

Renovation Rule

Haggai 2:10-23

29 November 2020 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: How can unclean people be made clean?

Big Idea: God restores relationship by renovating hearts and restoring his rule.

Introduction

Imagine you're driving down the road and you see a sign like this one, which says "Now reopened. Under new management".

What does that sign tell you?

It's a sign – literally – that there's been a change in the business.

They want you to know that the business is going to be operated differently in future.

And their hope is that you'll come in and try it.

It's a bit of a strange sign, really, because it's basically an admission that the place was actually a dud before.

If it was going gangbusters, then you'd want to reassure people that nothing's going to change.

This sign's saying, "If you've ever been to this hotel before, we want to you to know that it's not like that anymore. Things are different!

"Crooked pool tables, watered down drinks and bedbugs are a thing of the past."

Today is the third instalment in our study of the Old Testament book named after the prophet Haggai.

It's now the 18th of December 520 BC – two months since Haggai's last message – and it's a big day of celebration – Foundation Day.

The day's never actually ever called that in the Bible, but it was the day the foundations of the temple were finally being laid.

When someone builds a house, they often want to be on-site to see the footings poured, even though it really isn't much to look at.

It's significant though because it's the day when the building really begins.

According to Ezra 3, there was a massive celebration to mark the day because laying the foundations was the start of a new era, a new beginning.¹

Laying the foundations of the temple was a sign that Israel was under new management.

After a long and punishing absence, God's back.

Outline

Haggai's a book that's often forgotten about, tucked away at the end of the Old Testament.

The big theme of the book is the renovation of the temple, though it's just as much (if not more) about the renovation of God's people.

In chapter one, we saw how Haggai spoke on God's behalf to get his people to start rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

For eighteen years after they returned from exile, they hadn't really done anything about God's house.

Their priorities were revealed when Haggai exposed that they were living in houses that had panelled walls, while God's house lay in ruins.

Last week, we looked at chapter two and we saw that it was about being strong and persevering even though they were discouraged.

God had a plan that his latter temple would be even more glorious than Solomon's.

This week, we're looking at not one, but two prophecies that go together since they were both given on the same day.

They were given on the day the foundations of the temple were laid.

God's palace is important because it's a sign of his rule and when God's rule is restored, the people's predicament will be reversed and their position restored.

This is a renovation rescue!

God restores relationship by renovating hearts and restoring his rule.

We'll look at the two prophecies separately:

- Reversing Empty Religion in the present (vv10-19)
- Restoring God's Rule in the future (vv20-23)

Reversing Empty Religion in the present (vv10-19)

Four months after Haggai began his ministry, he receives another word from God.

Unlike the previous two prophecies, this one's for Haggai himself.

God tells Haggai go and ask the priests some questions.

Remember that everyone didn't own a copy of the Scriptures for themselves, so you had to ask if you wanted to know what they said.

And if you wanted a ruling about something that wasn't clear, it was the priests' job to make a ruling.

Especially if it was a question about what's religiously clean and unclean, pure and impure.²

Haggai's basically told to ask about two different scenarios.

If something's made clean, can it make something else clean?

And if something's made unclean can it make something else unclean?

Most of us are used to talking about clean and unclean.

Having a drink out of a glass that's just been through the dishwasher? Clean.

Having a drink out of the toilet bowl? Unclean.

I think that's fairly clear.

But there are some situations where the jury's still out.

My wife and I can agree that it's not hygienic to use the same knife on meat and vegetables.

Well, actually you can as long as you cut up the vegetables first because it's the bacteria from the uncooked meat that can contaminate the uncooked vegetables.

When we go camping, we take our meat sealed in vacuum packed bags.

What we don't agree on is whether using a knife to make a small nick to open the vacuum bag storing the meat makes the knife dirty or not.

Is it safe to use that same knife to cut up salad or do you have to get out and wash up another one?

Religiously speaking, we're a bit less clear on why cleanness matters.

Being clean matters because holiness matters.

God is holy – he's wholly other – perfect, different and separate from his creation.

Only holy human beings can stand in his presence.

For their own safety, God even limited who could touch the holy utensils that were used for worship in the temple to protect sinful people.

What can make something ceremonially or religiously clean or unclean?

When something clean touches something dirty, the clean thing usually gets dirty.

For instance, if a dirty hand touches a nice white towel, then the towel get dirty.

Or if someone touches a dead body, it makes sense that the person will become unclean.

Interestingly though, when it comes to ritual purity, it can work in the reverse too.

In some circumstances, if something clean touches something unclean, the clean thing can make the unclean thing clean.

Wow. That's a mouthful, isn't it?

Something clean can make something that's unclean, clean.

When you made a sacrifice in the temple, the sacrificial meat was considered clean.

