

Haggai 2:10-19 "How a Nation Gets Right with God"*

Proposition: According to Haggai 2:10-19, getting right with God involves two vital activities.

I. Getting right with God involves repentance (10-14).

A. We must understand how holiness is obtained (10-13).

1. Godliness isn't caught.

2. Ungodliness is—we inherited it.

B. We must understand what holiness demands (14).

1. Good deeds can't clean up a corrupt heart.

2. Only atonement can do that.

II. Getting right with God involves reflection (15-19).

A. Think about the consequences of disobedience (15-17).

1. When we ignore God, life is hard.

2. In some cases, God touches us where it hurts most.

B. Think about the blessing of obedience (18-19).

1. When we obey God, life is fruitful.

2. But remember, fruit doesn't grow over night.

Application: Let's take to heart Haggai's message...

1. We don't have to wait to change.

2. God is interested in heart change, not mere ritual.

3. No matter what we've done in the past, we can experience God's blessing in the present.

4. There is no substitute for atonement.

Listen carefully to the following words: "We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, the many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to God that made us. It behooves us, then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness."

Who said that? Let me give you a clue. The date was April 30, 1863. The statement was part of a proclamation for a national day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer. The man calling for the national day of prayer was the president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln.

In the couple of weeks something amazing has happened in our country. As a result of a terrible tragedy—the terrorist attack on the United Trade Center and the Pentagon—many Americans as well as people from around the world are doing something they haven't done for a long time. They're *calling on God*.

In the past twelve days literally thousands and thousands of people have met for corporate prayer all across this land. This past Wednesday morning, hundreds of young people and school personnel met at the flag poles of our area schools to pray.

It's good to pray. We are a needy people. By the way, we are needy *all* the time, but in recent days we've just become more aware of our neediness. And so people are praying.

But what do we need to do next? It's no secret that as a nation we've turned away from the Lord and His authority in recent years. And we've seen the effects of it in the increasing deterioration of morality in the past decades.

If there's hope for our nation—for *any* nation—we must change our ways. Check the historical record. No nation since the beginning of time has mocked the Creator God and survived.

I'm grateful that people are praying, but know this. Prayer is just the beginning of change that is lasting. We learn that from the Old Testament prophet Haggai.

The truth is, we're not the first nation to face the fact that change is needed. Israel was in the same predicament five hundred years before Christ. God got their attention, too. We can learn from what happened.

The problem was relatively simple. The priorities of God's people were out of whack. In the sixth century B.C., the Lord gave the Jews a job to do, rebuild the temple. But instead of rebuilding God's house, the people rebuilt their own houses and said, "Ah, we'll get around to fixing up the temple one of these days." But "one of these days" never came. And before long, sixteen years had passed.

So God sent His people some wake up calls—like drought and an economic recession. But the people still didn't "get it." So in 520 B.C. God sent a prophet, Haggai, to give it to them straight. In a four month period, Haggai delivered four pointed messages, sermons intended both to confront and encourage change.

The first message (ch 1) came on August 29, and in it Haggai exposed the problem head-on. Listen to Haggai 1:2-3, "This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'" ³ Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴ "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

The Spirit took that message and stirred up the peoples' hearts. After sixteen years of excuses, the people started rebuilding God's house. The needed change had begun.

About two months passed, and the people faced another problem. *Discouragement* set in. As they began to rebuild the temple, it quickly became apparent that this temple would pale in comparison with the former, gold-filled temple built by Solomon. And so Haggai delivered his second message on October 17, as recorded in Haggai 2:1-9. It was a message of encouragement in which Haggai said, in essence, "Be strong! Don't focus on the glories of the past. Just do what God has asked you to do in the present. Besides, God's not interested in gold, but in His *glory*, and that's exactly what He will receive from this place. So keep building!"

And so the people kept building. Two more months passed. December came, and with it came more discouragement. The people struggled to get over the hump of their past failures. A question haunted them, "Can you really experience God's blessing after you've blown it?" And if so, how? Perhaps you're wrestling with that question right now.

There's hope. Haggai addressed that very issue in his third message as recorded in Haggai 2:10-19. We could well entitle this sermon, "How to Experience God's Blessing *After* You've Blown It."

Getting right with God involves more than just "praying a prayer." The Jews did that, but the stark reality of their past sins still plagued them. They needed further counsel and encouragement on what to do next.

We need this message, as individuals, and as a nation. In recent days God has gotten our attention. Scores of people have responded. They've talked about God. They've even talked *to* God. There've been prayer services across the country. That's great. *But now what?* What does the Bible say that people must do to get

right with God?

That's the question Haggai addressed on December 18, 520 B.C. According to Haggai 2:10-19, getting right with God involves more than just talk, namely, two vital activities.

