

God Encourages

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Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. Let me encourage you to come expectantly to Haggai chapter 2. And let's just pray, shall we, just before we come to God's inspired word.

Heavenly Father, we were thinking about last week in this book of Haggai, about what you do as your word goes forth. Thank you that your word does not return to you empty.

Thank you that it is living and active. It is sharper than a double-edged sword. Father, thank you that you call your people to tremble before your word. And so, Father, we ask that you would transform us as a community as your voice is heard today.

Lord, help us to respond rightly, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, Haggai chapter 2. It's a famous story told about Sir Christopher Wren.

If you've no idea who Sir Christopher Wren is, if you're a young generation, let me just tell you who he is, you'll know what he's famous for. His famous work was the fact that he was the guy that designed St. Paul's Cathedral down in London.

[1 : 05] And there's a story told about Sir Christopher Wren, about how one day he decided when this building was being constructed, he decided to go undercover because he wanted to understand and see the heart of the people who were building his vision.

What was the mood like? So he goes undercover and he starts walking around the cathedral and he comes across three men. And he asks the three men the same question. He says, why is it that you're working?

So he goes around the cathedral, number, man number one, he says, tell me what you're doing, why are you working? And the man looks up at him and says, I'm just carving a bit of stone. Which is true, right? Just carving, chipping away, chiseling a bit of stone.

Fine. So he keeps on walking, going through the cathedral. He comes across man number two. He says, why are you working? And he says, well, sir, I'm working for five shillings, two pence a day. I don't know why that's worth today, but it sounds all right for me. The guy said, I'm working to put bread on the table for my family to eat. Another brilliant reason to work. So he keeps on walking through the cathedral and he comes across man number three and he asks him the same question.

[2 : 14] He says, tell me, what is it you're doing? Why are you doing it? And of course, this man is doing exactly the same as the other two. He's got a family to feed. He's chiseling away at a bit of stone.

But this man looks up at Christopher Wren, looks him in the eye, not knowing who he is. And he says, why, sir, I'm helping to build Sir Christopher Wren's beautiful cathedral.

So this man had seen the blueprints. He'd seen the drawings. But more than that, he bought into the bigger picture of what's going on, what's ahead. And there's a world of difference, isn't there, between fulfilling a task and understanding the bigger picture of why you're doing the task.

And this morning is all about buying into God's big plan for the future. Big plan for the future. And it's so important that we know as followers of Jesus why we're doing what we're doing.

What's the end game? Why are we doing this? Why do we meet on a Sunday? Why do we bother with evangelism? Why do we pray? Because I don't know whoever you are here today.

[3 : 22] Maybe you're a Christian. Maybe you're a non-Christian coming in thinking, what is this all about? And we all come here having watched the news this week and seen the things that have gone on. Okay, we've seen the devastation in Tonga.

Maybe you've read the stories this week about the two richest men in the world whose net worth has somehow doubled during lockdown, while the rest of the world is struggling to make ends meet. Or maybe it's just like me this week. I filled in, I did my gas and electricity prices this week, did my meter readings, and I could not believe the sum that came back.

Never seen a figure like that before in my life. All of these things, don't they, come at our hearts and cause us to ask the question, who's at the steering wheel?

Who's in control? Is there a plan for where the world is going? And this passage today would tell us that history is going somewhere.

[4 : 21] It would tell us that God has a plan for his people's good. Now the question we need to ask ourselves in the context of Haggai is why do these people at this time need to know that?

And this is where we join the action. Come with me to verse 1 of chapter 2. And the chronology is really important here. So this is near two months after the prophet Haggai has begun to speak. So two months, get that figure in your head, two months. And it's nearly one month since the people started rebuilding the temple at the end of chapter 1. So the maths is that they have been building this thing for nearly 30 days.

Okay. And I remember having some friends who are really into the gym. And they always used to say, we're never going in January. Never going in January. Because you have to queue for the machines.

You have to wait for a shower. We're not going in January. We're going in February. Do you know why we're going in February? Because all the people that came in January hoping that this was something they could do this year have given up.

