

Message: Haggai 3/3: Haggai 2:10-23

Last Week:

Well, Church! We're still in Haggai this week, and to spend three weeks on a book that might fit a single page of our Bibles is a little silly, except that it's such a rich book--just full of things that I think we need to hear, even this far away from when Haggai prophesied.

Last week we saw Haggai encourage Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people of Jerusalem. I summarized what God said to them all as

“Be strong and work, for I am with you. I promise. My Spirit remains among you. Don't be afraid. I'll give you what you need. Your work will be worthwhile. When it is finished it'll bring peace.”

Haggai gave just one prophetic oracle then, a month and change after his first one in Mid-August. Today we're looking at Haggai's final two oracles, given on the same day, about 4 months after the first time he spoke. After this we don't hear from Haggai again.

Introduction:

And we can hear what Haggai says today, but if last week's message was to everyone, today's is primarily to the leaders of the religious and social life of Israel. I think in looking at it, though, we'll be invited to ask, as we often are, how often God comes to mind as we go about our lives.

Let's pray.

Prayer!***Different Audiences:***

Haggai's audience for these two oracles is limited in a way it hasn't been before. We've seen Haggai speak to Zerubbabel and Joshua together; we've seen Haggai speak to Zerubbabel and Joshua and "the rest of the people," as the translation I read from puts it.

Today, the first oracle we read is to "the priests," and of course, although he isn't named, Joshua would be a part of that audience. His second oracle is to Zerubbabel alone. The previous oracles Haggai has made seemed to be for everyone; these are more specific.

It's wonderful that they are, because like we've seen

elsewhere in Haggai, the specificity of these oracles reveals a God who is understanding of what it means to be not just a person, but someone who wants to live faithfully.

In today's passages, Haggai gives the leadership of Israel what they need to hear. For the priests, it's a corrective promise; for Joshua, a legitimizing one.

First, the First Oracle:

First Oracle: Contagious Consecration

Let's walk through this. God asks Haggai to ask the priests,

“If someone carries consecrated meat in the fold of their garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, olive oil or other food, does it become consecrated?”

The priests answer “No.” We assume that this is a big deal; Haggai's already given a couple of oracles. Maybe Haggai gathers them together; Joshua would be there, of course. And Haggai asks the question, they debate it or just know, and the answer is “No.”

Consecrated meat--meat set apart as an offering for God, which the priests themselves were fed by--can't make other things holy. The consecratedness, the special-ness, isn't transferrable to what it's carried in, and to whatever that touches. The priests lunch boxes don't make the tables they sit on special. It's established: Holiness, consecratedness, isn't transferrable, contagious.

So Haggai asks his next God-given question:

First Oracle: Contagious Defilement

“If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?”

Haggai's second question is about defilement, uncleanness. He's talking, as before, about a ritual, religious context. Remember that Israel was meant to be set apart from all the other people around them until God made fully good on His promises to redeem creation through them. And when Israel was given the law, they were given all sorts of rules about how to live, many of which were meant to remind them that they were not like other people, and their society

wasn't meant to be like other people's society. The cleanliness/uncleanliness rules, holiness/defilement rules, were constant reminders of this. People could become "unclean" or "defiled" through all sorts of ways, but a really basic one was touching something or someone who had died. And, you know, you'd give an offering, wait a bit, be restored to your good, normal state. There were ways out, of course, but when you had become ritually defiled, your social status temporarily changed, if you touched someone else, they'd become defiled, too. Defilement was contagious. It spread out. Jesus makes the point that we can't catch this anymore.

But then, this functioned as a basic, ritualized, ceremonialized, religious reminder of their special role in the world. If they weren't careful, they'd become like everyone else, they'd lose what was, for them, "normal status," which was "being special" being set apart for God. They'd become like everyone else.

And the priests answer, "Yes." This is how defilement works. It's contagious.

First Oracle: State of Things

God's forced the priests to acknowledge that being consecrated, holy, isn't contagious; but being defiled is. Consecration isn't contagious; defilement is contagious. That's...settled wisdom. Religious truth, for the priests who guard religious truth. Consecration isn't contagious, but defilement is.

Once God has reminded the priests of what they know, Haggai declares for God:

***“So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,’...‘Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.*”**

We can read this in different ways. Israel has been in exile for 80 years, removed from the Temple and it's opportunity for religious cleansing, for consecration. We can read this understanding that they've all caught and carry a sort of religious contagion, defilement, and everything they've touched in the 20 years since they've returned has caught it, too. This could be just a moment in which God is pointing out, to the priests, something they've forgotten to realize: That Israel, God's People, are defiled, and this Temple that's being built, it won't save them from this, because it's being

built by defiled people.

