

Haggai 1:12-15

The Powerful Word of God

God's Word never fails to do what he intends for it. Think of Pharaoh back in the days of the exodus from Egypt. God sent his Word through Moses to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" Pharaoh would not listen, and then all these plagues came upon the Egyptians. From a human perspective, one might be tempted to say that God's Word failed. It failed to convince Pharaoh to change his attitude and actions. It was only when all the first born of the land were killed by the Angel of the LORD that Pharaoh finally relented. Even then he had second thoughts and began chasing the Israelites.

Did God's Word fail? Paul answers that question in Romans 9. He looks back at the episode of Pharaoh and Moses and the Israelites. Paul quotes from Exodus 9:16 where God says to Pharaoh, "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." God's Word did not fail to accomplish his purposes back then.

It never ever does. When God speaks, his Word does its work. His Word accomplishes whatever he sovereignly ordains. His Word never returns to him empty. Sometimes it is a Word of judgment, portraying the execution of his justice on sinners. At other times, it is a Word of grace, showing us sinners receiving the opposite of what they deserve. But none of his words ever fall to the ground.

In Haggai 1:12-15, God's Word also accomplishes its purposes. In the first verses of Haggai we saw how Yahweh called out his people on their failures. They had returned from exile in Babylon and made a good start. But fifteen years later, we see that they have failed to keep their priorities straight. They had failed to put him and his house first. They lived in nice houses, while the temple still lay in ruins. They put themselves first and left God in the dust. Through Haggai, God challenged the people and told them to think carefully about what was happening. Why were these covenant curses happening to them? There was not enough food, drink, clothing, a difficult economic

situation, and bad harvests. Why? Because God was trying to get their attention and get them to repent. Now as we continue in Haggai, we find that God's purpose was accomplished and in this instance it involved repentance and return. In these verses we will see how *God's Word through Haggai accomplishes its purpose*.

How the People Responded

Haggai the prophet must have been pleased to see the word he brought received so well. But even more importantly, Yahweh would have been pleased. The prophetic word of rebuke pricked the people and put them into action. Verse 12 says that the governor Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest, along with all the people, obeyed God's voice through Haggai. The people are described in that verse as "the remnant," and that reminds us that there's just a small number of Jews who had returned to the Promised Land at this point. The leaders are mentioned again because, quite simply, they're leaders. If Zerubbabel and Joshua were not on side with the temple building project, it would obviously not go anywhere.

They all obeyed in remarkably short order. Looking to the end of our passage, Haggai tells that this response of the people took place on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month of the reign of Darius. Here is another example of precision with dates in this little prophecy. The work began on September 21, 520 BC. The opening verses of Haggai's prophecy came on August 29, 520, making this just twenty-three days later. Now maybe you're thinking: why did it take them so long? Why did they not obey right away? To answer that, think about what is being done here. This is a building project. Materials had to be gathered. Workers had to be found and organized. Someone had to draw up building plans. There are all kinds of preparations that need to be made before the work can begin. So the question is not: why did they take twenty-three days? The question really needs to be: how did they manage to do all that in twenty-three days? It shows a remarkable degree of zeal and hard work.¹

¹ Alec Motyer, *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 984.

That's connected with what we find at the end of verse 12. We're told that the people feared Yahweh. Their problem before this was exactly that: they didn't fear Yahweh. They sloughed him off and didn't take him seriously. Consequently they didn't make his house a priority. But after hearing the Word of Yahweh through Haggai, they have a change of heart. They now fear their God. That means more than just reverence and respect. It is the sort of fear that recognizes God's holiness and justice.² Fearing Yahweh here means coming to terms with the fact that he has spoken rightly. What he revealed through Haggai was bang on. They had failed and they justly deserved God's wrath for it. Fearing Yahweh means that you realize that you can't and you don't mess around with God because he is not only the Holy One, but also Yahweh of Hosts with all sovereign power in his hand. He has armies at his disposal that can take you out at a moment's notice.