[5 : 29] Because it's quieter in February. And the enthusiasm of the people who came in January has totally dwindled. And we know that feeling, don't we, all of us? Just losing enthusiasm.

Just feeling the reality of what's in front of us. Of running out of steam. And that's what's going on on the streets of Jerusalem. The honeymoon period is over.

The reality of the project has set in. The sheer size of the task of rebuilding the temple has got them down. And you've got to understand that the energy and enthusiasm levels that once were there in shed loads have completely dwindled.

And they're just spiritually spent. And so if the issue, if you follow with me, if the issue in chapter one is apathy and God challenges that, the issue in chapter two is despondency.

And God encourages. They are weary. They are discouraged. They are disillusioned. They're discouraged. Now here's the thing.

[6 : 33] One of the last time, when the last time was it, you walked into Waterstones. Or Amazon. Or something like that. You know how you walk into Waterstones and you go in and there's the table. And it just says bestsellers on it.

Right? The ones that are flying off the shelves that week, that month. The bestsellers. You ever wondered what makes a bestseller a bestseller? I reckon it's because it clicks with where people are at.

Now let me just, whoever you are here today, let me just tell you about a Christian bestseller. It was written by a man. It was a book rather called Pilgrim's Progress. Written by a man called John Bunyan way back in the day.

And it remains a bestseller to this day. And it was this allegorical book that he wrote about the Christian life. A central character, a man called Christian, however he came up with that. I don't know.

But he's journeying towards heaven. He's journeying towards heaven. And on the way to heaven, he's coming across all these different characters. And one of the characters he comes across is the giant of despair.

[7 : 33] The giant of despair who lives in Doubting Castle. So Christian, on the way to the promised land, on the way to heaven, encounters the giant of despair. And somehow he's ushered into the castle of Doubting Castle.

And he becomes so overwhelmed by the size of the giant, it almost causes him to give up. And Christians over the years have bought that book because it clicks.

It's a bestseller because there's something in it. There's something that John Bunyan was saying all those years ago that we know to be true in our lives. That we become discouraged on the Christian journey.

That the size of the task, the size of the giant becomes overwhelming. And this is how it's going to play out in our day-to-day lives.

We know it, don't we? That relationship in your family that's wearing you down. That job that so many in our world are in and will be exactly the same.

[8 : 33] That job that seems dead end. You're at a career cross loads. You're wondering what life is going to look like after university. Applications, what's going to happen.

There's a niggling health issue in your life that's not going away. You just keep getting it wrong with the kids. The sin that dominates your life repeatedly just keeps coming up.

You don't feel like you're making any progress. That test result that came back that has left you flat. There's all sorts of things in our lives as Christians that can cause us to doubt.

And think, can I, should I, can I keep going? Can I keep going? Can I keep going? And this is what we need to say here. God speaks to encourage.

He spoke last week, a couple of weeks ago, to challenge. This week he speaks to encourage. And you've got to understand that the Lord here is the good doctor. There's a reason why Jesus is in the Gospels. He's the great physician.

[9 : 29] And here's what we need to do as we draw alongside these people in chapter 2. I want us to be honest about two things that can cause us to give up what God's called us to do.

Two things that will cause us to give up. And then I want us to be strengthened by three things I think should cause us to keep going. Okay. And here's really simply what I want us to see.

I want us to see that three is greater than two. Okay. Three is greater than two. Because here is two things in the text, or sorry, two things in this passage that can cause us to give up.

Okay. Ready for these? Here's number one. The present feels messy. Present feels messy. And this is kind of what's going on behind the text. The people have been at this for nearly 30 days.

You know what that's like to be at something for a month, don't you? And remember, this is 520 BC. So this is not high cranes at the St. James's Quarter kind of gig. This is not civil engineers and world-class architects coming together to join forces.

[10 : 33] This is just ordinary people. Ordinary people having a go at doing what God's called them to do and build the temple. And all the likelihood, all they've got to show for it so far is just they're looking at a pile of rubble.

And this thing that God has told them to do looks seriously unimpressive compared to their panelled houses. Do you remember when we met them in chapter one? Seriously unimpressive what they're looking at.

