

TCC Sunday 29th September 2013 – Haggai 1v1-2v9

Title: “Despicable Me x2 – When I cheat & when I’m a coward!!”

Purpose:

To get people to seriously look within.

To convict people, through the moving of the Spirit, where they belong to either or both categories of being:

- 1) those people who cheat on their partners (i.e. towards God)**
- 2) those people who are cowardly (i.e. towards all that God will do)**

Introduction

Q. Has anybody here seen

AND is happy to own up to having seen: the children’s film “**DESPICABLE ME 2**”?

Without doubt and hour and a half of non-stop **slapstick action, fun & games.**

I wonder - If you were to describe **something about someone** as being “truly despicable” – I wonder what sort of things might qualify themselves for that “DESPICABLE” label.

Well – I came up with two candidates.

Q. Do you want to hear them? (You’re not allowed to say no!)

DESPICABLE PERSON Type 1 – People who cheat on their loved ones.

DESPICABLE PERSON Type 2 – People who are cowards when it affects those they most love.

Background

This morning, and God willing next Sunday morning as well, we are turning to the book of Haggai – there right towards the very end of our OT, it is the second shortest book in the OT after Obadiah and has just 2 chapters – 38 verses in total.

Let me fill you in a little on the background to this letter, give you a 2 minute historical round-up:

- And I’m going to start at the year 606BC – this was when Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (the dominant world power swept into Israel and started the process of carting people away to Babylon – starting with people like the young Daniel
- In 597 he returned again for another bite at the cherry and then finally
- In 587 he came back one last time, laid siege to Jerusalem and then by 586 the city wall was breached and it was game over. Nebuchadnezzar then proceed to destroy the city and especially the magnificent Temple of the Lord that King Solomon had built 3-400 hundred years earlier on
- Jeremiah the prophet then tells the exiles to settle down in Babylon because they’ll be there for a while (70 years in fact)
- In 536 the 70 years reach their fulfilment and King Cyrus allows the Jews to return to their land with instructions to rebuild the Temple of their God – Yahweh
- And the last thing that happens is that the people have set to work with gusto and have got as far as getting the foundation in place after 2 years of hard work and having dedicated it but now everything has ground to an unceremonious halt and it has been that way for 14 long years

- So here we are it is the year 522 BC, King Darius the Great is the Persian king ruling over Babylon, and Haggai is God's mouthpiece to speak into the situation of God's people, the returned exiles, living back in the land

It is a great book and I am very excited about us taking time to step our way through it.

Let me, at this point, also just tell you little bit about this book of Haggai and try share with you a bit of my own enthusiasm:

- It's short, just 2 chapters, 38 verses and very much to the point – you don't have to do too much digging down and reading between any lines or reconstructing situations in order to get the meaning
- There are 5 words from the LORD that come via Haggai the prophet and it is worth noticing that there is proportionately more encouragement than rebuke – 60% is encouragement and 40% is exhortation – there has to be lesson there somewhere for us don't you think
- Something else that is very exciting is the fact that 20 times, so that's more than every other verse, we get a reference to: "the word of the LORD" or "declares the LORD" or "says the LORD Almighty" etc.

In this way we sense very strongly the direct authoritative word of the LORD coming through with power.

Haggai is a real POWER BOOK!

- One last thing – Haggai is very exciting because here we find what you might call a SUCCESSFUL PROPHET!

Q. What do I mean? Well, for a great many of the OT prophets, God let them know that the message they brought from the LORD was *NOT* going to be very readily received or acted upon. But Haggai is one such prophet who is allowed to "buck the trend".

This is what we learn in:

Ezra 6v14 "So the elders of the Jews continued to **build and prosper** under the preaching of **Haggai** the prophet and **Zechariah**, a descendant of Iddo."

Our structure – the first 2 key messages

I want to keep things as simple as possible and to that end we are going to focus on the first two key messages that come out from chapter 1v1 through to chapter 2 and verse 9:

So then No. #1 – what I'm calling ...

1. The People's LOVE & their "Excuses to Cheat" (Chapter 1v1-15)

Let me read the first chapter *READ* Haggai 1v1-15 *READ*

Going back to the historical timeline for just a moment, back in **538BC** Cyrus, who was a benevolent dictator, allowed as many or as few of the Jewish people to return and to rebuild Jerusalem and in particular the Temple of the LORD.

We know that 50,000 took up this once-in-a-lifetime offer, and although that might sound like a lot of people, actually there were a great many others who had been born in Babylon, had established themselves and their families, their businesses and were doing materially very well for themselves. Babylon was on a great trade route (so you could think of it like any other great modern day metropolis like New York or Paris or London).

So for the 50,000 it was spiritual interests that motivated and lay behind their return. In fact, about 2 out of every 15 were priests.

If you had asked them which song they most liked to sing – I guess **Psalm 126** would have been topping the hits chart:

Ps 126 “When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion,

we were like men who dreamed.
² Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

³ The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

There really were bucket loads of **JOY**
and (not only that) shed loads of **HOPE FOR THE FUTURE** – the psalm goes on:

⁴ **Restore** our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negev.

