

Haggai 2:1-9 (1984 NIV) ***When Your Efforts Seem Inadequate***

Introduction

In his book, “When God Whispers Your Name”, Max Lucado tells the story of John Egglan—someone who had never preached a sermon in his life until one Sunday morning when it snowed, and the pastor wasn’t able to make it to church.

In fact, John Egglan was the only deacon to show up that morning. He was not a preacher, but he was faithful and that meant on that Sunday morning he stood in the gap and preached.

At the end of his hesitant sermon, one young man invited Christ into his heart. But no one there could appreciate the significance of what had taken place that morning, not even John Egglan himself.

The young man who accepted Christ that snowy Sunday morning was none other than Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the man who has often been called the “prince of preachers”. God blessed his preaching and when he was still less than 30 years old, he became the pastor of London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle. His sermons were so powerful that although the building could hold 5,000 people, the crowds who came to hear him were so huge that they would line up outside trying to hear his sermons.

That amazing ministry of Spurgeon all started on a cold Sunday morning with the faithfulness of a deacon who had never preached a sermon before that day. It didn’t seem all that significant to preach the sermon on that Sunday morning when almost no one showed up, including the church pastor. But it demanded faithfulness and God blessed the faithfulness of John Egglan that Sunday.

Indeed, God is not so much interested in our big ability to do what He wants get done. Very often, God is more interested in our faithfulness to do serve Him and trust Him to do the rest.

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/19061/faith-by-tim-richards>)

It’s no superstition to say that Satan is always doing his utmost to hinder the work of God. In Haggai 1, you see how he tried to do that by distracting the returning Jews from rebuilding the temple. He got them to be consumed with the building of their own houses instead of the house of God.

Today in Haggai 2:1-9, you will see how he tried to do that by discouraging the returning Jews from rebuilding the temple. Satan has many weapons in

his arsenal. But of all his weapons, none is more potent than the one called “discouragement”. If he can only get the saints of God to despair over their efforts, then his battle is already won.

Our text today presents a case study of the reasons and remedy for spiritual discouragement.

After returning from exile in Babylon, the Jews commenced rebuilding the temple. Not long after, the work ceased largely because of opposition from the Samaritans. Sixteen years later God raised up Haggai to call the people back to the task at hand. Upon his prodding, they resumed the work. But their enthusiasm was gone yet again barely a month later. This time they were overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the project and by the memories of how great Solomon’s temple had been. By comparison their efforts seemed embarrassingly small. God through Haggai then spoke to the discouraged people.

Let’s look first at the reasons for their spiritual discouragement ... and in so doing we will discover something about our own spiritual struggles.

I. The reasons for spiritual discouragement

There are several reasons for their discouragement. One has to do with their memories of some things.

Memories can help or hinder us depending on whether we use them to inspire or inhibit us. And we often remember the things that are important or dear to us.

I remember asking my late mother one morning, “I am going over to the NTUC Supermarket to buy some stuff and pay some bills at the ATM. What would you like for breakfast?”

She thought for a while and said, “I want prawn noodle soup. But I want mee pok and not the usual yellow noodles. Do not mix the mee pok with the soup. Put them in separate containers. Otherwise the mee pok will get soggy. And ask for two packets of chillies in soya sauce.” Then looking at me somewhat apologetically, she asked, “Can you remember so many things?”

I replied her reassuringly, “Of course I can remember. I can remember even more complicated things than these.”

Off I went—busy with many purchases at the supermarket and waiting in line for quite a while at the ATM to pay some bills. I remembered every item and transaction that needed my attention.

After all had been done, you know what? I forgot to get breakfast for my mother. But I remembered that when I was half way on the

pedestrian bridge and walking towards home. So I turned back and headed for the prawn noodle stall.

But there was a long line of customers at the stall. So I took a shortcut—I went to the chee cheong fun stall, got some quickly and headed for home.

When I reached home, I was actually quite ready to explain to my mother why I got her chee cheong fun and not prawn mee pok soup. But she quickly opened up the packet and said, “You are so good. You remember my chee cheong fun!” Now you know what she would really like to have breakfast—chee cheong fun, not prawn mee pok soup.

Very often in life, we tend to remember what is really important or dear to us. I call this selective remembering. And for the Jews in Haggai’s time, they also suffered from selective memories. They remembered clearly what one of their kings, Solomon, had done. But sadly, they could barely remember what their God had promised.

