Be Strong and Work
Haggai 1:12-2:9

Last week we saw how the Jewish people had returned from exile in Babylon, to a destroyed Jerusalem. And whilst they began to rebuild the Temple, they quickly gave up. Instead, they put their efforts into building their own houses. They had prioritised their own comfort.

Now, you can understand why they might have done that, but still the reality was that they had pushed God to the margins and, as a result, life was unravelling.

And it's into that situation that the prophet Haggai speaks. And when he does, God's word cuts through their spiritual apathy and stirs them to action. But rather than it just being a spiritual kick up the pants, it also encouraged them to keep going when things got hard. And let's face it, all of us need that kind of encouragement at one time or another.

Haggai 1:12-2:9

Worship then Work
The people were caught up in the business of their own lives, and so Haggai calls them to rebuild the temple. And in v12 he tells us how they responded: 'Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel [he's the governor], and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God.' Verse 14: 'And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God.'

So, can you see how God's word had this powerful effect on the society? You've got the civil or political leaders, represented by Zerubbabel; you've got the religious leaders, represented by Joshua the High Priest; and you've got all the people responding. And they come together and are united in this vision and purpose to rebuild the Temple. So this wasn't the leaders dragging the people in a direction they didn't want to go. And it wasn't the people trying to twist the arms of a conservative leadership, refusing to change.

All of them grasped the vision of what God was doing in their day and went for it. And there is something wonderful about that, isn't there? You see, whilst division and disunity can be disheartening, unity and joining together in a task, can be amazing. And you know that's true in the work place, but it is especially true in a church, when you're uniting together in what God is doing in your day, when you are united around his vision of seeing the church built up and the kingdom of God extended.

But did you notice the order of how they responded? They 'obeyed' (v12), they 'feared' (v12), and they 'worked' (v14). So obedience and godly fear came first, and then they began to work. Now, why do I say that? Because there are a whole load of other reasons why people like you and me might start working and serving in the name of God or religion. You might do it to be noticed, to make a name for yourself, to get some attention. You might do it out of a sense of duty – your heart's not really in it, but you do it because you think you should; or you might do it out of guilt – you'd feel bad if you didn't do it.

And whilst some wonderful things can be said for duty, and for doing what's right even when you don't feel like it, there is little good to be said about doing something because you want the fame, and want people to notice you, or because you feel guilty. You see, when God spoke through Haggai and urged the rebuilding to begin, he said, 'Build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord' (1:8). And God is not glorified by our bad attitudes or motives is he? He is not glorified by me doing something so I get the glory, or even if I want God to have *almost* all the glory. And he is not glorified by me doing something that I don't really want to do, but I'll do it because I'd feel guilty if I didn't.

No, God is glorified when we do something because we want him to look great, and we do it willingly, and out of a good heart. In other words, worship comes before work. So whether it is rebuilding the temple, or building up Christ at the centre of your life, or building up the church through prayer, or acts of service or generosity, it is the heart that matters. Otherwise, it's just dead works.

And these guys began to work, because the word of the Lord had changed their hearts. And rather than continuing to push God to the margins, Haggai tells us, v12, that 'the people feared the Lord.' It's the fear of the Lord that Proverbs tells us is 'the beginning of wisdom' (Prov 9:10), the wisdom to know that life thrives when God is right at the centre.

And it's as they respond like that, that Haggai tells us v14, 'And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the remnant of the people. And they came and worked.' So it's not just that God challenges us to get our priorities right, and put him at the centre, it's that he gives us both the desire and the ability to follow through with it. It's why Paul writes to the Philippians, 'it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil 2:13). In other words, when God calls you to do something for him, whether that is at home, in a relationship, on campus, or at work, when he calls you to take a stand for truth, or to love against the grain, or to sacrificially give, to do whatever will glorify him, he doesn't just leave you to your own resources, he equips and enables you to do the very thing he calls you to.

And yet, the book of Haggai is not a fairy tale is it? Just because God calls you and equips you to do something, does not mean it will all be plain sailing.

Dealing with Discouragement

Now as you read the first part of chapter two, it becomes pretty clear that one month into this rebuilding project at least some of the people are becoming discouraged and it's spreading. And in some ways, that's to be expected isn't it? After all, the original problems they faced of trying to survive in a destroyed city are still there. Then the sheer slowness of the building project itself could wear them down.