I. Getting right with God involves repentance (10-14).

Repentance. There will be no lasting change and no blessing of God apart from genuine repentance. Repentance is more than shedding a few years. It goes beyond feeling sorrow and regret for past actions. It even requires more than admitting we've got a problem.

Fundamentally, true repentance involves change—a change of heart and life. When a person repents, he turns from going his own way and begins to go God's way.

But how does that happen? The Bible teaches that we are incapable of changing on our own. We don't want to change. We resist change. Quite frankly, we may know that we *need* to change, yet refuse to do so.

Then again, it's possible to respond with a deficient repentance. In 2 Corinthians 7:10 Paul calls it a "worldly sorrow," an initial willingness to change, yes, but only because we dislike the consequences of our sin, and not sin itself.

A while back a man came to my study and said, "I want to get saved." His marriage was shot and in the divorce court at the time. He even prayed a prayer that day and said He wanted Jesus to be his Savior and Lord. But he refused to change. Granted, I don't know his heart, but the fruit of his life indicated that what he wanted to get rid of was the *consequences* of his sin, and not the sin itself. That's not true repentance.

If we're going to exhibit true repentance, according to Haggai, there's something absolutely essential. We must grasp the *holiness of God*. Specifically, we need to understand two things about holiness.

A. We must understand how holiness is obtained (10-13). Let's listen to Haggai in verses 11-12: "On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Haggai.

Notice that Haggai didn't initiate this message. It came from God. God revealed His Word to the prophet. The prophet's job was merely to proclaim it.

¹¹ "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says.'" God told Haggai to ask the priests for their expert advice on the issue of ceremonial cleansing. Keep in mind, when God asks a question, it's not because He needs information. He's teaching something.

Here's the first of two questions—verse 12, "If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?"

In temple worship, often a priest would carry part of the sacrificed animal in the fold of his robe. The KJV refers to this as "holy flesh," that is, meat set aside for sacrifice to the Lord. In so doing, the priest's garment became holy, according to Leviticus 6:27.

But would the holiness be transferred to the other food items as well? For instance, if the robe containing the sacrificed meat touched some bread or stew in the temple, would those items become holy by contact? That was Haggai's question.

To which the priests answered (12), "No." Why not? Because holiness cannot be transferred by secondary contact. More about that in a moment, but first let's notice Haggai's second question.

Notice verse 13, "Then Haggai said, "If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?" According to the Torah, if a person touched something dead he became ceremonially unclean or defiled (Num 19:11). So Haggai asks, "If a person who is unclean because of touching a dead body then touches a food item, does the food item also become defiled?"

And the priests replied, "Yes, it becomes defiled." The case law of Numbers 19:22 made that clear.

Now, what's the point of the two illustrations? By asking these two questions, Haggai teaches us two critical lessons about how holiness (or godliness) is obtained.

1. Godliness isn't caught. You don't get it simply by going to church, or picking up a Bible, or listening to a Christian radio station. All are good things to do, for sure, but they're not enough. You can't "catch" godliness.

The people to whom Haggai spoke were engaged in a "holy" task. They were rebuilding the temple of God. But though the job was sacred, it couldn't make them holy. The "holiness" of the building wouldn't rub off on them.

But apparently, some thought it would. It's no different today.

Some people light candles and put religious relics in their homes. In their zeal, they believe these "holy" objects will give them favor with God. Other people go so far as to retreat to so called "holy" places (monasteries) thinking that there they will find holiness.

Know this. We can be involved in good, even "holy" tasks, but that doesn't make us holy. We can teach Sunday School lessons, participate in church work days, sing God-centered songs, and give lots of money to missions—all good things. But none has the power to transmit holiness.

The reason? Godliness isn't caught. On the other hand...

2. Ungodliness is—we inherited it. From whom? From Adam.

I don't know if you've ever thought about this or not, but it's true. You can catch a cold from somebody else, but it's impossible to catch his health.

"The power of defilement is far easier to communicate than holiness," as Herbert Wolf observes. "Scripture teaches that the sin of Adam has contaminated the entire human race, but believing parents cannot transmit their saved condition directly to their children."

Don't miss this. Holiness isn't contagious. You don't obtain it by sitting in a church or picking up a Bible. "Well then, how do we get it," you ask. Haggai tells us how...

B. We must understand what holiness demands (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.

Haggai applies the priests' answers to the situation facing his people. As a nation, there was a time when Israel was holy, set apart for the Lord's use. But no longer. In verse 14, Haggai says their deeds and offerings were *defiled*. Everything they touched became unclean. Why? Because they'd slighted God. For sixteen years, they'd failed to do God's will in completing the temple. And the unfinished temple stood like a corpse in their midst, a witness to their sins of negligence.

