

Haggai 2:20-23

God is Faithful

Lately there have been some high profile predictions of Christ's return.¹ When he didn't come back, there was some high profile mockery and some lower profile rationalizations and retractions. But the good thing that came out of this was that it had us thinking again about the day of the Lord. We know the Bible teaches that he will return. But wouldn't it be nice to be able to know exactly when? Is it going to be this year? Will it be next? Or does the earth still have another thousand or more years to go? Will he ever come back? That temptation is always there for Christians. We're often tempted to search for that knowledge, to have the time in our grasp, to have the certainty that it's really going to happen because we have the date nailed down. But we also know of how our Lord warned us to resist that temptation. Instead, we have to learn to trust his Word and rest with the knowledge that God our Father knows when Jesus is coming back – and then live every day as if it were the last day.

The question of whether God will be faithful to his Word and to his promises has been asked by many generations of believers. In different eras it's taken different forms. For us, maybe it's about the return of Christ. For the believers in the days of Haggai, it was about God's faithfulness to his promises to David. As we'll see in this study, these things are actually connected.

God had promised David that his throne would be established forever (2 Samuel 7). David's royal dynasty was to be everlasting. That was God's promise. But as the years rolled by, questions began to arise about that promise. Kings came to the throne who were wicked and unbelieving. In Jeremiah 22 we read about God's Word to some of these covenant-breaking kings. That chapter ends with God's Word to Jehoiachin, one of the last Davidic kings. God said that he had rejected Jehoiachin and cast him off. None of his offspring will rule anymore. So what then has become of God's

¹Originally a reference to predictions made by Harold Camping, a well-known American radio personality.

promise to David? It sounds like God has thrown in the towel with David's descendants. Will God still keep his Word to David?

This passage answers that question. We're going to see that *God will be faithful to his Word*.

God's Promise of Coming Judgment

The book of Haggai is made up of four prophetic utterances. This is the fourth and last one. It happens on the same day as the third one. It's the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month in the second year of Darius, king of the Persians. In our calendar that comes to December 18, 520 BC. You may remember from the last time that this date is important because it marks exactly three months since the rebuilding of the temple resumed. It was also approximately the date that the foundation of the temple was laid some years earlier, and it marked a turning point in God's relationship with his people. They've moved from covenant curses to covenant blessings. They can soon expect the harvest to bear this out.

This particular prophetic utterance is directed to Zerubbabel. We don't know a lot about him. We do know that he was the governor of Judah, although he may have only been a sort of figure head without any real power to govern, perhaps a puppet of the Persians. We also know that he is a grandson of Jehoiachin, the king of Judah, and therefore a descendant of David. Zerubbabel is mentioned twice in the New Testament. In both Matthew 1 and Luke 3 he appears as one of the forefathers of our Lord Jesus. Haggai has spoken to him before. Two of the previous prophetic utterances were addressed to him and others. Moreover, Zerubbabel was instrumental in getting the temple rebuilding project under way again. He's specifically mentioned in chapter 1 verse 12 as having obeyed the voice of God in this matter.

So God's Word came to Zerubbabel on that December day. It was first of all a promise of coming cosmic judgment. God said that he would shake the heavens and the earth. The whole creation will be affected by what God will do. If we skip ahead, verse 23 says that this is going to take place "on that day." That's the typical prophetic way of referring to the day of the LORD,

the day when God comes for final judgment. This is a day that lay in the future for Haggai and Zerubbabel and is also still is in the future for us.

Shaking the heavens and the earth reminds us that God is almighty. He has the whole creation in his hands. He has the power to do with it as he pleases. It reminds us too that God's judgment is not a light matter. No one will be able to ignore it or be indifferent about it. When God comes to judge, he will have everyone's attention. From faithful believers, to hypocrites, to followers of false religions, and atheists and agnostics, no one will fail to notice God's return for judgment on the last day. Living or dead, all will see it, including you.

Then what will become of thrones and kingdoms? God says that he will overturn them. Think of one of those toy snow globes.² You turn it upside down and all the snow goes to the top. You flip it over again and the snow falls. Like that, God is going to overturn the political systems of this world on the last day. He uses language here that's reminiscent of what he did to Sodom and Gomorrah in the days of Abraham. He says that he will shatter the power of foreign kingdoms. Here he uses language reminiscent of what he did to the Canaanites in the days of Joshua. We find all this language echoed in Psalm 2 as well. You see, this is not just about putting an end to the nations and kingdoms of this world, but judging them for their rebellion against God and their failure to recognize him. It doesn't matter whether these political powers are democracies, dictatorships, military juntas, Islamic theocracies or whatever else. They will all be judged by the LORD Almighty. They will all have to answer to him in the last day.

For us, this is a reassuring thought. We see political injustice and unrighteousness in many places in the world, also in our own country and in our own province. There are unjust laws and no laws where there should be laws (we can think here especially of the lack of any protection for unborn children in Canada). We can and should work to end this, but we can also be confident that this is not escaping God's notice. In the end, those who are primarily responsible for this injustice will have to answer for it before God

²The illustration is borrowed from Duguid, *A Study Commentary*, 58.

when he overturns royal thrones and shatters the power of foreign kingdoms. There will be a day of reckoning -- of that we can be sure. God promises it.

