

Haggai 2:10-19

From Curse to Blessing

Imagine for a moment that you were sick. You have certain symptoms because of your illness, so you go to a doctor. The doctor doesn't really have an interest in helping you – he just wants to get you in and out of his office as quickly as possible. So the doctor finds out what your symptoms are and gives you some medication to treat these symptoms. This doctor has no interest in discovering the root problem. He doesn't care about the disease that is causing these symptoms. We would probably say that such a doctor is not worth his medical certification. We want doctors that treat not only symptoms, but also root causes. We want doctors who understand pathology – the science of disease.

What is the root problem in our lives? We have all kinds of symptoms, but when it comes down to it, what is causing all these symptoms? People might give different answers. Some might say it's environment and upbringing. Others might say it's a failure in our thinking, a cognitive problem of some sort. There may be some truth in both of those answers, but what does God say? Why do things so often go off the rails in our lives? For instance, why do we have blow-ups with our spouses? Or why do we struggle with self-control? What is the "disease" afflicting us? God has a one-word answer for us: sin. Sin is our root problem. It isn't always necessarily our own personal sin, as if we sinned and then this happened directly as a result. Sometimes it is because of the presence of sin in this world in general. Whatever the case may be, sin is what ails us.

Sin is a huge problem because it places us under the curse of God and leads to eternal death. Sin makes us into enemies of God who are subject to his wrath. How do we address this root problem? How do we go from God's curse to his blessing?

That's what Haggai 2:10-19 is about. It's about a people who have been burdened with symptoms. They have had all kinds of problems. The Doctor

explains the root of their symptoms. He knows the pathology at work here and he knows the way forward.

To remind you, here in Haggai we're in the period immediately following the return from exile in Babylon. It's 520 BC and some of the Jews have returned to the Promised Land. When they first returned back in 538 BC, they had started rebuilding the temple. But when they faced opposition from the Samaritans, they quit. Haggai challenged the people with the Word of the LORD to get back to work and the people responded with obedience. They began rebuilding the temple in earnest. According to this passage, it's this rebuilding that is really a turning point for the people and their relationship to God. So we will see how *the rebuilding of the temple signifies the shift from curse to blessing*.

The People Defiled

By now you know that dates are important for this book. This is true again in this passage. This prophecy came through Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month in the second year of Darius, the Persian king. That puts us precisely on December 18, 520 BC. This exact date is significant for two reasons. In the immediate context, the temple rebuilding project has now been underway for exactly three months. But there's also the fact that the foundation of the temple was laid around this time in 538 BC. According to Ezra 3, the foundation was laid in the seventh month – though the exact date is not given.

At this particular moment, the Word of God came to Haggai. He was to go to the priests and ask them for a legal opinion.¹ The priests were tasked with being experts in the law of God. They were to know the law inside out and backwards and then to teach and lead the people with this law. We sometimes think that the priests were just about sacrifices and ceremonies, but they also had a teaching role among the Jews in the Old Testament. This is why God sends his prophet to the priests. They are to hear the prophetic word and then provide leadership and teaching based on that.

¹Duguid, *A Study Commentary*, 48.

Haggai comes with two cases from *Yahweh Sabaoth* – the LORD Almighty. The first case involves a man carrying consecrated meat. The Israelites made several different types of sacrifices. Some of them involved the burning up of an entire animal, such as a sheep or an ox. But other sacrifices (such as the sin, the guilt, and the fellowship offerings) only involved part of the animal. Part of the animal would be offered to the LORD and part would be given to a priest (in the case of the sin and guilt offerings) or to the worshipper (in the case of the fellowship offering). The part of the animal given to the person would be consecrated as holy meat (it would be considered ritually clean). In those days people didn't typically have pockets in their clothing. So to take this piece of consecrated meat home, a person might lift up their robe and keep the meat in a fold. That's what's happening in verse 12.

The question revolves around whether cleanness or holiness is contagious. Does the holy meat make the fold of the robe holy? And, in turn, can the fold of the robe then go on to touch other foods or drinks and make them holy? The priests don't even need to think about this one. The law never said it directly, but it's obvious that holiness is not usually contagious (there were a couple of exceptional situations²). But generally you can't make something holy by touching it with something holy. Cleanness and uncleanness don't work that way.

The second case involves someone who has touched a dead body. The law was clear on this. A dead body was unclean. It was defiled. It reflected the sin and brokenness in the world. And if someone comes and touches a dead body, he becomes unclean (Leviticus 22:4). Then whatever the unclean person touches, including the food mentioned in verse 12, all of that becomes unclean also. Uncleanness is contagious. If you are defiled and unholy, your uncleanness will spread to everything you touch. This too is a picture of sin. Sin impacts absolutely everything in your life. It's like King Midas in reverse. King Midas was the mythical king whose touch turned everything to gold. This is the mirror image. Everything the unclean person touches turns to filth.

²See Exodus 29:37, Exodus 30:32, Ezekiel 44:19.