Under certain circumstances, you were allowed to take some of this holy meat home in a doggy bag.

Of course, they didn't have takeaway containers and so they'd put it in the fold of their garment.

The holy meat made the cloak clean.

Haggai's questions go a little bit further than that though, by taking it to the next step.

What happens if that same holy cloak or the unclean human being come in contact with some other food?

What happens to the food?

In the case of the cloak, the Law is silent on the holiness being passed on so they assumed that the answer is NO, verse twelve.

Holiness can't be passed on to a third thing.

But if something's defiled by touching something unclean, the Law makes it very clear that the uncleanness WILL be passed on.³

If someone's unclean from touching a dead body and they touch other food, they'll make it unclean.

Uncleanness can be passed on, but holiness can't.

Uncleanness can be passed on more easily than cleanness.

That's the point that the priests confirm.

The core of this prophecy can be found in verse fourteen where God applies this principle to the temple builders.

They're defiled and so everything they touch – far from turning to gold – will be unclean.

God's people are unclean, which means that the altar is unclean, which in turn means that all of their sacrifices are unclean.

Haggai 2:14 NIV11 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.’”

For the last eighteen years, the returned exiles have been committed to carrying out sacrifices to God.

Ezra 3 tells us that one of the first things they did when they returned to the land was to build the altar to make sacrifices, even though there were no temple foundations.⁴

They thought they were doing a great job of worship, but God is saying through Haggai that their worship has been unclean.

All of the worship they've done on the altar has been unacceptable to God.

And it all starts with their own hearts which are mirrored in their attitude to the temple.

They're interested in worship that makes them feel like they're doing the right thing.

What they're not that interested in is God himself.

They've had such little regard for him that they've left his house as a heap of rubble.

The result is that their sin has tainted their sin-fixing rituals.

The God of the Bible isn't fooled by token, outward gestures.

Their tarnished hearts ruined their sacrifices.

God's interested in obedience and not just sacrifices.

The only worship that's acceptable to him is heartfelt obedience.

1 Samuel 15:22 NIV11 ²² But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

That's why Foundation Day is so significant.

This turning point in the building of the temple marks a turning point in what's going on in their hearts.

They're turning from essentially ignoring God to putting him in his rightful place.

This isn't a minor thing – it's essential!

It hasn't just affected their offerings in the temple, it's affected everything they do.

People debate whether the words "whatever they do" are referring to offering sacrifices, building the temple or working in the fields.

I think that the answer has to be all of them!

And the reason for that is that they're all related.

The sin of failing to build the temple is passed onto everything else that they do.

Theologians call this the doctrine of total depravity.

Total depravity doesn't mean that we're as depraved as we possibly can be – that everyone is absolutely as bad as possible.

It means that every single part of us – our whole person – is affected by sin.

We're bad through and through.

We're not essentially good with a few parts that need reform, but sin affects every thought, emotion and action.

God asks them the people think carefully in verse fifteen.

Before you laid the foundation of the temple – when one stone was finally laid on another – what was life like?

Up until this point, life's been pretty average, really.

They wanted to draw out twenty measures and there were only ten there.

Get a drink of wine and there's only twenty not fifty.

In terms of their everyday food, they've just been scraping by.

They'd suffered all kinds of misfortunes.

Their crops have been struck with blight and mildew and hail.

Israel was a little bit stuck, weather-wise.

If the wind blew from the east, then the dry and hot wind would damage the crops, but if it blew from the west then it would cause damp.

While this might all just look natural, we find out that the reason for all these things is that God caused them.

That seems a little harsh, doesn't it?

We feel like God shouldn't be someone who does that.

Why would he be punishing his people like that?

He's not really punishing them since this is only a taster of what it'd be like if he really treated them like their sin deserved.

This is corrective discipline on God's behalf.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that God's discipline is never pleasant.⁵

The whole purpose of these negative things was to get them to turn to the Lord.

But they didn't.

Unfortunately, negative experiences don't always change us.

Poor grain yields and dissatisfying wine production didn't return them to God.

Experiencing exile didn't turn them to God.

I'm not saying that the events of 2020 are God's judgment on us.

But what I will say is this year has shown us that hard, difficult and negative circumstances definitely aren't guaranteed to turn us back to God.

We want a solution for the pain, but it can be hard to believe that sin's the problem that underlies it.

God is disciplining them because their sin is tainting everything they do.

God takes sin seriously and so very often we don't.

We want to say that sin really isn't that bad, that it's just a minor thing.

Even in terms of the temple, we might wonder why God's got such a bee in his bonnet about it?

Why is the temple such a big deal for him?

Because not building the temple shows what their hearts were really like.

Foundation Day is the day they'll look back on and remember that it was the moment in time when everything changed.