So the people feared God and therefore they got to work on the building project. Ezra 5 tells more of the story. Ezra tells us that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were in there getting their hands dirty too. But then new opposition arose to the building project. The opposition came from certain Persian officials. A letter was sent to Darius trying to get the Jews to stop, but Darius stood behind them. The temple building continued and was eventually completed.

What we see in Haggai 1:12-15 is God's people responding to his Word in the way they should. When they hear his rebukes and admonitions, they humble themselves and change their ways. They reorient their priorities and put God's house first. Also, notice here the connection with these people holding special offices. There's the king and he's represented by the governor, Zerubbabel. There's the high priest Joshua. There's the prophet Haggai (and Ezra tells us that Zechariah is around too). We've got prophets, priest, and king. All of them submit to the Word of God. Even the prophet Haggai submits to the Word that he himself brings. Just because he's a prophet doesn't mean that he's above the Word.

Our Saviour Jesus fulfilled each of these offices perfectly: prophet, priest, and king. The obedience and submission of Zerubbabel, Joshua, and Haggai to

² Iain M. Duguid, *A Study Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Carlisle: EP Books USA, 2010), 33.

the Word of God points ahead to Christ's obedience and submission. Though he was and is the King of kings and Lord of lords, he still submitted to the Word of God. Though he was and is our Chief Prophet and Teacher, he follows the Word that he himself brings. Though he was and is our only High Priest, he was obedient to everything that the Word required. Our Lord Jesus was not above the law, but submitted to it and he did this for our sakes; for our salvation. The gospel tells us that we have a Saviour who placed himself under the Word in our place. God's gift of grace to you is this: his obedience is ours when we believe in him (Belgic Confession, 23).

As those who believe in him, our lives must increasingly reflect him because we love him and want to please him and thank him. In connection with our passage, that concretely means that none of us are ever above the Word of God. That needs to be remembered especially by those who hold special offices. Our thoughts right away go to the special offices of the church. Ministers, elders, and deacons are never above the authority of Scripture. They bring that message to us, but they also have to submit to it themselves. Pastors need to preach every sermon first to themselves. They, too, need to hear the Word of the LORD and respond with fear and obedience. But there are other sorts of special offices in our lives too. Parents, for instance, teach their children the Word of God, but it always has to be clear that they too are under the Word, and have to submit to it as well. Or we can think of teachers. Teachers also have a special office of authority in our community, not an ecclesiastical office, but an office nonetheless. Those who are teachers need to bring the Word of God to bear, not only on those they teach, but also – and firstly – on themselves. Special office does not mean special privileges. It doesn't mean you're exempt from what you teach. It means that even though you are entrusted with a task or a message, you are still one under the authority of the LORD.

Why the People Responded

So all these people in our passage repented and obeyed. They turned and did the right thing and began building. But now let's ask the question, "Why?" What happened that made the people resume work on the temple?

A worldly person might look at this situation and say, “Well, they were scared out of their wits and they found the wherewithal inside them to get busy. Out of their own resources, they did it. These people can be proud of themselves for what they’ve done. They made this beautiful temple – good for them!” In that way of thinking, it would be all about people finding the strength within. They had it in them all along and they just didn’t know it! But this is such an obviously man-centered way of looking at it, isn’t it?

Some believers might approach this a little differently. They would want to account for God, and might therefore say, “Well, God sent his Word and he challenged them. Out of their own free will, they responded in obedience and then God helped them more.” They took a step towards God and God took a step towards them. What we have then is a case of “God helps those who help themselves.” (Incidentally, as an aside here, some people think that expression comes from the Bible. “God helps those who help themselves” does not come from the Bible and it’s not biblical. That formulation came from Benjamin Franklin, the great American figure who was not a Christian.) So the question is: is this God helping those who take a step towards him? You do your part and God does his and the temple gets built?