I mean, for the last year or more, Mark and I have had to put up with these apartment blocks being built right in front of the church offices. And it's been months of dirt and mess and noise. And for month after month it seemed like

there was zero progress, and I began to wonder, 'is anything ever going to come of this?' And the same can be true of life can't it? You try and work on your marriage, or your relationship, but it seems like you keep facing the same old problems. No progress. Or you take on a new task, or face a new challenge, but the enormity of what you face and the slow pace of change can begin to wear you down. It's exciting at the start, but then that initial enthusiasm fades. You hear the call of God to act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God, but then you get bogged down in the unexciting routine of everyday, and discouragement sets in: 'is this really going anywhere? Are things ever going to change?'

But these Jewish builders faced something else as well, v3, 'Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?' So some of the people could remember the splendour of Solomon's temple. And what they were building now was nothing in comparison. In fact it was like a wooden shed in comparison.

And comparisons with the past can kill confidence, can't they? The danger of looking backwards, to the good old days, of a better work team, or a previous church, of better fellowship, or preaching, or worship, or even of your own relationship with God being better, *back then*. But the danger of that is that you fail to enjoy or be open to all that God is doing now, in the present. And dissatisfaction leads to disillusionment, and disillusionment to despondency. And your soul begins to shrivel.

But into this despondency God speaks his word: v4, 'Be strong'. Yes the challenges are great, yes the progress is slow, yes things may seem small, but be strong! In fact he says it three times, so everyone hears it: 'Be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land.' Because sometimes leaders who feel exposed need to hear it, and people who are giving of their time and resources need to hear it: be strong.

It's the same encouragement that Moses gave to Joshua on the verge of entering the Promised Land; it's the same encouragement that God gave to Joshua on the eve of battle. It's the same encouragement that David gave to Solomon to build the very first temple: "*Be strong* and courageous *and do it*." (1 Chron 28:20).

So being strong is not just an inner thing, to give you the warm fuzzies – it's also an outer thing. Faith has got to find an outlet. David told Solomon be strong *and do it*. And Haggai tells the people 'Be strong… [and] work' (v4). So God does not strengthen us and encourage us so we sit on our backsides watching TV, he equips us for acts of service and sacrifice, so that all of us might be engaged in his work of building up his church.

Well… sure, but when you're facing discouragement and things aren't going how you hoped they would, where does that strength come from? Is it just you pulling yourself up by the bootstraps? Well, Haggai tells us where it comes from. Verses 4-5 again, 'Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, according to the

covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not.'

So you can be strong when you feel weak, you can work when you feel like quitting, you can fear not when you feel afraid, because God is with you. And that's what makes you effective when others might quit: knowing that God keeps his promises to stick with you, even when everyone else heads for the exit. Is the pile of rubble vast? Yes. Is the task these builders face huge? Yes. Do the obstacles you face sometimes seem impossibly great? Yes. But the greater reality is God's presence. And he is greater than any circumstance or situation you might find yourself in.

And the timing of Haggai's words is fascinating. You see v1 tells us he said all this 'In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month' which was the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, when the people would have been living in tents to remind them of how God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them out into freedom. And God is saying, I have rescued and delivered you once, and I will do it again. Just as my presence was with you when I brought you out of slavery, so it is with you now. So be strong and work.

And this promise that God is with us is the rock to which you can cling when it feels like the rip-tide of life will sweep you away. Isaiah 43:2, 'when you pass through the waters, *I will be with you*.' It's the hand you can cling to when it feels like darkness is enveloping you. Psalm 23 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, *for you are with me*.'

And this is not just an Old Testament thing. Christ came as Immanuel – God with us; who promises his Spirit to be with us forever. And just as the people of Haggai's day were promised his presence as they rebuilt the temple, so are we as we build the church: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations… and behold, *I am with you* always, to the end of the age' (Matt 28:19-20). And as Paul says, if God is with us, if God is for us, who can be against us?

And it's understanding that promise that can give you the confidence to face what you face, or do what he calls you to do, because you know you're not on your own.

But the promise of his presence is not the only promise God makes here.

The Unshakeable Kingdom

Verse 6-8: 'For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in… the silver is mine and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts.'

Now, this language of the earth shaking is language the Bible uses when God comes down to rescue, or to judge, and everything quakes before him. And so Haggai is saying that God is going to come and upset all the stuff that people think is going to last, all the things that people put their trust in, like empires and power and might.

