Haggai - Commentaries by Hamilton Smith

Haggai, Haggai 2:20-23: The Fifth Message

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(Chapter 2:20-23).

(Vss. 20-22). The last message is addressed to Zerubbabel, and, therefore, while a word of the greatest encouragement to the remnant, it has specially in view the one that was instrumental in leading the people to obey the word of the Lord.

The people of God in that day were surrounded by heathen powers to whom the government of the world had been committed. They ruthlessly used their power in that day, as in this, to crush all who thwarted their will. In the face of all this power of evil the remnant had only to obey the word of the Lord, and in simple faith occupy themselves with the work of the Lord. It was no part of their business to oppose the world, or overthrow its power, or seek to right its wrongs. They are instructed that the Lord, in His own time will deal with all the evil of the world. His word is, "I will shake the heavens and the earth"; "I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the heathen," and "I will overthrow the chariots."

In our day it is not for the people of God to attempt to put the world right. This is the Lord's work, for He is coming "with ten thousands of His saints," to execute judgment upon all that are ungodly. Our part is, in simple obedience to the Word, to "earnestly contend for the faith," "building up" ourselves in our most holy faith, "praying" in the Holy Ghost, keeping ourselves in the love of God, and "looking" for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (Jude 14-15, 20-21).

(Vs. 23). Obeying the word of God, continuing the work of the Lord, and leaving the judgment of the world to be dealt with by the power of the Lord, Zerubbabel would not only find present blessing, but also inherit future reward. In the day of the coming glory he would have a place of signal honor as the chosen of the Lord.

Nor is it otherwise in our day. To obey the word of the Lord, and do the work of the Lord, according to the mind of the Lord, in a day of weakness, and in the face of reproach and opposition, may appear "as nothing" to the great religious profession, but will carry its bright reward in the day of the coming glory. To the one that has but "a little strength" and yet keeps the Lord's word, and does not deny His Name, the Lord can say, "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from My God: and I will write upon him My new name" (Rev. 3:12).

Haggai, Haggai 2:10-19: The Fourth Message

(Chapter 2:10-19).

The fourth message conveys a deeply important truth that we do well to lay to heart. It clearly shows that the root of all failure with the remnant of that day, as with the people of God in this day, can be traced to a low moral condition. In other words we are warned that outward activity in the service of the Lord will not prosper unless accompanied with a right moral condition.

Further we learn that this moral condition can only be maintained by separation from that which we know to be contrary to the Word. In that day the remnant could only rightly take up the work of the Lord as they kept apart from that which was unclean according to the law. Today, in the midst of the corruptions of Christendom the believer that calls upon the Name of the Lord is to withdraw from iniquity, and purge himself from every vessel to dishonor if he is to be "meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work."

(Vss. 11-13). The question that the Lord addresses to the priests brings into prominence two important truths that should govern the practice of those who desire to answer to His mind in a day of ruin. On the one hand, we learn that that which is holy cannot cleanse by association; on the other hand, that which is unclean can defile by association. It follows that the common notion that we can cleanse the world by association with it, or help the people of God by association with the corrupt systems in which they may be found, is a fallacy, and worse, for to act thus, is not only no help to others, but we ourselves become defiled—for that which is unclean defiles by association.

(Vss. 14-17). Alas! the remnant of Haggai had been acting on this false principle with the result that the work of their hands was, in the sight of the Lord, unclean. In consequence the Lord had dealt with them in governmental discipline and smitten them "with blasting and with mildew."

(Vss. 18-19). Nevertheless, we are permitted to see, that, however great the failure of God's people, if they repent and act in obedience to the word, they will be blessed. Thus, directly the remnant take up the work of the house, the Lord can say, "from this day I will bless you."

Has this solemn warning, and yet deep encouragement, no voice for the Lord's people today? On the one hand are we not warned that any departure in practice from the light that God has given us as to the principles of His house will bring upon us the discipline of God; while, on the other hand, if in obedience to the Word we act in the light of the truth we shall at once be blessed?

Haggai, Haggai 2:1-9: The Third Message

(Chapter 2:1-9).

