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Take Courage &amp; Work

Haggai 1.15b -2.9

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Theme verse, Haggai 2.4, “Yet now **take courage**, O **Zerubbabel**, says the Lord; **take courage**, O **Joshua**, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; **take courage**, **all you people of the land**, says the Lord; **work, for I am with you**, says the Lord of hosts.”

Who is a person (living or dead) you admire for his or her courage? What did he or she do? Why do you admire him or her? Two for me are Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and Dick Winters who served in the US Army in the Civil War and World War II. Some people would say Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine. Courage is not limited to those in the military or to heads of state. Courage is frequently shown by people who are unknown except to those close to them. There are many forms of courage from physical courage in battle or in a trial that tests one’s physical endurance, such as being adrift at sea like Eddie Rickenbacker or Louis Zamperini. There is the courage of mothers trying to care for and protect their children in terrible circumstances. Courage is a virtue that’s universally admired, and it helps you in almost any situation you face. There is no courage without fear, without situations that makes you fearful, there’d be no need for courage.

Today’s scripture is about a time when courage is needed. In the year 520 B.C., the Lord sends the prophet Haggai (Hag ay-i) to bring inspiration and motivation to the people of God who are living in difficult times economically, politically, socially, and spiritually. Judah **had been** an independent nation with its own king and defined borders, a decent agriculturally based economy, all centered spiritually around worshiping the Lord at the magnificent temple built by King Solomon. **Now** they’re a conquered, defeated people, a small province at the western outskirts of the vast Persian Empire. A terrible drought has devastated the crops and limited the supply of food, all that remains of the once magnificent temple is a burned-out shell of a building and a small half-hearted attempt at replacing it that was still not completed 16 years after work on it had begun. The relationship between the people returning from exile in Babylon and those who had remained in Judah working the land was often contentious and divisive as disputes arose over land ownership as people tried to eke out a living.

To this politically impotent, economically depressed, socially divided, spiritually fearful and discouraged group of people, the Lord sends the prophet Haggai (1.15b – 2.9). “In the second year of King Darius (dah-rī’uhs), in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai (Hag ay-i), saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel (Zuhr-ruhb-uh-bl) son of Shealtiel (shee-al tee-el), governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak (je-hahz uh-dak), the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory?

How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?

Yet now **take courage**, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; **take courage**, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; **take courage**, all you people of the land, says the Lord; **work, for I am with you**, says the Lord of hosts, according to **the promise** that I made you when you came out of Egypt.

**My spirit abides among you; do not fear.**

For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, **I will** shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and **I will** shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and **I will fill** this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place **I will give** prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.”

Haggai takes on the task of leadership at a time when it’s desperately needed. In his time and ours, **the task of leaders is to create urgency, embrace change, and bring clarity to the mission God calls us to. That is exactly what Haggai is doing.**

The Lord has several things to say through the prophet and as I read this book, one phrase kept coming into my head: **things get worse until you put God first**. In chapter one, the Lord asks the people to consider how they’re doing, how life is going, while God is pushed aside rather than put first in their lives (Haggai 1:5-6, 10-11). The answer is **lousy**. Much like the book of Deuteronomy, Haggai ties obedience with prosperity and disobedience with difficulty. There’s a certain degree to which that’s the case. Please understand, I’m not saying that if you put God first that all of life will be nothing but blessings, and nothing bad will ever happen to you or anyone you care about, and

you'll never get sick or have adversity. Some of the most faithful people who ever lived – have endured poverty, physically debilitating conditions, and even persecution - like John the Baptist, Jesus, and Stephen – who were all killed because of their faithful obedience. However, when we don't put God first, life often goes from bad to worse.

**Things get worse until you put God first.** This was certainly the experience of the people of Haggai's day. When we look at our own culture and the selfishness, materialism, violence, abuse, and hypocrisy the same can be said about us. The Lord says that **things are bad because the people have neglected God's presence and place in their lives and their community.**

The prophet's message in response to this down and out situation was unusual for a prophet - **rebuild the temple and give witness to God's presence and power, even and especially in difficult times.** In the Bible, we've seen that the prophets are almost universally critical of the temple – including Nathan (2 Samuel 7:4-7), Isaiah (1:10-17 esp. 14), and Jeremiah (7:1-15, esp. 11). They're critical of it for a variety of reasons. Through the prophet Nathan the Lord reminded King David how early in Israel's history under the leadership of Moses, they were a people on the move, following wherever God led. Isaiah and other prophets express the Lord's disgust toward sacrificing multitudes of animals and having solemn rituals and assemblies without people seeking to do justice, ceasing to do evil, and helping those in need. Folks got wrapped up in the magnificent temple built by King Solomon and **missed what God wanted them to do in the world.** In Haggai's time, that fabulous and opulent temple was nothing but a burned-out wreck. Changing circumstances sometimes require changes in thinking.

The Lord conveys through the prophet, that as long as the temple is neglected, which is symbolic of the Lord remaining low on the people's priority list, instead of helping them order their list, there are going to be major problems. God yearns to enter into deeper relationship with people and having the focus of rebuilding the temple will serve to unite the people while restoring their spirits and giving them hope for the future.

