GOD’S ENCOURAGEMENT

FOR DISCOURAGED SERVANTS

Haggai 2:1-9

By

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February 23, 2003

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Haggai 2:1-9

The famous inventor, Thomas Edison, tried again and again to find the right filament for the incandescent electric light bulb. One day he had completed his 10,000th experiment only to discover another way that would not work. When he arrived home that night, he shared this bit of news with his wife. “Aren’t you pretty discouraged, Tom?” she asked. “Discouraged?” responded Edison. “Certainly not! I now know 10,000 ways that won’t work!”

Perseverance seems to be an outdated concept in our day of instant everything. If it doesn’t come easy, why pursue it? If it’s hard or requires endurance, maybe it isn’t your thing.

It’s easy to start a new diet. It’s tough to stick to it when you crave that cinnamon roll. It’s easy to start a new exercise program. It’s tough to persevere when your aching muscles scream, “No more!” It’s easy to get married. It’s tough to hang in there and work through problems over a lifetime. It’s easy to begin a new ministry in the local church. It’s tough to keep on when problems arise or when the results don’t match your initial expectations.

That describes the people in Haggai’s day, just shy of a month after they had obeyed his first message and resumed work on rebuilding the temple. The foundation had been laid about 15 years before, but the project had been set on the shelf. But now, in response to Haggai’s word from the Lord, the leaders and people had begun to rebuild on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month of the second year of Darius (Sept. 21, 520 B.C.; 1:15). The seventh month in Israel began with the Feast of Trumpets on the first day, followed by the Day of Atonement on the tenth day. Then the Feast of Tabernacles went from the 15th to the 21st. On the last day of that feast (Oct. 17th), Haggai delivered his second message to the people (2:1-9). It is a message of God’s encouragement to discouraged workers. We learn that ...

God encourages His discouraged servants  
to persevere in His work.
These verses teach us three things about persevering by turning our discouragement in serving the Lord into encouragement:

1. **God understands and cares about the discouragement we face in serving Him (2:1-3).**

   The Lord did not gloss over or ignore the reality of the situation. He knew what they were thinking and feeling, and He brings it up to show them that He understood and that He cared for them. If we do not keep in mind that in all our troubles the Lord understands and cares for us, we will easily become discouraged. The text and historical context reveal several potential sources of discouragement when we get involved in serving the Lord:

   A. The loss of initial excitement can discourage us.

      There is always a certain sense of excitement when you begin a new ministry or project. But the glow easily rubs off in the grind. There were probably piles of rubble that needed to be removed. Perhaps some of the workers had envisioned putting the finishing touches on some gold work or other craftsmanship, but they hadn’t thought about hauling rubble. Their initial enthusiasm was already wearing thin.

      The summer after I graduated from seminary, I was involved with a group of men in starting a new church that was branching off of an existing church. We received some wise counsel from the elders of the mother church. They said, “What you’re doing now is new and exciting. But the time will come when the glamour wears off and then you’ll need to know that God has called you to this work and persevere in it.” The leaders did persevere, because last year I received an email from the pastor telling me that they were celebrating their 25th anniversary.

   B. Delays can discourage us.

      Work for the Lord seldom moves as quickly as we had hoped. Perhaps working around the numerous feasts and Sabbath days in the seventh month had dampened the initial enthusiasm because the work was going so slowly. It’s easy for that to happen in anything we do for the Lord, and the delays get us down.

   C. Outside opposition and criticism can discourage us.
In verse 5, the Lord says, “Do not fear!” He would not say that unless they had a reason to be afraid. Probably the same men who had threatened them and lobbied against them at the Persian court 15 years before were at it again. Any time you attempt to do God’s work, Satan will stir up opposition. We’re in a battle with the forces of darkness that are opposed to the church of Jesus Christ. Expect opposition!

D. Inside pessimism, comparisons, and faulty expectations can discourage us.

When I began in ministry, I naively thought that most of the opposition would come from outside the church. Boy, was I wrong! Most opposition comes from within, and it takes different forms.

