

The Prophecy of Haggai – And the People’s Response

The background to the prophecy of Haggai can be found in Ezra chapter 1. The prophet Haggai commenced his ministry at a highly significant stage of Israel’s history. The 70 years of Babylonian servitude, as prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11,12) had ended. And a glorious new age had begun, when all of Israel were called upon to return to the land promised to their fathers.

Ezra chapter 1 describes to us how Yahweh stirred up the spirit of a Gentile ruler, Cyrus, to bring about the restoration. A proclamation was made, “Thus saith Cyrus, king of Persia, Yahweh Elohim of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and *he hath charged* me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah” (Ezra 1:2).

What a remarkable thing this is! Cyrus recognised that he had not obtained his kingdom by the strength of his own hand, but that it had been given to him by the God of Israel. But also, he understood the Lord’s intention to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem, and that he was the man to bring this into effect!

This may well have been at least partly due to Daniel, who had been given a prominent position in the kingdom (see Dan 6:28). And so, in belief of Israel’s God, Cyrus issued a decree in verse 3: “Who is there among you of all his people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of Yahweh God of Israel, he is the God which is in Jerusalem.” Accordingly, Zerubbabel (2:2) and “the chief of the fathers” rose up and led the way back into the land. The name “Zerubbabel” literally means, “out of Babylon”. Thus, he represents the One who is able to lead his followers out of spiritual Babylon, to inherit the promised blessings. Just as Zerubbabel led the Israelites out of captivity into blessing, so the Lord Jesus Christ has redeemed us from the bondage of sin, that he might lead us into glory (Rom. 8:21; Heb. 2:10).

Just as Zerubbabel the Governor led the return into the land, Joshua the High Priest led the return to worship. In Chapter 3 of Ezra, we read how Joshua, Zerubbabel, and their brethren rebuilt the altar. Once this had been completed, the offering of daily sacrifices began once more. This demonstrates the principle that blessing cannot be obtained without dedication and worship. First, the nation had to rededicate themselves to Yahweh. They had to offer sacrifice for their sins, and resolve to continue in faith. Only then could the work of building up the house of God begin. And so it is, that upon our departure from the apocalyptic spiritual Babylon, we must firstly establish the correct form of worship. We must put the Lord first, submitting to what he requires. Only then, when we have dedicated ourselves to Him, by association with the Sacrifice of His Providing, can we engage ourselves in His work and receive His blessings.

But very soon after the initial enthusiasm and rejoicing at the laying of the foundation, the Jews ran into a mountain of opposition. In Ezra 4, we read of the Samaritan inhabitants of the land, who sought to subvert the work of God. They “weakened the hands of the people of Judah and troubled them in building” (v 4). But notice, the Samaritans did not begin by opposing the work, rather by offering to help! “They came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as do ye” (Ezra 4:2).

How much like the churches this is! The Samaritans, although they professed to worship the God of Israel, also worshipped other gods. They had so many false religious ideas, that the Lord was able to say to the Samaritan woman, “ye worship ye know not what” (Jno 4:22). And so, just like the churches today, they were not troubled by mere matters of doctrine. They believed that “as long as we all worship the same God, that’s all that matters”. But Zerubbabel and Joshua’s answer is most instructive. “Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto Yahweh, God of Israel”.

And so, this is the answer we give to the churches: “ye have nothing to do with us,” but we, as the united body of Christ, will build together, as the Lord has commanded (see 2 Cor. 6:14-18). So, opposition

began, and a letter of protest against the Jews was sent to the king. Another decree was made, and it became illegal to continue in the work of the Truth. But how did the Jews cope in such circumstances? Did they present the matter before the Lord in faith, and prayer, continuing in his work? No, rather they gave up. And so, we read that the work “ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia” (Ezra 4:24).

This then, forms the general background to the ministry of Haggai. The work had commenced, the foundations had been laid, but the building had now ceased through lack of faith and trust in the Lord. But the Lord did not leave the matter there. In verse 1 of chapter 5, we read, **“then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah, the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews ... in the name of the God of Israel”**. Here, the work of the prophets began: to reprove the people for their apathy, and to encourage them in the Lord, causing His House to be built. And so we read, “Then rose up Zerubbabel ... and Joshua ... and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem, **and with them, were the prophets of God helping them**” (Ezra 5:2). Once again, the leaders, Joshua and Zerubbabel rose up, and led the people in rebuilding the house. The work recommenced, with the prophets themselves assisting in the work.

