Rebuilding the Temple
Haggai 1:1-11

Let me begin by asking you a question. Do you have any unfinished projects? Something you've started but never finished or followed through on? Or anything that's on your to-do list, but you just keep hesitating and putting it off?

When we moved into our house, we hated the wallpaper in the kitchen so much that we immediately started peeling it off. Except, within a few days, we ran out of steam, and 18 months later we still have peeling paper hanging from the walls! We started but we never finished.

Now when you look at those half-finished projects or those tasks that you keep picking up but putting off – what do they say about you? What do they say about your order of priorities, or your lack of time, or your eagerness to do it? Because they say something, don't they?

Well, over the next few weeks we're going to be looking at the little book of the prophet Haggai, which is all about an unfinished project and what it says.

And the story begins some 605 years before Christ, when the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem, and deported many of the leading families into exile. But a few years later, in 598BC, the Babylonians were back and deported even more people, not just the elite. And it was about this time that the prophet Ezekiel had his vision of the glory of God abandoning the temple of Jerusalem, which was fulfilled in 587BC when the Babylonians came back again, and obliterated Jerusalem. They tore down the city walls and demolished every building of any significance, including the Temple of Solomon. And Jerusalem and the Temple at its centre, were left a pile of rubble. It was painful reminder of the total spiritual failure of the nation of Israel.

And that's how things stood for 70 years, with Israel in exile in Babylon. But then the Persians conquered Babylon. And Cyrus, the Persian king, wanted to be seen as a liberator. And so in 538BC he issued a decree, recorded on the famous Cyrus Cylinder, allowing all conquered peoples to return to their homelands.

And a first wave of Jews returned to Jerusalem that same year. And in their enthusiasm, they began to rebuild the Temple. At least, they laid the foundation. But then they stopped. They faced resistance from foreigners who had made Israel home; plus the daily struggle for survival in a ruined city. And the work on the Temple that they had started so keenly, they abandoned. And for 20 years the Temple mount was silent.

But then a second wave of returnees arrived from Babylon in 522BC. And now, leading the people in Jerusalem, was a man called Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest. Now Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David. And the Persian authorities had appointed him governor of Jerusalem. So now in Jerusalem you have a King, or at least a governor descended from King David, you have a priest, and a ruined temple.

And it's into that situation that the prophet Haggai steps. And whilst his message spanned only four months it had, and can still have, an incredible impact.

Reading: Haggai 1:1-11

When God Speaks
Look at v1: 'In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet.'

Now, notice how Haggai records the date, because in the past, prophets would date their messages by the kings of Israel. But Darius was the King of Persia. It's a mark of just how low Israel has sunk. They aren't an independent kingdom any more, they are a vassal state, a small cog in the vast machine of empire.

And yet, God still speaks, just as he will still speak to you however lost or insignificant you might sometimes feel. And he speaks through this man 'Haggai *the prophet'* (1:1, 3, 12; 2:1, 10), 'the messenger of the Lord' (1:13). And we don't know anything more about him than that. All that mattered was that this man had a word from the Lord. And when Haggai speaks, time and time again he says, 'declares the Lord.' So this is not Haggai's private analysis of the situation. This is not Haggai saying, 'you know what, I've been thinking, it would be a really good idea if….' He comes as a man speaking God's word.

And he doesn't just date it to the year, he dates it to the day: by our calendar it's the 29th of August 520 BC. And God spoke. So God speaks on a specific day, to a specific people, facing a specific situation. And he still speaks. Whatever your situation the word of God can come and encourage you, or challenge you, or direct you, or humble you.

But look what the Lord says through Haggai, v2: "Thus says the Lord of Hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord." In other words, 'come on, it's time to rebuild the Temple.'

Now, what do you think about that message? Because here are a people struggling to make ends meet, facing a city in ruins, and along comes Haggai wanting them to build a grand religious building. Doesn't that sound like the kind of superficial religion that so many of us want to run a million miles from? Because unlike previous Old Testament prophets, Haggai makes no mention of social justice, there's no voice lifted up for the poor, there's no suggestion that, actually, God dwells with the humble, and you don't need a building. All Haggai's interested in is a building campaign. Why? And why does it matter for us?

Where God Dwells
Look at v8, where the Lord says that they should rebuild the Temple, 'that I might take pleasure in it and that I might be glorified, says the Lord.' Now, ask yourself, why would God be glorified by the temple being rebuilt?