⁵ Those who sow in tears
will reap with songs of joy.

⁶ He who goes out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with him.”

A journey like that of their ancestor Abraham

And it is worth saying that in making the journey from Babylon back to the promised land and to Jerusalem – it was a lot like re-enacting that first journey which God told Abram to make in Genesis 11.

It was a very sacrificial thing, journeying 900 miles only to start pitching tents and building an altar where they would offer their sacrifices to God the LORD.

They left behind them security, friends, brick houses and a good many creature-comforts to which they were accustomed – Q. And why? Because this was God’s will and in this lay God’s interests, to once again have a place to put his name, to once again have a reputation before the nations.

All went well – for 2 years

Now all went well for 2 whole years, their sacrifice was paying off and they had been sensible about the rebuilding of the temple.

They realised that it was not going to be of the same glorious proportions as Solomon’s temple. They accepted the fact that their situation was very different from the glory days of the United Kingdom of Israel, those days when everything was at the highest height.

At the end of the two years there was more rejoicing they had finally been able to lay the foundations and they held a service of dedication.

And then BLAM!

And then BLAM! They ran into some serious difficulty, some concerted opposition from their near neighbours and they put God’s temple, God’s agenda on hold.

The years passed – 2, 4, 8 even 14 long years ebbed away without another stone being put onto the foundation.

Where this book of Haggai comes in

And this – at 520BC (16 years after the return granted by Cyrus) is where this book of Haggai comes in.

God speaks to the people through Haggai and says:

Verse 2-4 “This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come for the Lord’s house to be built.’ ”

Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?””

Q. What do you make of Verse 2? It could even be said in quite a spiritual tone – “Oh yes, the Lord’s time isn’t just yet. The reality is that times are hard and we have to know that the Lord does have His seasons and He is Sovereign in all these matters.”

Maybe they played their part keeping the site of the Lord’s temple clean of weeds and swept. Very possibly the stone altar was used regularly for their regular services.

It was almost as if, what they had was like a placeholder for the real thing.

What about us?

The application is not so very hard to make across to ourselves.

PERHAPS – we ourselves, here at Thatcham Community Church, also have a **PLACEHOLDER CHURCH**.

The essentials are in place – oh yes, we’ve got the website and we’ve got our regular services all happening on time and we’ve even got it put down on a plan – so it’s all really quite orderly and efficient and operative.

They had checked out

You see one by one they had checked out.

You know it’s a bit like that conversation you have with someone else and you realise that although the other person is listening to you and nodding at all the appropriate moments – the horrible realisation is that they are, in their minds, SOMEWHERE ELSE!!

Imagine the Oxford Cambridge boat race

Imagine the Oxford Cambridge boat race and how well it would go if one or two, or may 60% of the crew just one by one stopped rowing.

This is an important question for us:

Q. Have some of us, a while back, stopped rowing? Oh yes we’re still on board, but our oars are lifted clear of the water.

They had lost the plot

The truth, as God knew, was that they had lost the plot. In fact, they now had a new plot, a new agenda that had rushed in to fill the vacuum.

Verse 4 “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”

They were busy enough, they had their hands full – just *NOT* with the LORD’S BUSINESS.

Q. What are your hands filled with?

For these Israelites back in 520BC they were:

“Deferring what the LORD wanted & Preferring what they now wanted.”

Verse 9 captures the reality “...my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house.”

Give careful thought - REFRAIN

You will notice, as you read through Haggai, that there are a couple of places where we get this **refrain**:

“Give careful thought to you ways...” The phrase is used to sandwich a description of the consequences that they are experiencing.

As they, one by one emptied their lives of the LORD’s concerns, the LORD in equal measure began emptying them out.

Have you ever been emptied?

Let me ask you a question: Q. Have you ever been emptied? And when I say this, I mean, emptied BY THE LORD. Where God is behind your ever more straightened circumstances.

If so you need to establish the CAUSE which is leading to the divine EFFECT (your emptying).

God is trying to get your attention – but you know, usually we are SO BUSY engrossed in our own affairs that we completely don’t notice that what we are experiencing is more than just the random ups and downs that are a normal part of life.

THE PRINCIPLE – Obedience -> Blessing

There is an important principle here and its one that is evident right through the pages of Scripture from start to finish.

Perhaps its best and clearest expression comes in Deuteronomy 28 and if you can’t directly recall that chapter to mind it is that one which the NIV divides into two halves:

- The first headed “Blessings for Obedience”
- The second “Curses for Disobedience”

The opening verses of the chapter give the flavour of the **“blessings” section**:

Deuteronomy 28v1-6 “If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.”

And as Christian believers today, although we would be stretching things too far to say that we have here a universal binding cast-iron guarantee of “MATERIAL/ EARTHLY BLESSINGS”, so long as we yield our undivided obedience to the LORD – we do, nonetheless, have the riches of very real blessings that come to us in Christ.

Ephesians 1v3-8 reads “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with **every spiritual blessing** in Christ. For he **chose us** in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he **predestined us** to be **adopted** as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him **we have redemption** through his blood, **the forgiveness of sins**, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.”

