

There is a conviction, shared by various writers, that history is a series of key moments in the otherwise undistinguished flow of human life. According to this view, years may go by with little of importance happening. But suddenly there will be a crisis. A challenge will emerge, and the nature of the next period of history will be determined by how the leaders of the day react to that challenge. Hitler's invasion of Danzig (now Gdansk in Poland) on the last days of August 1939 was one such moment. Would Great Britain go to war as she had threatened to do? Or would Hitler be allowed to continue in his announced course of aggression? That Britain did go to war marked out the course of Western history for decades. Maybe 11 September 2001 with the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York by terrorists might be a key moment for the first part of this century?

The year 520BC was such a key moment. It would not appear that way to most secular historians, but it was important enough for God to have sent a prophet to deal with it and to record what happened in the Word of God. In 538BC the Persian emperor Cyrus issued a decree permitting the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:2-4). In response to this decree, almost 50,000 people returned under the leadership of the newly appointed governor of Judah, Zerubbabel, and Joshua, the high priest. Arriving back in Jerusalem in 536 BC they cleared the temple court of rubble and replaced the altar of burnt offerings on its base, so making it possible for the daily sacrifices to begin again. By spring of the following year they had laid the foundations of the temple.

But then troubles began. The people experienced hostility from various neighbouring tribes, especially the Samaritans. Moreover, Cyrus died in battle, and his successor, Ahasuerus, was pushed to stop the work. When the work ceased, the people turned to private affairs – building their own houses – and gradually became used to worshipping among the ruins of the once great temple. Desire to rebuild waned and 15 years passed. Then in 520BC God sent the prophet Haggai with his challenge to the people to get on with God's work and build the temple. That they listened to Haggai and started rebuilding was a significant turning point in their history, as important in its own way as the building of the temple by Solomon in the first place or the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon.

Haggai is one of the three last prophets of the Old Testament period, the prophets of the restoration: Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. By the time these men came on the scene gone was the glory of the former kingdom and temple and gone was the great population. All that was left was the rubble of Jerusalem, the remnant of the people, and the task of restoration. Two historical books – Ezra and Nehemiah – help us to understand this period. Haggai and Zechariah came rather early in the period. Malachi came about 100 years later, in years of decline.

1. The Right People, the Right Place, the Right Work and the Right Reasons.

In our sermons on the Minor Prophets so far, we have become used to prophetic warnings of God's judgment on a sinful and self-righteous people. But the last 3 prophets spoke to a different situation. Their audience was the remnant. And so, in Haggai, we are dealing with the right people, select people whose devotion to and zeal for God were evident. This is summed up in the spiritual meaning of the word "remnant". It means that they were not the entire body of the Jewish people at this time. When Cyrus issued his decree permitting the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple, most of the exiled Jews remained in Babylon where they had settled down and prospered during the exile period. It was only these few 42,360 (plus 7,337 servants and 200 singers) who actually left Babylon and made the long journey back to Judah with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2). As one commentator says, "The "remnant" to whom the message was given was composed of Israelites who were distinguished by special devotion to the Lord....They had been separated for a

(Haggai 1:1-15; Matthew 6:25-34)

purpose of great importance, for the direct line of God's dealings was to continue with them to the coming of Christ".

Second, the people to whom God directs his word through Haggai were in the right place. They were in Jerusalem at the call of God and not in Babylon among those who had preferred their stable and comfortable way of life to the hardships of a return to the ruined city of Jerusalem. In the Old Testament period God had placed a special value on Jerusalem and had required that the sacrifices for sin be made there and not elsewhere. He had punished the people by exile, but he had also promised to bring them back after the years of exile were finished. The people who had returned with Zerubbabel and Joshua were sensitive to these promises and wanted to be in the place of God's blessing. When the call to return came, they left Babylon and got back to Jerusalem as soon as possible.