But something else was missing. Yes, in response to Haggai's first message four months earlier, the people

started rebuilding God's house. But getting right with God involves more than external action.

A lot of people have the notion, "Ah, just do your best and God will be satisfied." Is that true? Not according to God's Word. Haggai says that people can do something for God—even rebuild His temple—yet remained defiled. What's the problem? It's this.

1. *Good deeds can't clean up a corrupt heart.* What does God think of people today who do humanitarian things, yet refuse to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior? Many today say it doesn't matter what road you take to God as long as you're sincere. Mohammad is one way. Buddha is another. Jesus is yet another. They are all great "men" who show us the way to God.

But that assertion overlooks one critical factor, namely, what the holiness of God demands. The fact is, I need more than a great religious leader to show me the way to God. I need a remedy for my sin problem.

God doesn't grade on the curve. He is holy, and He demands holiness. You cannot enter His presence if you have sin in your life. The religions of the world teach that you can offset sin by doing good things. But a sinner who does good is still what? He's still a *sinner*, and he still has a fundamental problem that his good works can't change. He has a *corrupt heart*.

You say, "That's just the Old Testament. The God of the New Testament is loving, and as long as you do your best, He'll take you to heaven some day." It's true that He's loving, but He never demonstrates His love at the expense of His holiness. James 2:10 (a New Testament text) makes it clear, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking it all."

No, good deeds cannot clean up a corrupt heart...

2. *Only atonement can do that.* That's why rebuilding the temple was so vital in Haggai's day. The only way to be right with God is through atonement, through a blood sacrifice that provides a covering for sin. After Adam and Eve sinned, God killed animals to provide a covering for them. In the Torah, God instructed His people to offer animal sacrifices to cover their sins. That's why the temple was needed in Haggai's day. You can't approach a holy God without an atonement, a covering for your sin.

You say, "If we need atonement, why don't we offer lambs today?" The answer is, we have One! His name is Jesus. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)."

When Jesus Christ came into this world, He came to give His life as an atoning sacrifice for all who would believe in Him. He died for our sins. He paid its penalty, broke its chains, and sets free all who call upon Him.

The moment a person accepts Jesus and His atoning work, God takes away his sin and gives him a new heart. But until that happens, a thousand—even a million—good deeds won't change the condition of a corrupt heart. Holiness demands an atonement.

How does a person or even a nation get right with God? It starts right here—with *repentance*. But repentance isn't a matter of cleaning up our own lives. It's involves coming to grips with God's holiness, a desire to be changed, and the willingness to accept His provision of atonement. If you want to be right with God, that's what must happen in your life. There is no other way.

Haggai urged his people to engage in a second activity in verses 15-19...

II. Getting right with God involves reflection (15-19).

Three times in this section Haggai says, "Give careful thought (15, 18, 18)." In other words, "It's time to stop

coasting and start doing some soul-searching evaluation." Someone has rightly said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." In the second portion of Haggai's third message he urged his people—and us—to reflect on two subjects.

A. Think about the consequences of disobedience (15-17). "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. ¹⁶ When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty. ¹⁷ I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not turn to me,' declares the LORD.

Things had been going bad for the Jews. Here Haggai explains why. He invites his people to remember how things were *before* they started rebuilding the temple. Things had been bleak for a decade and a half.

The farm market plummeted. Cash crops were down fifty percent—the wheat that should have produced twenty measures produced only ten. Grape production was even worse, dropping to forty percent—with vineyards that typically produced fifty vats of wine yielding only twenty.

And what was the problem? Was it just bad luck? No. These were the consequences of disobedience. Allow me to make a couple of observations from this.

1. *When we ignore God, life is hard.* God will not play second fiddle in our lives.

2. *In some cases, God touches us where it hurts most.* Verse 17 makes it clear that *God Himself* brought these hardships on His people. "*I struck* all the work of your hands with blight, mildew, and hail."

God did it. He is sovereign. Listen to His words in Isaiah 45:7, "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things." Lamentation 3:38 elaborates, "Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?"

Yes, sometimes the Lord touches us where it hurts most. Why? Because He's cruel? No. It's because He knows what's best for us. What's best for us is to put Him first. That's why He sends us wake-up calls.

Do God's wake-up calls always get our attention? Listen to what God said in verse 17, "I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, *yet you did not turn to me,*' declares the LORD."

No, hardship alone doesn't turn people to God. For years God had been judging the Jews, touching them where it hurt most, but they didn't turn back to Him. Instead they hardened their hearts, just like Pharaoh and the Egyptians did.

Amos addressed the same problem in Amos 4:9. Speaking for God he said, ""Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD."

Just because things get tough doesn't mean people will get right with God. Some people get bitter rather than better. Only those who take to heart what God is doing will change. That's why reflection is so key.

