

Haggai 2:1-9

Be Strong and Work

Some of you undoubtedly remember when 14.4 KB/s was considered fast for an Internet connection. That was back in the days of dial-up modems. Most of us were creeping along at 2.4 KB/s or less. Those who had 14.4 were really motoring. Webpages would sometimes take two minutes or more to load up. You had to be really patient. I don't know about you, but I know that now if a website takes more than twenty seconds, I get fed up and move on to something else. Unless it's something really important, I don't have the patience to wait more than twenty seconds for a website to load. We've come to expect instant results in our use of the Internet. It's elsewhere in life too. No one wants to wait for anything – we want what we want when we want it and if we have to wait, we get really annoyed. That's the world in which we live.

Impatience and the desire for instant results are nothing new. Impatience is usually about control; we want to control when things happen. We want to be God, or God-like. We want to have circumstances in our hands so that we can dictate how things will go and at what pace. This is part of our fallen human condition. People were afflicted with it in the days of Haggai too. The prophet had come to them with the Word of Yahweh, challenging them to rebuild the temple. They had to get their priorities straight. At the end of chapter 1, we saw that they responded with repentance and action. Twenty-three days after Haggai's first oracle, the temple rebuilding project got underway. Stirred to action by God's own Spirit, it didn't take long for the people to get busy.

Initially, they had great energy and enthusiasm for the work. But as days turned into weeks, it became clear that this was going to be a big project. It was going to take a long time and it was going to involve a lot of work. If anyone was expecting instant results, they were in for disappointment. It was dawning on them that this was a small beginning. Not only that, but there were those who had seen Solomon's temple. They reminded the people of how impressive that first temple had been. Nothing they could build would

be able to compare. Solomon's temple was the most impressive building the world had ever seen, and their little project was just going to be a shack in comparison. It was a reality check and this sobered the people and dampened their enthusiasm.

In the face of that situation, Yahweh sent his prophet Haggai again with his Word. God wanted to lift up his people and push them forward to continue with the rebuilding of the temple. In this study we'll see how *in a day of small beginnings, God encourages his people to be strong and work*

The Humble Present

As we've seen already several times, dates are important in this book. Haggai is always precise about the time that his prophecies were delivered. This time he tells us that the word of Yahweh came to him on the twenty-first day of the seventh month of the second year of King Darius. That puts us on October 17, 520 BC. Haggai's first oracle came on August 29, 520 BC, his second on September 21, 520 BC, and now it is October 17, meaning that the temple project has been underway for less than a month.

October 17 was a significant day for two reasons. This was the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths as it's sometimes called. You can read about that feast in Leviticus 23. During this feast, the Israelites were supposed to live in temporary dwellings. This was to remind the Jews of the time of the Exodus. It was also to remind them that, even in the Promised Land, they were pilgrims. They were on a journey to something greater. So here in Haggai's time, the people were called to leave behind their panelled houses and live in makeshift huts for seven days. They would have been gathered together at Jerusalem to do this. Haggai could then deliver his message for all the people to hear.¹

The other reason this date is significant has to do with Solomon's temple. First Kings 8 tells us that Solomon dedicated the temple he built at the Feast of Booths. All Israel gathered together in Jerusalem, living in makeshift huts.

¹Duguid, *A Study Commentary*, 38.

Finally, at this Feast of Booths, the LORD's dwelling place among his people went from something temporary to something permanent. It went from the tabernacle built during the days of Moses to this magnificent temple built by Solomon for the LORD. This was the end of an era and the beginning of a (brief) period of glory. Solomon's dedication of the temple at that Feast of Booths was a celebration that had been unparalleled in Israel up to that time.

So this date was important because it reminded the people of the former glory of the temple from the days of Solomon. That temple was spectacular. It had been constructed of cedar and pine and carefully quarried stones. Gold and silver were everywhere. This was a building of the finest craftsmanship using only the absolutely best materials. There were 30,000 men working to cut the timber in Lebanon. Solomon had 70,000 people hauling materials. There were 80,000 stone cutters and 3300 foremen who supervised. All in all, there were well over 180,000 people working on Solomon's temple. Even then, it took seven years to build it.

