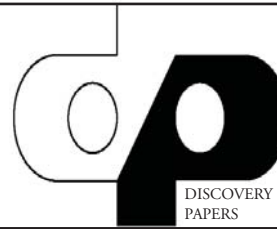


# HOPE WHERE IT HURTS



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Haggai 2:20-23  
Fourth Message  
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*SERIES: A REALLY REAL GOD*

Our focus in this message is on how we look toward tomorrow. We've touched on this topic several times in this series, but this is where we are really going to dive into it.

Caspar David Friedrich was a painter in the early nineteenth century. He was part of an art movement called German Romanticism. The German Romantics liked to paint landscapes, partly because they thought that God was everywhere. The technical term for the idea that God is in everything around us is pantheism. Now, this is not what Christians believe, of course. We believe in a God who is other, a God who created the universe, not a God who *is* the universe. But this belief and similar ones are fairly popular in our own culture.

Friedrich had vastly different theological convictions from his peers, however. He believed firmly in Scripture and the God who is revealed in Scripture. He believed that his art was a form of worship of this God. And although he painted landscapes, his objective was not so much to paint what he saw as to paint what he believed is revealed in Scripture. His paintings are, in effect, interpretations of Biblical ideas conveyed through landscapes.

One of his most famous paintings is called *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. (Reproductions of this painting may be viewed on internet websites such as [www.artchive.com](http://www.artchive.com).) This painting has everything to do with tomorrow. Whenever Friedrich paints people, he tends to paint them with their backs to you, as if you are invited to participate in a private moment that is taking place, step up alongside the figure in the painting and experience what he is experiencing. What you are invited to experience through this painting is a particular attitude toward the future. Friedrich typically uses several elements of landscape symbolically. Fog is a sign of divine mystery. Rocks are always a symbol of the solidity of the Christian faith. In this painting the man seems dwarfed by the vastness of the landscape he is contemplating. And off in the distance, the fog becomes thinner and the landscape kind of disappears.

Friedrich is inviting us to look toward the future. In contrast to the pantheism that surrounded him, he insisted that God was outside of nature. If nature is God, then there is no hope except what is offered through nature. But if God is outside of nature, then he can work in the world and offer hope. There is mystery, but there is also certainty that God is working toward something. As the landscape fades away into something else, we are reminded of the reality of the next life with God that awaits those who stand on the rock of the Christian faith. We need to look forward. We need hope.

In this series we've been working through Haggai. Once again, this book is a collection of messages delivered to a remnant of Jews in Jerusalem as motivation for them to work on rebuilding the temple, which was the physical, visible manifestation of God's presence: the way that God was made real to them. So all of Haggai is an encouragement to persevere in making God real. The last message in Haggai leaves the people of God with a reminder about how to make God real as they look toward tomorrow. These Jewish settlers were living a rough life in the midst of a world that constantly tempted them to turn away from the presence of their God. So what God leaves them with is a message of hope. Let's look at Haggai 2:20-23 to find out what kind of hope God gives his people, including us.

## God wins

Let's start by reading verses 20-22.

**The word of the LORD came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: "Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother."**

The message that God begins with is a simple one: When all is said and done, God wins. But he doesn't just say that he wins. He says it in a way that draws together the entire Biblical story. First, God says that he will shake the heavens and the earth. This phrase is used throughout Scripture to indicate the whole of God's creation. In fact, it shows up on the first page of the Bible in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." It's used again in Revelation 21:1 when John says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth..." The story begins with God's creating the heavens and the earth, and it ends with his re-creating the heavens and the earth. But in the middle, God's people live in a creation that isn't always friendly toward them. They face drought, floods, storms, disease, and disaster. They need the reminder that God will shake his creation and will restore it to what he originally intended. So God wins over nature.

He also reminds them that he wins over nations. Verse 22 tells us that he will shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. This language reminds us of how God delivered his people out of slavery in Egypt. Immediately after their salvation from Egypt, Moses sang a famous song (Exodus 15:1-18) saying,

*"The horse and its rider*

*he has hurled into the sea.”*

Here again, God declares his victory over nations that are enemies of his people. God wins over nations.

This issue of winning is a big one. We talk about “being a good sport,” but it’s usually pretty important to us who wins. Let me show you what I mean. In eighth grade I participated in the school wrestling tournament. I was a pretty scrawny, nerdy kid. My opponent in the tournament was Todd Champagne, the best-looking, strongest boy in our class, who was dating the most beautiful girl in our class. The day of the tournament came, and I went out on the mat to face Todd Champagne. We shook hands, the whistle blew, and we started to wrestle. Ten seconds later the whistle blew again. The match was over. And do you know who won? Todd Champagne. He pinned me in under ten seconds. Pretty depressing story, isn’t it? But admit it—you really wanted me to beat Todd Champagne, didn’t you? Because we care about winning.

