

Haggai 2:10-19

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The prophet Haggai receives the third message from the LORD during the second year of King Darius of Persia. He demonstrates how walking in obedience to God's ways leads to blessing while exposing the unfaithfulness of the people, causing God to discipline them. Finally, he tells the Judeans that the LORD will bless them from this time on because they have followed Him and started to rebuild.

In the previous section, the prophet urged the returning exiles of Judah to remain strong as they rebuilt the temple of the LORD. He told them not to fear, that He would be with them. He spoke of His power over the nations who opposed them, and promised He would fill the temple with glory and “give peace in this place” (vv. 3–9).

In the present section, the prophet emphasizes the importance of following His ways in their daily lives. He draws a parallel between pure and impure and shows how that applies to the people of Judah. Then, he gives an oracle of blessing. The covenant God made with Israel made it clear that they will make a binary choice between life and death, good and evil (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). God desires to bless His people, but to gain the maximum blessing requires that they walk in His ways.

In order to gain all God has for them, they must follow their commitment to abide by His covenant commands, which He made for their good (Deuteronomy 10:13). Following the commands leads to a maximum fulfillment in life; we cannot experience the good that flows from obeying His ways if we do not follow in His ways. This section (vv. 10-19) contains the third message of Haggai the prophet.

Like the first two messages, the third message begins by identifying the date and nature of the prophecy and the human messenger. It transpired *on the twenty-fourth of the ninth month in the second year of Darius* (vs. 10). In the Jewish calendar, the ninth month is Kislev. The equivalent date is on or about December 18, 520 BC, over three and one-half months since the first prophecy. On that date, *the word of the LORD came to Haggai* (vs. 10).

In some cases prophetic proclamations come over a lengthy period of time. For instance, Isaiah prophesied over many years, during the reign of four different kings of Judah (Isaiah 1:1). But Haggai's quite specific message was concentrated during a period of months.

The phrase translated as *the word of the LORD* occurs several times in the book of Haggai. It always refers to Yahweh's revelation (1 Kings 6:11; 16:1). When used in a biblical text, it clarifies the divine origin of the message. It emphasizes to the reader that God is the primary author of the message, not the human voice bearing the message. The New Testament proclaims that this is true of all scripture (2 Timothy 3:16).

During this era, Yahweh revealed His will to some individual servants who, in turn, were to relay the divine message to others. Those individuals were responsible for proclaiming God's revelation to their audience (e.g. Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1). They were not to add to the message or take away from it. As we have seen, the individual God chose as His spokesman in the book of Haggai is *Haggai*, so he is called a *prophet*.

The term *prophet* (“nābî” in Hebrew) means “proclaimer” or “forth-teller.” It describes someone who received a call from God to be God's spokesman. A *prophet* was a messenger of God. That means that he did not speak from his authority but was empowered to speak on behalf of God. The frequent prophetic formula “Thus says the LORD” (e.g. Jeremiah 11:3; Jeremiah 33:2; Isaiah 48:17) confirms this truth. It makes clear that the *prophet* spoke what he received from the LORD. The Hebrew term “nābî” can apply to true and false prophets alike (Jeremiah 6:13; 26:7–8; 27:9; 28:1; Zechariah 13:2). However, we know *Haggai* was a true *prophet* because *the word of the LORD came to him*.

The first part of the divine revelation is an inquiry concerning a religious matter. The prophet began with the prophetic expression *thus says the LORD of hosts* to confirm the divine source of his message. The term *LORD* refers to Yahweh, the self-existent and eternal God (Exodus 3:14). The term *host* translates the Hebrew term “sabaoth,” meaning “armies.” This term refers to the angelic armies of heaven (1 Samuel 1:3). All in all, the phrase *the LORD of hosts* demonstrates God's power and emphasizes His sovereign control over the entire world.

The LORD, the God who brought the Judeans back to their homeland, spoke to *Haggai*. He told him to *ask the priests for a ruling* (vs. 11). The LORD will now proceed to use a dialogue with the *priests* to create an illustration about the people as a whole: just as an individual can be defiled for disobeying God's law, so the nation is for failing to follow God's command to repair the temple.

A *priest* was a man of the law (Jeremiah 18:18). He was a specialist whose function was to teach God's people “the difference between the holy and the profane and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean” (Ezekiel 44:23). A *priest* would make the appropriate *rulings* on legal matters.

The Hebrew word translated as *ruling* is “Torah” in Hebrew. It occurs approximately 200 times in the Old Testament (208 times in the singular and 12 times in the plural). Sometimes, it refers to the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Other times, it refers to legal instructions. Here in Haggai, it refers to a decision of *the priests* on a matter of religious ritual (Malachi 2:7).

