

God's Priests, Providence and Plans Haggai 2:10-23

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This morning we finish our study in Haggai. Remember, last week Haggai brought the people a message that was intended to encourage a somewhat discouraged people.

This morning we move forward two months, to the 24th day of the ninth month when God gave His last two messages to the people.

In the first of these closing messages, God takes the people back over their experiences of the previous 16 years with a view to impress upon them some important spiritual lessons.

In the last message, which was directed to Zerubbabel, the political leader of the people, God brought a message of comfort and assurance for the future.

Let's begin our examination of these closing messages by first looking at chapter 2, verses 11-14 where we find a question for God's priests.

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Haggai 2:11-14, *"This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: 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 answered, "No." Then Haggai said, *"If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?"* "Yes," the priests replied, *"it becomes defiled."* Then Haggai said, *"So it is with this people and this nation in my sight," declares the Lord. 'Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.'*

One of the major errors into which many of the Jews had fallen, throughout their history, was that of ascribing an inherent worth to the performance of religious ordinances.

They thought that as long as they observed the various outward rituals of religious worship everything was alright between them and God.

God wanted to correct such erroneous ideas and, with that in mind, Haggai told the people to go and ask the Priests to give a ruling on two scenarios relating to the Law.

One of the responsibilities of the priests was to teach the people the law of Moses and to interpret how that law applied to specific situations.

In chapter 2, verse 12, the people were to first ask the priest, *“If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine or oil or other food, does it become consecrated?”*

Or to put the question into much simpler language, *“Can something that is Holy make something that is unholy, holy?”* To this question, the priests answered NO.

In chapter 2, verse 13, the second question the priests were asked was, *“If a person who has been defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things (that is something that has been consecrated, something that is ceremonially holy) does it become defiled?”*

Or, *“Can something that’s unholy defile something that is Holy?”* The answer the priests gave to that question was, *“YES, it becomes defiled.”*

The point God was making, and the thing that He wanted His people to grasp, was that holiness is not communicable, while defilement is.

A holy ordinance can't make an unholy person, who is performing that ordinance, holy.

But an unholy person can and does transmit his defilement to all he touches. Moral cleanness can't be transmitted but moral pollution can.

A healthy person, who goes into a room where someone is suffering from measles, can't transmit his health to the person who's ill, but a person who's ill can transmit his disease to a healthy person.

This is the principle that God established and the lesson that He wanted His people to learn. So, having highlighted this principle, God then goes on to apply this principle to His people.

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Haggai 2:14, *"Then Haggai said, 'So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,' declares the Lord. 'Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.'"*

Verse 14 drives home the point God wanted to make. These two questions were not just an academic exercise aimed at improving their understanding of the law.

They were presented to question the empty, defiled and unacceptable nature of their worship.

Although the people drew near to God with their lips, their hearts were far removed from Him. Their relationship with God wasn't what it should've been.

All the while the people were observing their religious duties, all the while they were going through the mechanics of worshipping God, they thought that God was pleased with them.

They thought He accepted their worship and that such religious observance would secure His protection and His favor. God wanted them to know that wasn't the case.

The first principle He wanted them to understand was that the mechanics of worship have no inherent power in and of itself to make the person performing it holy.

The elements of worship may have been holy in and of themselves, in that they were ordained and established by God to be part of worship, but they couldn't impart holiness to those who used them.

According to the second principle, namely that defilement can be communicated making what is holy, unholy, these people, being unholy because of their sin, were polluting the holy ordinances of God.

Because of this, God stopped accepting their sacrifices or their worship because it didn't come from a pure heart.

Now, this wasn't something peculiar to this particular generation of God's people. This same thing happened in Isaiah's day.

At that time, God made it clear how He felt about people going through the outward forms of worship when their hearts weren't right with Him.

Isaiah 1:11-15, *"The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me.*

New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood!”

