

Curses Turned Into Blessings

Tell God He Can Wait!

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Bible Text: Haggai 2:10-19

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Heavenly Father, as we turn now to the Scriptures men wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, we ask that you would pour forth your Spirit, grant us insight, illumination, understanding, but help us especially not just to be hearers but to be doers of your word. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now turn with me once again to the book of Haggai. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, the third from the end of the Old Testament, this short two chapter prophesy, all of which took place in the space of four months in the year 520 BC. And we pick it up this morning in chapter 2 and verse 10.

10 On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, 11 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Ask the priests about the law: 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?'" The priests answered and said, "No." 13 Then Haggai said, "If someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?" The priests answered and said, "It does become unclean." 14 Then Haggai answered and said, "So is it 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. 15 Now then, consider from this day onward. Before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the LORD, 16 how did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten. When one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. 17 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, declares the LORD. 18 Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid, consider: 19 Is the seed yet in the barn? Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But from this day on I will bless you."

So far God's holy and inerrant word.

In the middle of the 19th century, there was a professor of Semitic studies, Hebrew and Aramaic and so on, by the name of John Duncan and he was often referred to endearingly as Rabbi Duncan because of his vast knowledge and understanding of the Old Testament, but in a certain assignment that he gave to his class, he assigned a portion of reading from the Puritan John Owen on the mortification of sin, and as he gave them this assignment, he added the words "prepare for the knife." Prepare for the knife because John Owen has or had and continues to have in print this amazing facility of carving us up, as it were, of dissecting us and looking for that sin that lies within.

Well, that's in part what Haggai is doing in this particular section. We are now in what we would call in our calendar the week before Christmas. It would be December 18. You remember that Haggai begins in August and then there's another reference to a date in September, and then there's another reference to a date in October, and the entire ministry of Haggai spans, at least the recorded ministry of Haggai, spans just a period of four months. That's not to say that Haggai didn't preach before this, and that's not to say that Haggai didn't continue to preach until the day of his death, but for a reason that is obvious here in this passage, God raised him up for an extraordinary period of blessing and revival and renewal, and to instigate the rebuilding of the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians some 50, 60, 70 years previously. And you'll recall that the people of God had returned from Babylon in 537, and so 17 years have passed by. We read that they had built houses for themselves and nice houses with paneled walls and so on, but the temple still remained in ruins, and that rebuilding work has now begun. It's hardly feasible that much had been done in the course of just four months, and it would be another four years, at least, before this second temple would finally be constructed.

You remember in the first sermon, he exposed the spiritual laxity of the people of God, and then in the second sermon, he encouraged them to, when they looked at what they had done, you know, barely a month had gone by and it was very little, all they would have been able to do is clear away some of the rubble. Still an enormous feat ahead of them to do, and the second sermon is a sermon of some encouragement. The third sermon is even greater in its encouragement which was the one we were looking at just a couple of weeks ago where Haggai looks into the future and sees the blessing of God and the coming of the kingdom and glimpses the coming of Messiah and the dawn of the new covenant age and possibly beyond that to something of what we would call the new heavens and new earth and the fulfillment of God's purposes and plans.

But here notice in verse 15 and again in verse 18, and we've seen this before, he uses this term "consider, consider from this day forward," and if we were to translate that in some literal fashion, Haggai is saying, "Set your heart on one thing. Set your heart on one thing." It's reminiscent of one of Solomon's proverbs, "Guard your heart because out of it are the issues of life." It's reminiscent of something Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And he engages now in something of an analysis of the people of God. Where are you in relationship to your zeal

and your commitment to the things of God, and he asks them three questions, three searching questions. It's reminiscent, I think, of what we might call a nuclear test when you go to your cardiologist and you perhaps have been experiencing some chest pain, and the cardiologist recommends a nuclear test to examine the flow of blood through those arteries and whether several decades of eating bacon and sausage has done a number on your arteries. And that's something of what Haggai is doing here, he's checking their spiritual temperature, if you like, and he's going to go deep, and this is not so much an encouraging sermon, although the latter words of verse 19 are certainly encouraging, but it begins, I think, with a scalpel and he's going to ask where are you in terms of your commitment? Where are you in terms of your resolve? Where are you in terms of your zeal for the things of God? Are you living for that one thing? Do you have what Paul says, "This one thing I do, forgetting those things that are behind and reaching forward to those things that are in front of me. I press on towards the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

William Borden in 1904, William Borden of the dairy industry, the milk and ice cream and so on, that entire industry, he was, of course, a millionaire and he when he was 18, when he graduated from school before he went to Yale, his parents sent him on a world tour. They wanted him, I think they felt that he had been raised with some kind of privilege and shelter and so on and they wanted to have his eyes opened to the rest of the world, and he traveled across the world and was greatly impressed spiritually by the needs especially in the Far East and in China. And he went to Yale University as a consequence after the first year or so, he told his parents that he had decided that he would commit the rest of his life to being a missionary, to pressing forward for that one thing, and after he graduated from Yale, he went to Princeton Seminary and then made his way towards China, but found himself in Egypt for a season and ministering to the Egyptians about the Lord Jesus and contracted cerebral meningitis and died, and he would have been 24-25 years of age. He had given up the treasures of this world but he gained treasures in heaven and contrast that with King Tut whose wealth, you remember he died when he was 17 and was buried in his tomb with all the gold and treasures of Egypt, and they were discovered by Howard Carter in 1922, roughly speaking the same period as William Borden. King Tut had all the treasures of this world but none of the treasures of the world to come, and Haggai, I think, is saying consider where your treasure is. Consider where your heart is this morning.

