

Haggai 1

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[0 : 0 0] When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, who do people say the Son of Man is?

They replied, some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But what about you, he asked, who do you say I am?

Simon Peter answered, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

[1 : 1 4] From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Never, Lord, he said. This shall never happen to you. Jesus turned and said to Peter, get behind me, Satan.

You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. Then Jesus said to his disciples, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?

Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.

[2 : 3 3] I tell you the truth. Some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Many of us will be able to appreciate what Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, said about the Bible.

The Bible, Luther said, is alive. It speaks to me. It has feet. It runs after me. It has hands and lays hold of me.

Those of us who are believers know at least something of what Martin Luther meant when he said that. And yet, if we were all honest, perhaps we'd have to say that some parts of Scripture feel a little bit more alive to us than other parts.

Well, this evening I want to take us to a passage in a book of the Bible, Haggai, that is no doubt unfamiliar to many Christians the world over.

We'll look at the first chapter that we read there, the first 15 verses, remembering that all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable.

[3 : 49] Every part, every book, every chapter and verse is alive and speaks to us, has feet to run after us and has hands to take hold of us.

Before we get to that passage, let me just establish something of the historical background. Around 600 years before our Lord Jesus was born, Judah, the little southern kingdom, was dragged away by the Babylonian army into exile to Babylon.

And it was an undeniable act of punishment from God himself because of their persistent rebellion and sin against God.

And yet, after 70 years, the Persian king, Cyrus, invades Babylon, frees God's people, the Jews, and gives them permission to return back to Jerusalem in order to rebuild their temple, which was destroyed in the exile.

Well, when Gloria and I were on honeymoon in France, we visited a town called Orador, so Glenn, correct me after the pronunciation there. And this town was destroyed by Nazi Germany during the time of the Second World War.

[5 : 08] And it's a preserved town. And so you can walk through this town in something of eerie silence as you see rusted frames of cars that were burned by the Nazis and just left from 70 years ago.

You can look at houses that were set on fire and look through the windows and see fireplaces still intact and yet burnt standing there from the time of the war.

Will you imagine just how horrific it would have been to have been from that town during the Second World War and having returned? Imagine coming home to find your home, your hometown, utterly decimated, the streets that you grew up on just burnt to a crisp and destroyed.

Well, that gives us something of the situation that Judah found herself in when she returned back to Jerusalem. And among that number of returning exiles was Haggai, a prophet of God.

And the top priority upon returning to Jerusalem was, of course, rebuilding the temple. The temple was where God dwelt with his people.

[6 : 27] It's the place where his presence was. It's the place where his presence permeated the city. Sacrifices were offered for sin and yet 20 years passed by from the time they came back to Jerusalem to the time when they began to consider rebuilding the temple.

20 years. You see, the people didn't see God's dwelling with them as a priority. And in fact, all the temple did was serve as a monument to a bygone time in Judah's history.

And that is precisely where God steps in. It's where we find ourselves in Haggai chapter 1 this evening. If you're into taking notes for sermons, writing title messages, I want to title this message, A Matter of Priority.

And God has essentially two things to say to his people in this passage. The first is this. Prioritize my presence.

Prioritize my presence. Look at verses 1 to 11. We'll read them in their entirety again. In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel, son of Shatiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, son of Josedach, the high priest.

[8 : 01] This is what the Lord Almighty says. These people say, the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai.

Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses while this house remains a ruin? Now this is what the Lord Almighty says. Give careful thought to your ways.

You have planted much but harvested little. 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. This is what the Lord Almighty says. Give careful thought to your ways.

Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured, says the Lord. You expected much but see, it turned out to be little.

[9 : 05] What you brought home I blew away. Why, declares the Lord Almighty, because of my house which remains a ruin. While each of you is busy with your own house.

Therefore, because of you, the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil, and everything else the ground produces on people and livestock and all the labour of your hands.

God says, through Haggai the prophet, prioritize my presence.