God's brought them down to rock-bottom.

There's no seed left in the barns because it's all been planted in the ground.

They've had the harvest (as we saw last week) which was very disappointing.

Now they're waiting for the next crop the question is, will it be a failure, just like the last one?

The certain answer is that the next harvest will be different.

God promises that everything will be okay in the future because he's going to bless them.

The vine and the fig will start to produce again.

Pomegranates and olives will begin to appear on the supermarket shelves once more.

They're going to experience God's blessing on them.

Haggai 2:19c NIV11 “‘From this day on I will bless you.’ ”

The temple isn't complete yet – that's not actually the point.

What's important is that their hearts are in the right place.
They've begun to build the temple.
God's blessing will begin from this point, which's a mercy from God.
Right worship requires obedient hearts.
And obedient hearts are only made by God himself.
There's nothing that you can do to make you right with God.
He has to change you, renovate you.

This passage should remind us of another promise made through an Old Testament prophet.

God promised that he would make a new covenant, a covenant that would see the law is written on people's hearts by the Holy Spirit.

The only reason you and I can walk in obedience is because of God's Spirit working in us.⁶

Ezekiel 36:27 NIV11 ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

You and I can be guilty of going through the motions, can't we?
We turn up to church, we give of our time, treasure and talents.
We might even pat ourselves on the back for it.
Yet all while we do this, it can be the case that God's not even in the picture.
If that's the case, then we're not doing it out of love and devotion to him.
And it's not okay. It's unacceptable worship and empty religion.

In Romans 12:1, Paul says that if God has changed our hearts, then we will give our whole lives as worship.

He wants to be at the centre of everything we do.

He should rightly be the king of everything we do.

Because if he's not, then our worship will be tainted too.

Romans 12:1 NIV11 ¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

God' in the business of reversing the empty religion of his people.

May he renovate our hearts to keep us from empty religion.

Restoring God's Rule in the Future (vv20-23)

The second time that Haggai speaks, it's about what'll happen on "that" day, rather than what will happen on "this" day.

Again, God's word comes to Haggai, this time with the instruction to speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah.

That's the first time he's been called that in the book so far.

He's usually also called son of Shealtiel, but not here.

We haven't really talked about Zerubbabel much before now, even though he's been mentioned heaps.

He's the governor of Judah which means that he was the highest government official in the area.

That might sound like quite a grand title, but it wasn't really.

The Persian Empire was vast and Judah was this tiny little backwater in the middle of nowhere, barely even noticeable on the world stage.

Zerubbabel was nothing more than a vassal put in place to keep local control for his overlord.

Darius was the king.

Cyrus's son got murdered and another bloke was on the throne for about 10 months.

Darius was originally a military commander and managed to overthrow the previous king and make himself ruler.

The Empire was in a bit of a mess through this time so he'd spent pretty much the first two years of his reign just trying to bring in some stability.

By this stage, they would've seen that Darius had consolidated his power and that he wasn't going anywhere soon.

The Israelites were looking for a godly king.

The reason that the king matters is because he was meant to be God's representative.

The king of Israel was meant to be God's servant.

And while God had used Darius and Cyrus to achieve his purposes, you couldn't exactly say that they ruled God's way and kept his law.

God had promised that one of David's descendants would rule on his throne forever.

He first made the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7, but it'd all gone wrong.

The books of Kings and Chronicles give us a long list of kings who's messed things up. Instead of ruling under God, they rebelled against him and worshipped other gods. The result was exile.

A king named King Jehoiachin was the last real king of Israel before the Babylonians conquered them.

He goes by many names, just to make things confusing for us: Coniah / Jeconiah / Jehoiachin were all the same person. He only ruled for three months.

Jeremiah spoke against Jehoiachin, about how God would tear him off like a signet ring.

He says,

Jeremiah 22:24 NIV11 ²⁴ "As surely as I live," declares the LORD, "even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off.

God goes on to describe how he and his children will be booted out by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians and he'll never be allowed to return.

A signet ring was a precious possession in the ancient world.

Many schools won't allow the wearing of jewellery, unless it's religious or a signet ring.

So, I think of signet rings as being cheap.

In the ancient world, they were used to authenticate documents by being pressed into the seal.

So, it was a sign of having authority.

Being torn off like a signet ring meant that Jehoiachin was no longer authorised to represent God.

God was going to place someone else in charge to rule over his people as a temporary king.

Darius was God's king for the time being.

But that doesn't mean that God was done, even with Jehoiachin's family.

Although Jehoiachin had a rough deal from the Babylonians – including being blinded – he didn't lose his life.

And God made another promise through Jeremiah that one day he would keep his promise to make a king from David's descendants rule forever.

