The Disease Religion Can't Cure
Haggai 2:10-23

So this is our final Sunday in the little book of the prophet Haggai.

And to set the scene it's the 18th December 520BC. The people of Jerusalem have returned from exile in Babylon, but Jerusalem is a city in ruins. And whilst the people began to rebuild the temple, they quickly gave up, and instead concentrated on rebuilding their own houses and prioritising their own comfort. But as we've seen over the last two Sunday's, Haggai the prophet stepped forward to challenge that, and he called the people to start rebuilding the temple rather than keep pushing God to the margins.

And it's been 4 months since Haggai's first message, and 3 months since the people responded and started rebuilding the temple. And now Haggai steps forward with what will be his final message.

Now, I know you'd never say this in church, but sometimes you read something in the Bible and it can seem so alien to you, that you think 'this has got absolutely nothing to do with me, and even less to say to me… I'll just pass on by.' And on first glance you might think that about today's passage. But what I hope you'll see is that this is God's word to you this morning just as it was to his people 2,500 years ago.

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When babies are born premature you have to insert special intravenous lines into them to feed them. The problem is, though, that the babies are highly vulnerable to infection, and so the nurses and doctors go to great lengths to make sure that nothing contaminates the line, or the equipment, they use to insert it. And so the doctor will put on a surgical gown, making sure nothing touches the front or the sleeves, and they'll put on surgical gloves, making sure they touch nothing unsterile. And the nurse will open a sterile instrument pack onto a trolley, and the doctor will open that up and use it to prepare his lines and syringes and so on. And they'll go to all that care to make sure no bacteria got anywhere near the equipment, so they don't infect the baby. But then, someone might mess up, and the doctor will touch something unsterile with his glove, or the nurse might brush against the instruments with a sleeve. And they'll go 'great! I've just contaminated everything. Now we have to start all over again!'

And Haggai starts his last message by talking about this issue of contamination. Not contamination to do with bacteria, but ritual, religious, spiritual contamination.

And he starts by asking two questions that may seem totally alien to you. Verse 12: 'If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil or any kind of food, does it become holy?' And what he's asking, and he already knows the answer, is 'can you transfer holiness? Can you catch holiness from something that is already holy?'

Now the Law of Moses has a lot to say about this kind of ritual holiness. Something or someone that was holy was set apart, it was consecrated, it was acceptable to God. And so when an animal was dedicated to the Lord for sacrifice its meat became holy. And though this might seem bizarre to us, the priests might then carry that meat in the fold of their garment as you might carry your steak in a Migros shopping bag. But now, because the meat was holy and it had come into contact with the priest's clothing, it made the priest's clothing holy. As Leviticus 6:27 says, 'whatever touches its flesh shall be holy.'

But what Haggai is asking is one step further. 'Ok' he asks, 'but what if the priest's clothing now touches something else, does that other thing also become holy.' And the priests' response was 'no, it doesn't', because the Law doesn't say anything about that.

So Haggai follows it up with a second question, v13: 'If someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?' Sure holiness, being acceptable to God, can't be transmitted on and on, but can uncleanness? Is *unholiness* contagious? And the priests' answer was 'yes' this other stuff does become unclean.

And maybe Haggai's listeners were thinking what you're thinking: Haggai, what's your problem? Why this sudden interest in holy meat in priest's garments and impure things touching other things? I mean we're trying to build a temple Haggai – how about picking up that hammer over there and lending a hand instead?

But of course Haggai's not really interested in holy meat, is he? Verse 14, 'Then Haggai answered and said, "So it is with this people, and with this nation before me, declares the Lord, and so with every work of their hands. And what they offer there is unclean."' So this isn't about meat and food at all. This is about the people, it's about you and me.

You see, the call of God to the people of Israel, in fact to anyone who would come near to him, could be summed up in Leviticus 19:2 as 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.' So for God to be able to dwell among the people, and for them to be able to come before a holy God, these Israelites had to be holy; and for you and me to be in relationship with God, we need to be holy. But the problem, as Haggai has just shown, is that holiness cannot be caught, but unholiness can.

And that leaves the people of Haggai's day, and you and me, in a hole. You see, if holiness can't be caught, it means that all the things we do to try and make ourselves right with God don't work. But we hope they do, don't we? We hope that if we do something good, it will kind of rub-off on us, that it will sprinkle its fairy-dust on us, and make us acceptable to God; that if we *do* the right thing it will somehow *make* us right in God's sight. But what God is saying through Haggai is that doing religious things, even in religious places, like rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem (and you don't get much more holy than that!), on its own, cannot make you holy or acceptable to God.