One common form is pessimism. “We tried that before. It won’t work!” When they had laid the foundation years before, there was great joy mixed with weeping (Ezra 3:11-13). The young people who had not known the glory of the former temple were rejoicing. But the old-timers, who had seen Solomon’s Temple, wept at this new temple, because it just didn’t measure up. Although they would be in their seventies or older by now, a few were still around when the work got started again. Maybe they were saying, “God’s blessing just isn’t on this temple!” Pessimism!

A second form of inside opposition comes from those who drop little comparisons on you. The old-timers were saying, “You should have seen Solomon’s Temple. Now that was a temple! This new one is hardly worth calling a temple compared to the old one!” Sometimes people will say, “That church on the other side of town really has their act together!” (Implication: You don’t!) Or, “Have you ever heard Chuck Swindoll preach? He’s really good! You ought to listen to him.” Thanks for the encouragement!

And then there are those who have faulty expectations. This usually operates in conjunction with comparisons. “Where is all the gold? Solomon’s Temple was lined with gold. Why isn’t this one?” I’ve had people tell me about their former pastors who must never have slept and changed into their pastor uniforms in a phone booth! These pastors would visit everyone in the church, preach superb sermons (with great illustrations), attend all the youth activi-
ties, and always have time for drop ins. Besides that, they never neglected their families! Implication: "Why aren’t you like they are?"

E. A wrong view of success can discourage us.

Some view success externally rather than internally (or spiritually). “This temple isn’t as big as Solomon’s Temple was. This temple doesn’t have all the gold and fancy workmanship that Solomon’s Temple did.” But God says through Haggai, “I own all the gold and silver in the world, and I could cover this temple with gold if I wanted to. But I’m going to do something better. Instead of gold, I’m going to fill this temple with glory, the glory of My Messiah” (paraphrase of 2:7-9).

God doesn’t view things as we do. Just because one church isn’t as big or outwardly slick as another church doesn’t mean anything to God. A church may have a multi-million dollar facility, but if it doesn’t honor God’s Word or promote His glory among the nations, that facility is a big pile of wood, hay, and stubble! God is looking for the glory of Christ formed in the hearts of His people, not for the outward, superficial signs of success.

Another wrong view of success is the instant view as opposed to the eternal. None of the workers on this temple lived to see its glory exceed that of Solomon’s Temple. That didn’t happen until Messiah came into this temple over 500 years later, and even then many missed it! God says, “Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land” (2:6). While there may have been a partial fulfillment of that prophecy within a few years of Haggai’s day (in the overthrow of powerful kingdoms), the ultimate fulfillment is still future in our day! God will shake all the nations at the Second Coming of Christ, and they will bring the wealth of the nations to His temple in the Millennium.

If the people in Haggai’s day were viewing success from the short range, they would have been very discouraged. With God, a thousand years is as a day. True success will be measured in the light of eternity, not in our lifetimes. We need to keep this in mind as we labor for the Lord. The harvest is at the end of the age, not at the end of the meeting. God’s timing is not our timing.

Whatever our source of discouragement, God understands and He cares. But He doesn’t coddle us or let us stay there.
2. God’s word to us when we discouraged in serving Him is to persevere (2:4a).

Three times the Lord repeats, “Be strong!” (“Take courage!”) And He tells them to work. Keep going! Persevere! There are two aspects to this kind of perseverance: an attitude and an action.

A. Perseverance requires the right attitude: Be strong!

The people had the wrong attitude. They were weak because they had gotten their focus off the Lord and onto the slow, disappointing progress on the temple. Maybe they were thinking, “This will never get done. We’re just wasting our time!”

Have you ever noticed how much your attitude affects your ability to persevere? If you’re motivated, you can stay up all night on some project. But if you get discouraged, you procrastinate and never get around to finishing it.

We hear about many pastors burning out and quitting the ministry. While in some cases the cause of burnout is not properly managing one’s schedule, often the real cause is an attitude of discouragement because of setbacks or disappointments. I recently read that 70 percent of pastors constantly fight depression. Eighty percent of pastors and 84 percent of their spouses feel unqualified and discouraged in their ministries. I think every pastor should feel unqualified (2 Cor. 2:16), but not discouraged. As Americans, we’re far too emotionally fragile. Someone offends us, so we get our feelings hurt and drop out of service. Someone doesn’t do what we had expected, so we quit. Someone criticizes what we’re doing, and we say, “I’m out of here!”

