

Unless the Lord builds the house

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- [0 : 0 0] I don't know if any of you have recently or at any time visited a show house. It's a rather pleasant experience, smell of new wood, gleaming surfaces, everything tidy.
- Indeed, you would hardly want to move in with all your clutter. But that show house, a few months before, was part of a building site. And building sites are not clean and tidy.
- Building sites are messy, dirty, often chaotic. Presumably, hopefully the architect knows what he's doing, the foreman knows what he's doing, and each individual worker needs to know what they're doing.
- Haggai is a building site. And we've got to remember that wherever we may be, large or small churches, new churches or churches decades, even centuries old, the church on earth is always going to be a building site.
- It's not going to be a show house. That will come, Paul talks about it, changing the metaphor to bride, that one day he will present his church a glorious bride without spot or blemish or any such thing.
- [1 : 1 5] And when we remember that, when we remember we were on the building site, I think it will save us from two opposite mistakes. One is of despairing when the building doesn't seem to be going well.
- Now, obviously, we are human. We make mistakes. We get things wrong. There are always things we can do better. But as we know very well, in church life, in building for God, we are always passing through times of discouragement.
- The second mistake it will save us from is the very opposite one of when things go well, imagining that we are doing rather well ourselves.
- Truth of the matter is, none of our work, this side of glory, is all that impressive. We've got to remember that. While this is about building for God, it's actually the Holy Spirit who builds.
- It's not us who build. We build only by the power of the Holy Spirit. So a couple of introductory remarks. First of all, the situation of this whole book.
- [2 : 2 4] God's people had been in exile in Babylon for 70 years. They had now been allowed to return. In the book of Ezra, chapters 1 to 3, you read about how an early group of pioneers returned.
- And their particular focus when they returned was to rebuild the temple, to reestablish the worship of God. Later on, Nehemiah was going to come and oversee the building of the city, the rebuilding of it.
- But by Ezra chapter 4, we find that the initial work on the temple had fallen away. A combination of opposition from the establishment and loss of nerve among the people had caused this great enterprise to be virtually abandoned.
- What does God do? God doesn't send other builders. He sends two prophets. This man, Haggai, and his companion, Zechariah.

And these people encourage, we are told in the book of Ezra, the prophets of the Lord were with them, encouraging the work. Situation then, the building site work is not going well.

[3 : 42] People are discouraged. The initial vision has faded. And people feel that it's not worth doing. Now, here's then, secondly, Haggai himself.

The word of the Lord, verse 1, came through the prophet Haggai. It's interesting, actually, that Haggai is called the prophet. The people in the Bible whom we call prophets aren't usually actually called prophets.

We assume they're prophets. But Haggai is specifically given the title prophet. And that would suggest that he's well known and that he said far more than he says in this little book.

The second shortest book in the Old Testament and one of the shortest in the Bible. Compare that to mammoth books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. You can easily pass this over and think it's not important.

That's not unusual in the Bible. Paul, for example, wrote two letters to Corinth that we know about. Very probably he wrote four and certainly three.

[4 : 46] Haggai gives these six messages here in the 15 weeks or so between the rain and the second year of Darius.

Basically what we'd call August to December. Six short messages. Now he must have said a lot more than that. The messages have been a lot longer than that.

Nevertheless, this is what the Holy Spirit wanted us to have. And it's interesting, 29 times in 38 verses, the word of the Lord appears.

In other words, it's the message, not the messenger, that matters. The individual who brings the message is not the one who matters. It's the message itself.

That's why the word must come fresh in every generation. That's why God is always raising up other people to bring that message. And any movement of God, any work of the Spirit is always marked by an unleashing of the word.

[5 : 48] Preaching the word which leads people to conversion and leads the converted to growth. Now the style, the accent is his own. Very, very different from Zechariah.

I have to say I much prefer the longer apocalyptic book of Zechariah, but it's awfully difficult to fit that into two weeks. So we're looking at Haggai. I wouldn't exaggerate the differences because, as we'll see next week, this apparent, unimportant building of a temple on the mountain of Zion is actually about the temple of God filling the whole earth.

The word needs to become flesh. All of the messengers are different. So the temple is going to be built. Now, Psalm 127, which has just been sung to us, is the psalm from which we take our title, unless the Lord builds the house.

Now, if you look again at that psalm, it's very important to see the house. Probably, since the psalm is associated with Solomon, first of all, means the temple. Solomon, the great temple builder.

But if you look through, it's also about the building of home, the building of families. Right from the very beginning, the building of God, the temple, was always the people of God.

[7 : 09] And the temple was temporary. And the people of God had to do without it during the exile. So I want to ask three questions then. First of all, when are we to build in verses 1 to 2?

As I said, we're in late August, the time of the fruit harvest, and in the time of the King Darius. King Darius reminds us that even though the people of God have come back from exile, they are still a province.

There is no longer a Davidic kingdom. Although, as we will see in the second chapter, that the new kingdom is anticipated. And they had already built the altar in Ezra 1 and 2.

And they were starting to build the temple. Now, failure to build the temple, failure to persevere, put their commitment in doubt.

And the leaders are challenged. This is what the Lord Almighty says, verse 2. These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house.