Not only will political might be judged, but also military might. God speaks of this at the end of verse 22. He says that he will overthrow chariots and their drivers. Chariots were the ancient equivalent of main battle tanks. It's as if God is saying that he's going to take the world's armoured divisions and toss them in the air. He'll do more damage than a fleet of Apache helicopters or all the world's A-10 Thunderbolts. As for horses and riders, they'll finish each other off. They'll turn on one another. When he speaks of the chariots being overturned, he's evoking the language of what happened to the Egyptians in the Red Sea. Furthermore, the armies turning on each other reminds us of what happened to Edom, Moab, and Ammon in the days of Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:23). These three armies set on destroying Judah and Jerusalem ended up destroying one another. Haggai's prophecy hearkens back to that victory and says something similar will happen on the great day of the LORD.

We can be sure that no army, navy, or air force will be able to withstand the great day of judgment. Today's military forces have incredible technologies at their disposal. The killing power of modern soldiers, sailors and airmen is unsurpassed in the history of the world. There are not only advanced conventional means of destruction with bullets and bombs, but also nuclear, biological, and chemical means. When you stop to think about the great military power held by dozens of nations, it can be a frightening thought. But here God's Word reminds us that God is more powerful. Scripture reminds us that the just God will judge all of this too. When he returns, he will judge the use and abuse of military might. No military, no matter how strong, will be able to stand against him. All will be overthrown and all will fall. This is why we need to give attention to the words of Psalm 20:7-8, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm."

That great day of the Lord is coming. Our Lord Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead at God's appointed time. If we are not resting and trusting in him alone, we will be judged and condemned along with the world of unbelief. The overturning, shattering, and overthrowing described in our text

is a picture of what will happen to the world of unbelief. We will be witnesses to it, but we don't want to be included in it. For that reason, we're called again to be placing our trust in Christ. We're called to embrace the gospel of what Christ has done for us. When that great day comes, we don't want to be found without Christ. We don't want to be found clothed with our filthy rags, but with his perfect righteousness. To rise up and stand firm, as Psalm 20 puts it, we need Jesus. You need him, and you need to continue placing all your hope in him, for he is the way you are right with God. Then you can be confident that you will stand fast without fear of condemnation while the world gets turned upside down on that great day of judgment.

God's Promise of Coming Salvation

The day of judgment will bring terror to unbelievers, both the living and the dead. But for we who trust in God, it is a day of salvation. Think briefly of the events that God alludes to in our passage. When Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, Lot and his family were saved. When the Canaanites were pushed out of the Promised Land, God saved Joshua and the people of Israel. He gave them the victories and protected their lives. When the Egyptian army was destroyed in the Red Sea, that was for the rescue of the Israelites whom they were pursuing. If God had not drowned Pharaoh and his army, the Israelites could have been slaughtered. So it is with the day of the Lord as well. It will be a day for the condemnation and punishment of unbelievers, but for all of us who rest and trust in Christ, it will be the day of our ultimate deliverance. All of God's people will be taken into eternal joy and glory in the new heavens and new earth. We'll live in perfect communion and fellowship with him forever. That's the culmination of the salvation worked for us by Christ. So when we see the promise of judgment for the world of unbelief here, we also have to see the flip side: a promise of salvation for God's people.

There's more of this promise of salvation in verse 23 where God is speaking again. Like throughout most of Haggai, he identifies himself as the LORD Almighty – Yahweh Sabaoth – LORD of hosts, or Yahweh, the commander of heaven's armies. When he speaks, what he says happens because he has the power. Here his Word of power is about Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel is a descendant of David, but he has no royal throne. He has no crown. He has

no kingdom over which he sovereignly rules. He may not even have *any* real political power. Zerubbabel bears only a faint resemblance to the glory days of David and Solomon. He's a weak and unlikely person in which to see any glory, might, and majesty.³

Yet Yahweh says that he will take this Zerubbabel and make him like a signet ring. A signet ring was worn by kings. It was used to sign and seal royal declarations. On the front of the ring would be a sort of signature of the owner. It could be used to make an imprint in clay or in wax and then everyone could see that what was written had been approved by the king. It was a symbol of royal authority and power. Signet rings were precious to their owners. They were personal identifications and treasured as such. Now God says that Zerubbabel can be compared to his signet ring.

We have to see this in the light of what God had said to Zerubbabel's grandfather, Jehoiachin in Jeremiah 22:24-30. God had cast him off and rejected him. There would be no children of Jehoiachin on the throne. Shealtiel was Jehoiachin's son and Zerubbabel's father, but he was not a king. But did that mean that God was finished with David's line and that there would be no fulfillment of God's promises to David for an everlasting kingdom? With Zerubbabel on the scene, there is new light cast on that question.

