

The "Meh" Generation

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[0 : 00] Okay, folks, with Haggai open in front of you, and if you're struggling to find it, a wee inside tip is find the first book of the New Testament called Matthew, and then skip back three wee ones, and you'll hit Haggai.

Let me tell you a conversation I had recently. My oldest daughter came home from school and asked her that question, that annoying question that parents always ask.

And if you're a parent here, you've probably done it. And let me tell you from experience, I've subsequently realised there's better questions to ask that provide better inroads into our conversation. So I asked her on this occasion, I said, how was school today?

And walking back from her, it wasn't so much an answer, it was just a noise. Okay, she just went, meh. Here's what I want you to do, turn to your neighbour for ten seconds, have a go at translating meh into English, okay, go for it.

Okay, ten seconds. Here's what I took from meh. I took from it, I'm really not all that fussed.

[1 : 07] Say something like that. Kind of happened, went through the motions, and let's not pretend we don't do that as adults as well. Some of you have heard you do it when you talk about work.

It was a bit meh. A bit meh. But here's the thing, as we get into Haggai this morning, we're going to be in this for the month of January, thinking about this big challenge that this book presents us. It's maybe a book that you've never thought about before. The generation of God's people that Haggai's addressing, he's an Old Testament prophet, could well be nicknamed the meh generation. Because the problem in Haggai is not so much apostasy. They've not abandoned the faith. They've not thrown it out. The problem's not apostasy. The problem is just apathy.

They're just not really all that fussed about the Lord. They've just grown a bit meh towards him and his ways. Now let me ask you as you start this, as we start this, if I was to ask you honestly in your heart of hearts how you would describe your current view of the God of the Bible, would it be meh?

[2 : 20] The fire in your belly that maybe once was there for Jesus has gone cold. The zeal to serve him with your life, to give it your all, isn't quite what it used to be.

Let me just say, if that's you here today, then Haggai's the book for you. And these are always big questions to ask about our lives, isn't it?

My biggest fear for my life, dear brothers and sisters, is that I'm just going to go a bit meh, right? In life, in ministry, just go a bit lukewarm in my love for Jesus.

And this book prompts us to take in the panorama of who he is. Now, a great question to ask of this book is how did this generation of God's people get to this place?

And these are always wonderful opportunities to grasp the fact that when it comes to the God of the Bible, as we think about the background to this letter, we're not dealing in mythology. We're not dealing in mythology.

[3 : 23] We are dealing and diving into history. And maybe that's a new concept for you this morning. You had the Bible up there with kind of Aesop's fables and the little book of Chinese Proverbs.

Let me ask you lovingly, have you read it? Have you read it? Maybe you're watching this and you've never thought about the claims of Christianity. Have you read it? Would you like to read it?

I'm game. If you are, would you like to read it? How do we get to know the God of the Bible? We listen to his voice as he speaks to us. If you're a Christian here today, let me ask you, have you got plans to read the Bible this year?

It's always what they say, isn't it? Fail to plan, you plan to fail. Do we know the story? There's French philosopher, Emile Calais, who having asked some big questions of his atheistic worldviews, he sat in the trenches during World War I and thought, what is life all about?

A friend gave him a Bible and has returned to France and he said of it, this at last was a book that would understand me. And that's the claim that God would make in his word.

[4 : 28] Why? Because the God of the Bible, our creator, is the God of history. He is the God of history. And the Babylonians are the world superpower in 600 BC.

It's kind of roughly where we are. And as part of their territorial expansion program in the year 586, they conquer Jerusalem in the south.

And what happens is they gradually carry away God's people to Babylon. And just short of 50 years later, I mean, this really is like a great big game of risk.

Another superpower emerges on the world stage called Persia. And the Persians defeat the Babylonians and they take over everything that belongs to them, including the exiles from Judah who happen to find themselves away from their homeland in Babylon.

And the Persians have a different tactic to the Babylonians. The Babylonians take and try and convert. What the Persians do is they send back so that the people that they send back will think favorably of them.

[5 : 33] And so what happens under the orders and support of King Cyrus of Persia, the exiles from Judah are allowed to return to their homeland. So you imagine they make their way back.

Zerubbabel, you read about them in verse 1, he leads the first wave of God's people to come back home. But what the Bible is explicitly clear on is that these things didn't happen to God's people because they were the unfortunate victims of power politics.

These things happened because God made them happen, right? The exile happened not because the Babylonians are in control, but because standing above it all is a God who is punishing his people for their disobedience and flagrant sin against him.

And just like Adam and Eve were, they have to be banished from the promised land. God would not be faithful. He would not be holy if he allowed them to stay. And the people returned to the land not because Cyrus was a decent bloke, but the people returned to the land because this God is kind, this God is gracious, and this God has purposes to fulfill, plans to bring blessing to the nations of the world, and he's going to do it through this people.

