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Haggai 2:1-9 "When You're Stuck in the Rut of the Past"*

Proposition: In Haggai 2:1-9, we discover three steps to take when you're stuck in the rut of the past.

I. Step #1: Face the facts concerning the past (1-3).

- A. The past seemed so great.
- B. The present seemed so hard.
- C. The future seemed so bleak.

II. Step #2: Live for God in the present (4-5).

- A. We have God's presence (4).
 - 1. That's the basis of our strength.
 - 2. That's the incentive for our work.
- B. We know God's plan (5).
 - 1. God takes His covenant seriously.
 - 2. We should, too.

III. Step #3: Claim God's promises for the future (6-9).

- A. God told Haggai's people what He was going to do.
 - 1. God said He would shake the elements (7).
 - 2. God said He would shake the nations (7a).
 - 3. God said He would send the Desirable One (7b).
 - 4. God said He would fill His house with glory (7c).
 - 5. God said the glory of the future would exceed that of the past (8-9a).
 - 6. God said He would provide peace (9b).
- B. God has done the same with us.

Implications: Haggai teaches us some vital insights about God...

- 1. God knows our past better than we do.
- 2. God doesn't evaluate things on the basis of appearances.
- 3. God loves to use unimpressive means to display His impressive grace.
- 4. In the plan of God, Jesus makes all the difference.

The story is told of a man who once bought a new radio, brought it home, and placed it on the refrigerator. He then plugged it in, turned it to WSM in Nashville (home of the Grand Ole Opry), and proceeded to do the most unusual thing. He pulled all the knobs off! He had already tuned in all he ever wanted or expected to hear, and so he chose to limit his radio reception to one station.

It's easy to get in a rut, isn't it? There are many different kinds of ruts that can grip us, but one of the most powerful is this—the rut of *the past*.

The past can be such a beautiful thing. It's great to remember certain highlights in our lives. As I hit the rewind button on the VCR in my mind, I see Pastor Fissel's study and remember the day God saved me as an eleven year old. I thank God for that memory. And for many others—my wedding day, the birth of our two children, the phone call from this church inviting us to come and be your pastor, and more.

Yes, the past holds a lot of beauty for us. It can be a great source of encouragement. It can also be a noose around our necks. A bad past can haunt you. Even a good past can taunt you as a painful reminder of what you've forfeited by foolish choices in recent days.

Some people hate the past. Others live in it. Harry Truman once observed, "Men who live in the past remind

me of a toy I'm sure all of you have seen. The toy is a small wooden bird called the "Floogie Bird." Around the Floogie Bird's neck is a label reading, 'I fly backwards, I don't care where I'm going. I just want to see where I've been.'"

We all have a past, and part of honoring God in the present involves a proper perspective on the past. That's not always easy to obtain.

In 520 B.C., some people struggled in dealing with the past. I have in mind the Jews in the days of Haggai the prophet. In the Jews' past was the painful memory of the Babylonian exile—seventy years of captivity in a foreign land, all because their forefathers had turned their backs on God. But the exile was now over. Eighteen years earlier, in 538 B.C., God moved the heart of a pagan king, Cyrus, to authorize the return of the Jews to their homeland. A little under 50,000 Jews did just that—they came home.

But things weren't the same. For starters, most of the Jews didn't come home, choosing the comfort of their new Gentile surroundings to the risks of the war-torn homeland. And those who did return faced a mammoth challenge—the land was in shambles, and the temple in ruins.

Once back in the land, the Jews began to rebuild the temple. They fixed the foundation rather quickly, but then they got sidetracked. Instead of finishing God's house, they started pouring their time, energy, and resources into their own houses. Their priorities got all out of whack. No, there's nothing wrong with fixing up your house, but there's everything wrong with putting God on the back burner.

That was the problem Haggai confronted in chapter one, as we saw last time. The temple project had been just sitting there for over sixteen years, until God spoke through Haggai and said, "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin (4)?" Haggai confronted the people's mixed up priorities head on. And the people responded. They resumed the temple building project on September 21, 520 B.C., sixteen years too late perhaps, but better late than never!