And because we care about winning, God reminds us that he wins. He wins over nature, and he wins over nations. If you think about the people living in Jerusalem, you’ll realize that these were two of their major threats. They had an agrarian economy and lived off the land; they had no sophisticated safeguards against natural forces. So they had to contend with drought, flood, sickness, storms. And their political relationships were tense; they never knew whom they could trust. So they feared being attacked, double-crossed, or sold into slavery. But these two threats—nature and nations—God overcomes.

## We receive hope where it hurts

The passage goes on to say more. Not only does God win, but he chooses his team. And the encouragement to Zerubbabel, roughing it in occupied Jerusalem, is that God has chosen him as the captain of the team. Zerubbabel is chosen to receive hope. Verse 23:

**“On that day,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the LORD Almighty.”**

To see what’s going on here, we need to know more about Zerubbabel. Who was this guy with the funny name? Why was he so important? We need to peek into Zerubbabel’s family photo album to understand this.

Have you ever looked at photo albums of your parents and grandparents and suddenly found that something in the present makes more sense to you? The crooked smile that your sister has came from your grandmother! Or your dad holds himself just the way his grandfather stood. So let’s look into Zerubbabel’s photo album and uncover some of his past.

The first picture I want to show you goes back five hundred years, to around 1000 BC. It’s a picture of David with oil dripping from his head. He’s just been anointed

king over Israel. He was the golden boy. He ruled Israel during the “good old days,” and God promised him that someone from his line would always be king.

Now we jump forward about one hundred years to around 900 BC. We see a picture of an arrogant young man watching a crowd marching away from Jerusalem. David’s grandson Rehoboam is king, but he ends up splitting the nation. Ten tribes in the north follow a different king, and only two tribes in the south follow him. This is a sad part of the photo album. It’s the beginning of the end. This is one memory that doesn’t get talked about a whole lot.

The next picture is much later, 600 BC. It’s a picture of a descendant of David named Jehoiachin, of whom his grandson Zerubbabel is the spitting image. Jehoiachin is king over Judah, the southern part of God’s people. And this is a sad picture, too. It shows Jehoiachin on his knees before the dreaded Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. You see, Jehoiachin surrendered Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar, and he was taken away in exile to Babylon. This picture has a caption, which is found in Jeremiah 22:24. God says, “As surely as I live, even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off.” A king in the line of David surrendering to Babylon—you can hardly bear to look at this picture. It makes you think all hope is lost.

This signet ring imagery is going to be very important. I wear a signet ring myself. It contains the initials of my grandfather who was a Lutheran pastor. He died before I was born, but I feel a connection with him because I’m the only one of his grandchildren who has become a pastor. Wearing his ring reminds me that in some way I represent him. In some way, he is a part of the ministry that God has given me.

For God to refer to Jehoiachin as a signet ring that he casts off is to separate Jehoiachin from him and reject him. It is to say that the Davidic kings who were supposed to represent him on earth no longer have that function. It is a very sad picture.

The next picture is of Zerubbabel as a cute little baby on his father Shealtiel’s lap. The strange scenery in the background is that of the land of Persia where Zerubbabel grew up in exile.

Now we come to a recent picture of Zerubbabel standing amidst the ruins of Jerusalem. Over to the right is some dried-out grain, practically decimated from the drought. One the left you can see the Samaritans mocking him. Behind him are some aggressive foreign-looking people. And in front of him you can see the Jews, tired, discouraged, and dirty from building the temple.

This is the time when Zerubbabel is given the message of Haggai 2:20-23. You may have noticed that the other messages in Haggai were addressed to Zerubbabel along with other people: Joshua, the high priest, and the remnant are included in different ones. But this message is given to Zerubbabel alone. He is told that God wins. He is offered

hope specifically tailored to his circumstance. He is offered hope right where it hurts. In the midst of a drought, he is told that God wins over nature. In the midst of Persian-occupied Jerusalem, he is told that God wins over nations. Having grown up in exile, longing to see his family line of kings restored, he is told that he will be the restorer of what was taken away from his grandfather. With Jehoiachin, the signet ring was cast off. With Zerubbabel, it is restored. God's representative is back in Israel.

We too are part of God's people, and God offers us the same hope. Like Zerubbabel, we receive hope where it hurts. He offers us hope in the face of a dangerous creation in which tomorrow may bring disease, disorder, or disaster. He offers hope in the face of uncertain relationships with some who hate us and some who hurt us.

