

George Philip Bible Readings

The Book of Haggai

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The twelve books of the Old Testament from Hosea to Malachi are referred to as the Minor Prophets, not because they were of lesser significance than the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel) but simply because they are smaller in size. Of the twelve Minor Prophets nine ministered before the Jews went into exile in Babylon in the year BC 586 and the remaining three, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, spoke their messages after the Jews had returned to Jerusalem. The Jews went into exile in various phases from BC 605, when Daniel and his group were led away up until the year 586. The return from captivity took place in three stages: under Zerubbabel in BC 538; under Ezra in BC 458; and under Nehemiah in BC 446. The reference to Zerubbabel in this first verse tells us that Haggai's ministry was during this early phase of the renewed work in Jerusalem. If we take together 1:1; 2:1; 2:10 and 2:20 we see that Haggai spoke four significant messages to the returned exiles in the space of some fifteen weeks during the second year of King Darius, which was the year BC 520. The prophet may well have been an old man who had spent most of his life in exile in Babylon. After this brief recorded ministry he disappeared from the scene and the ministry of God's Word was taken up by Zechariah, whose preaching had now begun (Zech. 1:1). We know very little about Haggai's personal story and the fact that his person does not intrude on his ministry may signify something of his spiritual stature. His business was to direct the people of God to the Word of God and to cause them to give new diligence to the work of God. Personalities can be a distraction and a hindrance and we all need to make sure constantly that our activities are both sanctioned by God and truly in the service of God. When self intrudes, as shadow is cast on, and a hindrance is introduced into the work of God.

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The references to Haggai in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14, as simply 'the prophet' may indicate that he was well known and needed no further identification and they may also suggest that he and Zechariah were two of a very small number of prophets at that time. If we consider the dates given in the previous note regarding the return under Zerubbabel and the second year of Darius, we see that sixteen years of the new stage of God's work had passed before Haggai began his ministry. In his preaching he makes it plain that by that time, for a variety of reasons, the work had lapsed and indeed had ground to a halt. On the one hand the people had become disheartened by the sheer dimension of the task of rebuilding the Temple, and on the other hand they had become complacent. Their energy in building their own houses contrasted with their lack of energy in building God's House. They had to re-organise their priorities, and Haggai told them this in no uncertain terms (1:4). It is unlikely that Haggai was a 'popular' minister! But his ministry was not lacking in gracious encouragement as 2:4-5, 9 makes plain. Before considering his ministry in detail we must remind ourselves of how this 'new' stage of God's work began. It had its beginning in the sovereign act of God when, after the long years of captivity, the Lord turned the captivity of His people (Ps. 126:1-3). In the providence of God, to whom alone power belongs (Ps. 62:11AV,) and who alone raises up and casts down empires (Dan. 4:17,25), Cyrus, emperor of Persia, decreed at the beginning of his reign that exiled peoples could return to their home lands, and some forty or fifty thousand Jews returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-11: 2:64).

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We continue to set the background of this prophecy because Haggai must have been aware of how the Lord Himself had laid His hand on an unbelieving emperor to cause this tremendous change in the circumstances and opportunities of God's people. Isaiah, long before this, had seen the hand of the Lord on the rising power of Persia (Isa. 45:1-6) and now that developed empire was serving God's specific purpose. This is something to keep in mind when we survey our own contemporary historical situation. Never forget that God the Lord causes His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (Rev, 17:17). Six years after his edict, which opened the doors for the Jews, Cyrus died, and under his successor there was a change in foreign policy regarding vassal states. The returned exiles were not totally free nations and there was less provision made for them, less overseas aid, less patronage and less protection. In Ezra 4:1-24 we read of how the Samaritans, who dwelt in the land during the exile of the Jews, organised their opposition and succeeded in getting the work of building stopped for some

fifteen or sixteen years. It was at that point that Haggai began his ministry (Ezra 5:1-4). The opposition was continued but eventually overcome, not least by reference back to the 'minute books' of the original edict by Cyrus. This was the setting and atmosphere of Haggai's ministry. The early surge of enthusiasm had been quenched by circumstances. Perhaps the people of God had expected an easy victory. Perhaps the younger generation had no taste for the on-going slog of building foundations and walls for a long term work. Whatever interpretation we put on the situation the fact is that the work of God had got stuck. That is usually a sign that the people of God have got stuck, and we do well to consider our own spiritual condition in the sight of God.

