

New Year's Day: Haggai 1 - God with us: Part 3

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[0 : 0 0] Well today I'd like us to turn back to the passage which Ben read for us in Haggai chapter 1 and we'll look at the chapter as a whole but we can meet again at verse 12.

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shialdiel and Joshua the son of Jehoshodak the high priest with all the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai the prophet as the Lord their God had sent him.

The people feared the Lord then Haggai the messenger of the Lord spoke to the people with the Lord's message I am with you declares the Lord.

Now in both services last week we were looking at the great theme of the fact that in Jesus Christ God is with us Jesus is Emmanuel he is God with us and so last Sunday don't worry if you weren't here but we were just looking at that theme of the fact that God is with us and especially he is with us in Jesus Christ.

Today I want us to keep that idea of God with us in our minds as we turn to the book of Haggai and in particular to Haggai chapter 1 because it's a wonderful book and it's very very relevant and very helpful to us as we begin a new year.

[1 : 2 1] Now I'm sure that many of you are like me in that you're perhaps not completely as familiar with Haggai as you are with other parts of the Bible and Haggai is one of the books of the Bible which when I go to I have to remind myself what exactly Haggai is about and it's good for us to do that to get our bearings and really to understand Haggai we have to actually think in terms of the whole plan and timeline of the Old Testament because we need to be able to see where Haggai fits in. So to begin with just for a couple of minutes we're going to take a sweeping journey through the Old Testament to see where Haggai comes. So to begin with we have I put this on a diagram to help us we've got the Old Testament timeline on the right it begins with creation at the very beginning when God made everything perfectly God and his people together the perfect family the perfect land the perfect temple the perfect law the perfect kingdom all bound together in a wonderful covenant relationship that's Genesis chapter 1 and chapter 2. Genesis chapter 3 is the fall when humanity sinned and rebelled against God and the whole of creation including humanity suffered the effects of the curse. After that we come to the flood in Genesis 6, 7 and 8 where the whole world was judged by means of a flood but God preserved Noah throughout of that and the flood subsided. So that's Genesis chapter 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 where God is dealing with the world kind of as a whole and the effect of sin is ruining everything. When we get to Genesis chapter 12 God focuses in on a particular place and in and especially on a particular person he focuses in on Abraham and God calls Abraham out of the land called Ur of the Caldees which is about where little Abraham is God calls him and says come to a new land which I promise to give you so Abraham does this he leaves his land and he comes to this new area on the eastern end of the Mediterranean where God says I will give you this land I will make you you and your descendants a great nation.

This land was promised to Abraham which is why we call it the promised land. Abraham eventually did have a family and his grandson was Jacob. Jacob's other name was Israel and the family of Jacob grew. Jacob had 12 sons and they grew and grew and grew but towards the end of Jacob's life that family did not stay in this promised land area they moved to Egypt because of famine. They stayed there for about 400 years and they grew and grew and grew into a big nation still a family but a big nation but because of their size Pharaoh and Egypt began to feel threatened and they were forced into slavery and so they've become this nation but they are slaves. That brings us into Exodus which is where God through Moses calls the people out they leave Egypt and they again head towards the promised land.

Eventually after wandering in the desert they come into the promised land and they conquer it. That's the book of Joshua. Joshua led the people and they bit by bit take possession of the promised land. I hope everyone's keeping up. Not long after that the people started to rebel against God and so Joshua the book of Joshua is kind of in many ways a triumph because it entered in the land. Judges which comes after is kind of a disaster because the people just turn away from God and things just progressively get worse and worse. However by the end of that time God appoints a king.

It begins with Saul which again is a failure but with David God appoints a good king and things become established and by the time David's son Solomon takes the throne everything is at its high point. They have the land they even have the temple. Everything is looking really really good so you can see how it's all fitting into the plan. God had promised the land to Abraham now they've got the land and things are looking good but from the end of Solomon's life onwards the people started to turn away from God and in Solomon's son Rehoboam the kingdom split in two and so you had the northern kingdom which was called Israel and you had the southern kingdom called Judah and it is split in about the year 930 BC I think and they remained split.