But God says, “Be strong!” We aren’t to be strong in our own strength, of course, but in God’s strength (2 Cor. 3:5). But, be strong! Have the attitude that hangs in there in spite of obstacles. The real question is not how do we see things, but how does God see things? If we have not factored God into the equation, we don’t see things in the right perspective.

Do you remember the story of the 12 spies who went into the land of Canaan? Ten of them came back focused on the giants in the land and said, “We’re like grasshoppers in their sight. We can’t conquer them!” But Joshua and Caleb came back and said, “Be-
cause God is with us and He has promised us that land, we will eat them for lunch!” (Num. 14:9, paraphrase). Be strong in attitude!

B. Perseverance requires the right action: Work!

The attitude provides the motivation, but motivation without work won’t get the temple built. Joshua and Caleb had the right attitude of trust in the Lord. But they still had to go into the land and fight the giants. Much of the Lord’s work is far more perspiration than inspiration! That is certainly true of my weekly sermon preparation. These messages don’t come floating down from the sky! I have to work hard to prepare them. Just because you’re gifted in whatever you do for the Lord does not mean that it just flows effortlessly. To persevere we must not only be strong; we also must work.

Thus God encourages us in our service for Him by showing that He understands what we’re feeling and He cares. His word to us is, “Be strong and work!” Finally,

3. God assures us when we are discouraged in serving Him by His presence, His promise, and His prophecy (2:4b-9).

A. God assures us when we are discouraged in serving Him by His presence (2:4b).

After telling Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people to be strong and to work, God adds, “For I am with you,” says the Lord of hosts.” The Jews may have feared a hostile host against them, but God is the Lord of hosts, the Supreme Ruler over all the armies of heaven and earth. If the Lord of hosts is with us, who can defeat us? If we’re serving Him, then nothing can happen to us accidentally or without His express permission. The assurance of His presence should lift our discouragement and enable us to press on.

After many years of hardship and danger in the heart of Africa, David Livingstone received an honorary doctorate from the University of Glasgow. On that occasion, he said, “Would you like me to tell you what supported me through all the years of exile among people whose language I could not understand, and whose attitude toward me was always uncertain and often hostile? It was this: ‘Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.’ On those words I staked everything, and they never failed.”
B. God assures us when we are discouraged in serving Him by His promise (2:5).

"Promise" (2:5) refers to the covenant God made with Israel when they came out of Egypt. He promises them now, as He had then, that His Spirit would go with them and abide in their midst. Therefore, they need not fear.

God has made a better covenant with us than He did with them, the New Covenant, enacted on better promises (Heb. 8:6). Jesus sealed that New Covenant with His own blood. He promised us the indwelling Holy Spirit to be with us forever (John 14:16). When we grow discouraged in our service for Him, we should remember His promise, that He would not leave us as orphans, but would come to us and that in the meanwhile, He has given us the Holy Spirit to enable us to serve Him.

C. God assures us when we are discouraged in serving Him by His prophecies (2:6-9).

The many prophecies in Scripture are not given for us to speculate about the future, but to strengthen and encourage our faith. When we see how God has worked down through the ages in accordance with what He told His people in advance, it encourages us to keep serving Him, knowing that the remaining unfulfilled prophecies will surely yet be fulfilled.

Commentators differ on when the shaking of heaven and earth and the nations (2:6-7a) would take place. Some say that it referred to God’s stirring up Darius to supply help and materials for this rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 6:6-15). Others say that it refers to God’s bringing future judgment on the Persians, Greeks, and Romans (see James Boice, The Minor Prophets [Baker], 2:476-477). While that may be an initial fulfillment, like many biblical prophecies, there may be multiple fulfillments. In this case, it refers ultimately to the Second Coming of Christ, when God will shake the heavens and the earth (2:21; Joel 3:16; Matt. 24:29; Rev. 16:18-20) and conquer all the rebellious nations (2:22).