It's sad to say but a lot of people won't stop and think about God until He touches them where it hurts the most. For some, it's their pocketbook. For others, it's their health. For still others, it takes a shattered relationship to cause them to admit their need to get right with God.

Haggai's message hit home. Four months earlier his people repented. But that didn't mean life became a bed of roses. When the people started rebuilding the temple, they got discouraged. So in message #3, Haggai reminded them of what life was like before they repented.

We, too, need to think about the consequences of disobedience. Fellow Christian, life may be hard now, but think about what life was like before you met Christ. Think. Remember. Reflect. That will encourage you to keep living for God. So will this.

B. Think about the blessing of obedience (18-19). "From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid. Give careful thought: ¹⁹ Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit. 'From this day on I will bless you.'"

In this section Haggai urges his people to think about the blessing of obedience. As we've just seen, when we ignore God, life is hard. On the other hand, so is this...

1. *When we obey God, life is fruitful.* "From this day on I will bless you," God said. Life was hard before, but that's because of disobedience. From *this day on*, things will change. Why? Because now you're building My House instead of living for yourselves. Now you're obeying Me.

Know this about God. He loves to bless His people! He's generous. This is His promise. If you obey Me, I will bless you. And life will be fruitful.

2. *But remember, fruit doesn't grow over night.* Haggai asks an intriguing question in verse 19, "Is there yet any seed left in the barn?" The answer was *no*. Why was the seed not in the barn? What time of year was it? It was the *ninth* month on the Jewish calendar—December on ours. And in December in Israel, the seed would not be in the barn because they'd just planted it in the field.

Yet on that December day, speaking for God, Haggai made a prediction. In verse 19, he announced a bumper crop was coming!

That's quite a prediction, isn't it? It's the middle of winter. No sensible agronomist would dare predict the quality of next year's harvest in the middle of winter—especially since the yields in previous years had been down fifty to sixty percent! It would make more sense to wait a month or so to observe weather patterns and assess the amount of precipitation.

But that's not what Haggai did. He received God's promise, and He passed it on to his people. He predicted a bountiful harvest, not because he had inside information on future weather conditions. He predicted it because he saw the repentant and revived condition of his people. They were *right with God*. And since they were they were ready to experience God's blessing.

Granted, it hadn't come yet, but that's because fruit doesn't grow overnight. The seed was still in the soil. It takes time to see fruit. And patience. And faith. But the fruit will come. We have God's Word.

Perhaps you're in a waiting time right now. And perhaps you're wondering if it's worth it. The seed is in the ground, and you don't see much happening right now. Be encouraged. The harvest will come.

Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." And then He gave this promise—"and all these things will be given unto you (Matt 6:33)."

In 1831 after visiting America, French writer Alexis de Tocqueville said, "I sought for the greatness of the United States in her commodious harbors, her ample rivers, her fertile fields, and boundless forests--and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines, her vast world commerce, her public school system, and in her institutions of higher learning--and it was not there. I looked for it in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution--and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great

because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!"

What must a nation do to get right with God and experience His blessing? According to Haggai's message, getting right with God involves *repentance*—we must come to grips with how holiness is obtained and what holiness demands—and *reflection*—we need to get serious about obeying God in the long haul.

Application: Let's take to heart Haggai's message...

There are many lessons for us. I'll mention four.

1. *We don't have to wait to change.* I find it interesting that in verse 18, Haggai repeats the date he already stated in verse 10—the *twenty-fourth day of the ninth month*. Why the repetition? In part, I think it's because he's saying that *this is the day of change*.

When you know what God wants you to do, you don't need to think about it. You need to *do* it. If you know He wants a change to occur, then change! Don't think about changing. Change. Choose today to live God's way.

2. *God is interested in heart change, not mere ritual.* Holiness isn't "caught." It's not enough merely to go through the motions. If it's real, change begins in the heart, and then spills over into the life.

Maybe you've been attending church for awhile. Perhaps you've even been reading your Bible and praying. That's good.

Now answer this. Have you given God your *heart*? True change involves not just external actions, but internal repentance. Jesus said there will be religious people in hell, a lot of them, in fact (Matt 7:23).

3. *No matter what we've done in the past, we can experience God's blessing in the*

present. No one is too far gone for God. No one. Jesus said, "Come to me, *all* you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matt 11:28)."

Do you want to be right with God today? You may come to Him, and He will save you. God's Word is clear. No matter how ashamed you are of your past, you may come.

And to those who may resist, know this. No matter how impressed you are with your past, you *must* come. The reason?

4. *There is no substitute for atonement.* None. Mere good people don't go to heaven. To be right with God we must either be perfect or know the One who is.

"Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (Hebrews 9:27-28)."

A nation gets right with God as its people get right with God. May God help us.