He would put his king on the throne and they would live in peace and safety under the rule of a righteous Saviour.

Jeremiah 23:5–6 NIV11 ⁵ “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Saviour.

Now, God’s got a message for Zerubbabel.

He’s going to shake up the world – the heavens and the earth, verse 21 – which sounds a lot like what we heard last week.

This means that he’s going to overturn all the political structures that they’ve become used to.

God’s people would be disappointed by that at all.

Haggai 2:22a NIV11 ²² I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms.

They don’t need to worry about the military muscle of the other nations.

Chariots were some of the most devastating war machines of the day but God could take care of them.

And if there was any doubt about whether God could deal with them, remember how he dealt with the Egyptians and their chariots?

They were flooded in the Red Sea.

Remember how he’s even able to make enemies fight against themselves?

God’s able to disrupt power structures and they can look back to what God did to the Midianites in Judges 7:22.⁷

This wasn’t necessarily going to be something that would happen immediately, but it’s something that’s going to happen in the future.

It will take place “on that day”.

God makes a very particular promise to Zerubbabel in verse 23:

Haggai 2:23 NIV11 ²³ “ ‘On that day,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the LORD Almighty.”

That sounds like very particular signet ring language again.

The same language he used of Jehoiachin.

God is going to make Zerubbabel his servant.

And he’ll make him a signet ring – his authorised representative.

Both a servant and signet ring don't have authority by themselves.
They only have authority because of the one that they were connected to.
Davidic King was meant to represent Yahweh and do what he says.
The kings of Israel were meant to rule within the boundaries that God himself had given.

Zeruabbabel had royal blood flowing through his veins.

His grandfather was Jehoiachin.

He's the one that God's going to use to restore his rule.

But there's a problem.

Zerubbabel disappears off the history books.

We don't hear anything more about him in the book of Ezra or Nehemiah or the other prophets and as far as we know, he never actually became king.

God wasn't saying that Zerubbabel was going to be king.

But he was saying that he hadn't forgotten his promise to David.

In 2 Samuel 7, God promised that one of his descendants would sit on the throne forever.

And the same's true of Zerubbabel.

If you turn over with me from Haggai and go a few pages further forward in your Bible, we come to the first chapter of Matthew's gospel.

Matthew starts with a genealogy of Jesus.

It's the bit that we often skip over so that we can get to the good bits of the Christmas story.

You've got to be a certain age to care about family trees.

Matthew lists Jesus' family tree in three different parts.

Have a look down at verse twelve to see the bit after the return from exile:

Matthew 1:12 NIV11 ¹² After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,

What would you know? There's our friend Zerubbabel.

You can trace Jesus' family tree back to Zerubbabel.

God's promise, to Zerubbabel, through Haggai, is that he's going to overthrow the kingdoms of the nations.

He'll establish his kingdom with his king.

This is a promise that God will place King Jesus to rule over the whole world.

The Messiah came to establish God's rule in his kingdom.

And it was shown by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus died to free us from our sins.

He rose from the dead, conquering death.

And now he's risen to reign in heaven.

We look forward to that day when he will return and bring everything under his rule.

God will restore his rule by sending his own son.

Conclusion

Under new management – it's an important sign.

Foundation Day is the day that the Israelites look back to as the day when everything changed.

Starting to rebuild the temple meant that they weren't just dedicated to empty religion, they were under new management.

With the temple, God's reign and rule was restored over the nation once again.

Even though Darius was still king, Haggai encouraged the people to look forward to the day when God's king would rule again.

And that's exactly what's happened.

We look back to the Cross as our foundation day.

The day that Christ rose in victory and ascended into heaven to rule over all nations and people.

Praise God for the way that God has put his ruler in place.

More than that, he's rescued us and renovated our hearts.

And we look forward to that day when he returns and cry, "Come, Lord Jesus, come!"

Amen.

¹ Ezra 3:10ff

² Leviticus 10:10-11

³ Leviticus 22:1-9; Numbers 19:22

⁴ Ezra 3:3, 6.

⁵ Hebrews 12:11

⁶ Also Jeremiah 31:33.

⁷ There are likely also echoes of the promise in Ezekiel 38:21.

Title

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Big Question: How can unclean people be made clean?

Big Idea: God restores relationship by renovating hearts and restoring his rule.

Discussion Questions

1. What's different about these last two prophecies, compared to the previous two?
2. Draw a diagram that explains the answer to Haggai's two questions.
3. What was God making when he told Haggai to ask these two questions?
4. Why is "this day" (Foundation Day) significant?
5. What was the cause of the blight, mildew and hail?
6. What will things be like in the future? Why?
7. What is God going to do on "that" day and how do they know that God can do it?
8. Was God's promise in verse 23 true if Zerubbabel never became king?