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The word of the Lord came first to the leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua, and this may indicate that they had been affected and influenced by the lassitude and unwillingness of the people. This may be a word to people who are unduly critical of their minister. The fault may lie with the congregation who have crushed the minister, if not by criticism then by sheer lack of support and encouragement. Zerubbabel (a Babylonian name) who was of the royal line of David (Matt. 1:12) had been a captive in Babylon, but was obviously considered to be loyal to Darius and was made governor of Judah or at least part of it. The Jews therefore had one of their own as civil leader and Joshua, of the house of Zadok, was there as the priestly leader. Into that situation came the prophet speaking in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the mighty God whose powers are never limited. Note how the prophet, speaking in God's name, referred to 'These people' and not 'My people', almost as if God was reminding them that although they were called by God's name they were not living and working as if they were truly God's people. There is rebuke in the message. There was manifestly a huge task to be done but there was not the willingness to do it. Their plea was that the time was not yet ripe and that circumstances were not yet appropriate. No doubt to their own consciences they had said that they had every intention of getting down to it soon. That is an escape. How often do we say with regard to our personal devotions, our financial stewardship, and our taking our rightful share in the on-going work of our own congregation to which we owe our loyalty and service, 'I really must get myself organised.' It is time to do just that, says Haggai, and we need to be careful lest the opportunity is lost. We would then have regrets for a long time.

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It seems that in answer to the prophet's word in v.2 the people pointed out that there was a real problem of supply: wood was scarce, and until the 'market' or the 'economy' improved it was not opportune time to set in motion a renovation scheme for the House of God. The prophet replied, in the name of the Lord, that it seemed the people considered the time opportune for re-furbishing their own houses with wood while the Lord's House lay derelict. Now, God is not against His people having homes to stay in and having a real degree of comfort. It is a matter of priorities. If we give our time, energy and resources to establishing our own 'house' - our home, career, friends and hobbies, and then fit in our commitment to the Lord and to His work, there is something far wrong. That is the prophet's challenge. This was a people who had forgotten for what purpose they had been called, saved and delivered. Granted at first after their return from captivity they had been enthusiastic.

Indeed, they may have been critical of those Jews who had elected to stay in Babylon. But when circumstances made spiritual commitment and service difficult and at times dangerous they lost sight of their calling and turned in on themselves. The sad thing is that they seemed to be unaware of what they were doing. It is not an old story. Think of how easy it is to feel quite justified in staying away from Christian duties, be it Prayer Meetings, Services or Office-bearers' Meetings on the grounds of normal family routine, or because visitors come, or because of an invitation to a party. Jesus spoke about those who began to make excuses (Lk. 14:18-20). Should we not sometimes say to people, 'I cannot come. I have a church commitment'? What a witness that would be! It would certainly be an example that could well point others to Christ. Set your priorities. God comes first (Matt. 6:33) before family. There is an element of sacrifice in true Christian service.

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God now calls His people to consider their way of life and their circumstances in the light of what is being said. They had put a lot of effort into life but they were not getting 'out of the bit.' There was little real satisfaction on a

personal level and in their communal life it was little better. Harvests were poor and that meant a stagnant economy. Rising prices and rampant inflation meant money had no value. They were in a bad way indeed, but so far, just like our own generation, they had not got round to recognising that a nation's predicament can have, and usually does have, moral and spiritual causes. This is an important principle to keep in mind as we consider the life of the church and the nation in our day. A great deal of effort is being expended in terms of 'in depth reviews' and 'well structured plans' for recovery. But no amount of reorganisation will bring improvement unless the underlying sickness is treated. And it cannot be treated until it is recognised. On a government level there seems no recognition of moral rottenness, and on an ecclesiastical level no recognition of the spiritual falling away from God. On both levels, where there is no vision of God in His grace, goodness and gospel salvation, no vision of moral and spiritual judgment, and no vision of the need for a high and holy respect for law and order and for the institution of marriage, then the people cast off restraint and perish (Prov.29:18AV). When a nation sits lightly to God it can only get worse. How we need to pray for the nation and for the church within it!