But in addition to the priority mix-up, another problem hindered the temple work. It surfaced—and Haggai dealt with it—in chapter two. The problem was this. Some of the people were still plagued by the pain of past memories, not just their past sins but also their past blessings which they'd forfeited.

The problem surfaced quickly. After two months of building, it became quite apparent to the people that this new temple was a far cry from the old one. And the more they built, the more they felt the pain of the past.

At that point, God spoke again. He gave a second message to Haggai for His people, the second of four recorded in the book of Haggai. It's a message we need today.

What should you do when you're stuck in the rut of the past? In Haggai 2:1-9, we discover three steps to take if we want to move ahead for God.

I. Step #1: Face the facts concerning the past (1-3).

Notice verse 1, "On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai." Keep in mind the timeframe. The date of Haggai's first message—in our calendar—was August 29, 520 B.C. This second message came on October 17, a little under two months after the first message came and nearly one month after the work restarted on the temple.

We can guess what had been happening in Jerusalem during those weeks. Before you can perform any building project, there's a lot of preparation. No doubt, for the Jews that involved clearing the site of rubble, redressing stone that was fit for use, testing the safety of the walls that still stood, and organizing teams of workmen for different tasks.

Everybody was excited about rebuilding the temple—at first. But the reality of the hard work soon dampened their enthusiasm. Discouragement set in, as Haggai's words indicate.

Consider verses 2-3, "Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, ³ 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?'"

God told Haggai to give the second message to the same three parties that responded to the first: Zerubbabel, the political leader; Joshua, the spiritual leader; and to the remnant of the people. The message involved three questions. Please realize that when God asks questions, it's not to gain information. He knows everything. When He asks a question, it's to identify and deal with an issue or problem. In this case, the problem had to do with the mindset of the Jews. Simply put, they were stuck in the rut of the past.

By asking these questions, Haggai would bring out in the open three thoughts that were brewing in the minds of God's people.

- A. Thought #1: The past seemed so great.
- B. Thought #2: The present seemed so hard.
- C. Thought #3: The future seemed so bleak.

If you're stuck in the rut of the past, how do you get "unstuck?" According to Haggai, you start here. You face the facts about your past head on.

Another factor contributed to the problem for the Jews. Haggai says the second message came "on the twenty-first day of the seventh month." On the Jewish calendar, the seventh month is filled with major religious festivals. No work is allowed on these national holidays. They are Sabbath rest days. There's the Feast of Trumpets (on the first day of the month), the Day of Atonement (on the tenth day of the month), and the Feast of Booths (on the fifteenth day of the month).

Interruptions can discourage workers on any project. They make you feel like you're not getting anywhere. Such was the case with Haggai's people. The building project was huge anyway—remember it took Solomon seven years to build his temple. Then throw in some shortened weeks, and the project seemed even bigger. "We're not getting anywhere!" the people must have thought. They needed encouragement big time. Which is what Haggai gave them in chapter 2.

To do so, he asked some questions. Question #1—"Who of you are old enough to have seen the first temple?" Since that temple was destroyed in 586 B.C., those over 66 years of age would have seen it.

Question #2—"How does it look now?" Does anyone here remember what cars looked like seventy years ago? They've changed a little bit, haven't they? Well, some of Haggai's people had been around to witness the glory of Solomon's temple, and it was a site to behold. In size it was 90' long, 30' wide, and 45' high. In appearance there was beautiful white limestone, cedar, and gold exterior. The interior was covered with cedar walls and pine floors, all overlaid with gold. Years ago, it was estimated that the gold used to overlay the Holy of Holies alone was valued at \$20 million!

Question #3—"Doesn't it seem like nothing?" Indeed, it seemed that way. The facts don't lie. Zerubbabel's temple paled in comparison to Solomon's, especially at this point in the construction project (in 520 B.C.).

You say, "Haggai's questions don't sound very encouraging! What's God doing telling the prophet to ask them?" The answer is, He's forcing His people to face the facts about their situation.