[8 : 17] This is a specific call to the people of the time. As we will see in chapter 2, this is going to involve the shaking of the heavens and the earth and the coming of God's kingdom.

So, when are we to build? Now, you'll notice what they say in verse 2. The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house.

What they're really saying is the time will never come. We can't be bothered with it. They're really saying that we have lost our nerve, we've lost our interest, and so the house is not going to be built.

Now, the antidote for that is the living word that comes through Haggai the prophet. Psalm 95 speaks about this, and it's picked up in Hebrews.

As long as it is called today, hear the voice of the Lord. Now, since there's never a day that's not called today, that is a call to hear the voice of the Lord every day.

[9 : 21] Isaiah talks about the servant who, morning by morning, opens his ear to the word. So, you see, the point is, these people are saying, not just it's not time to build now, they're effectively saying, oh, we can't be bothered building at all.

But why is that so important? Now, basically, time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. In the Hebrew, this is in the emphatic position, the Lord's house, the time's not yet come to build it.

Now, we know very well, of course, that the buildings we meet in, whether it's Ennisland Gospel Hall, whether it's a cathedral, whether it's a Nissan hut or a school classroom, these are not the temple of the Lord.

Nevertheless, in the Old Testament, this is where God meets his people. And indeed, until Jesus turns his back on the temple and announces its destruction, this remains the place where God will meet with his people.

And Malachi, in a later generation, speaks about this. The Lord, he says, whom you're looking for will suddenly come to his temple.

[10 : 42] Well, there had to be a temple for him to come to. There had to be a place where people met with God. That's why, that is why, while we do not call our buildings the temple of the Lord or the house of the Lord, it's important to remember at this time, the fact that the people were not building was essentially saying they didn't care whether the Lord was among them or not.

So, when is it to be built? It's to be built now. And as I said a moment ago, that building is building not just physical structures, that's building life, building character.

And what is to be built then? This is verses 3 to 11. Then the word of the Lord came through the way. Is it a time for yourselves to be living in your canald houses, while this house remains a ruin?

Now, these sermons or prophecies that Haggai gives are very short. They're obviously summaries. It's like the Apostles' sermons in Acts. Hard to believe that the Apostles only preached for 12 minutes.

Indeed, we are told once that Paul continued beyond midnight. I love the NIV translation. Paul went on and on.

[12 : 05] I used to say to the Cornhill students, if you're going to imitate Paul going on and on, make sure you can also imitate his power to raise the dead. Because remember that occasionally young man called Eutychus fell out of the window and had to be raised from the dead.

In other sense, of course, that is what preaching is about, isn't it? That those who are dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. So it's an appeal to priorities. Now, very often, these verses are made for us.

Is it a time for you to be living in your canald houses? I've heard this chapter preached as an appeal to prop up a nailing fabric fund for a church building.

Now, that's not what it's about at all. Church buildings are, I mean, altering buildings, having buildings is great if it helps the work of the gospel.

But if it comes an end in itself, then it is simply not carrying out the work of God. It's not truly building for God. Living in your canald houses, sense of luxury and elegance.

[13 : 16] You see, it's not lack of money. It's they've compartmentalized their lives. That's the point of verses 7 to 11. All of their life is suffering because they are not building for God.

Their economic life, their personal life, their home life. Now, that's so important for us to realize all these things matter to God. But when we divorce them, if we divorce Sunday from the rest of the week, then what we do on Sunday is going to become very, very disengaged from the rest of our lives.

It's going to become stale, flat and unprofitable. As C.S. Lewis says, if we worship God all week, then Sunday will look after itself.

Or as George Herbert said, seven whole days, not one in seven. I will praise you. See, change comes not by feelings of vigorous engagement to the word of God.

There's appealed priorities. What are we building for? Who are we building for? Are we building for this life only? And neither here nor anywhere else is God saying it's wrong to live in pleasant houses and it's wrong to have economic security and so on.

[14 : 38] What he is saying is, ultimately, that's not what the kingdom of God is about. And so in verses 7 to 11, the appeals of both thought and action.

Give careful thought to your ways. See, there's no point in just thoughtless activism to be seen to doing things. It's got to be considered.

Go up to the hills and make an effort, hard and unglamorous. And their present state is a consequence of their neglect of God.

God controls the weather. God controls wealth. And another interesting thing that emerges in this chapter is this. The exile had cured the people from idolatry.

When they returned, they did not build temples to Baal. They did not worship false gods. What they were doing is what Isaiah condemns in the first chapter of his book, 150 more years ago than this.

[15 : 42] There are two wrong things. One is worshipping false gods. That's idolatry. The other is worshipping the true God without real feeling, without real involvement, without real obedience.

There's no heresy here. It's simply that God is pushed to the margins. Complacency. If you read the messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, you would expect that when you come to the church, which is condemned most strongly, Laodicea, you would find really dreadful heresies, dreadful personality problems, dreadful sexual irregularities.

And in Laodicea, there were none of those things, because in Laodicea, there wasn't enough life for them to take root and grow. And this is what has happened to this group of people, the returned exiles.