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God left the people in no doubt that they were dealing with Him, or rather, that He was dealing with them. God is not an inactive God. He is not a mere spectator of the affairs of society. He acts, and in the disciplines of His providence He can frustrate even the most earnest and most competent of human effort. God told the people through the prophet (whose sermons will not have been popular) to consider how their expectations had been disappointed (9) and how even what little they had achieved proved temporary in the extreme. Their experiences were not to be explained as 'one of those things that happen' but in terms of God's activity. There was a direct link between their plight and their neglect of spiritual responsibility. The prophet even emphasised the simplicity of the methods of God the mighty Creator. He withholds the dew and the rain. Without the gift of God there is neither produce nor reproduction (10-11). The people should have been aware of this because they were a people taught by God. As long ago as the dedication of Solomon's Temple, and surely that was on their minds as they considered the rebuilding of the Temple, they had been taught the principles of life and blessing (2 Chron. 6:26-31; 7: 11-22). They had proved the reality of God's Word in the experience of the captivity. They had heard similar ministry from Amos (Amos 4:6-12). But it is all too easy to sit under authentic ministry and still not hear or learn. How important it is to listen in the right way (Lk. 8:18; Heb. 2:1; 4:2). Haggai is very plain. Get the house of your heart right, and get your dealings with the House of God right, and then there will be change.

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We have suggested that Haggai's preaching may not have been popular but we are shown here the power of the preached Word of God when attended by the gracious power of the Holy Spirit. There was a generally positive response from the leaders and the people, and if we compare v.15 with v.1 we see that in a matter of three weeks there was set in motion significant change in the attitude and activity of the people. It would have been all too easy for Zerubbabel and Joshua to have resented the prophet 'taking over' their authority and 'intruding' into their area of responsibility. Instead they had grace enough to recognise that God was speaking to them and leading them away from their mistakes. The people likewise responded with the obedience of faith and it may be that the age and long experience of the prophet had something to do with their response. This does not mean that old men are always right, but it does mean that there is an unction of gracious authority on the ministry of those who have dealt with God and who have proved faithful over many years. Note how astonishingly 'the voice of the Lord' and 'the words of Haggai' are spoken of as identical. Perhaps there is a real lesson to learn here in the matter of what we call listening to sermons. As we sit under the Word of God when it is being opened and declared there is in fact a divine encounter taking place. We need to listen well, not because the preacher is important, but because God is speaking to His people through His Word. Consider Isa. 55:10-11; Jer. 1:12; Acts 20:20,27,32; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 4:1-3. Pray for the preaching of the Word (Eph. 6:18-20; Col. 4:2-4; 2 Thess. 3:1).

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Two lessons remain to be learned from this passage. In the context of building the work of God for the future, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit are evidenced by response to the Word of God and a glad commitment to the work of God. If these two things are not manifest then whatever 'spirit' is motivating people, no matter how spiritual it may seem, it is not the Spirit of God. Note that in v.12 we are told that the people feared the Lord, that is, they were awakened to a new reverence, and response and sense of responsibility. It may be that they became aware of how far they had slipped spiritually and how near they had come to losing the privilege of service. Think well of Jesus' words in Matt. 21:42-43 and Paul's similar warning in 1 Cor. 9:27. The second main lesson is to note how quickly God's word of reassurance came after the people gave evidence of their change of heart. In many ways the people had forgotten, and lost all sense of, the fact that the Lord was with them. We do the same at times, and that is why problems can loom so large and the demands seem so impossible. We need to be reminded of the words of God in Isa. 43:1-7. We need to rest in the words of Zech. 2:1-5, 8. We need to sing often the words of the Psalmist that remind us that God is the refuge and the helper of His people and that He dwells amongst His people (Ps. 46). In the fullness of time the Son of God gave similar assurances (John 14:18, 27; Matt. 28: 19-20).

