

So, this is week three in our **study of Haggai**, Now is the Time. If you missed previous weeks let me quickly tell you the back story. We talked about what happened back in 587 BC, when the Babylonians under the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Judah, including **the temple** that Solomon had built and this was more than just a physical blow, this was a spiritual blow to God's people.

For five decades the Jewish people were held in bondage, in captivity in what we now call Iraq, and so when they were allowed to actually go back and start to rebuild you can imagine the thrill. After fifty years of being held captive they were able to go back and to start to rebuild not only their own lives but also to rebuild God's temple, the house, the dwelling place for God.

If you remember in week number one they started strong. They **built the foundation**, they built the altar, but when the Samaritans opposed them they panicked and they gave up. Well God raised up the prophet Haggai and said, "The time is now. The time is now to build my temple." God broke it down into manageable **bits for them**: number one, go up to the mountain; number two, you bring down the wood; and, number three, you build the temple. So they started again but they became incredibly discouraged.

As we pick up the story now we find that they are facing a battle many of us face today. We feel as if we are trying to obey God and yet our life is still not working very well. You can almost feel the cry of their hearts, "God we're obeying you and yet where are you? Where are the results?" Is it really worth it to serve and obey you? - and this is a question I believe many people ask today.

If you have any experience of children, or sometimes even husbands, you will be aware of the condition **selective hearing** – they hear what they want to hear. "Please tidy your room" – "I didn't hear you."

"Please help with the dishes" - "I didn't hear you."

"Please hang out the washing" - "I didn't hear you."

But, open a packet of chocolate biscuits or a tub of ice cream and they hear that. It's selective hearing.

Today I want to talk about something similar – **conditional obedience**. As long as God continues to bless me everything is ok, but as soon as faith begins to cost that's going too far. "God, I'll do what you want me to do as long as I see the results I want to see. But if it makes me uncomfortable, is inconvenient, or you're not doing what I think you should do, at this point God I pull back." Conditional obedience. I'll obey as long as it doesn't make me uncomfortable or I see the results that I want to see.

I remember once when I was a student and training for ministry. I had been to our local shop - we didn't have much money but I have taken out £50 for something and was going back to the car. We had been at CLAN Gathering, a Christian conference, and Jackie Pullinger had been speaking about the poor and us being generous. There was a woman selling the big issue and as I approached her to buy a copy, as I often did, I felt that I should give her £50. I then had this whole conversation in my head about why that was a stupid idea. I bought my

copy of the Big Issue and went home with the £50 in my wallet. Three times I saw her that week and felt I should give her £50 – I rationalized that I didn't have it any more, or that I had no idea who she was, or what she would do with it, or that the moment had actually passed. She didn't get that money from me and, even although I saw her a few times after that, I never felt that way again. But I felt guilty that I hadn't done what I think God was telling me to do. Selective hearing – conditional obedience.

We can all be like that: we love the **verse that says**, “*For I know the plans I have for you,*” *declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”* Jeremiah 29:11 But forgive my enemies? Stuff that. You don't know my enemies. I'm not forgiving my enemies. I hate my enemies. Oh, pray for my enemies? Sure God, I'll pray for them. I'll pray that you smite them.

We'll take one part we like, but not the other more challenging part. It's 'I'll obey as long as I'm comfortable'. It's conditional obedience, but we need to understand that this text is going to get really, really serious here in a moment, because what we **find is that** *God does not give us options to consider, but commands to obey.*

What we see is the corruptive power of sin. The people had turned away from God and their hearts were not with him. They put their own houses ahead of God's house and Haggai is told to ask them some questions.

Haggai 2:12 *If someone carries consecrated meat in the fold of their garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, olive oil or other food, does it become consecrated?* Just so you know, when the priests were going to sacrifice they would always wear their robes. They would take holy or sanctified meat, and they would take the robes and fold it up into like a little pocket to keep the meat. What Haggai's doing is asking if the robe, which is now kind of touching something holy, brushes up against something that is unholy, does the holiness rub off on the unholiness, and the unholiness become holy? And, the answer is, “No”. In other words, the holiness doesn't rub off.

It's like this, a modern example would be. If I clean my hands, my hands are clean, and I touch a dirty plate full of spaghetti sauce. Do my clean hands make the dirty plate clean? No, the dirty plate might make my clean hands dirty. This is what he was saying, and then he illustrates that principle in verse 13.

Haggai 2:13 *If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?* The priest answers, "Yes." What's he doing? He's basically showing that sin is like a disease.

Sin spreads easier than holiness. It's the corruptive power of sin. Paul said it this way in the New Testament – **1 Corinthians** 15:33 *Bad company corrupts good character.* There is a corruptive power in sin. Like spaghetti sauce it stains everything it touches – and even a tiny little drop on your best white shirt ruins the whole thing.