First Oracle: Up a Creek

If you're a priest, you know, a leader and sustainer of the religious life of God's People, you've got to be thinking, "Well..crud." If the Temple and its works--offerings, prayers, blessings--are what cleanse people, and if that mechanism for cleansing is broken, then...maybe it's time to, like, change hereditary jobs, you know? Go back to school. Because a priest with a broken Temple isn't a priest, and a defiled Israel without a way to become clean isn't Israel at all. Unless, of course, God intervenes directly.

Do we see this problem?

So Haggai's backed the priests into this awkward realization. And he continues:

First Oracle:

Charges to the Priests

15 "Now give careful thought to this from this day on—consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the Lord's temple.

16 When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone

went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty. 17 I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not return to me,' declares the Lord. 18 'From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid. Give careful thought: 19 Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit.

“From this day on I will bless you.”

Two important things happen here. God promises that “From this day on I will bless you.” And the promise of blessing is directly related to Israel having enough food, having the provision that they need, and the stores that they need, to survive. God is promising that they will, from this moment, be blessed, rather than cursed. And that’s significant because they want to be blessed, right? I mean, really: They’ve had nothing for awhile now, they’re hungry, tired, all these things. And God promises that from here on out they’ll be provided for. When you’re in famine, there is no greater promise than food: to eat, to put back.

And God charges the priests to “give careful thought” to their situation. When they neglected the Temple, they went hungry. Their obedience in building the Temple is why God is going to bless them. More than this, though, God is inviting them, and of course Joshua with them, to be the caretakers, the stewards, of the people’s memory. They are the ones who are meant to remind people why this Temple matters, who Israel is meant to be, what it means to be God’s Special People.

Theologically God is doing a radical thing, because God doesn’t say here, “From here on out you’ll be consecrated again.” God doesn’t say “You’ll be cleansed, you defiled People.” Here, God just says, “From now on, I’ll bless you.” You won’t go hungry anymore.

This is direct intervention. God is saying that he’ll disregard the covenant curses that they agreed to in the past. God is going to offer them mercy, instead. And again, I’m struck by how little the New Testament relies on Haggai, when Jesus’ work so deeply echoes this. Humanity has always needed God’s intervention, God’s decision not to give us what we deserve. God

isn't holding Israel's uncleanness against them; the Priests need to remind His People of this.

What we don't read here, and I think would be a reading too far, is God saying that they're consecrated again, that their defilement is completely removed. This is why certain scholars--I think of N.T. Wright in particular--have lifted up the idea that Israel, at the time of Jesus, were still waiting for their exile to end. It's why we lift up the New Covenant promises of the Major Prophet Jeremiah, who wrote before Haggai did, about the New Covenant that God would make with His People, and we who follow Jesus can say that exile started to end at his resurrection and the Spirit's sending, and will fully end at his return.

But if we skip right past the idea that God is going to bless His People even though they are completely defiled, we miss out on something true about the character of God, which is that He just isn't out to curse people, and every common and special grace humanity receives really is a grace; a blessing given.

The Priests, along with Joshua, are charged, here, to steward Israel's understanding of God, of themselves, of the Temple; they're the caretakers of the truth that

trusting obedience to God will result in their blessing whether they deserve it or not. If God's great reminder last week was:

“Be strong and work, for I am with you. I promise. My Spirit remains among you. Don't be afraid. I'll give you what you need. Your work will be worthwhile. When it is finished it'll bring peace.”

This week what we realize is all this is true even though Israel, as far as their religious, ritual-centered life is concerned, is defiled. We in the room ought to think about how Christ died for us while we were still sinners.

But God has a charge for Israel's political leadership, too. And of course, as Haggai makes it clear, religious and political life weren't separate realms, of course.

Second Oracle:

So, in the morning, say, Haggai had a message for the priests, and Joshua, of course, along with them, then let's pretend it's the evening, and God has a message for Zerubbabel, too:

“Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. 22 I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.

“‘On that day,’ declares the Lord Almighty, ‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”

Zerubbabel is a confusing character, frankly. We’ll see this more as we look at Zechariah. What we know for sure about him is that he was the one who led Judah during the time the Temple was rebuilt. There’s some historical hints that Persia was in a difficult period during the time he was in charge; perhaps that’s what this first part of what Haggai says is referencing.