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These verses give the full content of Haggai's second prophecy and we must study it in detail over a number of days. It was given approximately four weeks after the work on the Temple was restarted, but there would not have been much progress. There would have been no work done on Sabbath days. The first day of the seventh month was the Feast of Trumpets and the tenth day the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:23- 28). The day on which Haggai preached was the last day of the week long Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:39-43). These were not optional Feasts and it may have been that some of the enthusiastic 'workers' were irked by the hindrance to the building-work because of this constant emphasis on the 'spiritual'. Besides, they would be aware that they were making slow progress indeed on the building site which had lain as a ruin for nearly seventy years. There would be the temptation to take liberties with and to ease off commitment to spiritual priorities in order to get on with the work. But, as we have emphasised in our previous readings, the spiritual comes first, and if the heart of the individual and the work is not right then nothing will be right. The work will be dragged down to the impoverished level of our personal walk with God. This is a spiritual principle urged upon all servants of the Gospel in the New Testament. Read Acts 20:28; 1 Tim.1:19; 4:16; Tit. 2:10. Then turn to 2 Cor. 4:1-2 where stewardship of the Gospel calls for a putting away of anything in our secret, private life that could hinder it. It is a solemn charge. Be right with God. That is the heart of everything.

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There was obviously a disheartened spirit among the people, even a spirit of depression, which called for this message from the prophet. What caused the depression we cannot say. It may have been the sheer burden of the work that had made them tired, or it may have been the compulsory spiritual feasts that vexed them. After all, a backslidden people seldom get enthusiastic about conventions or prayer meetings. It may have been the discontent of just a few people, perhaps older people, who were saying that things would never be the way they once were in the 'good old days' when the Temple was glorious. Whatever the human explanation we must undoubtedly see here evidence of a work of the Devil turning the days of spiritual feasting, remembrance and rejoicing into a weapon of hindrance. If we look at Ezra 3:10-13 we see some indication of the spirit of confusion that prevailed. Some of the people could not see what God was doing before their eyes because they were thinking of what He had done many long years ago. They were looking backwards instead of forwards. That is a prevailing sin among God's people. We give thanks for the past and rejoice in it but we must not live in the past. As God's work goes on, it goes from the lesser to the greater. This is what Haggai said in v.9. We must not be deceived or depressed by immediate evidences. We must hold by faith to the promises of God. If we feel that we or the work have run out of steam we must not conclude that God is in a similar debilitated condition. The best is yet to be. At Christmas we rejoice in the coming of the Saviour, and rightly so. But the coming again of the Saviour in the glory of His kingdom will be far, far greater.

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Look how Haggai awakened the people in v.3. He challenged them with their materialistic assessment of what was going on. They were assuming that a small building (which could never be as gloriously furnished as Solomon's Temple) was necessarily of less spiritual value than a bigger building. They assumed, as too many now assume, that a church whose statistics are always increasing is necessarily more pleasing and more useful to God than a church which, in the eyes of the worldly-minded, is small and insignificant. If this were true then God blundered in choosing a stable rather than a palace for the Saviour's birth, and Jesus erred in choosing and sticking with a mere twelve disciples, none of whom was much of a success at one stage. Of course it takes faith to see what God is doing and to recognise the future significance of a work that seems small and beset with difficulties. It is only when faith sees and rests in eternal realities that it can cope (2 Cor. 4:16-18) and make decisions that are costly (Heb. 11:24-27). Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Heb. 11.1). One old man looked by faith on a little child and saw all the glory of God's salvation, to such an extent that he died happy (Luke 2:25-32). We must always remember that, involved in the on-going work of God, we can see only a small part of what God is doing and an even smaller part of all that He has planned. But, when the final glory of it all is revealed, we will indeed be lost in wonder, love and praise. God does not presently tell us all He is doing. He asks us to trust Him and to go on working in the obedience of faith.