So, listen, you can't make yourself acceptable to God by getting a bit of religion, or by going to church, or by praying, or going on a pilgrimage, or whatever. You can't make yourself acceptable to God by giving to charity, even by giving *generously* to charity. You can't make yourself acceptable to God by serving, even by serving *sacrificially*. Because holiness does not rub off like that.

But it's even worse than that. You see, whilst holiness cannot be caught, unholiness *is* contagious. It's like the opposite of the Midas touch. Instead of everything turning to gold, unholiness contaminates everything. Imagine a child who's been out playing in the garden, and they're covered in mud. And they run into the house. What's going to happen? Does the clean house clean them up? No! Their hands and feet are caked in mud and soon there is mud everywhere: on the walls, and on the furniture. And does the clean carpet turn the shoes sparkling white? No… now there are muddy footprints everywhere.

And Haggai is saying that unholiness and impurity are contagious in a way that holiness just isn't. After all, you can't catch health, but you can catch disease. And it affects everything. Verse 14 again: '… so with every work of their hands. And what they offer is unclean.' So it's not just that religious activity, like rebuilding the temple, or whatever you and I might try, can't make you clean; it's that everything these guys touch, like the mud-caked child, is going to be soiled. Everything they do, everything they offer to God, all of life, is going to be unholy. Why? Because they are unholy.

It's why God refers to them in v14 as 'this people, and… this nation.' Not my people, and my nation. Why? Because this unholiness we all suffer from separates us from a holy God, and no amount of religious activity, all the ways we try to gain God's acceptance, can bridge that divide. Not even building a Temple. And the reason religious activity cannot bridge that divide is that it does not deal with the heart issue.

The Heart of the Problem

Now, if someone were to come to me and say, 'Martin, I come to church, I do all this religious stuff, but frankly God seems a million miles away' and if in response I said, 'ok, show me your bank balance, show me your salary slips, show me your household budget, show me your incoming and your outgoing' you'd think I was crazy wouldn't you? And yet, that's exactly what God does here to get the people to confront the real issue. And once again, just as he did in chapter 1, he gets them to review their economic problems: v15-16: "Before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the Lord, how did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures [that's measures of grain], there were but ten. When one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty." In other words, as they review the balance sheet of the last harvest, their fields and vines have only produced half of what they hoped or expected. And in an agricultural community that could have dire consequences. You see this is December, planting season, and the Lord asks them in v19, 'Is the seed yet in the barn?' And the ways that's phrased, the answer is 'no – there's no seed left in the barn, we've sown it all.' But think about it, there should be seed left, shouldn't there? Because the harvest should have been enough to give them seed

for sowing and seed for eating. And the seed for eating should have been in the barn. But they've sown all they've got. So unless things turn around rapidly they are heading for a famine. And it's not just the grain harvest that's suffered, v19 again, 'Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have yielded nothing.'

Now why does he do that? Why bring the economy, why bring business and productivity, and profit, and work-life, and food-on-the-table into what is surely a spiritual problem? Because there is no such thing as the sacred-secular divide is there? We cannot compartmentalise our lives and think this is the religious bit over here on Sunday, and this is the rest of my week at work, or at home, or on campus, and this religious bit has no impact on the rest. Because when you push God to the margins like that, even if you try and cover that with religious activity, all of life begins to unravel.

You see the heart of their problem was their hearts, this unwillingness to have God central to everything. And through Haggai, the Lord explains as he did earlier, that it's him, God, who has brought these economic problems about: v17, "I struck you and all the products of your toil with blight and with mildew and with hail, *yet you did not turn to me*."

And, once again, that is straight out of the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28, where God warned the people, having rescued them from slavery in Egypt, that if they turn away from him, if they walk out of their relationship with him like a wife turning her back on a husband who loves her, he will send blight and mildew on their crops. Not to destroy them, but to have them turn back to him, so that they might live in covenant relationship with him, to come back to the only place where life really thrives: the place with God at the centre.

But they hadn't done that. V17 again: 'yet you did not return to me.' So their fundamental problem, the thing that separated them from God, was their hearts, their unwillingness to yield all of life to him.

So it's not just that the temple needed to be renewed, and it's not just that you need a dose of religion every week, it's that our hearts must be renewed. Our hearts must be transformed.

But if we're incapable of doing that ourselves, if everything we touch does the opposite of turn to gold, then don't we need some touch, some power from outside ourselves to change our hearts?