Some of the people in Haggai's day would have seen that temple in its last days. These people would be old by now and when they saw it, they would have been children. But you can imagine these old timers saying, "Oh, I remember, that temple was incredible! Awesome and beautiful, there was nothing else like it!"

Now what do they have? That's what God is recognizing in verse 3, "Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?" Where an impressive structure once stood, there's now a foundation with the beginnings of some building activity. After less than a month of work, there's not much there. Certainly nothing like what was there all those years ago at that Feast of Booths when the temple was dedicated by Solomon. What we see right now is not even a shell of what was. The present was rather grim for the people of Haggai's day. Yes, they had made a start. They had listened to the Word of Yahweh. But now the facts were starting to come together. If it took Solomon seven years to build his glorious temple with over 180,000 men at his disposal, plus amazing wealth, what are these people going to be able to accomplish in comparison? You can hear them thinking: "Maybe it was a mistake to listen to the LORD. Maybe it was a mistake to set aside our own economic goals

and interests to put the LORD's house as our priority. We've taken a huge risk in doing this and after a month, maybe it's time to reconsider. We're obviously not going to see instant returns on our investment here. This is going to be a long-term project." It was a day of small beginnings and those small beginnings could easily lead to big questions and doubts.

Instant results are what we often crave. If we look at this in terms of the temple in this New Testament era, the analogy would be the instant growth of the church, or the instant growth of ourselves as Christians.² Remember: Scripture teaches that not only is the New Testament believer the temple of God (1 Corinthians 6:19), but also that the church, as the body of Christ, is the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). We want instant glory for both the church and ourselves. For the church, we would love to see the gospel be embraced by millions. We would love to see the church grow, not only in numbers, but also in maturity, and the sooner the better. We would love to see ourselves grow too. We get frustrated with the slow progress of our sanctification. Imagine that you could wake up tomorrow morning and just be done with that one sin that keeps besetting you. Imagine that it could be gone, instantly. No more struggle, no more fight with that evil that's been tempting you and tormenting you for years and years. Wouldn't it be nice?

We so easily forget the story line of Scripture. In the Bible, there is no instant glory. Solomon's temple was not built without blood, sweat, and tears. Before Solomon's reign, there was David and David's reign was marred by conflict, lust, murder, family strife, a hunger for power, and a lot of other sins. The glory only came to the temple after much tribulation. This story in the Old Testament continued its trajectory into the New Testament. Our Lord Jesus didn't instantly receive glory. He first plunged into humiliation, step by step, beginning with his conception and ending with his death on a cross and burial. Only after remaining in the grave for three days did he finally arise victorious. Only after his struggle for our salvation did he receive glory. This is the pattern of the entire Bible – because this is the pattern of Christ. Since it's his pattern, it's also that of those united to him. There are no instant results. Glory comes after the struggle. The apostles understood that too and

²Motyer, *The Minor Prophets*, 987.

that's why they said in Acts 14:22, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." Now we have small beginnings, both in the church and in ourselves. We have a humble start. We have a struggle, but in his wisdom God says that this is the way forward in the story of our redemption.

That's why God comes to his people with encouragement in verses 4 and 5 of Haggai 2. He tells Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all the people to "Be strong", an expression that is found throughout the Old Testament. It's usually spoken to people who've been given a special office or calling. In Deuteronomy 31:6, Moses says "Be strong" to Joshua before he handed over the leadership of Israel to him. Before they entered the Promised Land, Joshua told the people to "be strong" (Josh. 23:6). Now, on this last day of the Feast of Booths, as they looked back to the Exodus, God comes to his people again and tells them to "be strong" for the task at hand.