And it's like that, isn't it, in the Christian life. It can feel messy. It can feel unimpressive all the time. All the time. Praying. In your room.

Doing what God's called you to do. Right? We met last month upstairs hall. It was freezing up there. There was something like six or seven of us with the windows open. Thinking to myself, this looks so unimpressive.

So unimpressive. That relationship as we walk with one another through life. That relationship that seems to not be going anywhere. That seems to be getting harder. Instead of, it's going to emotionally cost you.

[11 : 38] To choose the road of saying sorry and being right with somebody. Seeking reconciliation rather than choosing the easy road of just walking away. It feels unimpressive.

I know many of you tomorrow are going to go to the fanciest offices. And you come in here and as wonderful a building as this is, the truth is that the roof leaks and it's cold.

You know, you can go on the internet and you can look at snazzy TED Talks complete with graphic design. And you come in here on a Sunday and we try our best and we seek for Christ's glorifying excellency.

But I'm so aware in a world that looks slick and impressive that we come in here and we're devoting ourselves to listening to an ancient text. It can feel like the world is so much trendier.

It can feel as we come in here. It can feel, isn't it? It can feel messy. It can feel unimpressive. But this is going to challenge us not to judge things by how we see them.

[12 : 37] It's to judge them. Keep on going. And like, well, in light of what God has said is true about the future. But it's true, isn't it? That the present feels messy. It's where these people are at.

The present feels messy. And number two, the past feels rosy. And this is what's specifically mentioned in the text. Look at verse three. God says, Now let me just point out there, isn't it wonderful that God asks questions?

Rhetorical questions. Yes, this is about submitting to the lordship of God. That he is Lord over every area of his people's lives. But this lordship comes in the context of relationship.

The Lord asks them questions. And you see, what's going on here is what the people are doing is that they're taking what they're seeing in front of them, the rubble. And many of them, probably an older generation, who remember what the temple was like in Solomon's day, all those years before exile, are looking at it and thinking, this is nothing compared to what it was before.

Nothing compared to what it was before. And the younger generation who are perhaps enthusiastic thinking, well, what's the point? What's the point? You know, like Uncle Albert from Only Fools and Horses, if you're in a generation, remember that, grew up on that show.

[14:04] What was his line? He always said, during the war, didn't he? During the war. Always loved telling a story about what it was like back in his day. How good he had it. And it's true, isn't it, friends, that nostalgia can get us down.

It can get us down. Being pessimistic about the present. Particularly when it's coming from a place of where we're rose-tinted spectacles about the past.

Particularly as things change. I hear it all the time as we look out at our country. And people say we used to be the land of the book. Right?

We used to have Billy Graham here. Celtic Park was packed. Revival was going on everywhere. And now look at us. I'm not unsympathetic to that view.

People say, John Knox, remember what he said? He said, give me Scotland or I die. That was his rallying call to his generation. And the thing is, if we want to recapture something of that, give me Scotland or I die, let's go for it.

[15:05] Absolutely. That spirit of revivalism that is expecting God to move in magnificent ways. That has a passion to take the news of Jesus out of our comfort zones to the suburbs and the schemes of our nation.

If that's why we're quoting it, absolutely. But what so often happens is we quote it and we look out. And we retreat.

And what we end up doing is we end up casting judgmental stones at a culture that seems to be so different from the one that we're used to. And that cannot be God's heart for his people. To be so caught up in the past that we're failing to get involved in the present.

Yes, I'm concerned about the state of our nation. But our God would say, I'm bigger than that. He has not ceased to be Lord over our nation. We saw about it last week. Jesus Christ, the risen Jesus, is Lord over all things.

That will never change. The present feels messy. And this generation, the past feels rosy.

[16:12] And those are two things, if we're really honest about it, that can cause us to give up. Remember what I said? Start three is greater than two.

So God, I think, gives them three things to be strengthened by. Three reasons that they need to keep going. With this building project.

Remember we said it was so much bigger than a building. It was about their heart for the Lord. I mean, about who he is. The heart for his presence. Wanting him. You see, verse four, God says, be strong, says the Lord.