And so God's people, to much fanfare and rejoicing, they begin to build the temple again in Jerusalem in 536 BC. And you can read about that in Ezra chapter 4.

[7 : 02] But the thing is, 16 years after that initial bit of enthusiasm, Project Temple 2.0 has completely fizzled out. The people have just lost the spark for the Lord.

They've lost the dream for the project. And what God does, because he's gracious, because he is good, because he is loving, he raises up the prophet Haggai to be his messenger.

And God's purpose through Haggai is to breathe new life into his people's hearts through a mixture of challenge and encouragement and get them building the temple again.

And so you want to tap into Haggai chapter 1 this morning. Here's what God knows his people are saying. Verse 2 of chapter 1. This is what the Lord Almighty says.

These people say, And you might ask, why is God getting so animated about a building?

[7 : 59] Why does he care so much about some bricks and mortar? The answer is because of what the temple represents. The temple is about God's presence.

This God, despite of who we are, should have said to Israel, he longs to dwell with us. He lives slap bang in the middle of our presence. It's an incredible thing.

The God who created all things, he looked on us not because we were good. He looked on us because he's gracious and he lives with us. All the gods of the world live up there. They live out there.

Our God lives in the middle of us. And the temple is about God's peace. This is where the sacrifices happen.

This is the place where you would go to know that your sins against a holy God have been dealt with. You want to be right with him? You want to be right with him? You're an Old Testament.

Israelite, you've got to go to the temple.

[8 : 55] You've been given of your sin and the temple is about God's promises. In other words, this building points beyond itself to a time when the peoples of the world are going to come in and see how good this God is and the whole earth will one day be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

This is about way more than a building. That's why we call the series More Than a Building. And let me try and distill that into one really simple, accessible truth for us.

In Haggai, it's almost as if God is laying his heart on the line and saying to his people, my heart's desire is that you would come to a point where the number one reason that you exist, the greatest longing in your heart is to know me and enjoy me forever.

And so that's the question that God would ask us this morning. This is all about priorities. This is all about what you and I most long for in our hearts. And this is why it's such a brilliant book to study at the outset of this year when we sit down and we think about the things that our lives are going to be about this year.

Are they going to be about the Lord? Are they going to be about serving him? Are they going to be about knowing him? Are they going to be about other things? And so in the time remaining, I just want us to focus on two things in these first 11 verses of Haggai chapter 1.

[10:20] Right, two things. What can we say about these people? What we can say is that they've lost the spring in their spiritual step. They've just gone a bit flat.

And there's two reasons why they've gone a bit flat. And just notice as we go through these just how close to the bone and relevant these things are for us. The first reason is in the text.

And the reason is it's just really simpler to settle down. Right, you know that in your life? Really just simpler to settle down. Now any good estate agent will tell you that a good investment strategy is to find the most expensive street and to buy on it the cheapest house.

Right, buy the doer upper. That's what they say. Well, in Jerusalem Main Street, the cheapest house going is the temple. Have a look at what God says at verse 3. Here's the challenge.

Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses while this house remains a ruin? So it's not like these people aren't busy.

[11:30] Right, they're really busy. Really busy. Verse 9, God knows that they're busy. Verse 9, you are busy with your own houses. There's nothing wrong with being busy. It's God's people were called to be productive.

But what's happened is that they've confused primary and secondary things. Right? Primary things have become secondary things. Secondary things have become primary things.

How true is that in the Christian life? This is a challenge to keep the main thing the main thing. They are prioritising panelled houses. They are prioritising their own little DIY projects.

Right? The extension on the side, going up to the attic, out to the garden. They're pursuing their own agendas for bigger and better over and above God's purposes. Yeah, think about it, guys.

Think about my conversations over the holiday there and how much of them centred around our home, our next move, the next project, the next promotion at work.

[12:31] Do you know these kind of things? I was challenged over those conversations, thinking to myself, what would somebody listening in on that? That, Shanks, what would they conclude is the thing that drives your life from what you've said in that conversation?

What gets you going? What gets you up out of bed in the morning? What would they derive from that conversation? Is you going to work tomorrow? Is you going to school? Is you going to school? Is you going to school? What is it?

Is people looking at us that they would deduce to the things that make us tick? It's easier to settle down and reason two, I think, is behind the text.

And it's just safer to blend in. I heard it in Ezra chapter four when the people started rebuilding.

There came a wave of opposition from their neighbours. Because for them to get back in the land, and remember, it's not just them.

There's people from all over the nations round about in there. For them to start building the temple, for them to erect a structure right in the middle, is to declare to the world that our God is the true God and all the other gods that you worship are pretenders.