Haggai 2:6 is the only verse from this book quoted in the New Testament. In Hebrews 12:26-27, the author states, “And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.’ This ex-
pression, ‘Yet once more,’ denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.” This refers to the final judgment when God will destroy the heavens and the earth, prior to establishing a new heavens and earth (2 Pet. 3:10, 12-13; Rev. 20:11; 21:1).

There is also debate about the translation of the phrase, “the wealth of the nations” (2:7). Some translations have it, “the desire of the nations,” which would be a reference to Jesus Christ. While this is possible, both the Hebrew grammar and the reference to silver and gold (2:8) probably tilt the evidence toward “the wealth of the nations,” a reference to the nations in the Millennium bringing their wealth in homage to Jesus Christ.

The Lord also says that He will “fill this house with glory” and that “the latter glory of this house will be greater than the former” (2:7, 9). Again there is some debate. How could Zerubbabel’s temple be greater in glory than Solomon’s? While Herod replaced this temple with more glorious buildings (the temple in Jesus’ time), this verse probably refers to the coming of Jesus into that temple. His presence made it even more glorious than Solomon’s Temple. In the Millennium, His presence as King of Kings and Lord of Lords will surpass the veiled glory of His first coming. In the new heavens and earth, there will be no temple, “for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev. 21:22).

Finally, the Lord promises that in this place He will give peace (2:9). Again, this has multiple fulfillments. In His first coming, Jesus preached peace to both Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:17). We have peace with God and with one another when we trust in His shed blood (Rom. 5:1). But true and lasting peace for this world and for Jerusalem will only come when Jesus returns.

We could get hung up on the details of interpreting these prophecies. But the application for us is that since the Lord of hosts has predicted the certain final triumph of the kingdom of His Son, we should be encouraged in our work for Him, knowing that our work in the Lord is never in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).
Conclusion

One of the most remarkable examples of a Christian persevering in the Lord’s work is that of William Wilberforce of England (1759-1833). He was converted in 1785. Two years later he gave notice in the House of Commons, where he served, that he would bring a motion for the abolition of the slave trade. This was a hugely lucrative business that brought much income into the British economy. The British plantations in the West Indies depended on slave labor for their profit. Owning slaves was a strong cultural institution. So it was an enormous task to undertake.

Numerous times Wilberforce’s life was threatened. There was political pressure to back down because of the international political ramifications. For example, if Britain outlawed slavery, the West Indian colonies threatened to declare independence from Britain and associate with the United States, which still allowed slavery. But in spite of all of these obstacles, Wilberforce persevered.

Finally, on March 25, 1807, after 20 years of setbacks, Wilberforce prevailed when the House voted to outlaw the slave trade. But the battle wasn’t over. Wilberforce battled on for the next 26 years, until his death, to abolish not only the slave trade, but also slavery itself. The decisive vote on that issue came on July 26, 1833, just three days before Wilberforce died. After 46 years of battle, slavery itself was outlawed in the British Empire.

But Wilberforce wasn’t just a one-issue man. He was also involved heavily in a number of missionary endeavors and in many social causes. He worked to alleviate harsh child labor conditions, for agricultural reform, prison reform, and the prevention of cruelty to animals. And he continually sought to win his colleagues to personal faith in Jesus Christ. (The above facts are taken from John Piper, The Roots of Endurance [Crossway Books], pp. 129-134).

Not many of us can rack up such a record! But we can persevere in whatever the Lord has given us to do for His kingdom. Just as the result of the people’s building the temple in Haggai’s day would bring more glory to God, so our obedience in building His spiritual temple, the church, will glorify Him. If you are discouraged in your service for the Lord, He wants to encourage you to persevere for His glory.
Discussion Questions

1. Why are so many American Christians “burning out”? Are we too emotionally fragile, or are there other causes?

2. How can we know if we are too committed to the Lord’s work? Where is the proper balance between work, home, and church commitments?

3. What discourages you the most in your service for the Lord? How can you prevent and overcome it?

4. What is a biblical definition of “success” in Christian service?