And the reality was that Judah had prioritized themselves. They came first. They came first. God was second, third, fourth down the list.

And they found time and resources to build for themselves. These panelled houses. These Laura Ashley beautifully decorated houses.

[10 : 10] All the while saying, it's not the right time to build the house of the Lord. Which really amounted to, which really meant, the house of the Lord is not our priority.

And so, if you were to be able to go back in time and walk through Jerusalem in that day, the physical state of the city would have revealed the state of the inhabitants' hearts.

All of their things looked wonderful and God's house was abandoned. That's to say, they were the priority and God was far down the list.

And God responds, he speaks through Haggai to Zerubbabel and Joshua in verse 4 and 5. Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in panelled houses while this house lies in ruins?

Now, therefore, this says the Lord, consider your ways or give careful thought to your ways. The question was essentially, what do your ways say about your priorities?

[11 : 18] That's a question for all of us, isn't it? What do your ways say about your priorities? Their ways, if you were to follow them around, if you were a fly on the wall at dinner time and heard their conversation and were in and around them during the week, their ways would have said, we prioritise prosperity and affluence and self.

And like so many, even today, they prioritised wealth, got wealth, and then were left empty. Look at verse 6. You have so much and harvested little.

You eat, but you never have enough. You drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.

You see, this isn't a reference to Jerusalem amid financial downturn. Not at all. This is a reference to an empty people amid a booming economy.

They had what their hearts prioritised. They had their food. They had their drink and their clothing, their money, but it left them empty. One commentator says this, their problem was not lack of goods, but of good.

[12 : 35] Because God was ignored. All the blessing had dried up, even though their prosperity overflows. And God asks the people again, verse 7, consider your ways.

There's that twofold asking of the question. In verse 5, consider your ways. Verse 7, consider your ways. What do they tell you about your appreciation and standing before God?

And over and above all this, God exhorts the people of Judah to prioritise his presence. Look at verse 8, 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 shockingly, to wake this people up, God eventually plunged them, this affluent people, into famine.

Verse 10 to 11, the heavens withheld their dew. The earth withheld its produce. God called for a drought on the land and the hills and the grain, the new wine, the oil. And what the ground brings forth and a man and beast and all their labours.

[13 : 40] Why? Because his house laid in ruins. God, through a famine, said, stop expecting earthly things to do what only heavenly favour can do.

Prioritise my presence. Now some of you are hearing this and you're thinking to yourself, Okay Hugh, I understand what you're saying.

But how does this have anything to do with us, the new covenant, the new testament church? Is the application of this passage for all of our buildings to meet in, for all of them to be the most extravagant buildings that we're meeting during the week?

Should every church building be, you know, like a millionaire's palace for us to say that we're a church that prioritises the presence of God? Well, I don't think so. Here's how this passage is relevant to us today.

If you are in Christ, you are part of a great work in progress. It's called the church. And God no longer dwells in temples of stone, but in living stones, us, his people.

[15 : 04] And we are now the dwelling place of God. And we are now being constructed into the image of Christ, who is the image of God.

And if we are going to know that blessing experimentally, in reality, in our lives, we need to prioritise the presence of God.

Individually, as individual Christians, as local churches, as this church, as the universal church worldwide, the invisible church. If we are going to know the blessing of God in being constructed into the image of Christ, the top priority for us as God's people is to prioritise his presence.

It is the presence of God that builds the church. God would say to us, just as he said to Haggai and Zerubbabel and Joshua, he would say, Prioritise my presence.

And the question must be asked, wasn't it? Consider your ways. If you were to consider your ways, what would they tell others that you prioritise?

[16 : 32] If you were to consider what you think about, if you were to consider what you dream about when you've got nothing else to think about, what you spend your money on, what you fantasise about, what would all of those things say that you prioritise?