The key here is verse 14. The NIV says, “So the LORD stirred up the spirit...” of all these people. A better translation would be, “*For* Yahweh *had* stirred up the spirit...” of Zerubbabel and so on. The words “for” and “had” better capture the fact that this is the explanation of everything that happens here.³ Yahweh sends Haggai with his Word. Then Yahweh works with his Word and Spirit to bring about repentance and obedience in his people. His people recognized that it was Yahweh who had sent Haggai. Haggai’s words were the words of God and therefore they had to repent and obey. Why do the people respond the way they do? Because God worked in their hearts with his Holy Spirit. He woke them up and he opened their eyes. God gave them the desire to obey him and to put his house first. The LORD subdued them and made them teachable and obedient.⁴

³ Alec Motyer, *The Minor Prophets*, 983.

⁴Calvin’s remarks are helpful: “It is not right to restrict the influence of the Spirit to one thing only, as some do, who imagine that the Israelites were confirmed in their good resolution, as they say, having before spontaneously obeyed the word of God... Foolishly, then, do they imagine that the Israelites were

Why does God reveal this fact to us? It is so that we would not praise people, but him. It is to remove the focus from Zerubbabel and Joshua and Haggai and the remnant, and put it on what God is doing here in the first place. He is behind all of this. Therefore, he deserves all the glory and honour.

Is the same thing not true today? When we are teachable and obedient to God, can we hold our chins high and take some of the credit? Can we hope for some pats on the back? Our text points us in another direction. No praise for us, but praise for him and for the gracious working of his Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit lives in us and he gives us the desire to fear God and obey him, even if that desire does not consistently bear fruit. He is there in our hearts and he is the only reason why we want to do anything really good at all, anything that is pleasing to our Father in heaven. Yes, the Spirit makes our wills come alive and when we are obedient, we can truly be said to be the ones who are obedient – that is what we confess from Scripture in the Canons of Dort (III/IV, 11 and 12). However, at the roots of this obedience is always the gracious work of our God through the Holy Spirit. This makes us humble. This makes us thankful. This makes us worshipful. It directs us outside of ourselves, and to the glory of God. He works in us so that we will glorify him further. That is what was happening in our text. They were building the temple – the place where he would be praised. Now this is what will be happening in our lives – the Holy Spirit wants to use these temples (our bodies) and this temple (the church) for the glory of God.

God Gives Further Encouragement

After the people responded in the proper way, Yahweh took notice. He sent Haggai to them once again with a divinely commissioned message. It is a very short message. In English it's four words and in Hebrew two. The message is: "I am with you."

led by their own free-will to obey the word of God, and then that some aid of the Holy Spirit followed, to make firmly to persevere in their course... We may also hence learn, that no one is fit to offer sacrifices to God, or to do any other service, but he who has been moulded by the hidden operation of the Spirit. Willingly, indeed, we offer ourselves and our all to God, and build his temple; but whence is this voluntary action, except that the Lord subdues us, and thus renders us teachable and obedient?" See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979 reprint), 345-346.

We should see this in light of the fact that they are building the temple. The temple was where God made his Name dwell in the Old Testament. The temple was the place where God sat on the mercy seat, living in the midst of his people. At this moment, the temple is still in ruins. Yet, in his grace, God comes and says, “I am with you. You still have my blessed presence.” It’s important to have that qualifier “blessed.” We say that God is omnipresent – that means he is present everywhere. He fills heaven and earth with his presence. There’s no place where God is not. But it’s not redundant for God to come to the people in our passage and say, “I am with you.” What he means is, “I am with you to bless you and protect you.” God is not present everywhere to bless and protect. The most extreme illustration of that is hell. God is present in hell with his wrath, which is an expression of his justice. He is not there to bless at all. However, here in our passage, God says “I am with you” and that’s meant as encouragement. It’s encouragement to continue, to keep building, and to not lose focus.

The book of Ezra makes it clear that there were enemies who wanted to stop the rebuilding of the temple. They would do what they could to put an end to it. In the face of the fear of man, God says, “I am with you. I will bless what you are doing.”