About 200 years later the northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria which was the nation to the north of them and it was wiped out. The northern kingdom fell. About 140 odd years after that the southern kingdom also fell but instead of being obliterated they were taken as a group in exile back to Babylon and so as a group as a nation they were pulled out of their land and brought back to Babylon as captives. Now they were there for about 70 years after that time a small remnant returned and so this small group comes from Babylon back to Jerusalem and that's where the Old Testament ends. Now where does Haggai come in and all of that? That was the three minute blast through the Old Testament. Where is Haggai? Let's see where's Haggai? He's there right at the very end. Haggai was a prophet to the community who returned back to Jerusalem and you can imagine what they came back to. When the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom they destroyed Jerusalem and they destroyed the temple so these people came back to a ruined city and so we see awful images of places like Aleppo and Syria where a city has been just ravaged by violence.

[7 : 41] These people would have been going back into a similar kind of scene. Their situation is very very difficult. Things are not looking great they are there with a massive rebuilding job to do.

So that was where Haggai prophesied and I want us just to look at chapter one of Haggai and it basically splits into three parts and these are divided into three paragraphs in the ESV verses one to six, verses seven to eleven and verses twelve to fifteen and these three parts are our basic guide as we go through what happens in Haggai one. The first part describes the mistakes that the people had made. Haggai chapter one begins by explaining that the people have gone wrong.

They've made mistakes they've done things that they shouldn't have done and there's three in particular. The first mistake is procrastination verse two. These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. They're saying we don't need to do it yet it's not the time for it so they were putting off the work that they should have been doing. Their second mistake was they had misplaced priorities. Verse four is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses while this house lies in ruins. God is basically saying you fixed your houses but you haven't fixed mine and the word panelled may well imply that their houses were quite luxurious that they'd done really quite a good job of building their houses and yet God's temple was still destroyed. And then thirdly we see that they were wasting their energy.

God says you've sown much and harvested little. You eat but you don't have enough. You drink but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves but known as warm and he who earns wages does so to put them in a bag with holes. Their misplaced priorities meant that their energy was being wasted. Now it's important to note that they weren't lazy. They weren't doing nothing but they were pouring their energies into the wrong things. And so this is where the people were going wrong and overarching it all is the fact that the people seem to have been caught up with a very unhealthy focus on themselves. God's house can wait for another day. My house is more important and I'm going to make sure that I have enough for myself. But the result was that no one was happy. Everyone was unsatisfied. Everyone was discouraged. Everyone was uncomfortable. Nobody was full. Nobody was warm and the hard earned wages were just disappearing. Now these are all very very simple mistakes and I'm sure that we can all see these mistakes in our own lives. I look at these mistakes and I see them in my own life. And I suppose we're all very different and we all struggle with things in different ways but we can make these mistakes with different things. Our interests, our hobbies, whatever that may be. Some of us may be really into into our computers and things like that. Some of us may be really into sports. Some of us may be really into our animals or our hobbies or whatever it may be. In all of these things it's very very easy for us to put off things that are more important. To prioritise the wrong things and to waste energy unnecessarily.

And I'm saying all of this to myself before anybody else because procrastination, misplaced priorities and wasted energies I think I can see if I look back over my life in 2016.

[11 : 28] And to a greater or lesser degree these mistakes can leave us all discouraged. They can leave us frustrated and they can leave us feeling empty. So the first part of Haggai is kind of a rebuke.

And it's very easy for us to sort of feel that it's a very heavy rebuke. And it's very easy for us to feel that we're just very much being heavy on ourselves. That we're giving ourselves a heavy heavy rebuke when we think like that. And that in a sense is true but we have to ask the question, what was God trying to achieve through Haggai by telling the people their mistakes?

It wasn't to give them a heavy rebuke. God was trying to point them in the right direction. And that's what we sang about in Psalm 103. The fact that God is a loving Father.

And if His children make mistakes, God's goal is not to leave them there. God's goal is to help them out of it. And that leads us on to the second part of this chapter.

In verses 7 to 11, God kind of sums up where the people have gone wrong. Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You looked for much and behold it came to little. When you brought it home it blew away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts, because of my house that lies in ruins. While each of you busies himself with his own house.

[13 : 03] Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew and the earth has withheld its produce. And that's called for a drought in the lands and on the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and what the ground brings forth, man and beast and all their labour.

And the key point that God is emphasising is that he does not want to leave his people in this mess. He wants his people to change. And the first thing he does is he gives them a command which we see in verse 5 and in verse 7. He says, consider your ways. Now literally that is translated, set your heart upon your ways. In other words, God is saying stop and think about what you are doing.

Now the word ways is very important because one sense it describes what we're doing, our activities, our priorities, our habits, the things that we do. But the Hebrew word for way is also the word for road. And so it's not just talking about what we're doing, it's also talking about where we are going. And so when God says to us, consider your ways, he's telling us to think about what we do in our lives, but also to think about where we are going in our lives.