And if you're thinking of the wider Bible story, you'll recognize echoes of what God said to Joshua and his generation. When they were thinking about, can we take the promised land? Is God good for his word?

And God would say to Joshua, no, be strong and courageous. Do not be discouraged. For the Lord, your God, is with you. Echoes of that here. Do you see how God, verse four, he addresses Joshua.

[17:14] He addresses Zerubbabel. He addresses the people. You know, in sport, they always talk about a good man manager. Somebody, they always said this of Alex Ferguson, that he would go around a dressing room and he would know exactly the right thing to say to every individual player.

Do you see how God here is the ultimate man manager? Knows what to say to the people. And it's almost as if he could, he would have gone around every single individual person and said, be strong, be strong.

Do not fear. Keep working. Keep building. Why? Here's our three reasons. First two will be really quick. And the last one, we'll think about it a little bit more. Number one, because the Lord is in your corner.

He's in your corner. Do you see six times, if you've got the text there, six times in quick succession from verse four, God says, I am the Lord Almighty.

It was in our second song, I think. Who can stop the Lord Almighty, right? So he is the God of angel armies. It's a warrior term. This is who this God is.

[18:13] He is the all-powerful God. He's the God who will not be thwarted in accomplishing the purposes that are in his heart for the good of his people. It's the Lord Almighty who's in your corner.

And while it looks unimpressive here, you've got to understand that sitting above this is a God who reigns over all things. You know, I love this story. I've told it before, but I'm telling it again, okay?

Love the story of the old Quaker Hall down in Birmingham. Sitting on a bit of prime real estate. And there's something like a handful of members in this little Quaker Hall. One day they receive a letter from John Lewis, big department store who are next door, offering to buy their land.

The Quaker Hall sent one back saying, thanks, but no thanks. But while we've got you, we'd like to make an offer to buy your land. You're sincerely John Cadbury, right?

John Cadbury, the owner of the vast Cadbury's Chocolate Empire and who was one of the handful of people in that Quaker Hall. It matters that you know who's on your team.

[19:18] It matters who you know has got your back. And God is saying to the people here, it's the Lord Almighty who's in your corner. And here's reason number two.

You keep going because the Lord is in your corner, yes, but the Lord is by your side. Verse five, do you see how God takes them on a history lesson? He says, I'm the same God who brought your forefathers out of Egypt all those years before.

Sure, they would have heard about that in exile. But how God had come through for them in the past and made these glorious promises to his people about the future. He says, I'm the covenant gods.

L-O-R-D, the covenant gods. Covenant, just meaning this binding commitment that God makes to his people. His promises to them that he will be their God.

They will be his people. He knows where he's taking them. He will take them to the promised land. What's so special about the promised land? It's not just that this is a nice place.

[20:19] It's because God is there. He is with his people. And this shows us the determination of the God of the Bible to win and bring his people home to himself.

He is with them. And then really quickly, number three. Why keep going? The Lord is in our corner. The Lord is by our side. And here's number three. Because the Lord has got our future. He's got our future. Verse six. And just look at how many times God says, I will there.

Just stop and have a look at it. I didn't see it until Friday. He says, I will. I will. Do you see? I will. It's wedding language here. God is binding himself to his people.

It's almost as saying, sorry. Do you see how the initiative is all of the Lord here? It's almost as if he's saying, stand back and see what I will do for you.

[21:17] Stake it all on me, knowing that I will come through for you. Now, here's what I want us to understand. This is about who the Lord is. This is not about these people.

This is not about you and I bringing our spiritual A-game to the party. God is saying, if only you could reach the spiritual threshold, then I'll be able to do things. But if you don't, I can't.

No, that's not what he's saying. He's saying, I will do this. I will do this. This is not about you and I getting our moral act together. This is about God being who God is. And what will God do for them?

Two words. He will fill. See that, verse 7? God will fill. He will fill the temple with his glory.

His people will experience and know his presence and his grandeur and his greatness in a superior way to anything that they've ever known before. Even greater, verse 9.