But what is that hope we receive? Is it that things will get better? Well, Zerubbabel never did overcome the Persians as he might have wished to do. And he probably never had complete relief from the threats of nature. So does that mean God's promise to him failed? Some people would say so. Because of the way history played out, one scholar said of this passage that Haggai's promises were "an idle dream that never took shape in history" (1). Another concluded that Haggai "was mistaken in his expectations for the immediate future" (2). So God's promise didn't come true for Zerubbabel in the short term. But I think God is pointing him past the short term. As Friedrich points his wanderer past the sea of fog, God is pointing Zerubbabel toward the end of the story, the place where the landscape fades away and the fog disappears. And that is where God is pointing us as well. Our hope is in the end of the story.

Where does life hurt for you? How does God offer you hope? I don't know the details of what is going on in your life, but I know that you probably need to hear the message of God's hope. Perhaps you're lonely and desperately want to be more connected with people. Or perhaps you're facing a new phase of life and you're scared of what lies ahead. Or you feel as if you do the same thing day in and day out and everything seems to have lost its meaning. But in the midst of those circumstances, God offers hope. Right there alongside Zerubbabel, you are offered hope where it hurts. God gives you hope that he will overcome. Things may not change in this life, but your eyes are lifted up toward the end of the story when God wins once and for all.

## We offer hope where it hurts

Zerubbabel wasn't only a recipient of hope. As we see how things progressed in God's plan, we realize that Zerubbabel was an instrument of hope as well. We hear about Zerubbabel again in the New Testament. He is in both of the listings of Jesus' genealogy: "Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel" (Luke 3:27; Matthew 1:12-13). And then we remember that the Davidic line did continue, and it reached its climax in Jesus Christ. Jesus was, is, and will be the ultimate fulfillment of the Davidic line of kings. Jesus

is God's signet ring. He is the captain who is guaranteed to lead God's team into victory. He invites people to receive hope. And so Zerubbabel received hope himself in the midst of his circumstances, but he was also an integral part of God's offering hope to the world.

We also share in that calling. Remember our images of how God has made himself real:

- The pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire when he led the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 13:21-22).
- The person of Jesus making God real to his world (John 1:18; 2:18-22; 14:7-11).
- The church, indwelt with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 18:20; John 17:20-23; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17).
- And finally, the new heavens and the new earth where God's reality will fill our experience (Revelation 21).

So just as God promises Zerubbabel that he is his signet ring, and that promise is carried forth in Jesus, it comes to us, the church, God's people assembled together and indwelt by his Spirit. We are his signet ring. We are chosen to receive hope, but we are also chosen to offer hope. We offer hope where it hurts.

One of the issues that plague our culture is the lack of hope. In some ways, things are getting better and better. Our cars get faster and cleaner. Our computers get smaller and more powerful. Our homes get more comfortable. Our food gets fresher and healthier. Our phones do more things. But in other ways—I would suggest in the ways that matter—we are losing hope. We're depressed. We're lonely. We long to belong to a stable group of people. We have so much stuff and yet we still feel empty inside. We're not quite sure what to do with our lives; we're constantly trying to evaluate whether we are where we want to be, and we're constantly drawn to other opportunities that might make us happier. We look forward to getting into the best school, getting the best job, getting the best spouse. And then we become convinced that there is a better school out there, a better job available, and maybe even a better spouse. We look forward to new people and places and positions, but when we get there, we realize that we are still empty. We are starved for hope and so we cling to insignificant replicas of what we long for.

One of the things that make it difficult for us in our culture to have hope, and also to offer hope to other people, is that our lives are so good. All in all, we've managed to make our lives quite comfortable and pleasurable. We've convinced ourselves that ultimate happiness is only a step away. Surely the next gadget or the next diet or the next sermon series will get us there. This can be especially true in this area of the country. One of my friends who used to live here often says, "Living in northern California makes it really hard to believe in heaven." If life is so good here, apart from a few small issues that I do my best to ignore, what do I need hope for? What do I need a really real God for?



This became clear to me on a recent Saturday. Our family went to the Farmer's Market in Sunnyvale. This is my favorite time of year for the Farmer's Market. I like apples and oranges just fine, but now is when you get the really good produce like peaches, nectarines, corn, and plums. Walking through the Farmer's Market on Saturday in beautiful seventy-six-degree weather, I felt as if I were in heaven. It was just a wonderful morning. But I wasn't in heaven, and that was made clear to me shortly.