And so as we start 2017, where are you going in your life? And is that where you want to go?

Where have you gone in 2016? Is that where you wanted to go? And not just in terms of 2017, but in terms of your whole life and even in terms of death, where are you going?

[14 : 59] And is that where you want to go? And when we ask questions like that, we realize that those three words, consider your ways are probably three of the most important words that you will ever, ever hear.

So God wants us all to think as we start a new year. But God also wants us to act. And his emphasis in this chapter was that he wanted the people to do something. He wanted them to return to him, to stop putting things off, to stop having selfish priorities, and to stop wasting our energy. He says to them, consider your ways, go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. And so basically what God is doing here, he is calling people to repent. Repent just basically means to turn back. He wants the people to come back to him. And in this chapter, we see some really, really important points about repentance. The first is that if God gives us a rebuke, he does not just want to leave us there.

Now, it's really, really easy to think that God just likes giving rose, that God just wants to tell us off and to leave us there feeling bad. And sometimes people do that to us, don't they?

People tell us off and they leave us there feeling bad, feeling that we've messed up and it's just a depressing process. But God never gives a rebuke just for the sake of giving a round.

When God gives a rebuke, it's because he wants something better for us. He wants us to turn back to him and he wants us to stop living lives that are wasting our energy or that are empty or that are unsatisfying. God is calling us away from sin and selfishness because he has something much, much better. Repentance always involves change, but it always involves change for the better. And we should just pause there to say as well that that's a really, really important point if we are ever having to give a rebuke to somebody else. Because sometimes you do have to tell somebody where they've gone wrong. Maybe it's at work or maybe it's in your family or maybe just in terms of community or whatever it may be. Sometimes we have to give people rebuke, but we should give a rebuke the way God gives a rebuke. Not just giving a row and leaving somebody there, but giving somebody a rebuke in order to give them something better, in order to make things better for them. And we should always show that we want things to be better for them.

[17 : 53] That's what God is aiming to do. And that reminds us that the end point of repentance is not misery. That's a really, really important point. Sometimes when we think about repentance, we often think about the fact that it's turning away from sin and in a sense that involves being sorry for your sins. And that of course is true. We do have a sense of regret and a sense of sorrow.

But sometimes we can be given the impression that when God says repent, his goal for us is to be so deeply miserable about our sin and so frustrated by it and so discouraged by it that his goal for us is that we would be miserable. But the goal of repentance is not misery. The goal of repentance is joy and peace because that's exactly what you get when you turn back to God. You get a sense of joy, a sense of peace because God is putting things right. Therefore the whole point of God saying consider your ways is not to hammer you into a situation of guilt and despair. God is saying consider your ways because my ways are so much better. And that's why we read Jeremiah 29, 11. I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans for peace and not for evil to give you a future and a hope. And so God's goal for us is that things would be so good and so much better.

And so maybe you're here today and you're aware that you have gone wrong and you have the sense of frustration. Maybe as a Christian you feel like that or just to any of us we might feel that we've gone wrong in our lives. Maybe we feel like that. Maybe we come here today looking back on 2016 and we have a huge sense of failure. I think we all struggle with a sense of failure. I'm sure many of you are like me. You don't tend to think about the things you've done. You tend to think about the things you've failed to do. And very often we can be pressed down by a sense of failure.

And very often we can be genuinely worried about the implications of following God. We can think to ourselves, well what will it be like? What if things change for the worse? What if things don't go well for me? What if I follow God? What if I start coming to church regularly? Or if I start going to the prayer meeting regularly? Or if I start telling people that yes I am a Christian. Or if I start really seeking the Lord. What if things aren't great? We can be genuinely worried by these things and genuinely burdened by these things. And I'm not rebuking you for feeling like that because often I feel like that myself. But the key point is that if you do feel like that, try and remember what God is really like. Because God is not a ruthless police officer who's trying to catch you out at every moment. God is not a cold-hearted taskmaster who is constantly seeking to oppress you. God is not a joy killer or this big restrictor on the happiness of life.

God is none of these things. What is God like? God is a perfect father.

[21 : 37] And he loves his children. And he rejoices in his children. And he wants to give so many good things to his children, to you. Remember we've been looking at the fruit of the Spirit, those of you who've been with us. And we must remember that when we see the phrase fruit of the Spirit, the word Spirit is referring to God. So the fruit of God is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, kindness, gentleness, self-control. That's what God is like. And God wants the best for you. And you only have to look at Jesus Christ to see the proof of that.