And at one level, this is exactly what happened. The Persians overthrew the Babylonians, allowed the temple to be rebuilt, and even paid for it. Darius the king gave the order for tax revenues to be sent to fund the rebuilding. Then the Greeks overthrew the Persians. Then the Romans overthrew the Greeks. And 500 years of so after Haggai, when Herod made the Temple even more magnificent, it was with money raised from the Roman empire. So nations and empires were shaken and the treasures of the nations really did come in.

And yet Haggai has something deeper in mind than the rise and fall of empires. You see, in the New Testament, in the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, the writer quotes Haggai and this business of shaking. And he links it back to when God delivered Israel from slavery and gave the law to Moses, and came down at Mount Sinai, and the earth shook. And so when God says 'yet once more… I will shake the heavens and the earth' (v6), it's a promise that God is going to do something just as dramatic as happened back then. That God was going to come down and rescue his people and shake the nations just as he did in the Exodus. And out of that shaking something unshakeable will arise.

Hebrews 12:27-28, 'This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken – that is, things that have been made – in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.' In other words, regardless of our strength or our weakness, God is going to establish Christ's unshakeable kingdom.

And the treasures of the nations helping fund the rebuilding of the temple were just a foretaste of the nations coming in to Christ's kingdom. Because, after all, what is a nation's greatest treasure if it isn't its people? And at Pentecost you had the nations flooding into Jerusalem and hearing the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection, as Peter and the disciples preached and taught them, where? In the very courts of this temple that they were rebuilding.

And so through Haggai, God is telling them, 'what you are doing may seem very small to you, but its shockwaves are going to spread around the globe'. And what you and I do for God's kingdom may seem very small, but we have no idea what God does with small things – as its ripples spread outwards. And just imagine what God can do with a church that gets it, that understands what God is up to in the world, and works and prays and gives for mission and for outreach, to see his church built and his kingdom come.

And behind it all is God's promise to fund it. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine.' It doesn't belong to the Persians or the Romans, it's not yours or mine, it all belongs to God. We're just his stewards, and his work will have his supply. But… he still calls us to join in the work of building.

But if there is this promise of an unshakeable kingdom, there is also one final promise.

Glory from Rubble

Verse 7, 9: ‘And I will shake all nations… and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts… the latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former… And in this place I will give peace.’

Now ask yourself, when God talks about the glory of the temple, what does he mean? He doesn’t mean its artistry does he? He means his glory, his presence dwelling in the temple. And if you know your Old Testament, you’ll know that the cloud of God’s glory came down on the first tabernacle in the wilderness; and the same cloud of glory came down on the first temple that replaced the tabernacle. But no one ever recorded that cloud of glory filling this second temple. So when God says its glory will be greater than anything that went before, how can he say that?

He can say it because 500 years later the glory would indeed return, as Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the Temple courts and Simeon, this old man, took him up in his arms and said, ‘my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel’ (Luke 2:30-32). You see, Simeon’s old eyes could see what younger ones missed: that God’s glory had returned to the Temple, that the one greater than the Temple had come. It’s what John saw when he wrote, ‘And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the father, full of grace and truth.’ (John 1:14). And that’s the greater glory this temple would enjoy, that the Son of God himself would enter its courts.

And so out of the rubble of the destroyed temple, God brings even greater glory. But think about it… that is always his way, isn’t it? You see, Jesus was not welcomed by the Temple authorities of his day as the glory of God. Instead, they crucified him. And at the cross he took upon himself every sin of ours, everything we haven’t done that we should have done, everything we should have done but we haven’t done, everything that cuts us off from God’s glory, he took it all upon himself and died for it. And the gospels tell us that the earth shook and the curtain of the Temple was torn in two. But out of the rubble and the destruction and the death of the cross, came the resurrection. Because God is a God who brings glory out of rubble.

And the death and the resurrection of Christ tells you, that just like these builders, you can be standing in the midst of a pile of rubble, the rubble of your marriage, the rubble of sickness, the rubble of broken dreams, the rubble of your past, and God can bring something glorious from it. It is the power of Christ’s resurrection working in you.

And it’s because of what Christ would do/has done, that God could say, ‘And in this place I will give peace’ (v9). In the place of destruction, and opposition, and financial trouble, and discouragement, in just such a place, whatever your place is like now, God brings peace. The peace of Christ that surpasses all understanding.

So, be strong, work, fear not. For God is with you, his kingdom is unshakeable and he brings glory out of rubble.