The first reason for their spiritual discouragement has to do with their selective memories—i.e. they had a ...

1. Long memory of the good old days (vv. 3, 9).

“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?” (v. 3)

“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. (v. 9)

It’s very possible that many of the older returning Jews remembered the splendour of Solomon’s temple. They mourned for what they had lost. They now lamented how puny the new temple would seem by comparison. Looking at the resources and people they had, they lamented, “Even if we give of our very best, the rebuilt temple will never be as great and grand as the original one.” And so, many thought it just wasn’t worth the effort.

Memory is a wonderful thing if you remember the right things and it inspires you to greater heights. But for the Jews in Haggai’s time, it was a hindrance because they did remember the good old days BUT they did not move on. Instead, they stayed in the past and lived there.

Because they lived in the past, they looked down on the present, and they forgot God’s promises for the future. In this case, it meant disbelieving God’s promise to be with them always.

Never let sentimentalism of the past drain our enthusiasm to move confidently into the future.

The second reason for the spiritual discouragement of the Jews in Haggai's time is also related to their selective memories—i.e. they had a ...

2. Short memory of God's promised presence (vv. 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. (v. 4)

“This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.” (v. 5)

The Jews had forgotten what God had done for them at the Red Sea. They had forgotten how they were trapped with the Egyptian army behind them and the Red Sea before them. Moses struck the water, the sea parted, and they walked through on dry land. When the Egyptians followed them, the waters came together and swallowed up Pharaoh's entire army.

Why did God remind them of this great miracle here? It is because He's the same God today as He was back then. His promised presence was with the Jews in Haggai's time as He was in Moses' time. Look at the end of verse 5 - “My Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.” Think of the implications of that statement:

- Moses is gone.
- David is gone.
- Solomon is gone.
- But God's Spirit remains among them!

When God's people in Haggai's time got discouraged and lost that sense of His promised presence, they began to ask, “God, are you still with us. Do you still remember us?”

And God through Haggai answered them in vv. 4-5 - “I am still with you. My Spirit remains among you. That's my covenant with you. Be strong. Fear not. Keep on believing. Keep on doing my work for you. Keep moving forward. Don't look back to the past. Don't be intimidated by your circumstances.”

God's Word is saying to us today - “Never let your circumstances dictate your view of God. But let God's promises dictate your view of Him.”

God has promised to be with us forever. This is our basis to be strong and courageous in the midst of difficult circumstances.

The third reason for the spiritual discouragement of the Jews in Haggai's time has to do with having ...

3. Doubts that our best efforts are good enough (v. 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 as nothing?” (v. 3)

The older ones among the returning Jews would remember the glory of the ancient temple. They wept when they realized how puny this new temple would be. They felt it wasn't even worth the effort to rebuild because it would never be like the good old days.

The same thing happens to us whenever we play the comparison game. We compare what we used to have with what we have now. We remember the past as better than it really was so that the present seems worse than it really is.

- Some of you among us have been with this church since its very first day. Maybe today you are lamenting, “We have been trying our best to do God's work here all these years. But somehow, the church today is not like what it was before. Is it still worthwhile to keep trying?”
- Some of you among us have been Christians for many years. Maybe today you are lamenting, “I was once zealous and fervent as a new Christian. But today with many demands to meet and responsibilities to carry, my Christian life does not seem as vibrant as before. Is it still worthwhile to want to grow in Christlikeness?”
- Some couples among us may have been married for many years. Maybe today you are lamenting, “In our early years of marriage, we were so sweet to each other. But today, it is not like what it was before. Then, we were so sure that we were MEANT for each other. Today, we are so sure that we are MEAN to each other. It doesn't seem to get better each day. Is it worthwhile to even try harder?”
- Some of you among us may have been in the workplace for many years. Maybe today you are lamenting, “I used to be influential and well respected in the workplace. But today not many want to listen to me in spite of my experience. In fact, people now expect me to listen to a much younger person. It is not like what it was before. Is it still worthwhile for me to help in developing others?”
- Some of you among us may have just finished your education and started out onto a new career. Maybe you are lamenting, “I was a star in my university days. Then, they cited me on the Dean's list year after year. Now, they criticize me on the complaints list day after day. This office is not like my university days. Is it still worthwhile for me to give my best at work?”