[22:22] Than anything that their ancestors had ever experienced before. God will fill this temple with glory. God will be with them. And how will he do that?

He will shake. See the word twice there? Verse 6 and 7. God is saying he will act.

He doesn't just make promises. He acts. He will act. He will do something. I take it that word shake just means he will do something so unmistakable in the eyes of the world to bring about his people knowing his glory.

And because he does it, because he acts, his people, the end of verse 9, will know his peace.

That's what God says he will do to this people who are currently looking at a pile of rubble.

And this is what he will do in the years to come. And of course, what does he want them to say? He wants them to say, if he was to walk around, why are you building?

[23:29] For them to say, because our God, we're going to fill this temple with glory. I don't know if you've ever had that experience of looking out over a mountain range.

And you look out, and all you can see is peaks in the distance. The thing is, as you look at the peaks, they look wonderful, but you just don't know the distance between the peaks. You know what I'm talking about? You just don't know the distance between the peaks. It's kind of like that with fulfillment when it comes to the Old Testament. Because this promise that God is saying that he will act to be with his people, it's got two peaks. And the thing is, we know one of them. So Jesus Christ, God's son lived. He died on the cross. And what do the gospel writers record as having happened as he dies on the cross? Darkness, this unexplainable darkness falls over the land. It's an unmistakable act. What is happening is Jesus is bearing the full weight of God's anger against our sin on himself as he hangs on the cross.

[24 : 41] It's an unmistakable act. Now what happens? The camera pans to the temple. What happens in the temple? There was a huge curtain there, this big no entry sign that says that sinful mankind cannot enter the presence of a holy God, the very place where God lived. And what happens is Jesus dies. The camera pans to the temple and this curtain is torn in two from top to bottom. It's an unmistakable act. And you can know peace with God. You can know access to this God. You can know him as your father because of the crucified Christ. And if you're here today and you haven't put your faith in this Jesus, you need to know that this is what you're turning down. This is what's on offer. Peace with the God of the universe. We are justified. We are right with him because of who Jesus is. And on the third day, Jesus rises. What is it? What do the gospel writers recall? They recall a violent earthquake. God literally shook the world. At the resurrection of Jesus, it is an unmistakable sign.

[25 : 52] God has acted in the crucified and in the risen Christ. That's one mountain peak. Second mountain peak still to come.

When this Jesus returns and there is a great trumpet call, I take it that just means there is another shaking. Unmistakable. As he ushers in the new heavens and the new earth, this kingdom of peace. Now it's a kingdom of peace because there is no more death. There is no more tears. There is no more sadness. There is no mourning because there is no sin. Because God has defeated his enemies. And for Christians, we understand that Jesus has paid for our sin on the cross. This is not about being a Christian, being a perfect person. This is about trusting yourself to Jesus who died for you. But if your hope isn't in Jesus, friends, this peace should come as a loving warning from heaven that either Jesus is paying for our sins or we're paying for our sins.

[27 : 02] And if our trust isn't in Jesus, then there is the thought of facing the almighty God, eternally having to be punished for our sins. Stuart was saying it earlier, we love people enough that we want to tell them about that.

But this is where history is gloriously going. And so God says to this people, do not fret over the rubble. Keep building. Keep building based on what I say will happen in the future. Let me just tell you one of my favorite stories that Jesus tells in the Gospels. And it's this parable of the mustard seed. Right? And he tells his two disciples who are facing up to the reality of what it is to follow him. And they're just watching this happen. They're thinking to themselves, why are the religious leaders in the Gospels not interested in Jesus? Why are the crowds disappearing, grappling with the unimpressive nature of following Jesus? And Jesus takes him aside and he says, the kingdom of God is like dot dot dot.

[28 : 10] You get this in Matthew 13. Think, top of my head. The kingdom of God is like, don't you ever play this game? I often play it in the Gospels. I don't know whether it's good, but it's called, if I were Jesus, how would I finish the sentence?

I'm speaking to my followers and I'm saying, the kingdom of God is like, I want to encourage them in the journey. What am I saying? I would have gone for something like, the kingdom of God is like Kilimanjaro. It looks huge. It's impressive. It's massive. Or I would have gone like something the kingdom of God is like, an impressive yacht in Monte Carlo.