Here too, this is a no-brainer for the priests. Anything an unclean person touches becomes unclean.

These two case studies of clean and unclean are meant to illustrate the condition of the people. This people and nation, these Jews, are unclean in the eyes of Yahweh. This is their root problem. Sin has polluted and corrupted everything in them. They are stained with sin and unholy. They are unacceptable to the Holy God. Moreover, everything they do and everything they might offer is also polluted and unclean. Anything they set their hands to, gets dirtied by their sin, whether it's their agriculture or their sacrifices. And they cannot simply touch something holy, such as the stones of the temple, to become clean again.

It sounds depressing. It is. This is the bad news of what sin does to us and how it affects our lives. Everything gets ruined by sin. The people of Haggai's day were to see that and cry out for their redemption. This prophecy comes to them so that they will say something like Paul would say a few hundred years later in Romans 7 "Oh, wretched people that we are, who will deliver us from this body of death? Who will save us? When will he come?" It's meant to elicit a cry for the Messiah.

It's appropriate for us to have the same sort of reaction. Without God's work in our lives, this is the picture of us too. Of ourselves, anything we do and anything we offer is defiled. It is not defiled because we've touched dead bodies, but because we are dead in ourselves. Consequently, we all have the anti-Midas touch – everything we touch turns to sewage. We're not just a little sinful. We're not just a little broken. We are seriously messed up by sin. We're all infected from head to toe. Sin impacts everything we do and everything that touches our lives. You have to see that.

How we need Jesus! Christ has come and taken our filth upon himself. He absorbed all of our defilement. He washed us clean with his blood. In God's sight, we are now clean, holy, and undefiled. This is all because of our Saviour. He is the fountain that washes us clean. He is the one who came in the fullness of time to fulfill all the hopes and expectations of the godly in Haggai's day. He has come and through him we can be assured of acceptance with the Holy One. We can also be confident that our works will be cleansed

by the Holy Spirit. He will sanctify the work of our hands and make it pleasing to God. Through Christ and through the Spirit he pours out on us, we therefore have hope and comfort for each day. Though the law reminds us that we are a sinful people, the gospel proclaims that we are a forgiven people and a people being sanctified.

Here we can think about God's Word in John 2 as well. In that chapter, Jesus speaks of himself as the temple. He is the fulfillment of the temple. He speaks of the tearing down of the temple and its rebuilding. That's his way of speaking about his crucifixion and his resurrection. He gets broken down at Golgotha on Good Friday and then "rebuilt" on Easter Sunday. It is this rebuilding that signifies that we have moved from curse to blessing. Paul says in Romans 4:25 that Jesus was raised to life for our justification. This speaks not only of a verdict of "not guilty", but positively righteous – through Jesus and his redemptive work. When the temple named Jesus was rebuilt on Easter Sunday, we moved from death to life, from curse to blessing.

This is what our passage is pointing forward to. In verses 15 and 18, Yahweh tells the priests to give careful thought from this day on. This special day is a day for which the foundations were laid some years earlier, a day in which the temple construction is well under way. Three times he says, "Give careful thought..." The rebuilding of the temple represents a turning point.

Verses 16 and 17 speak of the curse the people have carried because of their sin. Their defilement caused these symptoms -- it caused these things to happen. People would come to the granary looking for wheat or barley, expecting to find twenty measures³. But there were only ten. The granary fell short of their expectations, which means that the harvest also fell short. When someone would go to the wine vat, they expected to draw fifty measures, but they came away with only twenty. Here again, the wine vat fell short, which means that the grape harvest fell short as well.

Why did those things happen? Because it was a covenant curse of Yahweh upon the people for their disobedience. It was his chastisement. It was his

³ A measure can be anything you want it to be here – cups, litres, kilograms. Nobody knows for sure what measure was intended.

hand of discipline upon them. He says it explicitly in verse 17. He says that he struck them with unbearable heat that made growing crops difficult. He struck them with mildew, with fungus that grows when conditions are too wet. He struck them with the thunderstorms that hurled hail at their fragile crops and destroyed them.⁴ These were all covenant curses described elsewhere in the Bible, especially in Deuteronomy 28. If the people would not follow Yahweh, he would get their attention with these means. By getting their attention, he wanted them to repent, to turn from their sin and follow him again. But he says, “Yet you did not turn to me.” The people were stubborn and hard-hearted. They refused to get the message. They didn’t want Yahweh in their midst. As one commentator puts it, “the unbuilt house spoke of the unwanted resident.”⁵ They wanted to go on in their filth and defilement.

The People Blessed

But now the LORD says, “Give careful thought, because this is a new day. A new era.” Verse 19 says that this is the day blessings begin for the people. The rebuilding of the temple brings the people into this new time. Why? Because the temple is God’s dwelling with his people. Because the temple is where the ministry of reconciliation was located. Because the temple housed the sacrificial system which pointed ahead to Christ and his redemptive work. God was going to bless his people because now they were rebuilding his house, the place where the means of grace would be available to them. There they could find the Old Testament means of dealing with their uncleanness and defilement through the sacrifices which foreshadowed our Lord Jesus. With the temple in their midst, and with their use of its ordinances, the people would be blessed by God.

