

“Unmerited favor, unconditional love, acceptance, grace from other people in my life.”

“Times when we look to him in prayer and we see him respond in an obvious and real way, when we can attribute the response to nothing other than God.”

“At my father's death bed. He had been suffering for months after struggling with a deadly disease for years. On his last night I prayed, 'God, if you really exist, please end your son's suffering.' God answered my prayer two hours later.”

“When others love me and forgive me unconditionally. It's incredibly humbling, and so unlike our human nature that I see the Lord's mercy, grace, and love within it. It's like the Lord saying, 'I love you...I love you...I love you!'”

“The miracle of adoption, God putting us together as a family.”

“The godly legacy of my mother and father.”

“Sisters in Christ with whom I pray every week.”

“Singing in a choir, singing the Messiah, playing in orchestra.”

“God's faithfulness in my relationships with others, his presence and leading through good times and through really hard times, especially looking back on these times.”

“The birth of my daughter who has brought so much joy into my life.”

“When my wife forgives me for something I have done.”

How powerful relationship seems to be in making God real to us! And it's a certain kind of relationship in particular. Does God seem real when I pay a dollar and get a soda? Does God seem real when I do something nice for my wife on the condition that she do something nice for me? No. God seems real when we experience forgiveness, grace, and mercy. We were made for relationships that are free. Whenever we relate to anyone, we do so according to how we sense relationships work, whether we are relating to God, our parents, our spouses, our children, our friends, or our neighbors. As we learn to recognize the demand of disappointment in our relationship with God, we may see it in our marriage or our friendships as well, and it should break our hearts. Likewise, as we learn to recognize that relationships aren't fair, but they are free, we will see that truth show up in all our relationships: with God, with our friends, with our family. And we'll grow in forgiveness, love, grace, and freedom, with God and with each other.

God will bless his people

So if our relationship with God isn't fair, how does he treat us? Why should we persist in relationship with this God if it isn't fair? Why should we trust him if he won't give us what we want when we ask nicely?

The last section we'll look at is verse 19b.

“From this day on, I will bless you.”

Four simple words: “I will bless you.” God has taught his people a legal lesson: dirtiness corrupts cleanness. He has concluded that his people are unclean: their disobedience overrules their obedience. And he has pointed out that he didn't give them what they wanted. He didn't take away the drought when they started to obey, because he can't be manipulated. But then he surprises them with a blessing out of nowhere. “Even though you are unclean, even though you can't earn my blessing, even though the fact that you are rebuilding the temple doesn't mean I have to bless you—from this day on, I will bless you.” This is how God treats his people—not because he has to; not because they have kept up their end of the bargain and so he has to keep up his end to make it fair; not because they worked on building the temple, or asked nicely, or went to church, or gave a lot of money, or didn't drink, or lived a good life, or anything—but because he is God and he is a God who blesses.

At the end of this passage we learn a simple but incredibly important truth: God will bless us. It won't be on our terms, it may not look the way we want it to look, but God will bless us. And this is the surprise of a relationship with God. A relationship with God isn't fair, it's free. We think that all we want is for God to treat us fairly. But as it turns out, if he treated us fairly, we'd be stuck in our uncleanness. As it turns out, it's much better to be treated freely than fairly. The freedom of that relationship means that he blesses us because of who he is. The freedom of that relationship is that he sacrifices himself for our sake.

There's an interesting story in the gospels where we find

out just what kind of a free relationship God has with us. We learned in Haggai that dirtiness pollutes cleanness, that obedience doesn't rule out disobedience, that dirt wins. Yet there is this story from Jesus' life (Matthew 9:18-22; Mark 5:22-34; Luke 8:41-48). Jesus is walking to a city where a little girl is sick. The father has begged Jesus to come and heal his daughter. And in the crowd surrounding Jesus there is a woman who has suffered for a long time with a disease that makes her bleed continually. Besides the pain and medical problems of the disease, her flow of blood means that she is always unclean, always prohibited from touching anyone else, always prohibited from taking part in the life of the community, always alone, always rejected. So in a desperate act she comes up behind Jesus and touches his robe, hoping that he will heal her. Why would she think this? It's not how the Mosaic Law works. Jesus is a holy man, a clean man. According to the Mosaic Law, a touch would make him unclean, not make her clean. Dirt wins. Health isn't contagious. But she hopes in a relationship that isn't fair, and so she touches the edge of his robe. And she is healed. In this case, health wins. Power flows from Jesus and her disease is overcome. The cleanness of Jesus overcomes her uncleanness. Jesus' health becomes her health.

This is how God treats us. Jesus' health becomes our health. His life becomes our life. God will bless us. We have to learn the truth that in our lives, dirtiness wins. And we have to learn the truth that our obedience doesn't earn us anything from God. We have to learn the truth that we can't manipulate God and he won't give us what we want just because we ask nicely. We have to face the hurt of disappointment and feel the pain of demands denied. But all this prepares us for a message of hope. It prepares us to enter into a relationship with God that isn't fair, but it is free. And the freedom is God's blessing in our life.

Do you believe that God will bless you? How is your heart toward God right now? Are you disappointed with him? Do you feel that you've been treated unfairly? Or have you just stopped expecting anything from him? We'll talk more about this in the next message, about having hope and why it is so hard. But for now, we want to learn what it looks like to relate to God freely.

My children are learning that they can't manipulate me into getting what they want. Just because they ask nicely doesn't mean that I have to give them what they want. But they are also learning that their daddy loves them in surprising and unexpected ways. The other day I went and got out a cookie and gave it to Ellie, my oldest daughter. And she looked up at me and said, “Daddy, why are you giving me a cookie?” You see, she is still learning about the freedom in a relationship, just as you and I are. She didn't do anything good to deserve a cookie. In her understanding of relationship that is based on fairness and earning what she gets, she didn't understand why I would give her a cookie. My answer to her was simply, “Because I love you.” I don't think she fully understood it, but she was happy. So she sat in my lap and we enjoyed a cookie together.

## Conclusion

We've walked through what can be a difficult section of Haggai to understand, but we've seen God teaching his people a lesson that we are all in the process of learning. It's not something we learn once and put behind us. It's a life journey that we are on, slowly learning to relate to people in freedom rather than fairness, slowly learning that our marriages are based on freedom, not fairness, slowly learning that our friendships are based on freedom, not fairness, slowly learning that our church is based on freedom, not fairness.

Ultimately the lesson of Haggai is a message of hope: God will bless his people. God will bless you.