But it gets **even worse** – Haggai 2:14 *Then Haggai said, “So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,’ declares the Lord. ‘Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.* We could say it this way. When your heart isn't right with God, everything you do will be wrong.

So what do we see so often in our lives. "Oh God, I'll obey you, I'll obey, as long as you do what I want you to do." "God, I'll obey you as long as this is working out for me." "I'll obey you as long as it doesn't cost me too much, or isn't convenient to me." "I'll give you fifty pence obedience God, but not fifty pounds obedience."

This is absolutely the wrong approach to God. We need to understand that we do not obey God so that he will bless us. We obey God because we love him. It's all about the heart. We obey God because of who he is. We obey God because we love him, and we want to honour him with everything in us. This is why getting our hearts right matters so much.

Haggai 2:15 *Now give careful thought to this from this day on — consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the Lord's temple.*

If you were here at week number one you remember we talked about this. Haggai told them - you're drinking but you're still thirsty. You're eating but you're not full. You're putting your money in pockets with holes in it. In other words, you're doing everything you can to have meaning in this life but you're still empty. You're accumulating as much wealth and things and having as much fun as you can, but you still feel like there's something more.

You're consuming everything that you can and yet there's not enough left over. You're working your backside off, and you're not getting ahead. What's going on with this? He said, "You remember that? Before you built the foundation that's where you were." Then in verse 16 he says this, he says, "**When you hoped for a twenty bushel crop, you harvested only ten.**"

Haggai 2:17 *I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail,* STOP there for a moment - Now if I'm honest, I don't like that picture of God. I'm doing all this. I'm trying my best, and you God, you sent these things to keep me from having my crops? Is it even worth it? Why in the world would a good God stop us from having provision when we're doing everything we can just to survive. What kind of God is that? Is that a God that I want to serve? Is that a God that truly loves me? Why would God do that? The next part of the verse helps **us to understand.** *I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not return to me,' declares the Lord.*

There's the reason. You see God is not trying to punish his people. God was trying to restore his people. That was his goal. God was not trying to punish them. He was simply trying to restore them.

Sometimes God doesn't change our difficult circumstances because **he is trying to change our heart.** I'm NOT saying if something bad is going on in your life right now, you deserve it and God is sending it. I am not saying that. We need to understand that sometimes God may allow something bad to get our attention and draw our hearts back. Difficult things happen for different reasons – our own poor choices; the reality that we live in a broken,

sinful world; spiritual attack – usually allowed by God to make us stronger; and, because God wants our hearts.

If you go back to week number one, and this is why I love this book is because God is so simple in his love. Week number one, you remember the simplicity of God's message? They're like, "I know we're supposed to build it but we don't know how God," and God said, "Here's how you do it."

Number one, go up to the mountain. Number two, bring down the timber. Number three, build my temple. That's how you do it.

Week two they're doing it but they're discouraged and want to give up. **God said**, "**Just be strong and do the work**. Put down another stone. Put down another stone. Just stay in the game. Just be faithful. One stone on top of another."

Week number three, God has one simple message, and in this text above all **else God says**, "**I want your heart**." More than anything else God says, "I want your heart. I want you to seek me with all of your heart."

Matthew 6: 31-33 *So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

It's all about the heart. If your heart isn't right with God then everything you do is wrong, but when your heart is right with God you'll see him start to bless you. It's all about the heart. Seek FIRST and then

God doesn't mind if we have a nice house as long as it doesn't come before him. We can be ambitious, as long as it doesn't get in the way of our relationship with God. It's true that some people don't have much money, but we should never use that as an excuse not to give generously – seek first and then. We obey God because we love him, not to get a blessing.

I think one of the big problems for Christianity in the West is **conditional obedience** – Isaiah 29:13 *The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.* They honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.

The beauty of this story is God got their hearts and because their hearts came back to God, so did the blessings of God. Not because they obeyed, but because their hearts were right. So, here they are and even though they hadn't finished the temple. Even though they didn't do anything to deserve it, only because their hearts had changed God said, "I am giving you a promise now. Now's the time to build the temple." Now's the time to get your hearts right with God. Now is the time to repent of sin that you have rationalized or justified. Now is the time to stop giving lip service and not giving him your heart, and worrying about money and things. Now is the time to give your heart.

Haggai 2:18-19 *Today you have completed the foundation for my temple, so listen to what your future will be like. ¹⁹ Although you have not yet harvested any grain, grapes, figs, pomegranates or olives, I will richly bless you in the days ahead.*

This is not a reward for what they had done, because the temple was not near being finished. It was because they gave their hearts to God. Above all else God says, "I want your heart," and there might be someone here today that if you're really honest with him, God is going to do a miracle in you and no one may see it from the outside, because this one's going to happen on the inside.

You may be obeying outwardly, but you are rebellious or discontent inwardly. No more lip service. Let's give him our whole hearts. We do not obey God so he will bless us. We obey God because we love him. With all of our hearts, minds, soul and strength.