The LORD commanded Haggai to ask *the priests* two pertinent and opposite questions. The first one concerns the transmission of ritual purity: *If a man carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and touches bread with this fold, cooked food, wine, oil, or any other food, will it become holy? And the priests answered, “No”* (vs. 12).

The term *holy* means setting something apart for a special purpose. *Holy meat* is a piece of *meat* from an animal a *priest* sacrificed and offered to God. It is set aside for the nourishment and caretaking of the priest.

In Haggai's day, people used to wear long and flowing garments. Thus, they could form a bag from their robe, allowing them to carry items. According to the Mosaic Law, *holy meat* consecrates any bag used to carry it (for example, the *fold of a garment*). However, nothing (such as *bread, cooked food, wine, oil, etc.*) that touches that bag becomes holy (Leviticus 6:27). In other words, there is no transfer of holiness from the *garment* to another object it would touch.

Therefore, *the priests answered* negatively because indirect contact with what is holy cannot consecrate what is profane merely by touch, according to the law. Holiness must be genuine, it cannot be bought and sold, or acquired through a transaction.

Then, *Haggai* asked another question. This one pertains to the transmission of impurity: *If one who is unclean from a corpse touches any of these, will the latter become unclean?* (vs. 13). This question is the opposite situation from the first one. Ritual purity could not be transferred by touch. Ritual defilement, however, was contagious. A healthy person cannot transfer health to a leper by touch, but a leper can infect a healthy person by touching them.

The one who touched "the corpse of any person" would be "unclean for seven days" (Numbers 19:11, 22). He could not participate in public worship (Numbers 9:6). Therefore, knowing the Mosaic Law, *the priests* answered affirmatively to Haggai's question about a defiled thing touching something clean, and said, *It will become unclean* (vs. 13).

Having listened to the priests' *rulings* carefully, Haggai spoke on God's behalf to apply this principle to the people of Judah as a whole: holy things don't make unclean things holy by touch, but unclean things defile whatever they touch. Haggai makes a comparison between the people of Judah and an *unclean* person.

Just as someone *unclean from a corpse* causes anything he touches to *become unclean, so is this people. And so is this nation before Me* (vs. 14). The disobedience of the returning exiles of Judah rendered everything they touched as defiled.

The prophet paused to remind his listeners of the divine source of his message with his formula, *Declares the LORD*. In doing so, he added weight and emphasis to his speech, making it clear that he spoke under God's authority, not his own. Simply put, he was merely an envoy sent by the LORD to address certain spiritual matters.

Having resumed his message, Haggai emphasized once again the contagious nature of the people because they built paneled homes for themselves while leaving the temple of God desolate (Haggai 1:4). The prophet told the Judeans that their disobedience not only defiled their sacrificial worship at the temple but also contaminated *every work of their hands. And what they offer there is unclean* (vs. 14).

The disobedience of the returning exiles defiled everything else like a contagious disease. Everything they touched was defiled. Every *work of their hands* was like touching a *corpse*, it made what was touched *unclean*. Further, what *they offer is unclean*. Because their deeds did not conform with God's ways, their religious practice and ceremonial worship of Him was also *unclean*. If it was *unclean*, that means it did not please God.

God's priority is not for His people to follow religious rules. Rather, his priority is that we follow His ways with all our hearts. In order to love God, we must align our hearts and minds with His ways, believing His ways are for our best, which will result in loving and serving others (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37-39; 1 Samuel 15:22). The purpose of religious worship is to align ourselves with the ways that lead to life and benefit, that we stir one another up to love and good deeds, preparing ourselves for the day of judgement (Hebrews 10:24).

The prophet now transitions to the second part of the divine revelation. He marked the transition with the words *but now* to show a contrast. He spoke of the present blessing God would pour out on His people in contrast to previous measures of discipline He inflicted on them due to their disobedience. In so doing, Haggai asked the returning exiles of Judah to remember the past so that their present and future could be bright.

Thus, the prophet commanded the people, saying, *Do consider from this day onward* (vs. 15). Haggai will now tell the people they are about to be blessed due to their obedience, and wants them to remember the contrast with the previous time, before *this day*. The verb *consider* is literally "set your hearts upon." It occurred in the previous chapter, where Haggai urged the people to evaluate their attitude toward life and rebuild the temple of the LORD (Haggai 1:5, 7). Here also, the verb has the same meaning.

The Judeans were to think carefully as they moved forward in their relationship with God. God desires His people to choose a perspective that is right and true. The Apostle Paul exhorts New Testament believers in the same way, telling them to choose to renew their minds, and choose to look at life from a perspective that is true, through faith in God's word (Romans 12:1-2). In this case, Haggai exhorts the people to recognize that their physical prosperity is about to increase specifically due to their obedience to rebuild the temple.