Well, think about what the Temple symbolised. When Moses led the people out of captivity in Egypt God said, 'Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst' (Ex 25:8). And when King Solomon dedicated the first temple he prayed, 'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest

heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!' (1 Kings 8:27). You see, the tabernacle and then the Temple, was the ultimate symbol of God dwelling among his people.

And so refusing to rebuild the temple was like saying, 'we don't want God in our midst. We don't want God dwelling among us, in the centre of our lives, in the centre of our city.' And so if the God whom the highest heavens cannot contain wants to live among his people in covenant relationship, to leave the Temple a pile of rubble was a failure to respond to his grace. And did you notice how the Lord describes the people of Israel? '*These* people say…' (v2). Not 'my people' but 'these people.' Because whilst they may have failed to build the temple they had successfully built a wall between them and God.

However, if they *did* rebuild the Temple, it would be like saying, 'We do want God dwelling among us. We want God in the centre of every aspect of our lives: the way we do business as a city, the way we administer justice, the way we educate our children, the way we live as families.' To rebuild the temple was to say, 'we want to meet with God now, not live off hand-me-down stories from the past, but to enjoy his glory and his grace today.'

So, can you see that this is way more than a church building program? In fact, it was more even than putting God first and then letting everything else take its own spot. It was to put God at the centre of everything. His presence in the centre of the city, influencing everything else.

Ok, but what has rebuilding a temple 2500 years ago got to do with you?

Well, when Jesus came on the scene, he said of himself, "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here" (Matt 12:6). And after telling us about the announcement of Jesus' birth in his gospel, Matthew writes, 'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)' (Matt 1:22-23). So, ultimately, the temple wasn't it, was it? It was simply pointing forward, to something greater, to the day when God really would dwell with his people, to Jesus, who in the words of John, 'Became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14).

And so for you, to rebuild the temple is to look at your relationship with God, and ask, What state is it in? What priority do I give it? Is Christ at the centre of my life, influencing everything else: my studies, my work life, my home life, my relationships, my secret inner life? As the Temple should have had a profound effect on business and justice and education and daily life in the city of Jerusalem, is Christ in the central place of influence in mine? Not, does he get the top slot in a hierarchical list, and then everything else has its own place, but is he central to it all? With his influence pervading every aspect of my life? Do I build the space for him to do that in my life?

But listen, this is more even than your personal relationship with God. You see, the apostle Paul talks about the church, the family of God, as being like the

temple under construction. Ephesians 2:22, 'In him [that's Christ] you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.' And so whilst the call of God through Haggai was to rebuild the Temple so that God might dwell with them, to you and me it is to build up the church, his body, among whom God dwells by his Spirit. In the words of Jesus, 'to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness' (Matt 6:33). That as we allow Christ that central place, and build up Christ at the centre, and allow his influence to permeate every aspect of your life, how you use your time and your money, how you pursue your career, how you raise your family, you will give your life for the advancement of his kingdom and the building up of his church.

Now the danger is you hear that and think it's constraining, it's limiting, it squashes you. But what I want you to see is that God calls you to this, not to harm you, but for your good.

How Life Thrives

Now, did you notice how life was not going well for the people of Haggai's day? Verse 6: 'You have sown 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.'

In other words, they were constantly striving for more – trying to get the bumper harvest, but it failed, wanting food and drink, but never being satisfied. Buying more and more clothing but still feeling cold. Earning money, but where does it all go? Know the feeling? But why?

Because they have neglected the one thing that will truly satisfy them. They had pursued prosperity but it had left them worse off than before. And it's always the way with our god-substitutes, isn't it? Whether it's career, or sex, or money, or status, or romance, or possessions. You pursue it because you think it will make you, it will complete you, it will give you what you want. But like all idols, they ultimately fail you. And these guys weren't thriving because they had denied God that place in the centre. They thought they could do life without him. But they discovered what all of us discover, that every part of life is affected when God is absent or pushed to the periphery.

And the reason life wasn't working for them, is that God was not letting it work for them. You see, in Deuteronomy 28 Moses spells out for the people what are called 'the covenant curses', that if the people of Israel turn their backs on God, life won't work; God will withdraw his blessing. And that is exactly what Haggai says is going on here. Verse 9, 'You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away.' Verse 10, 'The heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labours." So life was unravelling, and their work was unsatisfying and unproductive – and maybe you know what that feels like. But it wasn't because their work was wrong, or that they were in the wrong job, but because their heart was wrong.