God gave his son his most precious possession so that we could be saved. And not only that, through Jesus' death and resurrection, we too become the children of God. We become just like Jesus. God as our Father, Jesus as our brother, and the Holy Spirit dwelling in your heart.

It's not that taskmaster who does that sort of thing or a ruthless policeman. It is our loving Father. That's why John writes, see what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called the children of God and so on. And if we can just have a glimpse of what God really wants for us, if we can just see that, the fact that God wants to just look after you and bless you and love you and pour his blessing out upon you for all eternity, if we can just get a glimpse of that, then we would realise that panelled houses or whatever else we are pouring our energy into are not really that important after all. And so God is telling the people to consider their ways because he has much, much better plans for them. That was true of Haggai's time. And of course, it's very true of today. But the amazing thing about Haggai chapter one is that God comes and rebukes them. God comes and tells them what they want to do. But the rather astonishing thing is that the people actually listen. And that takes us to our third point where we read from verse 12.

So, Rube about the Son of Shiaoitel, Joshua the Son of Jehoshedach, the High Priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai the Prophet as the Lord their God have sent him and the people feared the Lord. Now, that's really interesting because if you think back to the timeline of the Old Testament that we had, the general pattern throughout the Old Testament is that the people don't listen. A good example of 2 Kings 17 verse 13, the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer saying, turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes in accordance with the law that I commanded your fathers that I sent you by my servants the prophets but they would not listen but were stubborn as their fathers had been who did not believe in the Lord their God. And the whole reason the exile happened was that the people would not listen. And so it really is wonderful that by the time you reach the days of Haggai, Rubebel and Joshua and all the people actually listened to God. So let's just recap of where we are. The people had gone wrong,

Haggai comes to them and rebukes them but also calls them to repent and the people respond. They listen, they obey and they repent. And that brings us to what I think is the most wonderful verse in this chapter. The people have gone wrong but the people are holding up their hands before God and they're saying, yes, we have failed. And what does God say to them? Does God say, well you better not do that again. Does God say, the damage is done. Does God say, I'm just so disappointed in you. No, that's the reaction that we might get from colleagues or from schoolmates or from people that we might meet. But God does not respond. What does God say?

[26 : 15] Verse 13, then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message. I am with you, declares the Lord. Now I think that's just amazing because these people have said, yes, Lord, we've made a mistake and God says, I know, but I am with you. And that is an amazing demonstration of God's patience and his commitment that we sang about that in Psalm 103. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and a bounding instead fast love. And as we consider our ways at the start of a new year, we can easily, easily be overcome by a sense of our failings and our mistakes. But God is saying to you, I am with you. And that is just a wonderful thing because it's emphasizing that God's rebuke is eventually leading to encouragement, not to discouragement, but to encouragement. And when God says, I am with you, he is expressing the utmost commitment and dedication. I'm sure we've got lots of New Year's resolutions today. But if we ask the question, what's God's New Year's resolution? God's New Year's resolution is to be with you, to be with you as you go into the year ahead. And so as we consider our ways, we must remember that God's aim is not to discourage us. God's aim is to encourage us. And so maybe you feel like like you've mucked up. Maybe you feel like your prayer life has been poor. Now that may be true.

And we all struggle with that at times. But you have got to remember that God delights to hear your prayer. And even the simplest prayer that you offer is an absolute joy to God.

God is with you. And he wants to listen to you. And so you can move on from the mistakes that you might have made. You might feel that your own Bible reading hasn't been great. I'm probably a complete hypocrite when I say to the children, read the Bible and pray every day. Some days I forget to read the Bible. And there are times when we all feel that we've not been reading the Bible as we should. But it's not too late. Our chance hasn't disappeared. Even just reading a few verses and thinking about them and meditating on them. Even just one version, taking it with you, is such a good thing to do. And God is saying, I am with you. And I want to speak to you.

Maybe coming to church hasn't been a completely regular part of your life. It doesn't matter because there's no register. We're not keeping a record of anything like that. It's just brilliant that you are here today. And God says, I am with you. And I want to meet with you and with everybody each week as we worship. Maybe you've made a lot of mistakes in your life. We all have.

But Jesus is the great healer. And he can put things right. God is with you. And he wants to help you. And so the key point in all of this is that as we start a new year, do not be discouraged because God is with us. And that's the great message that Haggai gave to the people. Imagine how they must have felt. Haggai came to them. I have a message from the Lord. And they probably thought, what is God going to say? We've been building our houses and we've been neglecting his.