Since the coming of Jesus Christ, God has sent his people into the whole world with the gospel. "You will be my witnesses.....to the ends of the earth", said Jesus (Acts 1:8). But God does not send the individual believer into "all the world". He sends him to a particular place and to a specific group of people where he is to live for Christ and share the gospel. In other words, our response to God as individuals must be as related to a place as was God's call to the Jewish remnant. If we are to be the right people, we must be in the right place also. We need to ask where, in what city and in what church, does God want me to serve Christ and his kingdom.

Third, the remnant to whom Haggai spoke also wanted to be about the right work. There were many things they needed to do. They needed to provide homes for their families. They needed to make a living, in their case largely through farming. These were necessary and valid pursuits. But in addition, and of utmost importance, the people also wanted to rebuild the temple, which is what God had put into the heart of Cyrus to decree. As Ezra tells it, the first thing the people did when they arrived in Jerusalem was to take a freewill offering toward the rebuilding of the house of God – and it was a substantial offering used to pay masons and carpenters and to buy and transport cedar logs from Lebanon. And by the second year they had progressed as far as laying the foundation of the great temple. These people clearly wanted to serve God and put his work above their own interests.

Finally, the people were working for the right reasons. We could imagine them rebuilding the temple to assert themselves with some sense of distorted national pride: "The Babylonians destroyed our temple – but we'll show them who will have the last word. We'll build it again". We could imagine them attempting to construct a monument to their own fierce independence, like the Tower of Babel. But these were not their motivations. So far as we are told, their sole desire was to please God.

So, the people to whom the prophet Haggai spoke were the right people, living in the right place, trying to do the right work for the right reasons. Yet the years had gone by, and they were sufficiently caught up in their own pursuits to let the work for which they had come to Jerusalem slide. They were neglecting to build the temple and were living for themselves rather than for God's glory. Many people in our day are like that. They are not unbelievers. These people want to know the will of God and do it. At least they did at one time – perhaps when they were in a church youth group or in a Christian Union group during their university years. Perhaps they were zealous for God in the years immediately following their conversion. But life has moved on. Now there is a job or a wife or children (or any one of a dozen other things) to think about, and somehow they have let the work of God slide. They have left the work to younger or older or newer or merely other Christians. The word of God by Haggai comes to such people – to you, if you are one of them. God says: What is the condition of my house? What is the condition of my work in your home, your church, your

(Haggai 1:1-15; Matthew 6:25-34)

neighbourhood, your city, your land? He says: What are you doing to fulfil the purpose for which you have been set apart by Jesus Christ?

2. "Give Careful thought to Your Ways"

In a certain sense there is only one message in this book: "Give careful thought to your ways". It is found twice in chapter 1 (vv.5,7) and three times in chapter 2 (vv.15,18). In chapter 1 it comes about like this. Apparently, the people had not only ceased work on the temple, they had also done what many Christians who become lazy in the Lord's work also do. They had begun to make excuses. This is a clue to underlying guilt. The people said, "The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built" (v.2). How many times have you heard that? "Well, of course every Christian is to be a witness where he lives and works. But witnessing to my co-workers is a delicate business. I don't think it's time to tell them about Jesus". "I know I should tithe, but I can't do it this year – I have too many family obligations". "I'm flattered that you think my talents might help in that particular area of the church's work, but I don't have time to serve just now. Perhaps later when the pressures of my job or study let up a bit or when I retire".

In the first chapter of Haggai, God challenges this excuse and the inactivity behind it with two arguments. First, "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" (v.4). What a biting argument! God was accusing the people of having plenty of time for themselves while pleading a lack of time for God. It was an accusation of having plenty of time and money to spend on their own comfort and pleasures while claiming not to have enough for God's service. The people were prospering. How could it be, then, that they were unable to get on with the work God had given them to do? Surely as we read this, we can't help but think of the evangelical church in our own nation – it fits the pattern of the Jewish remnant perfectly. Evangelicals are orthodox, Gospel-centred- in that sense they are the right people. They are in the right place, attending good, Bible-believing fellowships. They are trying to do the right things – they want to share the gospel and do works honouring God. They are even trying to do it for the right reasons – that is, they really want to please God rather than man and see Christ glorified. But something is wrong. Their intentions do not come to fruition, and the reason is their failure to put God first. Instead of having God first, they put affluence, material prosperity first.