The remnant has been stirred up to "work in the house of the Lord." There is, however, in a day of ruin, the ever present danger of being discouraged in the Lord's work, because of the smallness of apparent results, and the little outward display. To meet this danger, and to encourage the remnant to continue in the work of the house of the Lord, a third message is sent by the prophet. In this message the remnant are asked to look back to the glory of the house in the past (vss. 1-3); they are reminded of their resources in the present (vss. 4-5); and they are encouraged to look on to the coming glory in the future (vss. 6-9).

(Vss. 1-3). First, then, this remnant was faced with the ever present danger of being discouraged by their outward weakness, and thus of despising the day of small things. The prophet does not seek to minimize their weakness: on the contrary, he would have the remnant to face it by looking back and comparing the past glory of the house with their own work. Solomon, in his day, had built the house in circumstances of power and wealth, and unhampered by opposition; and some in their midst could recall the glory of that house. Now a remnant are called to build the house in circumstances of poverty and weakness, beset by opposition, and in the presence of reproach. The work of this feeble remnant may appear "as nothing" in comparison with the former glory of the house. None the less they were doing the Lord's work according to the Lord's mind in a day of ruin. This being so it is a work in which the Lord can take pleasure, and be glorified (ch. 1:8).

So in this our day; to maintain the great principles of the house of God in a day of ruin, will make no display before the world, and in the eyes of many Christians will appear "as nothing." Seeing that the flesh loves to be important, and seeks display, such circumstances of outward weakness become a great test for our faith. One has said, "How hard it is to receive that the work of God and His Christ is always in weakness! The rulers of the people saw in Peter and John unlearned and ignorant men. Paul's weakness at Corinth was the trial of his friends, the taunt of his enemies, the boast of himself. The Lord's strength is made perfect in weakness....Everything must rest on God's power, otherwise God's work cannot be done according to His mind."

(Vss. 4-5). Thus, in spite of all their outward weakness, the remnant are encouraged to be strong in the Lord's work. To this end, they are further reminded of their present resources.

First, they are reminded again of the Lord's presence: "I am with you saith the Lord of hosts." In a day of weakness they are encouraged to be strong; nevertheless, let them always remember that the source of their strength is the presence of the Lord. So in our day, in the presence of opposition we are exhorted to "be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might" (Eph. 6:10).

Secondly, "the word" of the Lord remained in all its force as much as in the days of old when they came out of Egypt. For ourselves, are we not specially reminded that, in a day of ruin, we have the inspired Scriptures for our guidance? so that however great the failure of the Christian profession "the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Thirdly, for their encouragement, the Lord says, "My Spirit remaineth among you." In the days of old there was a mighty display of the power of God, when "He rebuked the Red Sea, and it was dried up; and He led them through the depths, as through the wilderness." In their present circumstances there was nothing that answered to this miraculous display of power. They had indeed been delivered from Babylon, but no cloud by day, or pillar of fire by night, had marked their way; no rock was smitten to quench their thirst; no manna was given to meet their hunger. All outward tokens of power were gone, but, in the mercy of God, the Spirit remained with the same power, though now displayed, not in outward show, but, in spiritual power that enabled faith to rise above every adversary and care for the glory of the Lord.

Nor is it otherwise in our day. Of the Spirit, the Lord can say, He will "abide with you forever" (John 14:16). No longer is His power displayed in an outward way by miracles, and tongues, as in the day of Pentecost; but He is still present to guide us into all truth, to show us things to come, and take of the things of Christ and show them unto us. Thus, like the remnant of old, if we seek to maintain the principles of the house of God, we shall find we have the presence of the Lord with us, the Word of God to guide us, and the Spirit of God to unfold that word and lead our hearts to Christ. Thus, whatever the difficulties of the day, we may take heart as we hear the Lord say to us, as to the remnant of old, "Fear ye not" (vs. 5).

(Vss. 6-9). Having recalled the glory of the house in the past, and reminded the remnant of their resources in the present, the word of the Lord by the prophet gives them further encouragement by directing their thoughts to the future coming of Christ, and the power and glory of His appearing. At the moment, the work in connection with the house of God looked "as nothing" compared with its past glory. But faith is encouraged to view their work in relation to the coming glory. Christ—the desire of all nations—is coming, and, in that day, all the great works of men, that today look so imposing, will be shaken. The setting up of Christ's kingdom will be introduced by the judgment, and setting aside, of the kingdoms of men. Then the house of God will be filled with the glory of God, and the latter glory will be greater than the former.