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We walk by faith not by sight, but we have good grounds for confidence. It is God Himself who tells us to take courage because He is with His people as they work. Read Joshua 1:1-9 and then the promise of Jesus in Matt. 28:16-20. This is what Haggai was saying to his generation and to ours. We have God's presence and His promises (4-5). The Bible is full of God's promises and they all stand true. God will not break His Word. He has made us His people and He will not go back on His choice and commitment (Rom. 11: 29). Remember that all this was being said by Haggai at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles when all the Exodus experiences were being celebrated. Read Exod. 29:45-46. Haggai pressed in on the people the fact of God's presence, God's promise, God's Spirit, God's mighty power (6) and God's sovereign provision so that His work will lack nothing that is necessary for its furtherance (7-8). Because this is so, there is no doubt at all about the final outcome. The latter splendour shall be greater than the former. God says so, and we must believe Him and rejoice in the sureness of the victory. After all, we are a part of it by His sovereign saving and keeping grace. That is why we must take courage and get on with the work.

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We cannot leave this passage without considering v.6-8. Verse 7 speaks of the desired of all nations coming and this would be a prophetic word pointing to the coming of Christ who is the true glory of the House of God. The Hebrew word seems to suggest 'desired things' which the R.S.V. translates as 'treasures'. If we look at Ezra 6:3,8-12 we see how the opponents of the work were compelled by government edict to provide fully for the on-going work. This is an example of how v.8 is to be understood. The silver, the gold and the cattle on a thousand hills all belong to God (Ps.50:10-11). If we go forward to New Testament times we find Herod lavishing his wealth on building a magnificent Temple for the Jews, a building so glorious that the Jews felt it would last for ever (Mark 13:1-2). But nothing can last unless the Lord wills it, and He spoke through Haggai about a time soon to come when He would again shake the nations. There may be some reference here to the famous earthquake in the time of Amos (Amos 1:1). Commentators point out that others of the prophets speak of earthquakes as acts of God by which He speaks loudly in His rebuke of the world and its evil (Isa. 2:13-21; 13:13; 29:6; Joel 3:16; Ezek. 38:19-20). In our modern way of thinking we tend to be reluctant to think of God being so involved in and making use of the convulsions of both creation and history, but in the New Testament Jesus speaks of the present order of things passing away (Mark 13:31) and Peter speaks of the same thing in a vivid way (2 Pet. 3:10-13). We must not be deceived by the phrase 'a little while'. God is neither slow nor slack concerning His promises.

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Haggai's third sermon was a call to obedience. Think of the context. There had been a real measure of spiritual awakening (1:1-15). The agency had been the Spirit of God through the Word of God (1:2,12-14). A new phase of the building of the work of God had got started and was progressing, the people being encouraged by the promises of God (2:1-9). Before this third sermon of Haggai, if we check the dates, we have the first sermon of Zechariah (Zech.1:1-6), which gives further emphasis on the need to be right with God. It is almost as if Zechariah is saying to the people not to be too sure of themselves, and he reminded them that their fathers who sat lightly to the ministry of the prophets were taken out of the way into captivity. They disappeared from the scene, but the work of God did not fail. Haggai's sermon, which takes some concentration to understand, is likewise a warning message. It concerns holiness and sin, and it emphasises, by way of questions to the priests about Levitical rules, that while there is no easy way to holiness and sanctification (by touch or by association) there is an easy way to defilement simply by contact and association (12-13). A holy ordinance cannot sanctify an unholy person, but an unholy person can defile all he comes in contact with. If there is wrong in our lives, if we are wrong with God or with people, if there is unforsaken sin in our lives, no amount of Bible reading, prayer or worship will put us right with God. Getting rid of sin is the vital thing. If we don't, we are a danger to the work and to everyone with whom we get involved. Go to Jesus without delay. He can set things right.