Where were they to find that strength? In the presence of *Yahweh Sabaoth*, the LORD Almighty. Yahweh is omnipotent and all powerful. He is in control of heaven's armies and he is with them. His Holy Spirit is among them. That's where the strength comes from to carry on. Not from within. Not from themselves, but from him. When God says, "Be strong," he means, "Be strong by looking to me in faith and trusting my strength for you and in you." He means, "Be strong, because in my grace I will give you strength. Trust me."

In so doing, they'll have what they need to get the work done for which they've been commissioned. By believing God's Word, they'll have the strength to finish the temple. Yes, it will be a long time, and it will be a lot of work. There will be long days and the days will roll into weeks and months and years. But they have to persevere and push forward. God says, "By my Spirit, you can and will do it."

The Trustworthy Promises of the Past

Then God appeals to his trustworthy promises of the past. Remember that this is at the time of the Feast of Booths. The exodus from Egypt is on their minds. God says, "Think about that event and think about the covenant I made with your forefathers back then. That covenant was not only with them, but with

you. I made a covenant promise to always be with you, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. I promised to remain with you through my Holy Spirit.” Those promises were made in the distant past. But God doesn’t change and neither do his promises. They’re trustworthy and dependable -- they never fail. They never get rusty with the passing of hundreds or even thousands of years.

Since that’s the case, what is there to be anxious about? We find that command at the end of verse 5, “Do not fear.” This is the most frequent command in the Bible. God knows what people are like. He knew what the people in Haggai’s day were like and he knows what we are like. Faced with the prospect of no immediate results and the possibility of a temple which could never compare to Solomon’s, it would have been tempting for those people to doubt, question, and wonder whether it was worth it. It would have been tempting to fear that they had not done the right thing by following the words God spoken through Haggai. Some might ask, “Should I listen to God or take care of my family?” God says, “Look at my promises, believe me, and do not fear that when you listen to me, your family will be taken care of. When you follow me, everything else falls into place. Seek first my kingdom and all these things will be added unto you.”

All those covenant promises of the past point ahead to one person. In the fullness of time, our Lord Jesus was born. God had promised a Saviour and he came. He lived a perfectly obedient life in our place – never doubting, never fearing. He died on the cross to pay for all the times we’ve had sinful doubts and fears. The gospel promises that Jesus is the fulfilment of all God’s promises. The Spirit of Jesus lives in us too. We have him to direct our hearts upward in faith. Through Christ our Saviour, we have the trustworthy promises of our God for us too. He can say to us, “Do not fear.” Though we have struggles, though we face trials in this life, we can move ahead in faith. Because we love God and want to show our love and gratitude for the grace he’s shown us in Christ, we’ll want to put him first in our lives. We can trust that when we do that, this will meet with his blessing in his time and in his way.

The Glorious Future

Finally, let's look at what's revealed in the last four verses of our passage. God says that in a short while he will shake the whole creation, heavens and earth, sea and land. The whole works will be shaken. This is not referring to any sort of literal earthquake. This is special biblical language that is used in other places to refer to the appearance of the LORD on his great day. This is the way it's being used here too. God is saying that he is coming and he will appear. When he does, nothing in creation is unaffected. Everything in creation gets touched by the appearance of the Creator.

His appearance also impacts the peoples of the earth. They too take notice of Yahweh's appearance and are affected by it. God says, "I will shake all nations." Right after that in verse 7, our Bible translation reads, "and the desired of all nations will come..." What that means is that the treasures of all nations will come to God and will enhance the glory of his temple. That part of verse 7 has to be seen in close connection with verse 8 where God says that the gold and the silver of this world belong to him. Everything belongs to him.

This is a prophecy of things yet to come. Yes, it says, "in a short while," but that's being spoken from God's perspective. From the divine standpoint, these things will happen shortly. From a human point of view, it may be years and years in coming. But these things are yet to come and that's the main point here. What's being described here in Haggai is the same thing as what we read in Revelation 21. There too we read about the temple, the fulfilment of all temples in the Bible. The whole creation, described as a city, becomes the temple of God. Verse 24 of Revelation 21 says that "the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it." Verse 26 says, "The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it." Just as the spoil of the Egyptians was used to enhance the tabernacle during the exodus, somehow in the age to come the wealth and splendour of the nations will enhance the temple of God in the New Jerusalem.³ How exactly that works, I don't know. I'm not aware of any Scripture passage that explains the details. But I can say that this

³Motyer, *The Minor Prophets*, 991.

eschatological (end of the times) temple of the LORD will be an amazing and wonderful place and it will be partly because all the silver and gold that belong to God will be used to beautify it.