Why was God talking like this? Weren't these forms of worship that He Himself had ordained. Didn't He require the people to pray to Him; to observe New Moon and Sabbath and various other festivals?

Didn't he institute the sacrificial system and command the offering of the blood of bulls, goats and lambs? Yes, but the holy ordinances that He instituted and ordained for worship had been profaned.

They had been defiled by the people because the people were inherently sinful, living sinful lives. They weren't right with God in their heart. Listen to what God said to them.

Isaiah 1:16-18, *“Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. “Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”*

And so it was in Haggai's day. Because of their sinful condition, they were bringing defiled sacrifices to the Lord.

Their worship was polluted because they were unclean; their worship didn't make them holy and acceptable. This is a lesson that God wants us to take note of this morning.

There are many people in churches today who think that as long as they come to church, join in prayer, read the scriptures and give an offering, that's what makes them acceptable to God.

But those elements don't impart any holiness to the person by their participation in them. There's no inherent value in the ordinances of religion.

Some Christians believe it does them spiritual good and enhances their relationship with God to come to and participate in worship, even though they're living in disobedience to Him.

But the spiritual pollution of their uncleansed heart is transmitted to the very worship in which they're engaging. It causes that worship to be unacceptable to God.

The same is true of those who aren't Christians; people who're religious, but who've never trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior.

They think that God is, in some way, pleased with them because they go to worship each week. They think that participating in worship counts for something when it comes to their relationship with Him.

The reality is that those holy exercises, in which they're engaged, are defiled by the pollution of their sinful and uncleansed hearts.

John Calvin sums up what God was saying through Haggai when He stated, *"Nothing can flow from an impure and polluted fountain but what is impure and polluted."*

Religious ritualism is worthless. It doesn't and can't make us right with God. God's looking for a heart that's broken and contrite on account of its sin.

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We then see God's providence in verses 15-17. Here, God, through the prophet, returns to a theme that He had already talked about in His first message.

Namely His dealings with His people in His works of providence, mainly His chastening.

Their chastening was intended to get the people to take stock of their lives and consider the folly of their sinful ways.

Haggai 2:15-17, *"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. 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. I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not return to me," declares the Lord.*"

God reminded them that when they were in a state of spiritual apathy, when they weren't putting God first in their lives, He punished them by bringing them into circumstances of adversity.

The specific nature of that adversity was economic hardship. God touched them where they felt it, in their pockets.

One year after another, the two staple crops of the land failed to produce anything like their normal, expected yield.

There was a 50% reduction in the yield of the wheat crop and a 60% reduction in that of the wine. Where they expected 20 measures of wheat, they ended up with only 10.

When they expected 50 measures of wine, there were only 20. By means of blight, mildew and heavy hailstorms God destroyed much of their crop.

He was doing this to get their attention; to get them to wake up spiritually, but it seems the people just thought it was bad luck.

The external hardships weren't considered as God's call to repentance until it was later explained to be such by Haggai.

God was speaking to them in the circumstances of life, but the people didn't hear Him; *"Yet you did not turn unto me."*

What God did was teach the people to be sensitive to His voice as it spoke to them in daily circumstances and situations in life. Then He tells them:

Haggai 2:18, *"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."*

God wanted the people to look back on that whole period, from the day the foundation of the temple was built over sixteen years ago to the present day, and think about all that happened and learn from it.

It's easy for us to forget that God speaks to us, not only through His Word, the Bible, but also through His Works, through His providential dealings with us in our daily lives.

When we, as Christians, go astray spiritually, God, with a view to drawing us back to Himself, speaks to us through His Word and if we don't heed it, He then resorts to using other means to get our attention.

Those means are his providential chastening. He'll bring us into adversity in one form or another or one degree or another.

That hardship that you're facing at the moment, could it be that God has brought that upon you in order to get your attention.

Maybe you're not as committed to serving God as He would expect and want you to be?