In the day of the remnant the world empires looked very imposing, and the work of the remnant in connection with the house of God appeared to be very insignificant; but whatever the outward appearance might be, as to fact, the remnant were engaged with a work which will last, and be displayed with all the glory of the Lord when the mightiest kingdoms of the earth have crumbled to dust and passed away. In that day of glory it will be seen that this feeble remnant, in the day of their greatest weakness, were in reality connected with the mighty purposes of God so soon to be displayed in glory.

For our comfort, and encouragement, the Apostle Paul uses this prophecy to sustain God's people in the path of faith, in this our day. He reminds us that the seen things, that are so imposing in the world today, are things that can be shaken, and therefore will be removed. But God's people are connected with a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Therefore, he says, "Let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:25-29). If we are working, and serving God, in the line of His purpose, however feeble our work may appear to be, it will last when all the earth shall be moved away.

To walk in the light of the truth of the house of God, and thus walk worthy of our calling, will make no great show before the world, and, in this day of ruin, may entail the contempt and reproach of many of God's people who prefer the ease and display of man's religious systems, but, in the day of the coming glory it will be seen that such were in the line of God's purpose, and, though they had but little strength, yet, in the day of glory they will have an honored place as pillars in the temple of God (Rev. 3:12).

Haggai, Haggai 1:12-25: The Second Message

(Chapter 1:12-15).

On the Twenty-fourth day of the same month the Lord sends a second message by Haggai, who is honored by being called "the Lord's messenger." How good to realize that though the returned remnant had so grievously failed to carry out the purpose for which they had been delivered from Babylon, yet the Lord does not give them up. He still has His Messenger to deliver His message to the people.

So, too, in our day of weakness and ruin, when evil men and seducers wax worse and worse, we read of "the man of God," and that such an one is to "preach the word; be [urgent] in season, out of season; [convict], rebuke, [encourage] with all long-suffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 3:17; 4:2).

The Lord's messenger has appealed to the people with a word of rebuke. Happily the people "Obeyed the voice of the Lord their God," and "did fear before the Lord." At once Haggai is sent with this second message of encouragement. Having obeyed the Lord, they can count on the presence of the Lord; "I am with you, saith the Lord." How much blessing is involved in this short message! As one has said, "I am with you is the saving principle for faith in the weakest possible day…and what had they better in the brightest day?"

The remnant that returned from Babylon in that day, even as those who have been delivered from the bondage of human systems in this day, may find themselves in circumstances of great weakness, opposed by many adversaries, and in reproach; but, if the Lord is with them their blessing is certain; the needed succor in all their weakness will be forthcoming; and all needed protection from their enemies assured. So in the parable in John 10, we have a beautiful picture of a flock of sheep wholly dependent upon the Shepherd. Left to themselves sheep are stupid, feckless things, prone to wander and easily frightened, but with the Shepherd going before all is well.

Good it is then for us, like the remnant of old, to obey the word of the Lord, "fear before the Lord," and go forth without the camp "unto Him." Thus acting in simple faith we shall find in every difficulty that arises, in every opposition that we may meet, in any reproach we may have to endure, that we have the Lord present, with all wisdom to direct, all love to comfort, and all power to sustain. Obeying the word of the Lord, and walking in His fear, we can count upon His presence, and ever fall back on His words, "I am with you saith the Lord."

Moreover, if the Lord is with us we shall find, as the remnant of old found, that He will stir up our spirits to "work in the house of the Lord."

Haggai, Haggai 1:1-11: The First Message

(Chapter 1:1-11).

The first word of the Lord opens with an appeal to the conscience (vss. 2-4); followed by an exhortation (vss. 5-6), and closes with a word of encouragement and warning (vss. 7-11).

(Vss. 2-4). The history of these times, as presented in the book of Ezra, presents the adversaries as stopping the building of the house, but is silent as to the condition of the people. The prophet Haggai makes no allusion to the adversaries, but at once lays bare the low moral condition of the remnant. History has to do with events; prophecy with the moral condition that lies behind the actions of the people of God.