So the first diagnostic question that he asks and he asks it in language, of course, that would be 520 BC and the temple and the Levitical ceremonial language, and he envisages a priest carrying something that is holy in his garments for use in the temple, and if that garment then were to touch something else, it would touch some bread or some oil or something, does the fact that it had carried something that was holy, something that had been consecrated and set apart for temple use, does the mere fact that the garment had touched something that was holy make anything else holy that it touches, and of course, the answer was no. It was the correct answer. So what is he saying? And he's talking about formality. Are you setting your hearts on what is truly important or are you content with mere formality?

Let me put it in 2020 language. Does the fact that you sit next to somebody who is holy, the fact that the person in front of you is a godly person, and you know this person to be a godly person, does that make you holy? Does the fact that you sing wonderful hymns together in church, does that make you holy? Does the fact that you have a copy of the Bible and that you read it and that you read it methodically, does that make you holy? Does the fact that you attend a young professional's Bible study and you attend with some measure of continuity, but does that make you holy? Does the mere outward fact that you are in contact with that which is holy make you holy? And the answer is no. The answer is no because what Haggai is addressing, what God is saying, and notice once again, Haggai is the one who speaks but what comes out of Haggai's mouth is, "Thus says the LORD of hosts." When he spoke, God spoke. When he uttered, God uttered. His words were God's words. He was a prophet. And so this is God addressing the issue of formality, formal religion; that you can be a member of an evangelical church, you can be a member of a Reformed church, you can belong to a certain Bible study, but that says absolutely nothing about your own heart. It merely says something about the externals. It merely says something about that which is on the outside.

J. C. Ryle, that wonderful bishop of Liverpool in the 19th century. A biography, a couple of biographies of Ryle have emerged within the last few years and one by Ian Murray that I enjoyed reading very much, and when I first became a Christian in the early 1970s, one of the first books that was given to me by my, well, she wasn't my wife then but by Rosemary, was J. C. Ryle's "Holiness." Classic book. It's a wonderful book in the Top Ten of books that I would love to recommend to any Christian to read. It begins with a chapter on sin. Now, no publisher today would allow you to begin a chapter with sin. If you're going to take about sin, you need to put it halfway through or preferably towards the end of the book. But J. C. Ryle came out with all guns blazing and the very first few sentences are like, I'm mixing my metaphors but they're like scalpels tearing your flesh apart so that you can examine your heart. And he has a sermon and it's based on 2 Timothy 3:5 where Paul says, "having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof." Having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof. Paul is addressing Timothy. This is Paul's swansong. He's about to be executed and he's handing over the reins to young Timothy and he's giving him a lesson about church life, and he's reminding Timothy that not everybody who associates with the church, not everybody who gathers with God's people is a genuine child of God. They may have the outward form of godliness, they may have the outward patterns and behavior patterns of godliness, but they have no power. They don't have the residing Holy Spirit. He's reminding them and warning Timothy about formality, the form of religion but denying its power.

J. C. Ryle says in this sermon of his, "When the heart is wrong, all is wrong." And so the question that Haggai is asking the people of God in December of 520 BC is, "Where is your heart? Where is your treasure? What is that one thing that drives you? What is that thing that motivates you and challenges you as you wake up in the morning and as you go to bed at night? Do you have the real thing or is it a fake?" I purchased some earbuds thinking I didn't need to spend, what was it, \$200 on an Apple product when these were being advertised for maybe \$25, and I thought, "I'll go for the \$25 thing." They worked

for maybe a week and they were fake, they were trash, they weren't the real thing. It pretended on the outside, the packaging looked okay, and even the look of it was okay, but when you examined it a little closer, you could tell it was cheap and nasty and it was fake and it didn't work. It had the form of godliness but it had no power. I threw it in the trash. It would have cost me more to fix it than to buy another set.

Thomas Brooks, a Puritan, speaking on formality and he says it's more light than life. It's knowing more than you can trust. It's more notion than motion. It's more head than heart. It's more outside than inside. It's more leaves than fruit. It's more shadow than substance. Well, that's the question: are you Bunyan in "Pilgrim's Progress" as a character called Formality, he comes along at the same time as Hypocrisy, are you Mr. or Miss Formality, you have the outward form but do you have the real thing? Do you have the real thing that energizes and equips and motivates and challenges and enables you to say, "This one thing I do, turning my back on those things which are behind and reaching forth to those things that lie ahead. I strain, I use all my energy for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Well, that's the first diagnostic question. Do you simply have the outward form but none of the inward reality? Well, a second question and this is the opposite of the first question. The first question was if something holy comes into contact with something that is unholy, does it make it holy? And the answer was no. And again taken from the ritual and patterns of Levitical ceremonial language, the opposite now. Does something that is holy, if it comes into contact with something that is unholy, and the example is a priest, say, who comes into contact with a dead body, a dead body of a human being or the dead body of an animal, and does the fact that it comes into contact with a dead body, does that make it unholy? And the answer is yes. And you'll remember from Leviticus that there were all kinds of rituals that you would have to go through if you came into contact with a leper, or somebody with a skin disease. There were all kinds of things that you would have to do in order to bring yourself back into a state of holiness before God. So the question is one of, it's the opposite of the first question.