We were sitting down on a bench at the end of the street eating a delicious lunch when an older woman tried to step up on the curb and caught her foot. She fell to the ground and her head hit the bench that we were sitting on. It was a sickening sound. For a few moments she just lay on the ground and then we all reacted. We helped get her up. She had a huge gash on her forehead. She was bleeding everywhere. We called 911, and an ambulance came and the EMTs started to take care of her.

As it turned out, she was seventy-four years old, and she told the police there wasn't anyone they could call to meet her at the hospital. She'd be fine. It was a really scary experience for us. It was so sad to think of her being all alone, and it was so hard for her with all the policemen and EMTs and everyone swarming around her. All she had wanted to do was sit down and eat her baked potato, but her morning ended like this. As we walked back to the car through the Farmer's Market, my stomach hurt from the experience, and the peaches and plums and corn didn't look anywhere near as appealing anymore. In fact, they made me nauseated. I was given a stark reminder that I'm not in heaven.

So even when our lives are comfortable and pleasant and good, there are times when we remember that we need hope. And those times often come through pain. In fact, pain opens us up to receive hope. It opens us up to the reality that we all long for a better place. Then God steps in and offers hope where it hurts. And this is how we can interact with our world, by offering hope where it hurts. If pain opens us up to receive hope, then we can look at our world and look for where there is pain. When people are hurting, they are reminded of their need, reminded that they want something to hope for. This is why ministries like recovery are so successful, because they offer people hope where it hurts.

So we look at our world and ask, where are the hurts? How can we offer people hope in the midst of those hurts? This kind of hope often works to provide relief for whatever they are feeling. If they are addicted to drugs or alcohol or sex or pornography, we help them break that addiction. If they are struggling to make ends meet, we help them make their lives more financially viable. If they are lonely or depressed, we come alongside them to be comforters and companions. So we offer hope where it hurts, but we don't just fix their problems; we point them to a larger hope. The hope we offer in the midst of their circumstances points them to the end of the story—a long-term hope.

What does it look like to ask where our culture is hurting and how we offer hope? There are several ways that we are doing this as a church, but I want to highlight one ministry that is growing and may have more opportunities in the future. For several months some men including Jay Heeb, Steve Holmlund, Bill Dwyer, and others have been getting together on Saturdays and going out to offer practical help to people who need it—fixing fences, painting houses, repairing appliances, clearing brush. They are meeting people where they are, offering relief from their circumstances in a way that points them toward the end of the story. We as a church need to keep asking these kinds of questions. If God chooses us to give hope for the world, how do we fulfill that calling?

## Conclusion

At the end of this message we stand alongside Zerubabel as recipients and instruments of hope. We are reminded that God wins. Because of our confidence that he overcomes the things that threaten us, we receive hope right where it hurts. And having received hope, we offer hope to the world.

That brings us back to the image that formed the backdrop of our discussion of tomorrow: Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. Can we stand firm on the rock of our hope, look toward the fog of divine mystery, and anticipate the next life? Knowing that whatever this life holds, we have hope set before us. Can we believe in the hope that God offers us, and can we offer that same hope to a world that desperately needs it?

We've come to the end of our series on Haggai. It is a short book, but it is given at a significant time in the history of the nation of Israel. And Haggai addresses issues that are all too real for us today. He reminds us that we serve a really real God and encourages us to get to work in making God seem real, in our lives and in our world. As we've studied Haggai, we've been looking at the things that make God seem unreal to us, that make it harder for us to focus on the reality of his presence. In the first message we talked about distractions and how easy it is to become convinced that the things of our world are actually far more real than God's presence. In the second message we saw how nostalgia for the past can paralyze us in the present so that we forget to look for what God is doing today. In the third message we saw how disappointment can lead to demanding certain treatment from God and can tempt us to try to manipulate God to get what we want. And in this message we've seen how discouragement can make us forget that God is working toward something hopeful in the future.

These are the things that lure us away from engaging in relationship with God. What is the antidote that God offers? He continues to offer himself, a relationship with him, his presence. The presence of God reminds us of his reality amidst distractions. The presence of God focuses us on today when we feel nostalgic. The presence of God makes sense of our disappointment. The presence of God

gives us hope amidst discouragement. So Haggai reminds us of the presence of God. The cruel irony for the Israelites is that what they needed was the one thing they had stopped working on: the temple. They needed his presence. And just as they forgot God when they needed him the most, we tend to do the same. So what does it look like to remember the presence of God and to remind the world? What is our temple? Let's get to work!

#### Notes

1. I.G. Matthews, quoted in Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *The New American Commentary: Haggai, Malachi*, © 2004, Broadman and Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN. P. 199.
2. H.G. Schmidt, quoted in Taylor and Clendenen, P. 199.