But is God's response to them God just being vindictive? No! It's a wake up call to them, and to us, 'Listen, if you turn your backs on me, life will begin to disintegrate, and I'll allow that to happen to get your attention, so you'll turn back to me, which is the only place where you'll really thrive.'

Which begs the question, if all that is true, why weren't they rebuilding the temple?

Well, the book of Ezra tells us that the people faced opposition from outsiders. And if you've ever faced repeated opposition over something, that can happen can't it? On-going opposition can drain the life out of you. And as a result, these guys had put down their tools. Then there was the economic situation. Haggai records them as saying 'The time has not yet come' (v2). 'The time isn't right to do this. Times are hard. We're struggling to survive, these other things must take priority. It would unwise to divert our limited resources to temple building.'

And maybe you've heard yourself say something similar. Times are hard, I'm really busy right now, life is crazy, and I need to get these other things done, I need to prioritise this and this, I'll get to church, or to praying, or to Bible reading, or to giving, or to my relationship with God, or to my family, when I can. And you focus, or at least you think you focus, on surviving.

But Haggai sees deeper than these surface issues. Because whilst these surface issues can be real, the real issue is the heart. Verses 3-4: 'Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins?"'

You see, it was not so much a lack of money, but a lack of will that meant the Lord's house lay in ruins. They had time and energy and resources and enthusiasm enough to work for their own comfort, but that enthusiasm did not extend to their love for God. They had become spiritually apathetic and indifferent. Their hearts had grown cold. And maybe you know what that feels like as well.

Now I don't know if you've ever seen that chart that explains what the British say and what they actually mean, but if a Brit says, 'with the greatest respect' what they really mean is, 'you are a complete idiot.' If they say 'that is very interesting' what they mean is 'that is complete nonsense.' And if they say 'that is a very brave proposal' they mean 'you are clearly insane'. And one commentator says that when the people say, 'the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house' what they really mean is 'the time will *never* come'. There was this disinterested half-heartedness. Were they loyal to God? Sure they were. But they were hardly passionate, or excited about it.

They represent, as one commentator says, the danger of 'seeking first the kingdom of self and my comforts' rather than the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Taylor, NAC). And isn't it so easy to get trapped like that? To become preoccupied with me, and my agendas, and now my comfort is at the centre.

But wonderfully, God is not prepared to leave them or you and I there, and he sends his prophet to speak his word. And he called them and he calls us, v5, to 'consider your ways.' Press pause, and take a look at your life. Think about your priorities and what they say about the state of your heart toward God and his mission to see his church built up and his kingdom come.

The question is, though, when you're in that state, and you see the negative impact of not having Christ in that central position and yet you feel indifferent or apathetic to change it, how *can* you change it? How can you start building and living for something greater than yourself?

The Man who Climbed the Hill

Look at how the Lord tells the people they are to get building again: v7-8, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. 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.'

So first comes repentance. Consider your ways, be honest with yourself and with God, that you are not where God wants you to be, or even where you want to be.

But secondly the Lord tells them to climb the hills around Jerusalem and bring down wood from the forests, to start the rebuilding. And some 500 years later another man would climb one of those same hills around Jerusalem, but not to bring wood down, but to carry wood up the hill, the wood of a Roman cross. And here the Lord says they should start rebuilding that he might be glorified. And just prior to Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus prayed, 'For this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." And John records that 'a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again'" (John 12:27-8). And nowhere is God more glorified than at the cross – as the Son of God is nailed to its wood, on a hill outside Jerusalem, in the shadow of the Temple, and gives his life to bring back people like you and me into relationship with him, to break down the wall of division that our apathy and cold-heartedness has built up.

And as Christ hung on the cross, he took upon himself all those curses of the covenant in Deuteronomy 28, all those things that we deserve for turning our backs on God, which culminate in being cut off from the presence of God. The very curses Haggai says they are bringing on themselves and the city. And in the words of Paul 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"' (Gal 3:13).

And it's when we consider the incredible love of Christ for us, the man who climbed the hill, carrying the wood, to bear the curse for us, and allow that to sink in, that we'll find our hearts being warmed with that desire to rebuild our lives with him at the very centre. It's as we know his love for us filling our hearts, that that same love and self-sacrifice can flow out of us and influence every other part of our lives. After all, if that is how much he is prepared to sacrifice for you, isn't he worth everything for you to sacrifice and work and build for him? Not to earn his love, but because of his great love.