[13:35] So you can imagine the people of the world looking in at that thinking, we're not having that. Not for that. We really don't like what you guys stand for. And that can be hugely discouraging.

Do you know that in your own life? Discouraging when people say, I don't want anything to do with what you stand for. You know, I was taking the kids yesterday to the rope park at Craig Miller, telling a lady I met there what I did for a job, and her face dropped.

Not interested. It's discouraging, isn't it, when people say that? And after a while, that discouragement can lead to despondency. And after a while, it can just leave us with the feeling

that it's just easier to duck a conversation.

Yeah? And I find it as a parent not to try and constructively try and speak to the school lovingly about why they're asking my children to wear purple to celebrate Pride Day.

Right? It just becomes easier to duck that conversation. not because I want to do anything other than love and welcome and respect every human being who's made in God's image and hear me right clear on that.

[14:43] But because as a Christian, I just cannot affirm any, any lifestyle that would run contrary to what the Bible teaches. I just can't do that in good conscience. But after a while, it just becomes easier to duck a conversation.

It becomes easier to avoid a certain question. When people ask you what you did at the weekend, how easy is it just to say that you spent time with friends? And all of a sudden you see how this becomes really close to the bone.

It's just simpler to settle down and it's just safer to blend in. And you bring those two things together. Here's what happened. Here's what's happened in the background here to these people. The ideal of comfort.

We just want a comfortable life. Right? You're not doing away with God. We just want a comfortable life has taken the throne in these people's lives. And they've just lost a sense of the buzz for who the Lord is.

But what we can say secondly about this God is that he won't settle for second place. For here's the question God asks verse 5 and 7.

[15:49] He says, give careful thought to your ways. He says, stop and think about how you're living and stop and think and consider how it's going.

Right? God knows what these people are throwing themselves into. You get a list there from verse 5 and from verse 7. Planting, harvesting, eating, clothing, earning.

These are busy people. And particularly if you consider Haggai because of the dating he begins to speak at the harvest season when the people would begin to think that they might see results from these things but they're not.

God says, consider your ways. What's it telling you? I love that image you get there of putting money in a purse with holes in it. That constant cycle of money coming in and going out again and it didn't even hit your bank account.

You know that feeling? It just comes and it goes. I've never seen it. What's going on? That's what he's saying. These things that you're plowing yourselves into, do you see just how fragile and unsteady it all is?

[16:52] I read a fascinating quote from Jim Carrey recently, Hollywood actor. He said, I don't blow money. I don't have tons of houses. I know things can go away. I've already had that experience.

And it's true, isn't it? The things of our lives that we so often pursue are here today and often gone tomorrow. And God says, where is this getting you?

What is it telling you? But more than that, God says, and this is, this is difficult for us to hear, but this is true when you think about it. God says, I brought these things to pass.

Right? Verse nine, what you brought home, I blew away. Verse 11, I called for a drought on the fields. And if the people were on the ball, they'd remember that these are the covenant curses that God said he would bring in them for their disobedience.

What does this signify? It signifies that things aren't good between them and the Lord. Now we need to understand that we live at a different time in history from these people when Jesus has taken the covenant curses that we deserve on himself on the cross.

[18:00] Okay, he has died for the curses and punishment that I deserved. So this is not a straight line application for us today. But the heart of God in this remains the same.

The love of God in this remains the same. What does he want? He wants his people to wake up and remember who he is. Remember who he is.

Seven times in these verses God's covenant name capital L capital O capital R capital D that was a mouthful. The Lord is used. Do you see it? Seven times.

Thirty-four times in these three sorry, these two chapters God says I am the Lord, right? I am the God who has loved you with an everlasting love. Remember that.

I am a God who has fully committed myself to you in love and to my plans. I am the Lord. Don't forget that. I am the Lord. Not changed.

[18 : 54] You've gone and come back. I've not changed. And he is the Lord Almighty. He's the God of angel armies. That's what that means.

God wants his people to know in a world of scary opposition that he's always in control. that he's always bigger. That he's always better. And why are they to build the house?

See that magic word beginning with P at verse 8. God says that I may take pleasure in it. This God is a jealous God.

He's not jealous of his people, right? That's us. We get jealous of things all the time in my heart. It's our twisted hearts. I see someone having a better time than me in Facebook. I want it.

That's my jealous heart. We get jealous of things. But this God is jealous for his people. And there's a world of difference between being jealous of something and being jealous for something.

[19 : 53] There's a world of difference between him and us. He wants the sole affection of his people's hearts. He wants the people, his people to find their all satisfaction in him.

And so this God says, I will not settle for second place. And fast forward to Mark's gospel in the New Testament and we see Jesus saying the exact same thing.

So in Mark chapter 10, this rich young man comes to Jesus with a burning question. He says, what must I do to inherit eternal life? For all intents and purposes as a reader, you read it and you think, this guy has it sorted.