But they could also be fearful in another way. What if things continue to go bad economically? What if they follow what they heard and yet nothing improves? From a human perspective, they are taking a risk by giving up all sorts of other economic activities to focus on building the temple. A “realistic” risk assessment might conclude that their obedience is foolish and will result in only more hardship. In face of that fear, God says, “I am with you. I will bless your obedience.” In other words, if you are doing the right thing, then there is no need for fear. God will bless those who heed his Word. Through Haggai, God wants to bring his people to a place of joyful confidence and assurance in him. With God on our side against us shall be none (Romans 8:28-31).

If that was true for the people of Haggai’s day, how much more so for us now who live after the coming of Immanuel? That’s one of Christ’s names: Immanuel, God with us. Christ came and lived on earth among God’s people some 2000 years ago. Today he continues to live among us through his Spirit.

He continues to give us the assurance, “I am with you.” In fact, when you read verse 13 of Haggai 1, it’s difficult not to think of what our Lord Jesus said to his disciples before he ascended into heaven. It’s in Matthew 28, right at the end: “And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” We have the promise of the blessed presence of our God and Saviour too. As we walk with him each day, there’s no need to fear anything. He will bless us and protect us.

What kind of blessings are we talking about here? Can I expect to have everything go my way because Jesus said, “I am with you always”? No, but you can always expect to have everything go his way. Furthermore, because he loves you, his way will always be for your good. You may not yet see how this adds up. I don’t know of any guarantee that you will. But of this you can be sure: you have a Saviour who loves you, who will be there for you, and who will give you strength for your trials and difficulties. Trust him.

There is one more form of encouragement that we find in our text. It’s a subtle change from the passage preceding. Did you notice the way God is referred to here? In verses 1 to 11, he is referred to as Yahweh Sabaoth, “the LORD Almighty”. But here in verses 12 to 15 there’s a shift. Now he is “their God”.⁵ He is still Yahweh Sabaoth – he’s referred to that way in verse 14, but he’s also now described as their God. What that means is that covenant judgment is past and the relationship between God and his people is being mended. Things are on the right track again. This would have encouraged the Jews of Haggai’s day to carry on. They were working for their God, living for him.

Some glorious day, the dwelling place of God will be with us. He will dwell with us and we will be his people. We read about that in Revelation 21. What does John say further? “...they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as *their God*” (Revelation 21:3). Because of what Christ has done for us, we can anticipate that eagerly. Haggai describes the building of an earthly temple in Jerusalem and how the building of that temple restored the covenant relationship of God with his people. This points ahead to Christ’s work. Because of the reconciliation he accomplished, we will someday see

⁵Alec Motyer, *The Minor Prophets*, 981.

the whole creation become the temple of God. At that moment, he will be present with us forever to bless us and to be our God living near to us. Then we will be his people, never more prone to wander, never more prone to leave the God we love. That day cannot come quickly enough.

The author of Hebrews tells us that the Word of God is living and active. It is sharper than any double-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). It's a tool in God's hands that always gets the job done. In our passage, we see that illustrated beautifully. God's Word challenged the people, and changed the people. God's Word then encouraged the people further. In humble submission, let us see his Word continue to do its work in our lives, so that he will be eternally praised.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What fallen aspects of our human condition does this passage address and how does it address them?
2. This passage speaks about the fear of the LORD. What is that fear and how should we think of it in connection with Christ and the gospel? Is it easy for us to "fear God"? Why or why not? How can we learn this fear?
3. We believe that the Word of God applies to all of life. How might you apply this passage to the political realm today?
4. In verse 12 is there a difference between "the voice of the LORD" and "the message of the prophet Haggai"? How does your answer have a bearing on church life today?
5. As mentioned in the exposition, Ezra 5 describes the same period. Compare and contrast Ezra 5 with Haggai 1:12-15. How do these passages complement one another?