Having urged the people to evaluate their behavior and be intentional in choosing their perspective, Haggai described how in their recent past things had gone from bad to worse because of their misplaced priorities. He began with the statement *Before one stone was placed on another in the temple of the LORD* (vs. 15) to recall the time period after work on the temple had stopped (Ezra 4:24), to the time when the returning exiles had responded to Haggai's first message and resumed the rebuilding project (Haggai 1:14-15). During this period of work-stoppage, their economic fortunes plummeted. Now that they are obeying, their fortunes will reverse.

When the people began laying the foundation of the temple, they encountered opposition from unfriendly neighbors all around, those of the nations that were imported and who "settled in the city of Samaria, and in the rest of the region beyond the River (Ezra 4:10). Assyria had emptied

most of northern Israel/Samaria, taking them to exile. Assyria then imported people from foreign nations to settle there (2 Kings 17:24).

Years later, when the Judeans returned from exile in Babylon and began rebuilding Jerusalem, the leaders of these immigrants from other nations petitioned to Artaxerxes, king of Persia, to ask him to halt the rebuilding in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:8-16). They framed the request in such a way to ignore Cyrus's decree to rebuild Jerusalem, and the work was ordered to be stopped. Then after the Jews in Judea began to rebuild after heeding the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1) there was another letter sent to King Darius. Darius searched his archives and discovered the decree of Cyrus, and ordered the work to continue (Ezra 6:6-8).

As a result of the cease-and-desist letter from Artaxerxes, the Judeans had stopped working on the temple some sixteen years prior. They rationalized it was not yet time for them to complete it (Haggai 1:2). Having ceased work on the temple of God, the people of Judah experienced economic hardship as divine punishment: *From that time, when one came to a grain heap of twenty measures, there would be only ten; and when one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there would be only twenty* (vs. 16).

The Israelite society was primarily agrarian, meaning the people relied on agricultural products (such as *grain and wine*) for their daily sustenance. The term *grain* refers to wheat or any other cultivated cereals used as food. The *wine vat* refers to a container used in the production of wine, which was a source of both nourishment as well as enjoyment. The abundance of *grain and wine* symbolized blessings from God (Genesis 27:28; Deuteronomy 33:28). Conversely, the lack of such products symbolized judgment and curse (Hosea 8:7).

After the repair of the temple stopped, Judah's fields yielded only a small quantity of products at harvest time. When the people planted a grain heap of twenty measures, they reaped only ten. When they drew *fifty measures* of wine from a vat, they would find less than half (*only twenty*) of what they had expected. What was the cause of such a disappointment? The LORD answered this question in the next verse, where He said, *I smote you and every work of your hands* (vs. 17). Just as the touch of an unclean person would defile what was touched, the *work of the hands* touched by the Judeans was defiled (vv 13-14).

The verb translated as *smote* denotes the act of striking a manual blow by a human agent. Such an act leads to injury or damage (Exodus 2:13; Deuteronomy 25:11). Here in Haggai, the verb is used for God taking an action. It is He who struck His covenant people and their labor *with blasting wind, mildew, and hail* to demonstrate His displeasure. In doing so, He caused a disproportion between their expectation and the actual results in the grain and grape harvest. This was in keeping with God's covenant with Israel, in which God promised to bless Israel if they acted in obedience, and curse them if they acted in disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:38-42).

The term *blasting wind* refers to hot east winds blowing for days at a time (Amos 4:9). It can potentially dry up vegetation and destroy crops (Isaiah 37:27; Psalm 90:5-6). The term *mildew* means "paleness" and refers to the disease caused by a type of fungus growing on plants that suffered damage from destructive east winds. The term *hail* refers to pellets of frozen rain that will destroy crops. During the conquest of Canaan, the LORD used *hail* against the Amorites,

“As they fled from before Israel, *while* they were at the descent of Beth-horon, the Lord threw large stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; *there were* more who died from the hailstones than those whom the sons of Israel killed with the sword” (Joshua 10:11).

The people of Judah were under the disciplinary hand of God because they had stopped reconstructing the temple. He used the three punishments described here (*blasting wind, mildew, and hails*) to punish His covenant people. He did so to see if they would be willing to return to Him. Yet *the LORD* declared that they had *not come back* to Him (vs. 17).