God describes Zerubbabel as "my servant." This is the same way that God referred to David. God describes Zerubbabel as his chosen one. Again, that's Davidic language.⁴ David was chosen by God to be the king to replace Saul. Furthermore, he's like God's signet ring: precious and a representative of authority and royal power. In Zerubbabel, the rebuilder of the temple, God is picking up where he left off. God will be faithful to his promises to David. He has not forgotten what he said. He's not forgotten his promises for coming salvation. Judgment had to come to Jehoiachin and other Davidic kings like

³J. Alec Motyer helpfully comments, "Zerubbabel, the Davidic descendant, was in reality the heir to nothing. There was no throne for him to mount or crown to wear, no empire to rule or royal acclaim to enjoy. It is not even certain that his title of governor was anything more than honorific. The whole Davidic enterprise had long since run into the sand. But to write off the Davidic promises would be to forget the faithfulness of God, who does not lie or change his mind (Num. 23:19)." Motyer, *The Minor Prophets*, 1001-1002.

⁴Motyer, *The Minor Prophets*, 1002.

him, but God still had a plan for a way forward in his purposes for the redemption of his people.

What do we know of Zerubbabel in the years following this prophecy? Nothing. Zerubbabel did not restore the kingdom of Israel. He did not become a royal figure with authority and power. God was not speaking here about Zerubbabel directly, as if he would be the promised Messiah. Rather, God was transferring the promises made to David to Zerubbabel's line, to his descendants. God was saying that in Zerubbabel his promises for salvation would come to fulfillment.

In just a few generations one would be born from David's royal line, a chosen one who would take up royal authority and might. However, first he would have to be like both Jehoiachin and Zerubbabel. As he lived on this earth, Christ often had the appearance of a Zerubbabel, a king without a crown, a ruler without a kingdom. Where David had once ruled, a foreign power dominated, while David's descendant worked as a humble carpenter and later as an itinerant preacher. At the end of his life, he had the appearance of Jehoiachin. He came under God's curse. How could this crucified one be God's signet ring, his precious and treasured mark of authority and power? The people recognized it too. In Luke 23:35, they mocked him saying, "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."⁵ Chosen descendant of Zerubbabel? Not likely. More like the offspring of the accursed Jehoiachin.

Through the humiliation and suffering of the cross he went. He entered into the darkness and suffering of hell, experiencing the full weight of God's wrath to pay for our sins. On the other side, he came out victorious. He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. He took up his place at God's right hand. Now, today, the descendant of Zerubbabel is like God's signet ring. As Peter says, he is that living stone, chosen by God and precious to him (1 Peter 2:4). God's promise to David and to Zerubbabel came to fulfillment. God was faithful to his Word and he has kept his promise for coming salvation.

⁵Motyer, *The Minor Prophets*, 1002.

This is a promise that he will continue to keep. We can be sure of that because of Christ – in him all of God’s promises are “yes” and “amen” (2 Corinthians 1:20). God is faithful and we need not ever doubt or question that. Sometimes we face challenges and hardships in this life. Perhaps some of you reading this are experiencing that right now. There are things that providence brings our way that make us groan. There can be burdens that seem so heavy. There’s much hurt and misery and brokenness in this world. We have to deal with disease, with broken relationships, and with the consequences of our sins. It can be overwhelming at times. We need to be reminded again of God’s faithfulness to his promises for our salvation. We need to hear again that God has not abandoned us. He has not forgotten you and he’s not indifferent to your situation. Through these heartaches and difficulties, he will carry you and he will even shape you and lead you forward in your sanctification – another essential element of our salvation. Through it all, let’s trust his Word and believe that he will be faithful. David says in Psalm 55:22, “Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.” “Cast your cares on the LORD,” -- do that and believe that he will be faithful to his Word and will not let you fall.

At the end, we can be sure that our Lord Jesus will come for us. That last chapter of our salvation has been written, but it is yet to be carried out. However, our God has a track record of faithfulness. We can see it in his Word, over and over again. The day is coming when all things will be as they should. The power of our great King Jesus will be acknowledged by all who live in the renewed creation. And we will live under his reign in peace, without sorrows or burdens. Forever. What a day that will be! Continue to believe his Word. The night is drawing to a close and the day is coming. Let me conclude by encouraging you with the words of Hebrews 10:35-39,

³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For,

“Yet a little while,
and the coming one will come and will not delay;
³⁸but my righteous one shall live by faith,

and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him.”

³⁹But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What lies do we hear (and maybe sometimes believe) about God’s ability and willingness to fulfill what he has promised? How can we best counteract these lies?
2. How does this passage speak to us of Christ and the gospel of our salvation?
3. Given what this passage says about military might, should Christians serve in the military? Why or why not?
4. It sometimes seems that Reformed believers give little attention to eschatology (the doctrine of the last things) especially when compared with many so-called “evangelical” Christians. Is this true? If so, what could account for that and is it a good or bad thing?
5. Can this text, with its presentation of judgment and salvation, be regarded in any way as a model for our witness to unbelievers? Why or why not?

Wes Bredenhof