David, in Psalm 119:67, said, *"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now (that is 'now having experienced the affliction you sent and learned from it) now I obey your word."*

Four verses later he says, *"It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees."*

May God help us to discern His voice when He speaks to us by means of His providence.

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Another thing that Haggai brought to the people was the promise of God's blessing.

Haggai 2:19, *"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.'"*

As a result of Haggai's preaching and the work of God's Spirit, the people turned from their spiritual apathy and made God a priority in their lives. Their relationship with the Lord had been restored.

In this verse, God was reminding them of how they had suffered as a result of disobedience, now He was encouraging them by promising to bless them since they returned to Him.

This message came to the people in the ninth month, that's equivalent to our November. At that time the seed from the previous harvest would have been planted.

But, because the harvest of the past year had been so meagre, there were no seeds left to plant in the coming year.

That's what God was pointing out when he said, "*Is there any seed yet in the barn?*" The answer was no. It's all in the ground.

For the past number of years, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree hadn't born any fruit or at least hadn't born enough to satisfy the needs of the people.

So, on this 24th day of November, the people didn't know what to expect in the months ahead.

Would the seed they had planted wither and die? Would it be destroyed by mildew or hail?

At that point in time, they couldn't see how the seed in the ground was faring, whether it was beginning to sprout or not. All they could do was wait.

Then God came along and said, "*From this day on I will bless you.*" He gave them a wonderful promise of encouragement.

His chastening hand was being removed, and His hand of blessing was being laid upon them now that they had turned from their sin and returned to Him.

When a child of God, when a family or when a church is brought to the point where they recognize their sin, turn from it and return to God with all their heart, God will bless them.

The blessings that had been withheld throughout this period of disobedience was to be granted again as they walked in the ways of obedience.

If our walk with God isn't what it should be, then we need to get it sorted out so that God will say of us, *"From this day on I will bless you."*

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Conclusion

The last thing that I want us to consider this morning is found in verses 20-23, a message of an assurance of preservation.

Haggai 2:20-23, *"The word of the Lord came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: 'Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. 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."*

This message was delivered that same day to Zerubbabel, the political leader of the people.

Israel was a small nation surrounded by nations that were much stronger, nations that were keen to enlarge their territorial boundaries by invading and taking over smaller states.

Zerubbabel would've felt threatened by these powers, each of which could easily have invaded and overthrown his people.

So God, in this last message, comforts and encourages Zerubbabel and the people by assuring them that they would be preserved.

They weren't only under the protective hand of God, they were also part of His glorious, redemptive purposes for the world and, as such, precious to Him.

In this passage, God described Zerubbabel as His "*signet ring*," one whom He has "*chosen*."

The signet ring was important and precious to ancient kings. It was used for sealing official documents. It never left ruler's person. The ring was carefully guarded since it represented its owner's power.

God told Zerubbabel how precious he was as the leader of His people. In so many words, God said, "*You have nothing to worry about since the foreign powers that are around you are going to be destroyed.*"

God was telling Zerubbabel that He was working to bring about His plans and purposes and, in the midst of all this upheaval, his people would be preserved because they were precious to Him.

The reason for this was that it would be from Israel that God would raise up the ultimate leader of His people, of whom Zerubbabel was an Old Testament type, Jesus Christ.

Just as God promised to preserve His people through all the political upheavals back in the 5th C B.C., in order that His eternal purposes would be fulfilled, so too He'll preserve His covenant people throughout all ages until His kingdom is finally and fully consummated.

Amidst all the national and international upheavals that have taken place, and will yet take place in this world, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Covenant people of God, will be preserved.

Jesus said, "*I will build my Church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.*" The Church is the safest institution in the world.

The Church is the only thing that will ultimately be preserved when God makes that final shaking of the heavens and earth at the end of time.

A shaking that will forever destroy everything else that's not built upon the rock, Christ Jesus.

What a privilege and a joy it is to be a member of that glorious blood bought institution. May God write the lessons of this book upon our hearts and work them into our lives.