In different seasons of our lives, we engage in different “building projects”. And we also tend to do “project comparison”—I was good then, am I still just as good or even better today?

If you are feeling uncertain or discouraged in this season of your life, God is saying to you today – “You must keep giving of your best and let Me be the Judge because only Me can make a proper comparison.

We now move on to learn from the text the remedy for spiritual discouragement.

II. The remedy for spiritual discouragement

Our text suggests three specific steps we must take.

1. Look up to the LORD Almighty (vv. 4, 6-9).

To look up means to get a fresh view of God. Notice that Haggai used one particular name for God six times in our text today—vv. 4, 6-9. It's the name translated as “The LORD Almighty”. The word “LORD” is capitalized—it refers to the Hebrew word “Yahweh” which is God's personal name. The word “Almighty” translates the Hebrew word “sabaoth” which means “the armies of earth and heaven”. The King James translated that as “the LORD of hosts”, meaning “He who is sovereign over all the powers of earth and heaven”. It's an extremely majestic name for God.

No one can stand against Him. No one can defeat His purposes. When the LORD Almighty goes out to do battle on your behalf, you're going to win for sure.

But the Jews in Haggai's time had viewed God as a small god. So the task of rebuilding the temple seemed overwhelming to them. In the same way, our view of God radically affects the way we approach life. You and I are worshipping God today. Is He big enough to handle our problems? If not, then we need to look up and get a new view of God—the LORD of Hosts, the LORD Almighty.

2. Pray to look ahead from God's perspective (vv. 7-9).

God could see what the Jews in Haggai's time could not. So He gave them a glimpse of what's to come. This prophetic window into the future was designed to help them believe that God would use the puny rebuilt temple beyond the limitations of their own vision.

“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. (v. 7)

“The silver is mine and the gold is mine,” declares the LORD Almighty. (v. 8)

“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. (v. 9)

What was God telling His people? “The best is yet to come!” God wanted His people to see His perspective. So He said to them, “You think you don’t have enough wealth to build a temple that will surpass that of Solomon. But I tell you this—the silver and gold all belong to me. If I have wanted you to build an elaborate temple better than Solomon’s, I could have easily given you even more wealth than you need to do that.”

And God added, “You think your best efforts may not even be good enough. But I tell you this—My glory will fill this house. It will be greater than anything Solomon ever experienced. So don’t let the reality you’re looking at right now affect your obedience to Me.”

Today, we may think what we are doing won’t amount to much. “It’s just a small thing,” we say. But God says to us, “You must pray to see what I see. The best is yet to come!”

When we stay focused on God’s kingdom priorities in the midst of discouragement, God uses us beyond our limitations. We may live to see how God does it, or we may only have a prophetic glimpse of how God will do it much later. The greater glory that God speaks about in v. 9 is not about what we can do with our abilities. It is about what God can do with and beyond our limitations.

The temple that Zerubbabel and the people completed was visited some 500 years later by Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus Christ had to first cleanse the temple because His presence there embodied the very holiness and glory of God (Matt. 21:12-13).

Jewish and Christian commentators have agreed that “the desired of all nations” in v. 7 refers to the Messiah. Christians understand it as one of the titles of Christ, especially with reference to His Second Coming.

And v. 9 tells us that when Christ, “the desired of all nations”, finally comes among the spiritual house of God’s people (the eternal temple not built by human hands but by the Spirit of God), the restless in spirit will find rest in His shalom peace.

So the greater glory has nothing to do with a temple grander than the one built by Solomon. It has to do with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. All the things in the temple, including the worship and sacrifices, were meant to point to Jesus Christ, “the desired of all nations” to come. He is the greater glory. If we only see the grandeur of the physical temple or the pomposity of King Solomon, but miss seeing the glory or majesty of Christ, then all the grandeur of the temple or pomposity of Solomon is meaningless and worthless.

It is like the 107 year-old Logan Square Church in Chicago today. It is a “glorious-looking” church. But do you know that some people are

working towards buying it over ... so that they can turn it into a circus training centre? If this eventually happens, you and I will be going to this church not to worship Christ, but to watch circus! If we only see the grandeur of a church building or pomposity of man, but miss seeing the glory or majesty of Christ in there, then all the physical grandeur or human pomposity is meaningless and worthless.