There is a glorious future for God's temple. Solomon's temple will not compare. The people in Haggai's day have their heads hanging low because they're comparing what they see now with what they know was there in the past. But God says, "Forget about the past glory, let me tell you about the future." That temple they were building was part of God's plan to lead his people onward to that glorious future. He wanted them back on track for his plans for their redemption. He wanted to encourage them to keep building so that everything would fall into place for their salvation.

It was this temple where God would continue to dwell among his people for another 500 years. Yes, there were interruptions in that period. There were invaders and the temple would be again desecrated. It would have to be refurbished again later by Herod. But this temple still had a place -- it was still part of God's work among the Jews. It would be part of the plan until the coming of Christ, until his death on the cross and the tearing of the temple curtain. That would signify the end of the ministry of the temple in Jerusalem. Through the ministry of that temple, people had peace and reconciliation with God through the sacrifices offered there -- but only because those sacrifices pointed ahead to Christ. Christ came as the fulfilment of all those sacrifices *and* the temple in which they were offered. He is now the one through whom we have peace and reconciliation with God. Without Christ, we are still under the wrath of God for our sins. By trusting in Christ, we are forgiven and the penalty is paid. We have peace. Because of the peace we have through Christ right now, we can be sure that someday we will enjoy peace in the new heavens and new earth -- that place where God will dwell with his people. That will be the last temple of all.

What does that peace involve? We often think of peace simply as no fighting. But the biblical concept of peace is richer. We're speaking here about *shalom* in Hebrew. *Shalom* is wholeness, having things the way they were designed and created to be. Everything is in order, both the spiritual and physical. That's what we have a foretaste of now already in Christ and the promise of God is that someday we will have it in its fullness. As we live worshipfully

in the end-time temple, we will be living out God's design and purpose for us perfectly.

Hearing that message from the prophet Haggai was meant to be an encouragement for the people of God in his day. They were to hear these words and respond by saying, "Yes, my God, I believe you. I know it's a small beginning now, but you've been faithful in the past and you've given great promises for the future. You are Yahweh Sabaoth – God almighty. You command the armies of heaven and you've set your love on me and your Spirit is among us. So, I'm going to trust you, I'm going to be strong in you, and I'm going to get to work on this temple. I'm going to put aside my desire for instant results, and just follow you faithfully without fear."

That's the response we need as well. God doesn't promise us instant results. But he does promise us his Spirit. He promises us his presence. He promises us a glorious future. All of this he graciously promises through Christ. His promises are meant to stir us up to continue working for his church and kingdom, finding our strength each day in him and his word. Today might be the day of small beginnings, but we have a big God with big plans and almighty power to carry out those plans. Trust him.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. There have been many interpreters in the past (see, for instance, the notes in the old Dutch Staten Bijbel -- published in English as the Dort Study Bible) who understand "the desired of all nations" in verse 4 to be a Messianic prophecy which speaks of the coming of Christ. How should we evaluate this interpretation?
2. Do verses 7 and 8 say anything about how we should think about the culture around us and what it produces? If not, why not? If so, how?
3. Find five places in the Bible where you see evidence of the "through suffering to glory" motif. Try to think of five places in church history where we find this motif. Finally, reflect on the presence of this motif in your own life and what it says about your relationship to our Saviour Jesus.

4. In what sorts of situations could you use Haggai 2:1-9 to encourage a brother or sister?
5. How does this passage address and challenge us in our three-fold office of prophet, priest, and king? Hint: think particularly of the fear that might be associated with our calling.

Wes Bredenhof

www.christianstudylibrary.org