And what God says to Zerubbabel is language that we tend to associate with Jesus: Messianic language, language the New Testament, which we spend most of our time in, links to Jesus.

But if we simply accept this as it stands, and try not to make all sorts of links to the New Testament that the Bible itself doesn't make, then what we see here is simply God affirming Zerubbabel as His chosen leader of God's People.

That's all. Zerubbabel is affirmed in his leadership. He is told "I have chosen you." And it's what he needs to hear, right? I've preached a thousand times about how we ourselves, this side of the Spirit, need to know that God loves us, need to know that we're God's children, need to believe that we're loved, and bring God pleasure, and ought to be listened to when it comes to those things we've been called to. Zerubbabel needed something like this, too: He was leading a tiny group of returned exiles back to a ruined city, and charged with helping rebuild, with Joshua, their religious life and all their societal infrastructure.

So "I have chosen you" is a word he can hang his heart on, you know? His efforts, his work. And because, of course, all Haggai's oracles were public oracles, this would have been heard by others, repeated by everyone.

So God's word through Haggai legitimized Zerubbabel's authority during a time when it needed legitimized; it empowered Zerubbabel during a time when he needed to feel empowered.

Two Oracles:

So two oracles, given to two groups of people responsible for the societal life of Israel, which, again, didn't separate religion and politics, or pretend to try.

To those primarily responsible for the faithfulness of God's People, God gave a charge that they remember their need and God's mercy, remember their defilement, and how obedience can break through it. To Zerubbabel, responsible for the administration of Israel, God declared that he was chosen, in one word empowering him and legitimizing his role among the People.

Unlike last week, there was no mention of how these oracles were to the people of Israel, but of course they were for them, right? By degrees: But Israel needed to know that God had decided to bless them and was their source of blessing. They needed to know that God would use Zerubbabel's administration for Israel's good.

And it might be making a conclusion the text doesn't totally invite, but it seems to me that behind these messages Haggai gives, God is re-centering His People around him. The end of famine comes as his blessing; not as a result of the Temple being built. They need to know that; the Temple, as Haggai speaks, is four years away from being finished, from functioning at all in Israel's life. And to people who were so centered on that place, it would have been a great temptation to forget, as they work so hard and give so much, that God is greater than the Temple, and God's blessings can come despite the Temple being finished or not. The Priests, Joshua included, needed to hear this especially. Zerubbabel was sent to Israel by Persia; Israel needed to hear that God had chosen him for the tasks ahead of him, and he needed to know that he was chosen, too. But God needed lifted up as the chooser, not Cyrus.

See, Over and over in Haggai the message that we get is that God is with Israel, God is actively engaged with Israel, God will bless Israel, and it's God's presence with them, despite the Temple's destruction, that must function as their center, the foundation of their worldview, their sense of identity as a people. For

those individuals with great responsibility in their communal life, those people need to recognize it is God that empowers and legitimizes them, that blesses them and sustains them. The titles and roles that they have are empty and nothing apart from that.

Jumping:

To Jump to now, is I think to remember that we are, as Peter puts it, “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” We are those who once “were not a people, but now...are the people of God; once...had not received mercy, but now...have received mercy.”

I have preached for more than a decade now. It’s a long time to circle around the same small handful of themes and ideas and truths that thread through each message I give. I hope you’re not tired of it, but the repetition could give anyone a cramp.

Do you know that God is with you?

In the decisions you make in life, is God a part of them?

God is with us. God is actively engaged with us. God will bless us. And it's God's presence with us that has to function as our center, as the foundation of our view of the world, as our identity as a people. For those of us with great responsibility in our communal life, or in the places where we work and rest and play, we need to recognize that it's God who empowers and legitimizes us, who blesses us and sustains us. The titles and roles that we have are empty and nothing apart from God with us.

And just as Haggai's people were defiled, but their defilement didn't keep God from blessing them because he loved them and had promised to help them, we are those who don't have our sins counted against us, because in Christ, we've been reconciled to God, brought into His reconciling People.

Whatever

So whatever we're building or whatever we're leading--whatever we're building or whatever we're leading--we must be sure that our center is our center, that God is our sustenance and our hope. Whatever we eat or drink or whatever we do, God's glory needs to guide us.

And God will not abandon us. Let's offer Him our obedience, our trust, and let's remember Haggai exists, as we move on from this book.