**HAGGAI Be strong and keep going 10th November 2024**

*In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: “Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.” Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. 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. “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.” Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD. Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD's message, “I am with you, declares the LORD.” (Hag 1:1-13)*

I began so well, after years of anticipation, months of preparation, and weeks of expectation … I was now here. I was doing it. The walk began well enough … a gentle meander out of Florence along the river Arno. Picking up some fresh fruit from a local market we paused to enjoy lunch in this idyllic scene.

But then the events of the past few days started to catch up with us. Leaving Australia not more than 36 hours ago, we had travelled for over 24 and slept for about 6. And what was early afternoon in Italy, was about 3 in the morning back home … All we wanted to do was lie down and sleep. Just a little nap!

Our legs felt like concrete, our head all a spin … and to make matters worse we knew the next 5 miles was all up hill. And even then, we would still have another 280kms to go! What did we think we were doing? Why were we doing it? And what was the point anyway?

It was not to be the last time such thoughts dominated my mind. Halfway up a 1000m climb at the end of a 25 km hike. Or trudging into a town along bitumen roads as the sun beat down on our weary bones.

We had begun so eager, so enthusiastic, so earnest … But now distracted by our own weariness, we dawdled on, willing ourselves to keep going, we felt discouraged and defeated by the challenge before us.

This is a little of how it felt for the returning exiles to Jerusalem. Haggai, unlike most of the other prophets, who had chastised the Jewish people for idolatry,

For their worship of Baal and other Canaanite gods,

For setting up idols and high places to worship them,

For simply, tragically, disastrously abandoning the Lord.

They had been warned against their injustice,

For their oppression and cheating the poor,

For their ungodly behaviour and pagan practices

But Haggai was different. God’s people haven’t abandoned God and gone after other gods. And they still have a deep devotion to God and zeal for God. They had returned from exile eager to rebuild the temple. Enthusiastic to restore it as a place of worship. Earnest in their efforts to restore Jerusalem.

But now things had come to a halt. Initially because of opposition, distracted by the verbal and physical threats, spending time and energy defending themselves …

But now that had become routine. Instead, settling into life in Jerusalem had taken precedence. Making their own homes comfortable, setting up their own rhythms of life … this had become their priority. All the time arguing – once life is good, safe, settled … then we will get back to rebuilding the temple!

You know how it goes.

“Once I am rich – then I will be generous and tithe

“After my children have left home - then I will start serving in the Church

“When I have retired – then I will spend time loving my neighbours

Or, perhaps “When I know my Bible more, pray more, am a better Christian … then I will share my faith, mentor a new believer or lead a Bible study.”

We get distracted by good things, things that are nice, pleasant, satisfying … But they can get in the way of the best. They take our attention from what matters most.

I remember George (not his real name). He and his wife began attending my church after moving into the area. It was the first time they began to understand the gospel and how life transforming a relationship with God can be. Soon, after responding to Jesus, they were all in. Eager, Enthusiastic, Earnest. Turning up at working bees. Reading their Bibles voraciously. Taking every opportunity to talk with others about their new found faith.

However, as time went on, I could see their priorities shifting. They spent less time with others from Church, or reading their Bible. And their conversations shifted from their faith, to their growing business. When asked about this –they would enthusiastically speak of how a successful business would free them up for the Lord’s work. It would give them finances to be generous. Freedom to spend more time serving God. Capacity to be hospitable … All they had to do was just a little bit more, then they would be back on track!

But I could see they were distracted. Distracted from the main thing. And sure enoughm their faith slowed to a dawdle. They became less regular at Church. More invested in conferences and seminars associated with their business. And no longer did they talk about Jesus, or share with excitement what they had been learning from God’s Word.

Eventually they just stopped attending. The slide into discouragement had become complete. And while, when asked, they would still call themselves Christian … there was little that distinguished them from anyone else I knew.

Like the returning exiles to whom Haggai was writing. They had begun, earnest with eager enthusiasm – now distracted. Their faith had dwindled to a dawdle. Until they were so discouraged … they were in danger of discarding their faith completely.

Into this scene Haggai speaks. He calls them to ‘Consider your ways’. To take a long hard look at themselves. Face the excuses they are making. And be honest with what is happening

*“Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.” Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. Hag 1:2-5*

It's not the right time! Have you ever heard, or made, this excuse!? Once I get to spend more time with my friends, just another year or so, then I can tell them about Jesus. I can’t tithe/give this year – too much happening in our family. Yes, I believe in overseas mission and aid and development but my budget won’t stretch to send money. Thank you for telling me I have gifts in leading or music or serving but I don’t have time to be involved in the church. Maybe when I retire.

To which Haggai says pointedly – well you seem to have enough time and energy for your personal building project.