[30 : 26] We've been selfish. We've been stupid. What is God going to say? Here comes the prophet. And you can imagine them almost politely whinsing at the thought of what his message would be. And yet Haggai says, thus says the Lord, I am with you. And it shows how wonderfully committed God is.

And your mistakes don't exclude you from this. Your unworthiness don't exclude you from this because this is God's message. And it's what God wants. So it's a great, great encouragement to us.

But it also has very important implications for our church, for both our congregations, for us as God's people. And I want to just close by mentioning two points very briefly.

The first is that God's call to these people was very much focused on practical action. He said, go up to the hills, get wood and start building. And so although a huge task lay ahead of them, God simply wanted them to make a start. And it would take many, many years to build the temple.

But God wanted them to do what they could, to do a little. Now we, in many ways, are in a similar situation. A huge task lies ahead of us as a church. There's a village all around us that desperately needs to hear the gospel. We ourselves have to grow in our own faith. We want to grow closer together as God's people. We want to try and minister to the needs of those around us.

[31 : 57] We've got so, so much to do. But God is saying, I know you have a big task to do, but do what you can. And so whether it's by praying for people every day or by getting involved in an activity in our congregations or by simply taking an interest in your neighbors and the people around you, whatever it may be, we can all contribute a little to that work. Step one for the people of Haggai was to go up to the hills and gather wood. That was a very simple job, but yet it was vital.

And we can all make that kind of contribution. So that's the first thing to emphasize. Practical action is a great, great thing in the lives of God's people. But the second thing I want to emphasize is a very interesting and important point. God's priority in all of this is that he wanted God, he wanted the people to build his house. Now you can imagine the scene.

They had come back to a wrecked city. Houses and the temple was destroyed. Now you come into the time of Haggai where you can see that the houses have been rebuilt, but the temple still lies in ruins. And God is saying, I want you to give attention to my house. I want you to rebuild my house. Now that's a really, really, really important point. And obviously at that time, it was essential that they had this temple where they could worship God. But it's easy for us to misunderstand what this verse is saying. Because I could easily stand up here and say, Haggai is telling us that you must not neglect this building. And I could say that, you know, we need to muck in and we need to paint this building, we need to look after it better, we need to attend to it more, we need to contribute to it more, we need to make this building fit for the 21st century, we need to look after it. I could stand up and say all that. And if I did that, I would be completely misinterpreting what this is saying. I would not be telling you what this chapter is saying.

Because this chapter is saying that God wants his temple to be built up. God wants his house to be prioritised. He's saying it's not right if you live in panelled houses and the temple of God lies in ruins. And so the question to ask is, where is the temple of God today?

And the answer is that the temple of God today is you. Every Christian is the temple of God, you are where God dwells. Therefore, the principle of Haggai has got to be understood in terms of the New Testament definition of God's temple. When God is saying to us, you need to work on the house of God, he is saying, we need to work on ourselves. We need to work on ourselves as God's people. And that applies to us individually. We must guard our ways. We must keep away from sin.

[35 : 25] We must strive to follow God in our lives. But it also applies to us collectively. We are to build each other up like a building, not a building of bricks and mortar and wood and slate, but a building of God's people where we support one another, where we love one another, where we uphold one another. That's why when Paul speaks of how he wants us to live as God's people, how he wants us to care for the body of Christ, he doesn't talk about bricks and mortar. Rather, in Romans 12, he says, as in one body, we have many members and the many members do not all of the same function.

So we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them if prophecy in proportion to our faith, if service in our serving, the one who teaches in his teaching, the one who exhorts in his exhortation, the one who contributes in generosity, the one who leads with zeal, the one who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness. Let love be genuine, abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honour. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. That's what God wants us to be as his people, using our different gifts. And it's really important to remember that. We can't all do everything, but we can all do some things. And so we contribute together by working together, by being together as God's people. And we support one another, we help one another, because we all have gifts, but we all have weaknesses. We all have things that we're good at, we all have things that we struggle with. And God wants us together, because by being together, we can help and support one another. And that is where God's household is in his people. And that is where he takes pleasure. And that is where he is glorified. And so as we go into 2017, we remember what Haggai 1 tells us, that we are to consider our ways, but above all, that God is with us. So remember that. I'm not going to say, may God be with you for the year ahead. I'm going to say God is with you. Amen. Let's pray.