(<https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20151203/logan-square/107-year-old-church-circus-project-seeks-zoning-change>)

Are you looking ahead from God's perspective? Or are you living in the "good old days"? No matter how old you may be, God can still show you His plan. And Scripture reminds us in Joel 2:28 that even old men can dream Spirit-inspired dreams.

So pray to see the future from God's perspective. Ask God to show you what He sees. Scripture reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:18 to "fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal".

3. Get moving and keep working (v. 4).

Here is the final step. Get up and get moving for God.

"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. (v. 4)

Perhaps, too many people tend to stay put when the Lord says, "Get up and do the work I have called you to do." That's what the Lord said to the Jews. Three times in v. 4 God says, "Be strong." Be strong in the face of difficulties and do the work of God. Be strong, arise and work!

Sometimes the best move is to simply ask God to give us strength to take just one more step. God is only asking us to take the next step. And in taking that next step, He will give us strength to take yet another step.

The Jews in Haggai's time had to let go of their fond memories of Solomon's temple. Until they did that, they would never make any spiritual progress.

This is one of the problems of God's people. We are always looking back to the past. And we long to have it just that way. But the lesson that God wants to impress upon us is that He can choose to do a new and different work. God is saying, "Keep on working, I am with you. And when I am in your midst, you don't need to worry about how it is going to turn out. It may be different but it will be better."

The Bible school I teach at in Yangon is the Myanmar Theological College (MTC). It is situated in a rural village just outside Yangon City. Many of the villagers are Buddhists.

When we were preparing to set up the school, the villagers were suspicious of us. They even made attempts to stop us from getting started. By God's grace, MTC managed to begin its ministry in 2011.

One of the things we put priority in is to be a good neighbour to the villagers. Every year, a Christmas event would be organized and the villagers in the neighbourhood would be invited to celebrate with us. It would be held on the school ground. There would be singing, testimonies, Gospel sharing, and food.

The first few years were rather discouraging because not many in the neighbourhood would accept our invitations to come.

I was at MTC last December (2015). Before I left, I asked one of my co-workers there, "Will we still be inviting the neighbours to our Christmas event?"

He replied, "Yes, we will still continue to invite them. Also, we are getting the other believers in our two affiliated churches to come as well. We try to be faithful to what God has called us to do, and we trust Him to bring about what only He can do."

I left MTC a few days before Christmas Day. But I received the encouraging news that this time, some 400 people attended the Christmas event. Many of them were villagers in the neighbourhood.

By God's grace, they showed us on Christmas Day 2015 that they had finally trusted us as a good neighbour because for the other 364 days of that year, we had not been discouraged by their past responses, but had been moving and working to be a good neighbour in their midst.

To get moving and working for God, we must let our past (good or bad) to mobilize and not immobilize us.

To be sure, discouragement is not a sin unless it drives you away from God. Perhaps you've been through a series of events that have shaken you deeply. Whatever you do, don't turn away from God.

This also applies to those who do not know Jesus Christ yet. God's Spirit is here today calling you to salvation. He can lead you to repentance and faith, and give you new life in Jesus Christ. If you feel hopelessly discouraged, congratulations! God specializes in saving hopelessly lost people. He lifts the fallen and encourages those who turn to Him in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

When we see ourselves not as “glorious” as before, or when we think our best efforts don’t even seem to be good enough, we tend to ask, “God, what’s wrong? Are you still with me? Do I have to carry on?”

It is in such times that you and I need to hear again what God said to the Jews in Haggai’s time—“I am still with you. My Spirit remains among you. That’s my covenant with you. Be strong. Fear not. Keep on believing. Keep on doing my work for you. Keep moving forward. Don’t look back to the past. Don’t be intimidated by your circumstances.”

Are you engaged in a certain “building project” in this season of your life? Whatever it is, remember to trust and let the Lord work in and through you by His Spirit because “unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labour in vain” (Psalm 127:1-2).

Let’s ask God help us press on so that even if our best efforts may seem inadequate, we can still see Him do greater things with and beyond our limitations.

And like Simon Peter in the NT, when we step out in faith onto the waters, we learn that the Lord will not let us drown. Instead, He will surely lift us up. Amen!