Notice this, “with them were the prophets of God helping them”. Neither Haggai, or Zechariah were like some today, full of condemnation and rebuke for other men’s failings, but never engaging in the work themselves. These men led the way, both by word and example.

And so, Haggai was a man of action. A man of faith, who, with Zechariah, brought the people back to God, that the work might recommence, and the House of God built. As we come to consider the prophecy of Haggai therefore, we are going to consider a prophecy designed to stir up our spirits. It is a prophecy designed to give exhortation and encouragement to those feeling the pressure of adversity, whose faith may be waning. It is an encouragement and a warning to us, that we might not forsake our obligations to the Lord, but rather be strong, setting ourselves to the task of building up the House of God in faith.

As we saw in Ezra, the immediate effect of the words of the prophets, was that Zerubbabel, and Joshua were stirred up, to lead the people in action. In Haggai chapter 1, we see that perhaps the reason for this, was that the first prophecy was delivered to these men first, and then the people. The word of Yahweh came by the hand of Haggai, drawing attention to the condition of the people.

“Thus saith Yahweh of hosts, saying, This people say, the time is not come, the time that Yahweh’s house should be built”. This is what the people said in their hearts, “the time is not yet come”. They were familiar with the prophecies of Jeremiah, given just before and after the Babylonian invasion. He prophesied that in addition to the seventy year period of servitude, there would be another seventy years during which the Land would be desolate (2 Chron 36:21).

To the faithful, such as Daniel, the promise of a restoration after 70 years of destruction was something to long for. We know that Daniel understood “the number of years, whereof the word of Yahweh came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem” (Dan 9:2). And toward the end of this period, we have the marvellous prayer of faith that he gave, earnestly beseeching the Lord to “cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary which is desolate” (v 17).

This was the prayer of all the faithful, that the restoration would come, that the mercies of God would once again be in abundance upon His People. But, it would appear that the people had worked out that the 70 years were not yet ended. That the time had “not yet come”, there was a short time left. And so they concluded that there was no need to work yet. They had begun to do the work of God, but opposition had arisen, and they had to stop. What further proof did they need, that the time had not yet come? When the time came, surely the opposition would cease, and they would be able to continue?

Such is the reasoning of the flesh. How subtle, how logical to the natural mind, which finds no satisfaction in the work of God. Yet, how contrary to the mind of the Spirit. What a contrast this is to the response of David, who earnestly desired to build the original house (Ps 132:3-5, 2 Sam 7:2).

David was commanded by Yahweh through Nathan the prophet that he could not build. The time for the house to be built would not come until David slept with his fathers, and the reign of Solomon had begun. But David did not use this as a reason not to engage himself in the work. Although he could not actually build the house, he set himself to work in preparing all the materials necessary (1 Chron 22:14-19). And so, when the time came for the temple to be built, Solomon could start immediately, everything being ready, and prepared. But the Jews of the restoration said, No, the time to work “is not yet come!” But then came the Divine Rebuke: “Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste? Now, therefore, thus saith Yahweh of hosts; *Consider your ways.*”

They dwelt in “ceiled houses”. The word means “to cover over” and refers to the wood panelling they had covering the interior of their houses. The word is used in Jeremiah 22:14 speaking of those “that saith, I will build me a wide house and large chambers, and cutteth him out windows; and it is *ceiled* with cedar, and painted with vermilion”.

And so rather than to build God’s house, they built their own houses! But even worse than this, the cedar panelling they used came from materials originally prepared for use in God’s house!

We read of this wood being given in Ezra 3:7, “cedar trees from Lebanon ... according to the grant that they had of Cyrus, king of Persia.” But now, in their apathy, and self-indulgence, they had stolen the wood for use in their own houses. Truly they needed to consider their ways. The fact that they used the wood, indicates a lack of belief that the time *would* come. They thought the wood would never be needed. But, the command came for them to get more wood: “Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house” (Hag 1:8). They had brought additional work upon themselves by their own foolishness.

But how easy it is for us to do likewise. We live in the last days before the return of our Lord, when there will be a second, greater restoration. But yet in truth, that time has not yet come. How long remains, we do not know, but what are we doing? Are we diligently striving to overcome all opposition, in our efforts to build up the House of God? Are we like Daniel, earnestly desireing that day to come soon? Like David, labouring in preparation for that great day? Or are we like the people who were concerned only with their own affairs, in making their lives more comfortable? Let us not say within our hearts, “the Lord delayeth his coming” (Mat 24:48), or “the time has not yet come”, using this as an excuse to engage in fleshly pursuits. But let us rather be stirred up to action by the word of the prophets, that we might be ready when that day comes.