The truth is this. Your past may be great. Or your past may be horrible. But know this. Your past is *past*. It's gone. You can't change it, and it's foolish to live in it.

Haggai knew that some of his people were struggling to let go. The past seemed so great, and it seemed ever greater as more time passed. "Oh, if we could just go back to the glory days! Things were so good then!"

But God doesn't want us to go back. For starters, the past wasn't nearly as glorious as we tend to imagine it (it's easy to forget about the heavy taxation and forced labor that Solomon used to fund his elaborate temple—and lifestyle). The fact is, God has something better for His people than the past, and it's in the *future*.

Those who remembered the "good ole days" could have been a thorn in the side of others who were busy doing God's work. So Haggai brought the issue out in the open. He faced the frustration head on. He faced it with realism.

No, this temple isn't as glorious as the first. That's true. But this temple is important. And what makes it important isn't its appearance. It's what it represents. This is the House of God, a place for sacrifice and worship. That's why God wants us to build it. And build it we will.

Peter Craigie offers a word of application, "But now, as then, there are those who are overcome by the power of negative thinking, who can see only problems and no possibilities. Look how long the Christian Church has been struggling at this business of the Kingdom of God, and where is it today? Frankly, the world does not seem to be a much better place than it was 2,000 years ago; if anything, in a nuclear century, it is worse. So is it not a waste of time to sweat and struggle with the Kingdom of God?"

And on the one hand, the nay-sayers are right. The work of the church for two thousand years has not stopped the spread of evil. The world is a vile place, and it's constantly inventing new ways to express its vileness.

But wait. Is it the church's job to stop the spread of evil? Is that why we're here? Are we supposed to preserve this world, to reform it? And furthermore, if we don't see that happening, does that give us reason to question and even stop doing the mandate our Lord gave us? Those are critical questions, ones that Haggai can help us face.

For starters, though we should be having a preserving effect on this world—Jesus did say we are *salt*—that's not our ultimate reason for being here. Jesus didn't tell His disciples to restore the world—in fact, He promised He would establish His kingdom when He returns. He told the disciples to be His witnesses.

We are living in enemy territory. This vile world is not a friend to grace. It never has been and never will be. We are engaged in spiritual warfare. We're on a rescue mission. Our task is to proclaim the good news of Christ to those entangled in the web of the evil one, and trust God to set free those He has graciously chosen.

He didn't say, "Tell the world about Me as long as you see the results you want to see." He said, "Tell the world about Me until I return. Don't worry about the results."

So there's step #1. When you're stuck in the rut of the past, you need to face the facts concerning the past.

II. Step #2: Live for God in the present (4-5).

By the way, of the four messages Haggai preached in his book, he delivered only one to get his people going. But he preached three to encourage them to keep going. When it comes to obedience, we need lots of encouragement.

Listen to Haggai (4-5): "But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty. ⁵ 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'"

The first step involves the past, the second the present. Haggai challenged his people to live for God not in the fantasy-world of yester-year, but in the real world of today. Problems and all. But how? How can we live for God in hard times? According to Haggai, we have two resources.

A. We have God's presence (4). Don't miss the final words of verse 4, "I am with you, declares the LORD." There's a truth that will keep us going when the going gets rough. God is with us! He's *a/ways* with us.

What would we do without the assurance of Romans 8:38-39? "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

If you know Christ, you belong to God. Let that sink in. You have the presence of God, beloved. And experiencing the presence of God is very practical, in two ways.

1. *That's the basis of our strength.* In verse 3 Haggai asked three question, whereas in verse 4 he offered three charges—actually the same charge three times: "Be strong, be strong, be strong." Why can you be strong? Because I am with you!

2. *That's the incentive for our work.* "Be strong, *and work*," God told His people. It's significant that David used very similar words to encourage Solomon to build the first temple in 1 Chronicles 28:20, "David also said to Solomon his son, "Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the LORD is finished."

Yes, the presence of God is both the basis of our strength and the incentive for our work. Do you ever feel like quitting? At times we get disillusioned about God's work. We don't see the results we'd like. We hear about the "glory days" (or perhaps remember them) and think, "What's the use? I can't do anything significant for God. Why try?"