**Whenever work goes forward anywhere that always leads to new challenges.** In this case, it was some people having the wrong attitude, mourning what they had lost, waxing nostalgic about the good old days of Solomon's temple rather than

continuing to praise God for what they had and for what remained. This is a danger for the church today as well. Some of the older generation in Haggai's day recognized that the new building didn't compare well at all with the one built by Solomon. The second temple was nothing in the sight of the older generation (Ezra 3:10-13). It may be true that the older we get the more difficult it becomes to look forward with hope as our body ages and more of our life lies behind us than ahead of us. The criticism of these people could have been contagious, potentially infecting and hindering the perceptions and activity of those who had not seen the earlier temple.

**Regardless of our age it's often easier to complain than to compliment, to criticize than to constructively assist, to tear down than to build up.** Often, we complain against those who are working the hardest and doing the most for us, whether in our families, at work, school, or church. It's easier to complain than it is to propose answers or to be part of a solution.

Our attitude and approach to problems makes a tremendous difference.

**We choose how we will go through any trial or test. We choose our attitude, and the Lord basically says through the prophet –**

**Dedication to the task is more important than nostalgia for the past.**

Jesus says in **Luke 9:62**, *"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."* Haggai was trying to help God's people move into a future, but some folks were critical, fearful, or skeptical and thus unable to help make God's future a reality. That's a problem

**The solution, God says, is to Take Courage.** Courage is needed because it is so easy to be negative, to have no faith or lose our faith, to be scared in the face of an overwhelming challenge. God knows the political and religious leaders need courage and so does the remnant of the people, so the prophet **tells each to Take Courage.** You can be paralyzed by fear. You can suffer paralysis by analysis and do nothing. God says, ***"Work for I am with you."*** ***"My spirit abides among you; do not fear."*** God's Spirit stands in our midst. When the Lord says, Take Courage and Work, God is speaking concerning our Attitude and our Effort. Through our relationship with the Lord and trusting in God's promises we're to cultivate an attitude of courage and faith, of believing that nothing shall be impossible with God.

People of faith and vision need the right attitude, but you also need to **Work**. If you have a bad attitude, if you're critical, negative, unbelieving, or if you're not willing to work and invest your time, energy, resources, and ideas, then you need to ask yourself, whether you're impacting your family, your church, your work environment, your school, your neighborhood, your country in the manner and direction God desires. Would people say you're an encourager or a discourager?

**Courage and work, attitude and effort this is the sweat equity you contribute** to God's work whether it's rebuilding a temple 500 years before the birth of Jesus or building your family and relationships, your church, business, or community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When the people of God work together, we bring about something greater than the sum of our parts; **spiritual power is unleashed**. The Lord of hosts promises, *"I am with you, my spirit abides among you, do not fear."* The Lord promises (Haggai 2.6-9), *"I will shake, I will shake, I will fill, and I will give."* God provides the resources for what the Lord wants people to do.

God still wants to be in relationship with people and I believe one thing the Lord wants right now is **churches that are rebuilding their communities**. The challenge in our time is not so much rebuilding a physical temple, as it is rebuilding hope, helping those in need, sharing the good news of God's love in Christ in practical ways that even those who may not share our faith convictions can't ignore. Churches that welcome people and groups into their facilities while releasing their people and resources to engage their communities have a rippling impact throughout the area in which God has placed them. The renovation we recently did at Cape Cod Foster Closet in Orleans, the generosity in responding to needs here and abroad are all examples of this truth. We engage in acts of generous grace in response to the generous grace God has shown us.

For Christians, the temple of God is no longer a physical building but a spiritual house, the church that Paul says is, *"built upon **the foundation** of the apostles **and prophets**, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and **grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God.**"* (Ephesians 2:20-22). We're all called to the faithful building up of the body of Christ. At this moment, we need

to focus on rebuilding our volunteer base, identifying, and developing leaders, and helping people emotionally. These are similar tasks that faced Haggai and the people of his time. We need people to engage and participate. For example, we need nursery volunteers so we can welcome young families again, and folks to assist with Children's worship or Sunday school. Our task at the present is not to construct a physical temple to build a community around like Haggai needed to do. **Our task is to rebuild our spiritual house which is the church and to take it into the community in every way that we can.** What a great witness it is when we can say, **"The church has left the building."**

So, remember, things get worse when you don't put God first, but when we Take Courage and Work, we can help fulfill God's purpose in our time. Those who follow Jesus believe God's Son lived and died and rose for us, that God is still with us even and especially in difficult times. We believe God's Spirit abides among us, and this same God promises to provide all that we need for the Lord's future to be accomplished in and through us if we will take courage and work.

**Blessing:** *"Take courage, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, My spirit abides among you; do not fear."*

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Think of a person (living or dead) you admire for his or her courage? Who is it? What did s/he do? Why do you admire him or her?
2. Who is someone whose work ethic you appreciate? It could be someone you know personally or someone who is well known. What do you appreciate about how she or he approaches work?
3. The Lord calls Haggai to speak with authority to people who are discouraged and not showing any urgency about the task of rebuilding the temple. What do you find helpful to do when you're discouraged?
4. Haggai repeatedly tells the leaders and the people to "take courage and work." Why are both of those needed and important when you're facing a challenge?

5. What does the Lord say about providing the resources that are needed to do God's work (see Haggai 2.6-9)? How does this impact your faith and your approach to living generously?
6. Why is it important for each of us to do our part in building God's church in our time as we attend worship, serve, and give? Discuss or reflect on the importance of each person who is a part of BBC attending worship, serving, giving, inviting, and encouraging – and the impact that can have for God's work in the world.