And we know all this, don't we? As churches, everybody knows that it's the presence of God that is the priority for the church. And yet, perhaps often we leave that priority for corporate gatherings, and in our individual lives, it's just not really there.

Well, the question is, if we are going to prioritise God's presence, how do we do that? How do we ensure, as individuals and local churches, that it is the presence of God that is first top high on the list?

Practically. Practically. If we are going to prioritise the presence of God, we must prioritise the word of God.

It is God's word that mediates his presence. Where do the arms of the Bible take us?

[17 : 57] They take us into the throne room, into the presence of God. It's the Bible. It is the word of God. It's the word of God that makes dead bones live and arise and assemble into a mighty, all-victorious, conquering army.

If you're going to prioritise the presence of God, you must prioritise the gospel. It is the gospel that is the means by which we can know and enjoy the presence of God.

The only reason you and I can know the presence of God is because Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again. And the door that welcomes you and I into the presence of God is cross-shaped.

If we're going to prioritise the presence of God, we must pray for the presence of God. You don't presume upon the presence of God.

We pray and call out for the presence of God. We must be a praying people, individually and corporately.

[19 : 21] And it's just so necessary. As I was preparing this message this week, looking through it at least, and praying to God, what can I say specifically to this church?

Not just replicate every message. But I am so thrilled, and MEC is so thrilled to know that this church are calling a pastor and this pastor is coming.

Praise God for that provision. Praise God for the weight that the church has been able to survive through for the pastor. But the point needs to be made, the reminder needs to be made, no man is a replacement or a supplement for the presence of God.

To look at the pastor being called and say, well now we can take our foot off the pedal of prayer and of the word of God and everything else is a disaster.

Prioritize the presence of God. So, yes, for whatever it's worth, yes, praise God, a pastor's coming.

[20 : 31] But praise God all the more that the presence of God is here right now. Well next, God says this, work in my presence.

First, prioritize my presence. Second, work in my presence. Look at verses 12 to 15. Then Zerubbabel, son of Shattiel, Joshua, son of Josedach, the high priest and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai because the Lord their God had sent him.

And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message to the Lord, to the people. I am with you, declares the Lord. So the Lord stood up, the spirit of Zerubbabel, son of Shattiel, governor of Judah and the spirit of Joshua, son of Josedach, the high priest and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people.

They came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God, on the 24th day of the sixth month. Now, did you notice with me that in the passage, as the people begin to work, as the people begin to obey the voice of the Lord, the language changes in the passage.

No longer is it the Lord, but it is now the Lord their God. Verse 12, the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord, their God, and the message of the prophet Haggai because the Lord their God had sent him.

[22 : 01] Why is that important? Well, we're seeing here that as the people obey God's word, they turn to him in repentance and he meets them in enabling grace.

As you build, as you work, God said, know this, I am with you. You are my people. I am your God in all of your building work.

And we see the proof of God's presence, the evidence of God's enabling presence with his people in that he stirs up the people's hearts. All of a sudden, after the 20 years of being back from Babylon, the people are fired up again.

The people are excited again. The Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, son of Shattiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, son of Josedach, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people.

How do we know that God was with them? Well, because before they laid a finger on a stone, God was stirring up a holy desire to obey him and to work for him.

[23 : 18] And we know this, don't we, for ourselves wonderfully. The same is true for us. When God begins to stir in you, when God begins to stir in me and in the church, a desire to see the church of Jesus Christ built, God in Christ says to you, I am with you.

What did Jesus say to his disciples before he sent them into Jerusalem and Samaria and to the ends of the world? I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Paul says, you are called upon to obey not in your own strength, but in the power that God supplies so that in everything God may get the glory.

And how does God supply his power? By his presence. By his presence. His enabling presence. His forgiving presence.

That's said to a people after 20 years of prioritizing themselves, I am with you. I am with you. And as we build the church by the grace of God, we hear him say, I am with you.