And that, of course, is where God steps in. Look at v19 again, 'From this day on I will bless you.' So ultimately, God's blighting their harvest was an expression, not of his desire to cast them off, but of his desire to bless them, and do them good and see their lives thrive. And even the times in our lives when it feels like nothing is going right and everything is unravelling might be just such a time when God is calling us to turn back to him to be truly blessed by him. A blessing that is way deeper than simple material prosperity.

And it's as they responded to his word to have God at the centre of their city and of their lives, and as we hear his call to acknowledge him in every part of our lives, that blessing can begin to flow.

The One with the Transforming Touch

And this little book ends with Haggai speaking directly to Zerubbabel, the leader. Verse 21-22 'Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of nations.' So God moves from the unholiness of the people, and the failure of their harvest and his promise to bless them, to this vision of future universal upheaval, when everything is going to be shaken.

And if you remember from chapter one, God has said this once already. So why the need to repeat it? Well, maybe, when life is hard, and everything around you seems a mess, but you have begun to respond to God and rebuild your life with him at the centre, maybe you need to hear again what God is up to in the world. That even though you may feel small and insignificant, and your life seems to count for nothing, maybe you need to hear that God is working out his eternal plan in history and calls you to be a part of it.

And God says to Zerubbabel, v22, 'I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders. And the horses and their riders shall go down.' And if you know your Old Testamant, you'll know that this talk of chariots and horses and riders going down has all these echoes of the Exodus, when God overthrew Pharaoh's army. So God is saying that he is going to remove all rival kingdoms and powers and once again come and rescue his people from oppression, just like he did before.

But how's he going to do that? Well, step forward Zerubbabel. Verse 23, 'On that day, declares the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, declares the Lord, and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the Lord of hosts.' So Zerubbabel is God's chosen man. He is going to be this major league player. He's going to be like God's signet ring, that just as a letter sealed with the King's signet ring carried the King's authority, so Zerubbabel would carry God's authority.

Except, things didn't exactly turn out like that, did they? You see, far from Zerubbabel becoming a major player on the world stage, he was a very minor one. Was he a key figure in rebuilding the temple? Sure he was. But after that we don't hear much about him. He drops off the pages of history and drops into obscurity, and there was certainly no triumphant march against the forces of the gentiles.

So was Haggai a fraud, and Zerubbabel a failure? No. And the clue is this description of Zerubbabel as being like a signet ring. Because Zerubbabel's grandfather, Jehoiakim, was the last king before Judah was sent into exile in Babylon, and this is what God said through the prophet Jeremiah at that time: 'As I live, declares the Lord, though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were the signet ring on my right hand, yet I would tear you off' (Jer 22:24). So if the

royal line of David was like a signet ring on God's right hand, because of their failure and rebellion it was as if God tore off that ring and threw it away, when he sent them into exile.

But here is God saying to Zerubbabel, in you Zerubbabel I am putting that ring back on. It is God's promise that his earlier promises to the house of David, that there would always be a son of David, a king upon the throne of God's people, were being restored, and being restored through Zerubbabel. But ultimately Zerubbabel wasn't it, just as David wasn't it. Zerubbabel was just the next in line, until one greater than David, one greater than Zerubbabel came.

So turn to Matthew chapter 1. It's the genealogy, the family line of Jesus: v12-13: 'And after the deportation to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud.' And there is Zerubbabel in the family line of Jesus, the Messiah. And so Zerubbabel embodied in his day God's renewed promise that one day this Son of David would come and establish his unshakeable kingdom and deliver his people. And however many generations later, in Jesus, he came.

And Christ is the ultimate signet ring on God's right hand. The one who truly bears his image. And if everything *we* touch is defiled and made unclean, it was Jesus who cleansed the lepers with a touch. He is the one with the transforming touch. The touch that can make holy. So whilst religion, or serving, or giving, or building temples cannot make us holy, Christ can. And it is he, the ultimate blessed one, who became a curse for us at the cross, and as he did so, he became sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. That he was separated from God at the cross, so we might be reconciled to him. That he gave his life, so we might have life, life in all its fullness, the blessing of God that Haggai speaks of here.

And it's when you allow all he has done for you to transform your heart by his Spirit, that you will want him at the centre of your life, influencing every part of your life, just as these Jewish builders now wanted God, through the temple, at the centre of their city. And as you understand what he has done for you, that he gave himself for you, then you will give yourself for him, and you'll live and serve and invest your life in what really counts in life, the building up his Church and the extension of his unshakeable kingdom, rather than just living for your own comfort, as they had done. And you'll do it all for his eternal glory.