The prophet urged the people to *consider* (give careful consideration) *from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, from the day when the temple of the LORD was founded* (vs. 18). The equivalent date is on or around December 18, 520 BC, over three and one-half months since the first prophecy (v. 10). Under the edict of 538 BC issued by King Cyrus of Persia, the Judeans began returning to their homeland. King Cyrus also granted the returnees permission to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 6:3-5). The people indeed began rebuilding the temple in 536 BC. However, they stopped for about sixteen years until the LORD raised His prophet to rebuke them.

Work on the temple in Jerusalem began in earnest in 520 BC, when another wave of Jewish returnees arrived with Zerubbabel, the “governor of Judah” in Haggai’s day (Haggai 1:1). At that time, the people began the restoration of the temple with the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1). For this reason, Haggai asked them to *consider* all that had happened since the day when the temple of the LORD was founded. After urging them, he asked them a question, *Is the seed still in the barn?* (vs. 19).

The expected answer to this rhetorical question is “No.” If there is no *seed in the barn*, that would indicate that their crop production was so scarce that there was no surplus; they were just scraping by. However, God wants them to take note of this, because from this point forward, there will be surplus and abundance. God wants them to connect their covenant obedience with the covenant blessing, as set forth in God’s covenant contract with His people, which was structured in a manner of a Suzerain-vassal treaty, with blessings for faithful service and cursings for rebellion ([see our Tough Topics Explained article: Suzerain-Vassal Treaties](#)).

The answer to the question whether there is excess *seed in the barn* is “No” because there was no rain or dew (Haggai 1:10). *Even including the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree, it has not borne fruit* (vs. 19). The absence of seed and fruit characterized that period. Everything failed.

Nevertheless, despite the people’s faithlessness, the LORD promised to change their situation from curses to blessings. He thus ended the third message on a positive note: *Yet from this day on, I will bless you* (vs. 19). The Suzerain (ruler) God of Israel promised to pour out His abundant blessings on His covenant people, turning their crop failure into prosperity.

The LORD is truly a gracious God, desiring to bless His people. However, God made humans in His image, and a part of that image is to have the freedom to make moral choices (Genesis 1:27).

Choices have consequences, and much of scripture is admonishing God's people to understand and adopt a true perspective that we might make choices that are for our true benefit. God is our shepherd, guiding us along the way (Psalm 23).

There is potential tension in this story, in that scripture asserts that we ought to obey earthly authorities, as all authorities are appointed by God (Romans 13:1). And the people of Judah had ceased building God's temple due to a decree by the human authority over them at the time, King Artaxerxes of Persia (Ezra 4:21).

However, there is also a principle that when there are conflicting authorities, the higher authority prevails. Examples include Daniel, who defied an order of the king because of his conviction to pray to God three times each day, God clearly being a higher authority (Daniel 6:10). Also the apostles defied an order of the Jewish ruling council who commanded them to cease speaking about Jesus, saying they ought to obey God rather than man (Acts 5:39). In our story, there is conflicting human authority between King Cyrus of Persia commanding the Judeans to rebuild the temple (Ezra 6:3), then a subsequent king commanding they cease rebuilding (Ezra 4:21).

Haggai infers that God's displeasure came about in part due to Judah's attitude of being complacent, and not contending to rebuild (Haggai 1:2-4). Once the people began to prioritize rebuilding, it generated an appeal based on the original command of Cyrus. Accordingly, the human authorities reversed their decision, and authorized the construction (Ezra 5:1-6:12). According to the recording in Ezra, the construction continued from the second year of Darius until the sixth year of Darius's reign (Ezra 6:15).

Biblical Text

¹⁰ On the twenty-fourth of the ninth *month*, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Haggai the prophet, saying, ¹¹ “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Ask now the priests *for* a ruling: ¹² If a man carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and touches bread with this fold, or cooked food, wine, oil, or any *other* food, will it become holy?’” And the priests answered, “No.” ¹³ Then Haggai said, “If one who is unclean from a corpse touches any of these, will *the latter* become unclean?” And the priests answered, “It will become unclean.” ¹⁴ Then Haggai said, “‘So is this people. And so is this nation before Me,’ declares the LORD, ‘and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean.’ ¹⁵ But now, do consider from this day onward: before one stone was placed on another in the temple of the LORD, ¹⁶ from that time *when* one came to a *grain* heap of twenty *measures*, there would be only ten; and *when* one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there would be *only* twenty. ¹⁷ I smote you *and* every work of your hands with blasting wind, mildew and hail; yet you *did not come back* to Me,’ declares the LORD. ¹⁸ ‘Do consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth *month*; from the day when the temple of the LORD was founded, consider: ¹⁹ Is the seed still in the barn? Even including the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree, it has not borne *fruit*. Yet from this day on I will bless *you*.’”