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Commentators interpret and apply the passage in this way: The prophet had said in his first sermon that their failed harvests, economic stringency and many frustrations were the result of their unfaithfulness to God and to His House. They had listened, repented and begun to work for God with a new dedication. Now, three months later, having been very spiritual and dedicated, their circumstances were no better. They were disappointed and perhaps even resentful. They felt they had dealt pretty well with God but He did not seem to have kept His part of the bargain. This indicates just how shallow a concept of sin and repentance they had. They (and we are no different) had assumed an easy repentance and an easy return to prosperity, just as their forefathers had done in the time of Hosea (Hos. 6:1-4). The paraphrase of these words, 'Come, let us to the Lord our God with contrite hearts return' gives a spiritual emphasis not really found in the Biblical passage. We must always emphasise the glory of God's forgiveness. Sinners and sinning saints alike need to know that sin's guilt can be dealt with in a moment. But within that forgiveness there are still the consequences of sin to be lived with. The entail of sin is not easily got rid of and it takes time. When, in the past, in a bus or train where people were smoking and you found that the pollution clung to clothes and hair for a long time afterwards. There are indulgences which harm the body and the scars remain even when the habit is broken. There are experiences in the realm of immorality which leave the mind and emotions confused for a very long time. Forgiveness is real, but we cannot just take up life and service again as if nothing had happened.

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Read Psalm 51 in conjunction with this passage so that we may learn the true nature of repentance. Remember that for a whole year David had tried to forget, without forsaking his sin and returning to God. God's gracious work of conviction, repentance and restoration takes time. If this applies to the individual, it applies also to the church and to the nation. A congregation that has been denied true ministry and has lapsed into a shallow worldly attitude cannot all of a sudden become totally different just because a new minister comes with true biblical ministry. The whole life of the congregation has to be re-moulded. If a nation has gone far down the road of godlessness, materialism and immorality, it cannot suddenly change direction. The poison has to be worked out of the body politic. Think of it in terms of a huge ship at sea. It changes course only slowly. From going ahead it cannot suddenly go astern. First the engines must be stopped, then when the vessel is slowed down the engines can slowly be made to go astern. It takes time. Now, says Haggai, the gracious work of restoration, revival and advance has begun. Give it time. Do not be impatient or discouraged. Do not complain at your present difficulties and demands. Remember what things were like when you were adrift from God. There was frustration and disappointment and you were without God. Now you are with God and God is with you and His intention is to bless you. Trust God. Wait for Him. So sure was Haggai that he forecast a great

harvest. How we need the words of Peter urging us to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand so that in due time He might exalt us (1 Pet.5:6).

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Haggai's fourth and final sermon is a call to hope, and it was delivered on the same day as the previous message. God declares He is about to shake the heavens and the earth. He is about to act in some quite decisive way and He is well able to do so. There is no questioning of His power. How we need to remember this. Our thoughts of God tend to be far too small and limited. Read the great passage in Isaiah 40:12ff. which declares that there is no-one to whom God can be compared. He stands alone. Haggai seems to have been aware that the people were looking far too much in the direction of the surrounding nations, their threats and intimidations, and they were afraid. His message to the people was simply: 'God will deal with them.' There seems to be an echo here of the story of God confounding Pharaoh when he pursued the children of Israel through the Red Sea (Exod.14:21-31). There are echoes also of some of the other great deliverances of the people by the mighty intervention of God (Isa. 37: 33-35). Think of the effortless sovereignty of God in the face of the godless opposition of the nations as it is expressed in Psalm 2. This is the confidence of God's people concerning themselves and their work. God is indeed their refuge and strength (Ps 46), their deliverer and their victorious King. All the issues belong to Him and He is working out His purposes as year succeeds to year. How much we need to learn what God is like, and how we need to learn to discern His presence when there is little outward sign. Remember, He is a God who hides Himself (Isa. 45:15). He does not do so to tantalise but to teach His people faith.