That's what I would have gone for. Impressive. Grand. I know the world can't see it, but it's grand. Jesus says, the kingdom of God is like, it's like a mustard seed.

Next time you're in Dobby's, have a look for one. The smallest seed that you can imagine. It's like a mustard seed. Jesus said, the kingdom of God is like that. But when that mustard seed goes to the ground and dies, and it begins to grow, over time, at the end of the day, that is growing into the largest of garden trees.

[29 : 23] And what looks to you like the kingdom of God looks unimpressive now, but it will be anything other than unimpressive on the final day. Here is the mustard shaped king calling his people to adopt a mustard seed life, all because they have been captured by a mustard seed vision of the future.

Your life feels messy now? Your life feels unimpressive now? Absolutely. So did Jesus's. As he dies on the cross, that looked anything other than impressive. And yet, what would he say? Mustard seed kingdom. Working away, buying into God's plan for the future, not being discouraged by how things look now, but buying into this glorious vision as God says, I will fill the temple with glory.

And just as we close, let me tell you about an older lady I visited recently. An older couple finding it more physically difficult to get out on a Sunday.

And I'm sure that they could have easily tapped out the present. And as well, because I recognize the church will have changed a lot in their time here.

[30 : 48] Particularly, I'm sure as they come back, they will look out and many of you will not have seen them before. All these new faces. But let me tell you when I visited them, what encouraged me massively?

What they did is that they told me they very much have a heart to be involved in the present. They can't physically be here as much as possible as they want, but they want to be here spiritually speaking.

Do you know how they do it? They go and they bring it out, they keep a scrapbook. Right? They keep a scrapbook and it's a prayer scrapbook.

What they do, every month we produce a newsletter. They get the newsletter, any new members, cut them out into the scrapbook. So if you've been a member here in the last two years, three years, your picture's been in there, you're in the scrapbook.

Right? New member, scrapbook. Prayer request, scrapbook. Mission report, scrapbook. Anything else going on, scrapbook. So they have this scrapbook at home and they just pray.

[31 : 51] They just pray. Can't physically be here. They want to still be involved. They want to still be active with what God is doing in our nation all in the scrapbook. It's amazing. Scrapbook.

In the scrapbook. I'm driving home and reflecting on it, picturing them, praying, their age, in the room, thinking, that is the mustard shaped life.

Right there. Anything other than impressive. Anything other than impressive. But what is it that keeps them going? What is it that keeps them wanting to be involved in the present? Because they understand the future.

They understand the future. The mustard shaped life. Knowing the best is yet to come. So here are these people, Haggai's generation, looking at a pile of rubble, thinking about giving up.

And God says, keep going because what I'm doing in the future. Keep going. Blow you away what I'm going to do. God says to our generation today, making disciples, keeping on speaking for Jesus, seeking first the kingdom of God.

[32 : 55] Keep going. Why? Because Jesus is with you. Keep going because of the future. And so here's what I want you to do today. If you're weary and you're tired and you're spent and you're discouraged, come and drink in these precious promises from God, your father.

and here's what we're going to do. We're just going to be silent for a moment and I want us all to do that and just bring him our requests and let's pray that God by his spirit would take these promises and would they be furnace, fuel for the furnace of our hearts.

That's what I'm saying. Let's pray, shall we? It is grace that has brought us safe thus far and it is grace that will see us home.

And we just thank you, Father, for who you are today. Who can stop the Lord Almighty? Oh, Father, help us with the eye of faith to keep on doing what you've called us to do.

Father, furnace the fire of our hearts with a burning desire to serve you in this nation. Father, for those who are discouraged today, I pray that you would draw alongside.

[34 : 16] Father, for those who are hurting today, Lord, would you be the God of all comfort to them? Lord, those who are struggling with sin, would you bring a fresh understanding through your indwelling Holy Spirit of just who Jesus is, what he's done for us on the cross and the fact that in him he will get us home.

So, Father, we praise you for who you are today and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.