So let's put that in 2020 language. You're holy, that is to say, you're a Christian. You've been set apart in Christ. You're indwelt by the Holy Spirit. You're a child of God. You're an heir of God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ. Your identity is that you are a Christian. Your sins are forgiven. You're at peace with God. You have the assurance of the Holy Spirit and you come to church and you sing, and you pray, and you listen to the sermon, and then you go home and suddenly indulge in something that is entirely contrary to the law of God. Does that make you unholy? He's not asking the question does that make you an apostate. That's not the question, but does it make you unholy? And the answer is yes. He's identifying here Christian believers, Old Testament believers in this case, who are spiritually indifferent. There's no zeal. There's no concern for holiness, no concern to grow in holiness, no yearning, longing to be sanctified. They're easily satisfied and they're easily driven aside. And there's something of a level of hypocrisy if the first question raised to the surface the issue of formality. This one raises to the surface the issue of hypocrisy, that you can be a Christian and that you can mix with other believers, and that you can spend time in worship but deep down there's no real zeal, and no real

sense and conviction of sin. It's why we have in our liturgy, in Reformed liturgy we have a confession of sin and in recent years I've been writing my own confessions of sin based on passages of the Bible. Yes, as soon as we go out into the world, we, as it were, become unholy. We sin. We fall short of the glory of God and we need to confess our sins and we need to come back and experience that ongoing washing. That's part of what Jesus was teaching in the Upper Room.

So the first question is dealing with the issue of formality, this one is dealing with the issue of hypocrisy. Then there's a third question and you see it there in verse 15. Are you yearning for the blessing of God, or are you actually experiencing blighting, God's blighting? Now this is about a period, verses 15 through 19 is talking about a period before Haggai has begun his ministry. There are hints of it, you remember, in chapter 1 and verse 6, "You have sown much," this is on the first day that Haggai begins to preach, "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." He's describing the life of these people before the blessing of God came down upon them. They were living for themselves and they had high expectations, high expectations in terms of material things and crops and so on, and God sent a blighting. Their barns were not full. The wages that they earned just didn't measure up, it didn't meet all of their needs, and they were living constantly in a state of dissatisfaction. "I ain't got no satisfaction," Mick Jagger's song. That was their condition. They had plenty, they had wonderful houses, they had paneled walls and so on, there's a hint that they might have used some of the wood that was meant for the second temple to construct their own houses and so on. Outwardly if you'd have looked at them, they looked prosperous. They came back from Babylon, many of them, and prospered. But they were never satisfied. They could never fulfill their satisfaction. They could never fulfill their longings and that fulfillment can only come as you walk with the Lord, as you experience the ministry and assurance of the Holy Spirit. They were satisfied with too little. That was the problem. They were satisfied merely with things and so God took the things away a little. He made them dissatisfied.

I wonder, I've been doing a lot of wondering as probably every minister not just in this country but in the world, we are thinking about what will the church look like when we come back in full, when this business is gone away and may it soon go away back to where it came from, and we're wondering will everybody be back? Is this a sifting season, like separating the wheat from the chaff, separating those whose religion was only formal, it was merely outward but not inward? There was no zeal. There was no one thing. They were conforming to society's rules and regulations. They were conforming to parental expectations and grandparental expectations, societal expectations in South Carolina, but perhaps a season, what if they haven't been in church for a year? What then? What if this season of blighting, that's what it is, isn't it, it's a season of blighting, will it create in them a longing that can only be fulfilled and that can only be satisfied in communion with the living God? May it be so. May that be our prayer, that this season in which so many of our members are confined to their homes and not able to do all the things that they want to do, and visit all the places that they want to visit, may it create in them a longing and a thirsting after God.

I think that's what Haggai is suggesting here, and if you do that, if you walk with the Lord in commitment, in sincerity, you make the things of God the one thing that motivates and drives you, you notice in verse 19, "Is the seed yet in the barn? Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But," those wonderful words that scatter the Scriptures, "but from this day on I will bless you." Oh, may that be true for us here at First Presbyterian Church, that from this day onwards the blessing of Almighty God would fall down upon us, upon as we work and labor for the Lord, that we would experience that wonderful accompaniment of the blessing of Almighty God, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. May it be so.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for your word, thank you for these sermons that Haggai preached 2 ½ thousand years ago, but they're so very relevant to the day in which we live. Pour out your Spirit now upon us. Make us as a church, a people that are committed to you in every conceivable way. We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.