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Note that this sermon was addressed to a person rather than to the whole people. It was a word from God to the man entrusted with the leadership and administration of the work. Note what the Lord said to Zerubbabel and let your mind and heart ponder the words in relation to your own life and work. God said, 'I will take you.' This man was marked out as a servant of the Lord. He could no longer ever be insignificant or irrelevant. He had a work to do which no one else could do. God then said, 'I will make you.' All the man's capacities and limitations would, in the hand of the Master-potter, be moulded into an instrument for service (Jer. 18:1-4). Think of Jesus' words to Peter: 'You are you will be' (John 1:42) and Jesus' words to the disciples: 'I will make you fishers of men.' (Matt. 4:19). What hope this holds out for those who are perhaps over-aware of their limitations. God is greater than all our flaws put together and we should be only too willing to be in His school of discipleship. We can well imagine Zerubbabel's thrill when he heard the words: 'I have chosen you.' This is one of the wonderful mysteries of the Gospel. He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4) and the God who began the good work in us will see it through to the perfect end Phil. 1:6). What a God. He commits Himself to His people. He is not ashamed to be called their God (Heb. 11:16). To His faithful workers He says, 'No weapon that is formed against you will prevail (Isa. 54:17).

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Zerubbabel is spoken of as a chosen one and referred to as a signet ring. Such a ring, 'engraved with the king's seal, was used to endorse all official documents (cf. Esther 8:10). It was so precious that, to guard it against theft, it was usually worn on the king's person.' (Baldwin) 'Eastern monarchs deputed their viceroys by giving them their signet.' (Henry) The one wearing the signet ring would be seen to be the executor of the plans and commands of the King and this is the picture of the Lord Jesus Christ given in Rev. 5:1-14. He is the appointed and anointed and chosen one who opens the seals on the scroll that has written on it the perfect plan of God. Everything about Haggai's prophecy points to the future and insists that the future God has planned for His people is a glorious one. It is a guaranteed future and we must hold to this no matter what we may be experiencing at any interim stage. 'Let us lay the lesson to heart. We may be working better and greater things than we know. It is always futile to judge the value of God-appointed tasks by the appearance of the hour in which they are done. If they are indeed appointed by Him, that is enough for us to know; and more, that is the assurance that they are better than the past, for God is ever moving towards the higher, the grander, the nobler; and will do so, until He has wrought out the final perfection of His will.' (Morgan).

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For this final study, in which we consider in general terms the ministry of the prophets, read also 2 Chron. 24:19; 36:15-16; Zech.1:1-6; Matt. 3:1-10. 'It should be remembered that the Jewish prophets had a twofold function to perform. They were preachers of righteousness as well as predictors of future events. To reform, to correct, to restore, was no small part of their vocation and ministry. They had to make ready a people for the Lord, as well as to awaken and keep alive the expectation of His coming. These two branches of their work were in perfect keeping and harmony with each other. They were but different parts of one great whole, different forces in the one great onward movement which characterised the Old Testament dispensation. If the promise to Abraham, that in his seed all the families of the earth should be blessed, was to be fulfilled, then the seed of Abraham must not be allowed to fall utterly away from God. By correction and chastisement, by stern rebuke and severe invective, they must be moved from time to time to repentance and amendment. If correction and rebuke were to be effectual, they must be accompanied by the incentive of hope, and by the renewal of trust in the promise to the fathers. The preaching of the Baptist, only intensified by the greater nearness of the Kingdom, was in substance the preaching of all the prophets who had preceded him: "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." But in the prosecution of His plan, Almighty God was pleased to commit the two parts of this preaching to His messengers in varying measure and degree. To Haggai the former and severer part was specially committed. On the latter and brighter topic he was far from silent.'

(Perowne) The commentator goes on to emphasise how Haggai's message had the recurring theme: Be strong; stick fast to the work God has given you to do; consider your ways; see life steadily and see it as a whole. If we do this, then obstacles will never cause us to give up.

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