The second argument with which Haggai challenges the people's inactivity is an observation on what has actually transpired in their lives. They had put other things before God, and God, who will have no other gods before him (Exodus 20:3), sent leanness. This is where the reference to giving careful thought comes in, as we see in vv.5-6 and 7,9-11. I do not know any passage in the Bible that better describes the feverish yet ineffective activity of our own age. Haggai's first remark (in v.6) is that the people had "planted much" but had "harvested little". Since farming was their chief occupation it is the equivalent of saying that they were always working. They were like the people in our day who take on extra jobs, who work through lunch and stay back late or take work home with them, who are always rushing around to get ahead. Yet little had come of it. They seemed to be on a treadmill.

Not only were they falling behind in their push to get ahead – a picture of frustration – but they were also dissatisfied, even in the midst of their apparent abundance. A number of phrases speak of this: "You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it" (v.6). I do not think this means that there was insufficient food or drink – though the next verses do speak of drought that affected the fields. The people were eating, after all. They were drinking. They did have clothes to wear. But they were not satisfied by these things and therefore always went about with a sense of longing for what was not there. Is this not a picture of our age? More cars, more houses, more

(Haggai 1:1-15; Matthew 6:25-34)

food, more computers and mobile phones, more clothes, more vacations.....Yet people are wretchedly unsatisfied. People have everything, but they are miserable. And some of those miserable people are so-called evangelical Christians. What is the cause of this? It is the work of God. God has sent emptiness so that his people might awake from their idolatry and turn back to him. The KJV of Psalm 106:15 says, "He gave them their request (he gave them what they asked for); but sent leanness into their soul". The last phrase of v. 6, "You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it", reminds us that our money is eaten up by taxes and increased government charges and spending on frivolous and wasteful things. What is the solution? It is obedience! It is getting on with what God has given us to do. In the context of Haggai's situation, it was the command, "Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured" (v.8). In our context it is to set spiritual matters first and get on with serving God to the best of our ability. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "But seek first his (God's) kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

3. The Result and God's Promise

One of the discouragements of Christian ministry is to preach the Word of God with all your heart and be greeted with people who seem disinterested and keep doing what they have been doing all along. But there are times when the Word of God strikes home, and a life is genuinely changed. When that happens in large numbers, you have a revival. From our study of the earlier Minor Prophets, you will recall that the warnings given to the Jewish people before God's judgment by the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions generally were ignored – for the most part the people could not have cared less for the prophets' warnings. It is a joy to see a different kind of response from the people of Judah under Haggai's ministry. They had been negligent in carrying out God's work. They had invented flimsy excuses for their inactivity. But they were not basically hostile to God or his commandments, as the people living before the exile had been. They really wanted to please God. So when the word of the Lord came to them by Haggai, they recognized it as a true word from God and did what he commanded: ".....the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God.....and the people feared the Lord" (v,12).

The chapter concludes by telling us that the Lord "stirred up the spirit" (moved the heart) of the whole remnant of the people and they began work on the temple again (v.14). Indeed, we are told that the people resumed the work on the 24th day of the month (v.15). In light of the fact that verse 1 tells us that Haggai began to preach on the first day of the month (about 30 August 520BC), we find that the change came about in about 25 days!

I wonder if there is a date like that in your life or if today might possibly become that day. I do not mean the day of your conversion – indeed you may not be able to specify a date for that. I mean the day in which you finally got the priorities of your life straightened out and determined that from that time on you would put God and his work first in everything. You need to do that. You need to ask yourself these questions: "Is my own comfort of greater importance to me than the work of God?" "Am I making increasing efforts to get ahead financially but finding greater and greater disappointment or dissatisfaction in my life?" If the answer is "Yes", then just turn around and get on with God's business. Obey him. Put him first in your life.

Amen