This is the guy that we would look at and think, we want to be like him. And Jesus gives him the commandments, do not steal, do not murder, honour your father and mother. And it's almost as this guy goes, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick.

Done it all. I've kept them. And I love it, you read Mark 10 and it comes across as you read it, Jesus could have quite easily left the conversation there and said, that's great mate, off you go.

[21 : 04] But no, he didn't leave it there. Because Jesus loves us too much for us to make him second place. Mark lets us know that Jesus, and notice this word in the text, you've got to notice it, okay?

Jesus looked at him and what did he do? He loved him. And that's why the conversation kept going. And that's why Jesus asked the searching question of this man's heart because he loved him.

And that's why God would ask of us this morning as he searches our hearts through his words, doesn't do it to out us, he does it because he loves us. Jesus looked at him and loved him.

Jesus isn't simply after this man's surface obedience, he longs to have first place in this man's life because true life will only be found in making Jesus king, letting him have the driving seat, and allowing him to reshape and reform our minds.

So I was thinking about this over the holidays, remember driving out and I'm driving behind somebody with L plates on. Do you remember doing that? Maybe some of you are doing it, maybe some of you will do it.

[22 : 13] Remember doing it. What is it they made us do? Remember before we sat our test, just put the L plates on, saying to the world, I'm still learning. Let me just say the Christians that have made the biggest impact on me over my Christian life are the people I could look at and I could say at whatever age they are, they've never stopped learning.

They've never stopped learning Jesus. And it's almost as if Jesus at this point is this man comes to him and says, what will it take for me to follow you? He is saying that you need to put an L plate on your life and you need as a disciple to be all about learning me for life.

To be a disciple is to learn Jesus. Learn Jesus. And the thing is when you come to Jesus, and I love this in the Gospels, people flock to him.

Why? Because in him they don't find someone with arms folded. They find somebody with arms open wide who welcomes them in and says, come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest.

And that's the Jesus who we meet in the Gospels. And that's why Jesus goes after the idol in this man's heart and he says, go and sell everything that you have and come follow me.

[23 : 24] Because that's the idol in this man's heart. And Jesus loves him too much to let him settle for that. But the decision's in his core. And it turns out he loves money more than Jesus. And Mark tells us that he goes away with his face sad.

heart. But let let's he see him what would define success for you this year? If you're thinking about what's on the throne of your life, what if it didn't happen this year would leave you feeling gutted?

the grades at school you need to get into that college or uni getting into that friendship group you've been trying to tap into get your foot in the door for years what about that holiday that it might happen or might not happen that time off what about that partnership promotion at work whatever it is Jesus would say because he loves us he would say is following me your greatest priority is following me your greatest priority the thing is we don't go to a temple anymore we go to Jesus as new testament believers the true meeting place between God and man and so the question becomes are we prioritizing knowing him are we investing what we have in the spread of the gospel do we love and serve and care for the people that are so dear to Jesus his heart have we got a heart for the peoples of this world who do not know this Jesus because life is to be found in him you know as we close I had something to close with and I just from the drive up I thought I'd change it in light of this morning let me just tell you about a man who had his priority is right so three years ago I remember speaking to Archie at an evening service and he sat right there and I asked him Archie how can I pray for you this week and let me just say if we want to change the spiritual temperature amongst us that's a great question to ask how can I pray for you this week so I asked him the question and he sat there for but 10 seconds just in silence and I could see that he was staring just thinking about it and the guy at that point in his life was not sure of physical ailments could have said anything could have said hip could have said all sorts of things physical stuff he could have also said pray for my family pray for my family pray for their interest pray for what's going on in their lives because you know the Naismith family is big right could have said family but you know what he said he said would you pray for my walk with Jesus and to my dying day that will stay with me as a man who had his priorities right so the question that comes from Haggai chapter one and the question that's going to come at us through this book Jesus says am I number one am I number one do you see that I love you to ask you enough am I your greatest priority let's just pause for a moment just before I pray and let's just allow God to do his work by his spirit through his words in our lives as we respond to this challenge this morning let's pause for a moment and then we'll pray so heavenly father we ask that by your spirit you would show us this morning the areas where we need to change thank you that you love us so incredibly much that you would take the time to send your son Jesus in pursuit of us to search us out to save us to rescue us to reconcile us to yourself and you are committed to forming us more than to the likeness of him and so Lord I pray that you would help us this year to prioritize above all the other things that are important and that we need to think about would they all fall into place under the number one priority of seeking first the kingdom of God and your righteousness and we thank you that you are a God who is committed to lovingly meeting all of our needs in Jesus prone to wander Lord I feel it prone to leave the God I love here is my heart oh take and seal it seal it for thy courts above
Amen