Fellow Christian, when God gives us a job to do, our part is to do it—and to keep doing it until the job is finished. God's part is to take care of the results.

Maybe you have an unsaved spouse, or child, or parent. And you've witnessed to that person, and have been praying for that person for a long time. And just maybe you're thinking, "What's the use? Nothing's happening. I could really serve God if I had a Christian husband, or Christian teen, or Christian parent." But God wants to know if you'll trust Him, and serve Him with the family *you have*.

Possibly for you the frustration concerns a job. "I could really serve God if I had another job!" you say. Maybe some day God will give you another job. Until then He wants you to serve Him right where you are. "Be strong, and work!" He says to us, just like He did to Haggai's people. And we can because we have His presence. We also have a second resource.

B. We know God's plan (5). Verse 5 again, "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear." With those words God took Haggai's people back 900 years and reminded them of His work at Sinai. And notice how He personalizes it, "I covenanted *with*

you," He told the Jews in Haggai's day. When I rescued your ancestors, I had *you* in mind.

Know this about God. The God of the Bible is a *covenantal* God. He makes promises to His people. And He keeps them. He made a covenant with Abraham—"I'll bless you and give you more descendants than you can count." He established a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai—"I will be your God, and you will be My people." He did the same with David—"One of your descendants will rule the world forever." Then, with the coming of Christ He established a *new covenant*. The point is twofold...

1. *God takes His covenant seriously.* Which means...

2. *We should, too.*

Haggai's people were tempted to live in the past, but that wouldn't be right. Not for them, nor for us. Why not? Because God has a plan for the present and the future, a plan which involves us!

So, "do not fear," He says. Fear is a big problem for us. Fear can keep us from doing God's will. The fear of man is a snare, according to Proverbs 29:25. But right here is the remedy for fear. It's learning to live in light of the presence and plan of God.

Beloved, if we really believed God was with us, would it change the way we live? It sure would. If I really believe God is with me, then I'm not going to go some places I might otherwise go, or watch some things on TV I might be tempted to watch, or listen to certain songs. If I believe He's with me, I'm not going to cave in to peer pressure, nor am I going to miss opportunities to be a witness for Him to the lost. The key, again, is to learn to live in the light of His presence and plan.

Which brings us to step #3. If we're stuck in the ruts of the past, we need to face the facts about the past. Then we must resolve to live for God in the present. Thirdly...

III. Step #3: Claim God's promises for the future (6-9).

Someone has said, "You can't break God's promises by leaning on them!" God's promises are wonderful. God wants us to lean on—to claim—them. So in verses 6-9...

A. God told Haggai's people what He was going to do. He gave them six promises, six guarantees of future events:

"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. ⁷ I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. ⁸ 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. ⁹ 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."

Remember the problem at hand. The people were thinking, "The temple we're building isn't glorious like the first one! What's the use?" To which God said, "Just build it. I'll take care of the 'glory' part!"

In fact, God promised He would. Notice six predictions about the future God gave through Haggai.

1. *God said He would shake the elements (7).* "In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land." That's what God did at the exodus. He shook the elements—hail fell from the sky, water turned to blood, the daytime turned dark. And what God did to Egypt He now says He'll do once more. He doesn't give a date, but merely says in a *little while*.

2. *God said He would shake the nations (7a).* The *goyim*. The godless.

What's the significance of "shaking?" We shake things to mix them up—like ingredients in a cake mix. Sometimes we shake things to jar them loose—like a stuck door. This is also an activity we might use at times to get someone's attention—like shaking your spouse in the middle of the night so he'll wake up and check out the unusual sound you heard in the garage.

God predicts a day is coming when He will shake the heaven and earth, the sea and dry land, and all the nations. In the Bible, the imagery of an earthquake is symbolic for God's supernatural intervention. Haggai's not the only prophet to use this word picture. Amos did (1:1). Isaiah did (2:13-21). Joel did (3:16). And so did Ezekiel (38:20).