Judging simply by the history, we might conclude that the building of the house was stopped by what the adversaries said. From the word of the Lord, by the prophet, we learn that the true reason is found in what the people said. Thus the message opens with the words, "This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." For twelve years they had ceased to do the one thing for which they had been delivered from Babylon. They seek to excuse their failure by saying. "The time is not come" to build the Lord's house.

Alas! how often the same excuse may be made today. We may be tempted to say, All have failed, and the church is in ruins, and because the time is not yet come to put all things right by the coming of Christ, we must lightly pass over the moral confusion that marks Christendom, and shut our eyes to the irregularities, and departure from the Scriptural order of God's house.

If, however, we speak thus, the Lord appeals to us, as to His people of old, with the conscience reaching question, "Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste?" Thus we learn, that whatever excuses may be made as to the time being inopportune, the true reason for indifference to the carrying out the principles of God's house is found in occupation with our own things. Even in the Apostle's day we read of believers that, "All seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's" (Phil. 2:21). One has said, "It is an inevitable alternative that we must be occupied either with the Lord's things, or with our own."

Some may seek their own by settling down to "mind earthly things." But apart from the snare of worldliness and earthly mindedness, we may mind our own things in the sense of simply confining our thoughts and activities to the individual blessing of souls, and entirely neglecting the great truths concerning Christ and the church, and thus cease to walk according to the principles of God's house. This was a great danger even in the day of the Apostle Paul, for he could write of the "great conflict" he had that believers might enter into the mystery of God. In our day, when the truth of the church has been recovered, the constant danger is once again to give up these truths and settle down into evangelism without the mystery. It is possible to engage in much evangelical activity which may exalt ourselves in the religious world, and entail little or no reproach; but, to maintain the truths of the church, and to act in the light of the truth, will at once involve reproach and conflict. From such conflict, our natural love of ease will shrink, with the result that, where there is a lack of faith, we are in danger of becoming [solely] a gospel mission, and letting go all the truths that have been so graciously recovered.

(Vss. 5-6). This solemn appeal to the conscience is followed by the exhortation, "Consider your ways." The remnant are asked, as we are asked, to consider what is the result of occupation with our own things, and our individual soul blessing, while neglecting the deeper interests of the Lord, and the things that concern His glory.

The result then, as now, is expressed in the words, "Ye have sown much, and bring in little"—great activity but little return. Moreover, this neglect of the house of God leads to spiritual starvation, for, says the prophet, "Ye eat but ye have not enough." Again, it brings no spiritual satisfaction, for, "Ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink"; it leaves the spiritual affections cold, "Ye clothe you, but there is none warm"; and it carries no reward, "He that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes." Such then was the sad condition, not of the people of God who were still in Babylon, but of the highly privileged remnant who, in the mercy of God had been delivered from Babylon—a condition which is wholly the result of having so largely given up the purpose for which they had been brought back to the land. Has this no voice for the people of God, in our day, who seek to answer to the mind of God?

(Vss. 7-9). For the second time the Lord exhorts the remnant to consider their ways. The first time it was in the way of reproof, now it is to encourage them to resume the work of the house of God. We know that then, as now, it was a day of small things. As we shall see, the house they built was "as nothing" compared with the former glory of the house. Nevertheless, the Lord says to this feeble remnant, "Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified saith the Lord."

As with the remnant of old, so with ourselves, the low spiritual condition that we so often have to mourn, is the outcome of doing our own pleasure and seeking our own glory. Self-will and self-importance lie at the root of our failure. Nevertheless, is it not the deepest joy and encouragement to know that, in a day of weakness, and in spite of all our failure, it is still possible to judge our ways and do that in which God can take pleasure and, through which, God can be glorified?

Further we are again assured that the "pleasure" and "glory" of God are connected with His house, marked by holiness, prayer, worship, and testimony to the grace and goodness of God. There may be with us much zeal, and activity, as with the remnant of old who "looked for much," but "it came to little," because the house of God was neglected.

(Vss. 10-11). Neglecting the great purpose of God for which they had been delivered from captivity, they brought upon themselves the chastening of the Lord.

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