Then what about verse 19? God asks whether there’s any seed left in the barn. He notes that the main fruit trees have not produced. No grapes on the vines, no figs, no pomegranates, and no olives. How does this fit? Here’s where the timing of this prophecy is important again. Remember that this is December. In Canada, we don’t expect fruit trees to be producing fruit in December. It’s a similar situation in Israel. With the grain, it is a little bit different. In Israel,

⁴Motyer, *The Minor Prophets*, 997.

⁵ Motyer, *The Minor Prophets*, 996-997.

grain would be planted late in the year. But by this time, it was still too early to tell what the outcome would be, what the harvest would be like. Here in December of 520 BC, the people are still languishing under the effect of the curses from before. You have to keep in mind that they only started obeying God and building the temple again back in August. Covenant curses on agriculture don't get reversed overnight. It will take time until the next harvest. But with the end of verse 19, God promises that the next harvest will bring better times. There will be plenty of grain, and there will be plenty of grapes for wine, and figs, pomegranates, and olives. There will be abundance again. The people will have moved from curse to blessing.

Putting one stone on top of another was the beginning of the way forward in the days of Haggai. They were to start laying the foundation and then build on it one stone at a time. However, in a little more than 500 years, their work of rebuilding would be undone. When God dwelt among them in Jesus Christ, when the real temple came, they were the ones to destroy it. When many of them would not repent of their treatment of the Christ, and would not believe in the one they had crucified, they went back to the curse. In Luke 19:41, our Lord Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He prophesied of how the Romans would sack the city in 70 AD. Then in verse 44, he said, "They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." Luke uses the language of Haggai 2, except it gets put in reverse.⁶ Not from curse to blessing, but blessing to curse. Why? Because they did not recognize that the true temple was among them and they themselves destroyed it and would not repent.

This reminds us that God's blessings are not automatic, meaning you don't get them automatically because you were born into the right family or the right church. Without exception every one of us receives all the covenant promises. But that doesn't mean that we receive everything that is promised. For that, we each need to take hold of Christ by faith. We need to embrace the righteousness of Christ for ourselves. We need the forgiveness of sins through his blood on the cross. You can only have access to God's promised covenant blessings through Christ Jesus. If you're like the Jews and refuse to

⁶Luke uses the terms employed by the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) in Haggai 2:15. Cf. Duguid, *A Study Commentary*, 247 (note 27).

“recognize the time of God’s coming to you” in Christ, you, like them, will be subjected to his covenant curses. That’s a horrible thing to contemplate. It’s far better to hear the gospel call again and respond in faith and be blessed by your God and Saviour.

Our text speaks of material blessings, of food and drink. But these are always pointing to deeper spiritual realities.⁷ They are pointing to a friendly relationship of fellowship with God. To be this blessed people whose hunger and thirst are satisfied, we must turn from our sins and turn to Christ. We have to rest and trust in all his work on our behalf. In him alone, the rebuilt temple, do we truly move from curse to blessing.

In sin, we have a serious problem. In sin, we’re not merely sick, but we’re dead on arrival. Our symptoms are the stench given off by rotting corpses. It’s not a pleasant thought, but it is the reality. We are dead and dirty and even our so-called righteous acts are all filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). We have no resources of our own to change this situation. How thankful we can be to God for his Word! His Word came to the Jews in Haggai’s day and, with the Spirit, brought about a mighty change and blessing. Today his Word comes to us again – his life giving Word. His Word breathes life into the dead. It addresses our root problem and all the symptoms. Believe that Word, and in particular believe what the Word says about your Saviour, the rebuilt temple. As you rest and trust in him, you can be confident that God’s Word here is for you too, “From this day on, I will bless you.” (Haggai 2:19)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why did God give laws of clean and unclean in the ceremonial law? How have these laws been fulfilled in Christ and what bearing do they have on us today?
2. Is there a connection between our passage and the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer (“Give us this day our daily bread”)? If you think so, explain.

⁷Duguid, *A Study Commentary*, 54.

3. How does this passage challenge the pride and narcissism (self-love and vanity) so prevalent in our day? Reflect especially on how the Word of God here challenges your own pride and narcissism.
4. Does our passage have anything to say on questions of cultural engagement for Christians today? Think especially about the notion of contamination from uncleanness. We have been made clean in Christ – can we be made unclean by involvement with the world?
5. Ponder and then evaluate this statement by commentator Iain Duguid:

“Yet some did receive [Jesus], and along with him the blessings that flow from relationship with God. They discovered that to receive Christ was to be reborn as a child of God (John 1:12). Just as the coming of Christ to the world is a radical turning point in redemptive history, so also coming to Christ is a radical turning point in the life of a believer. From the moment that a person is in Christ, everything has changed.”⁸

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⁸Duguid, *A Study Commentary*, 55.