**So, let’s be honest – there is never a good time.**

**But the right time is now!**

Could this be what God is saying to you?

Perhaps there has been something He has been calling you to do

Reach out to that neighbour

Increase your giving to the Church

Get involved in COACH at the local school

Or get baptised and start taking your faith seriously

Until now, your response has been – “I will, just not yet. “It’s not the right time!

You have been distracted by other things, dawdling in doing what God demands. But as Paul said to the Corinthians:

*Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (2Co 6:2)*

The **second** thing Haggai did was to point out the consequences of their failure. “Have a long hard look at yourself and your situation. You say you need to focus on getting your life in order, becoming settled … then you will be able to rebuild the temple, do what God demands … But if you care to look, things are not actually going all that well for you.

*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. “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. (Hag 1:6-7)*

“Your lack of “success” is a result of your disobedience?

So: “Give careful thought to your ways …

Here we have an example of a basic principle in Scripture:

Simply put: “You flourish best when you do what God wants”

Now hear me when I say this – this is not a guarantee as some would suggest … that if you give all your money to the Church, God will bless you abundantly with riches.

BUT … Jesus did say… *everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. (Mat 19:29)*

And there is no doubt, your best life will be when you live it the way God wants. After all, Jesus did say I have *“come to give life and give it abundantly” Jn.10:10.*

So quit being distracted, stop dawdling, and don’t be disobedient … Instead get on with what God wants you to do.

Which is exactly what the people of God did: *Then Zerubbabel…, and Joshua…, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD… And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, (Hag 1:12-14).*

BUT … unfortunately… this was not the end of their struggles. After getting over the distractions which caused them to dawdle, after only a week or so - discouragement crept in.

*In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet: “Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, ‘Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? (Hag 2:1-3)*

As a pastor, I am aware that this can be one of our greatest challenges. Out of a desire to do the best for God … Because of the faithfulness of His people over many generations … When the next generation starts to step up … instead of enthusiastic encouragement … All they hear is – veiled criticism. Inference that it is not as good as it could be, should be, was when they did it!

This is what was happening in Jerusalem … The foundations had been rebuilt, the building was starting to take shape … work was being done to restore…

But, when the older people and priests who had seen what the temple had been like before …

When they saw the foundations – they wept (Ezra 3:12).

“It’s not like it used to be!

“It won’t be as good, or reach the lofty heights we wanted!

“It will never be anywhere near as wonderful as the one Solomon built!

And as a consequence, the workers became discouraged!

The older we get, the easier it is to fall into this trap …

We want the Church to flourish

We want younger people to step up and get involved …

But every time they try – instead of cheering them on and giving encouragement, we can’t help ourselves…

“It’s great to have you involved in worship, **but …**

(and this is the word we must watch out for).

If you ever find yourself using it, I suggest you stop right there!

But … it would be nice to have a few more hymns!”

This word is what kills enthusiasm, discourages those willing to have a go!

I worked with one Church who had struggled for many years because ...

The congregation, predominantly older folk, passionately loved to study God’s Word, but struggled to encourage others who did things differently. If someone volunteered to be on the cleaning roster – instead of thanking them for making the time in their hectic schedule – they would comment on the corner of the building that was left unvacuumed. “Thanks for cleaning **but** …

Or when a new person came to help in the kitchen – they would be told off for putting the plates in the wrong cupboard. Great to have you here, **but …**

Or if someone turned up early to set up the chairs, they would be chastised for parking in the wrong car park. Nice you could help, **but …**

Or if a new person was operating the data projector – as well as a word of thanks, they couldn’t help themselves include the **but …** because of a few slides that went up a little late!

Can you imagine how young people began to feel about getting involved?

Why would I!? What’s the point?!

Let me speak directly to us who have been around for a while.

If you want to see new or young people involved in Church – never, ever, ever give them advice or suggest they should do things differently.

Unless you have a really good relationship with them

AND it is your official role!

For Haggai – knowing the discouragement they felt, he says two things:

To the workers he says: *Work, (keep going) for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. (Hag 2:4-5)*

And so, to you today I say, if you are feeling discouraged

If you have been working hard for God but not seeing much progress

You are not seeing any fruit, or worse, just getting criticism and rebuke.

Keep going. I am with you

So fear not and keep going.

And to everybody - the detractors and the workers.

He says, hang in there, remain strong, because I will make this building great!

I WILL fill this place with my Glory

*I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.’” (Hag 2:7-9)*

Be strong. I am with you. I am going to do something amazing – so keep going.

You know sometimes – it is as simple as this.

It can be hard following Jesus,

Being faithful when things are tough,

stepping out in faith,

or telling others about Him …

But if you are distracted, dawdling or discouraged – today God would say …

“Be strong. I am with you

I am doing amazing things

So, trust me and keep going.