They are simply no longer interested in building the temple of God. I mean, that's why these books, these post-exilic books, like Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, often seem so low-key.

There's a kind of east wind blowing, if you like, a spiritual east wind. The atmosphere is gloomy and dull. And, of course, they've returned, but the desert is not blossoming like the rogues.

[17 : 06] The tribes are not flowing to Zion. But there has to be a building of the temple, so that when the Lord comes, there will be a temple for him to come to.

When do we build now? What do we build? The beegence and character. And then verses 12 to 15, how do we build? There can be many examples of prophecies being heeded so swiftly and spectacularly.

Poor Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel labored for 40 to 50 years without this kind of result. Daniel, during the whole period of the exile and beyond, was in Babylon.

That's why, although Haggai is speaking in challenge and rebuke in the first two messages, in the third message, in verses 12 to 15, he's speaking in encouragement.

The governor, then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people. I am with you, declares the Lord. So the Lord stirs up the spirit of the leaders and of the remnant.

[18 : 20] Now, you're familiar in the earlier prophets of the idea of the remnant. Even if God's people on the whole are departing from the faith, there is always a remnant who will carry on the vision through whom God can work.

We saw this, of course, in previous weeks in the first two chapters of Luke. The remnant, Elizabeth and Zacharias, Mary and Joseph themselves, and Simeon and Anna.

They were the remnant to whom the Lord, to whom and from whom the Lord came. And look at exactly what it says here.

Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message. So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people.

Now, notice there's two things happening here. One is the Lord is giving his message, but Haggai is the messenger. Now, both are important.

[19 : 24] We mustn't collapse the word of the Lord into the words of Haggai. And yet Haggai is a vital link in the chain. Rather like a passage in Acts 10, where Peter, speaking to a group of Gentiles, we are told that when Peter spoke these words, the spirit fell on all who heard the word.

That's terribly important. Peter was the messenger. He wasn't the one who changed people's hearts. It was the spirit who used the word. And yet, Peter was a vital link.

What's absolutely and totally true in Jesus, the word became flesh, must also be true in a different way in his messengers. That's why messengers are all so different.

Never imitate your favorite preacher, because all you'll do is imitate his mannerisms, and usually his irritating mannerisms, because the word as it comes has to come through a human being to human beings.

Haggai is a faithful spokesman, and he feared the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom. So there is reassurance. Verse 13.

[20 : 39] I am with you, declares the Lord. That's really what Isaiah said, isn't it? Emmanuel, God with us. And very often the word is unheeded for a long time, years maybe, and then the light dawns.

All through the history of God's people, there have been dry, barren periods. Periods of dearth. Periods of lack of growth. Indeed, in the 18th century, Bishop Butler, who was a good man, said, The church in England, no power on earth can save.

That was true enough. The church in England had declined to an all-time low, and represented by characters like the odious Mr. Collins and Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice.

Shortly, about a year after this, a man sat in Aldgate in London, listening to an exposition of Romans.

And he wrote in his diary, My heart was strangely warmed. The Lord laid his hand on John Wesley and Charles and George Whitefield and others.

[21 : 56] And within a few short years, the bishop's doleful prophecy, revival was sweeping through large parts of this country and into America.

Now, I'm not saying for a moment that it's going to happen tomorrow. We've no right to say that. On the other hand, we must never lose sight of the fact that God can and does and will intervene in a particular way, which will glorify his name and which will bring people into his kingdom.

So, there is reassurance. And then there is divine and human activity. The Lord stirred up the spirit. And then the people came and began to work.

Now, beginning to work without the spirit would have achieved nothing. Now, they may have completed the building, but that would have all they would have done. Possibly some preliminary work had been done and been abandoned.

And now they would come and when it says began to work, it doesn't mean the absolute beginning. It means this. It means a new beginning. There is a sense of excitement here.

[23 : 08] The spirit. The Lord stirred up the spirit. And it's a comprehensive thing. The leaders are stirred up and the people are stirred up.

You see, it's difficult to exaggerate the importance of good leaders. Because if leadership goes bad, then the whole community goes bad.

That doesn't mean the community are not to blame. Because it's often said we get the leaders we deserve. But this is what's happening here. And if it weren't such a short passage, if we could imagine the real excitement here.

People, perhaps people working at home, going home, then suddenly saying the Lord is with us. Emmanuel has come. Now, as we finish, this is not just church work.

Not just what we do in Christian activities. It's a great mistake. If we say that, then we're basically saying the Lord only needs people. Only needs ministers and preachers and so on.

[24 : 14] The Lord needs all his people all over the place. Building the temple. Building the kingdom of God. Showing Jesus. That's well summed up by a chorus of my youth.

No great shakes as poetry choruses seldom are. But it does make the point. We are building day by day as the moments pass away.

A temple which the world cannot see. And every victory won by grace will be sure to find a place in that structure for eternity.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for every victory won by grace. And we confess every feat where instead of trusting in you, we trusted in ourselves.

And we pray that on the threshold of this year, on the threshold of a new beginning, that we may continue in our individual lives and in our corporate lives to build the temple so that when the Lord returns, he will find people ready and willing to greet him.

[25 : 23] And we ask this in his name. Amen.