[24 : 44] As the church prioritizes listening to and practicing the word of God, God says to you, I am with you. as the church prioritizes the gospel, the rehearsing of the gospel from behind the pulpit, the preaching of the gospel behind the pulpit, God says, I am with you.

As the church prioritizes the mortification of sin in our lives, he says, I am with you. We work in his enabling presence.

When we set out to do God's will, he gives us the grace to get on with it and complete the task. Now, I truly hope that this doesn't come across too harsh in any way at all.

I have a great deal of experiences preaching to churches without pastors. And so, many of them are much more local than this one is. And go around and you preach in churches usually much smaller than this church.

and people say after, oh, Hugh, you know, the older people, they squeeze my cheek and, oh, that was so great, Hugh, and, oh, would you consider being our pastor? And almost always there's a sense in which I'm so prone to say no because the distinct impression that so often I get is what they want is what I've called a church chaplain.

[26 : 15] what they want is somebody to fill the pulpit on a Sunday and then just keep the church afloat the rest of the time. And the sense of the presence of God being the absolute priority and the only reason we're going to call you, Hugh, as our pastor is so that you can prioritize the presence of God full time in all your studies and everything else.

It just isn't there sometimes. And people say, oh, you know, we've been without a pastor for so long and you know as a church how difficult that can be and how strenuous that can be.

But here is the truth. You don't need a pastor to know the presence of God. You don't need a pastor, a full time man to know the presence of God.

Every member of the new covenant knows that. No one will say to his brother, know the Lord for they shall all know me. the promises given. And I want to be a pastor.

I'm not downplaying pastors. God willing, I will be a pastor someday. But what's the priority in having a pastor? Is it a man to lead the way in prioritizing the presence of God?

[27 : 33] Is it a man who can lead the way in working in the presence of God? Or is it a church chaplain? I want to speak to those of you who are perhaps here this evening who are not yet believers.

There's even a word for you here in this passage, in this seemingly obscure passage of scripture in the Old Testament from a book you may never have even heard of before. And here's the word to you this evening.

Jesus Christ is building a kingdom. It's the kingdom of God. And it's a kingdom founded on grace.

It's a kingdom founded on goodness and love. And the invitation is freely offered to all, not only to be a part of this kingdom, but to help build this kingdom.

To offer grace and goodness and the love of God to others. But here's the point for you this evening. The only way you can be used to build that kingdom of grace and goodness and love is first to receive grace and goodness and love.

[28 : 47] The grace, goodness and love of God himself. You cannot extend to others what you don't have yourself.

And I want to invite you this evening to the place where the grace and goodness and love of God is found.

It's a place called Calvary. It's the place where years ago the Son of God Jesus Christ died on a cross.

and even though this Jesus was without sin, even though this Jesus was innocent in every way imaginable and could actually ask men who had seen him for years and years and years which one of you can accuse me of sin, no response was given.

This man, Jesus Christ, was a man without sin. and yet Jesus Christ was the same man who took upon himself all our sin past, present, and future and Jesus Christ substituted himself in the place where we should have died for our sin against God.

[30 : 12] Jesus dies in our place for our sin against God. the anger and the wrath of God that would rightly fall on me fell on Jesus as a crushing weight that killed him.

He took our sin and our sorrow and he made it his very own. And in that moment the father looks on the innocent son and cuts him off in wrath and anger so that men like me a sinner like me men and women like you who have all turned aside could receive the grace and goodness and free love of God without price because the price is paid.

And the question is will you accept that grace that goodness and love in order to be an inhabitant of a kingdom that offers that grace to others?

Again you cannot extend what you don't have and the invitation stands this evening to receive this grace for yourself to receive the forgiveness of sin through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ to be ushered into a kingdom that can never perish and can never fail.

Whose kingdom are you a part of this evening? The kingdom of this world or the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ? He stands and he knocks and he waits for you to come.

[32 : 03] How will you respond? Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy.

To the only God our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory majesty dominion and authority before all time both now and forevermore.

Amen.