The Jews in Haggai’s day lacked faith in the ways of God. Their ways which they were to consider (Hag. 1:5, 7) were not in harmony with His ways (Is 55:8,9). We cannot expect the blessings of God, if we forsake Him, only cursing. They sowed much, but reaped little. The scarcity of food brought famine, and rising prices. The high cost of food meant that they could not have enough. They could not afford sufficient clothing to keep warm. In short, those who earned wages found that the money went very quickly, like putting it into a bag with holes in. And all “because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house” (Hag 1:9). And so, the people needed to seriously consider their ways.

This is what we must do, if we would be partakers of Yahweh’s blessings. Speaking of the Memorial meal of fellowship, the apostle wrote: “But let a man *examine himself*, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.” At the time when we unite together to consider the perfection of our Lord, we must examine ourselves. We must consider our ways, whether they are Yahweh’s ways or not. And we must resolve to repent from all evil works, that we might be acceptable to him.

After hearing the message of the Prophet, both the leaders and the people did consider their ways, and repented. In verse 12, we read that Zerubbabel, Joshua “with *all* the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of Yahweh their God ... and the people did fear before Yahweh”. What a marvellous response this was! Notice that Haggai used no sign, no miracle to achieve this – simply an uncompromising declaration of the Word of God.

Upon their repentance, the next message to the people through Haggai was short, yet full of meaning: “I am with you, saith Yahweh” (1:13). Previously they had faced opposition and uncertainty. But now, they were given an assurance of Divine aid. The work would continue, the house would be built, for Yahweh was with His people. As the apostle declared, “if God be for us, who can be against us?”

The builder of the first house, Solomon was moved by the Holy Spirit to write: “Except Yahweh build the house, they labour in vain that build it (Ps 127:1). This had been the situation previously. The people, building under their own strength were hindered, and the work ceased. But now, they recognised that God’s blessing upon both themselves and their work was contingent upon obedience. They were building in God’s strength, and so they would succeed.

And so we read in verse 14, that “they came and did work in the house of Yahweh of hosts, their Elohim”. The immediate, and long term effects of these actions are recorded for us by Ezra. What they were doing, in recommencing the work was against the decree of the king, and therefore illegal – and punishable by death. In Ezra 6, we read of how the adversaries of Israel commenced their opposition once more. But, “the eye of their God” was upon them, that they “could not cause them to cease” (Ezra 5:5). And so, they wrote another letter to the king, questioning the legality of the matter. “Let there be a search made ... whether it be so, that a decree was made of Cyrus the king to build the house of God at Jerusalem ...”

A search was made, and the decree of Cyrus was found. And Darius ratified it with another decree: “***Let the work of this house of God alone***” (Ezra 6:6-12) he commanded, and gave details of how provision would be made to assist the work.

The way in which the opposition was removed is very instructive for us to consider. It was a direct consequence of faith in action. It was a direct result of the people resuming their work as the prophet had commanded, that the events just described took place, leading to the rebuke of the adversary (Zech 3:2).

So it is, that when we meet adversity and opposition in our labours in the Truth, there is no place for complacency. We cannot just sit back and wait for deliverance. We must act, for as Bro Roberts wrote, “Human action is the basis of divine supervision in human affairs. If a man were to lie down in sloth, the angels would have nothing to work on, so to speak, as regarded that man’s matters.” (Ways of Providence).

When the Israelites were to enter the land, the Divine promise came, “I will give you the land”. But, if the people had just waited at the border for it to have been given to them, they would never have possessed it. They were to go in, and to fight. And so, likewise, if we would inherit the blessings of Yahweh, we must be active in faith. And it will be that the Lord’s ministering spirits (Heb 1:14) will guide events in our lives to deliver us from all evil (Psa. 34:7) and prepare us for that great day to come.

In the prophecy of Haggai, we have an example of faithful service on the part of the Prophet. He used no miraculous sign, but just spoke forth the Word of Yahweh. He was a man who led by example: and the people – despite their earlier failures – listened, and considered their ways. We must do likewise, preparing for our Lord’s return, who will lead us out of Babylon into the glories of the Age to Come.

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