3. *God said He would send the Desirable One (7b).* "The desired of all nations will come," the Lord announced. To what or whom does that refer? Some say "the desired" refers to the treasure the nations will bring to the temple in the day God shakes them. I believe, however, it refers to the Messiah. He is the *Desirable One*, and here through Haggai God makes the prediction, "He is coming."

Notice the order. The shaking will occur first, then the Desirable One will come. And what will happen after the Desirable One comes?

4. *God said He would fill His house with glory (7c).* "I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory."

So you don't think this temple is too impressive right now? Just wait. The day is coming when I'll shake the nations, send the Desirable One, and then I'll fill this house with glory. And not just any glory...

5. *God said the glory of the future would exceed that of the past (8-9a).* "The silver is mine and the gold is mine," God said. Solomon's temple had plenty of gold and silver. Zerubbabel's didn't. But that's no problem for God. If He wanted His house to have gold and silver, He'd provide it—it's all His anyway.

But He's interested in something more than a temple made of gold, and that's what He promised in verse 9, "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," says the LORD Almighty."

God's interested in glory, not gold. According to 2 Chronicles 5:14 when Solomon finished the first temple, "the glory of the LORD" filled it. Later, when God's people turned from God His glory departed, as Ezekiel described in his book.

Answer this. When did God's glory return? When did the glory of the temple Haggai's people built exceed the glory of Solomon's temple? Listen to Luke 2:31-21, "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for *glory* to your people Israel."

Simeon spoke those words. Where was he standing? In the temple. Who was he holding in his arms? Baby Jesus.

Remember what John said? "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14)."

When did the glory of the latter temple exceed the glory of the former temple? When the Messiah, Jesus the Lord, walked into it. That never happened to Solomon's temple! But it did to this one, just as God predicted.

6. *God said He would provide peace (9b).* Where? "In this place I will grant peace." You see, this temple had to be rebuilt—gold or no gold—because the day was coming when the Messiah would enter the world, enter its doors, and bring peace to the world.

You say, "I don't see much peace in the world. It doesn't look to me like God's prediction came true." But God's not done yet. Haggai's prophecy is fulfilled in stages. Zerubbabel's temple was completed in four years. This happened with the help of several nations. Cyrus the Persian decreed it, Darius the Mede endorsed it, and then later Artaxerxes presented it. Still later the Roman pawn, Herod, rebuilt it. So the fulfillment of Haggai's prophecy began in his own day.

But the prophecy became even clearer at the first coming of Christ. When Jesus walked into the temple in A.D. 30, truly the Desirable One had arrived.

Yet the ultimate fulfillment of Haggai 2 will occur when Christ comes again. Then God will shake the elements, the nations, and display His glory as never before on earth. Then, after the shaking, God will grant peace to those who know Him. And then, we'll receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken, as Hebrews 12:26-28 says—which, by the way, is the only verse from Haggai quoted in the New Testament.

Yes, God told Haggai's people what He was going to do. What's more...

B. God has done the same with us. His Word is full of promises. And we need to claim them and live in light of them.

Implications: Haggai teaches us some vital insights about God...

1. *God knows our past better than we do.* Are you ashamed of your past? God knows all about it. That's why He sent Jesus—who died to rescue us from our sinful past, and who rose again to offer us new life.

2. *God doesn't evaluate things on the basis of appearances.* Just because something's not impressive to us doesn't mean it's not to God. Remember the widow's mite? And how about the selection of the shepherd boy David to be Israel's next king?

No, it didn't seem to Haggai's people that the temple project was very significant. But it was to God. Know this. If you are doing God's will, it's important, no matter what it is.

3. *God loves to use unimpressive means to display His impressive grace.* The Messiah walked into a man-made building to demonstrate His glory. He does the same with our lives, too. We're just clay pots, yet He displays His glory through us (2 Cor 3:18).

4. *In the plan of God, Jesus makes all the difference.* What made the temple so significant wasn't the mortar, the wood, nor the gold. What made it significant was when Jesus walked into it.

Beloved, if you have Jesus, you have the glory of God living in you! Praise Him!