The fact is that the BEST OIL to ensure the smooth operation of our covenant relationship with God is the OIL OF OBEDIENCE.

Recall the words of Jesus which he spoke during the sermon on the mount:

Matthew 6v33 “... seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and **all these things** will be given to you as well” Q. **All WHAT THINGS?** Well all those mundane things that are needful in life – what we eat/drink etc

Two wonderful things

As you look at how chapter 1 ends we see **two wonderful things**:

1. The **FIRST** is that the people respond:

Verse 12 “Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord.”

That must have been joy in God’s sight – to see his people doing a u-turn and putting a stop to their excuses and their cheating on God.

2. The **SECOND** is how God responds to His people responding:

So many times in Scripture we see and get to understand that we have a wonderfully RECIPROCAL God:

Verse 13-14 “Then Haggai, the Lord’s messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: “I am with you,” declares the Lord. So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God...”

For every step we take towards God, as soon as He sees that we are serious about changing our ways then He quickly takes steps to encourage and establish our renewed attitude and our revised priorities.

Let’s move on to our second point and this brings us to chapter 2 and the first 9 verses.

#1 – The People – Agreeing to Cheat

And now #2 – The People’s FEAR & their “Leaning to Defeat”

2. The People's FEAR & their "Leaning to Defeat" (Chapter 2v1-9)

Let me read the second chapter *READ* [Haggai 2v1-9](#) *READ*

As you know the fuller storyline behind the prophetic book of Haggai is there in the historical book of Ezra and so let me just draw out a bit of background from [Ezra chapter 3](#) at the point where they had just completed the foundation, after 2 years of having been back in the land, and they are having a dedication service where a peculiar thing happens:

Ezra 3v10-13 "When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the Lord, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: "He is good; his love to Israel endures forever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away."

Amazing isn't it:

- Tears of unbelievable and irrepressible JOY from some & at the very same time
- Tears of undeniable and unstoppable SADNESS from others, from the older ones

A mark of God's grace that he speaks again

It's a mark of God's grace that he speaks again before the month is out – there on the 21st day of the seventh month.

And in the same way that God had uncovered & exposed the root problem of where their LOVE was being misdirected – NOW he quickly follows that up by exposing a 2nd problem that will also be their undoing if it is not equally brought up to the surface – it is that problem of FEAR.

Easy to see v5

It is pretty easy to see this in the text – verse 5 ends with the words "... do not fear." This is the problem. Q. And what is the remedy?

Verse 4 "... **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."

Size = significance

We have in our churches here in the UK a particular tendency – and I don't know whether this is in part to do with who we are as British people or whether it is just down to the prevailing spiritual decline in our country – and that tendency is to EQUATE the SIZE of something with its SIGNIFICANCE.

And so we desperately count up the number of people that make up our congregation and we very directly map that on to:

- our "SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE" and to
- our "KINGDOM CLOUT"

Whether we mean to do this or not – somehow this thinking, this mindset begins to creep into our psychology and we give in to FEAR and our God-informed COURAGE slowly ebbs and drains out of us.

We are left as somewhat PALE-FACED Christians – with all the faith-filled blood drained out of our faces.

Application to us

Q. Is that us this morning? Q. Do you look at the 15 or so that we are today and do we echo the tone and sentiment of **Verse 3** “... Does it seem to you like nothing?”?

A remedy

It's best we are honest – you see God knows the reality of things, whether we own up to it or not.

Maybe you say – “Well, if we have to be really honest – then I guess some days I do think like that. Is there a better way? Is there a ready remedy or do we have to operate some sort of process of clever denial?”

Listen to what God says – having told them 3 times to “Be strong” he goes on in **Verse 5** “This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.”

He takes them back to remember the covenant. And we have the same ourselves :

Hebrews 13 verses 5&6 ““Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?””

Q. Have you forgotten God's power? Q. Have you lost confidence in the gospel which is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes?

Perhaps you have lost sight of the sort of spirit that was in people like Jonathan son of Saul and his armour bearer, just 2 of them facing a Philistine outpost:

1 Samuel 14v6 “Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, “Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.” “Do all that you have in mind,” his armor-bearer said. “Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul.” “

Perhaps the sentiments of a fired-up apostle are not ones that you have recently echoed for yourself:

“He is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us...”

Let me try and draw the strands together and bring things to their natural conclusion.

CONCLUSION

This morning we have:

- gone back in history **2 and a half millennia**
- AND YET it is not even **2 and a half miles** removed from our own situation today

It's a great challenge. And particularly this morning in TWO AREAS:

FIRSTLY – Our Cheating (LOVE)

First off: Q. What do you think God hears as he tunes in along the corridors of our church?

Maybe, in one of a million ways, we are saying – “the time hasn't come for the Lord's house to be built”.

And God is saying back to us – **“YES!** And each of you is busy with his own house – while MY HOUSE remains a ruin!!”

Q. Brothers, sisters – WHERE is your LOVE directed? Q. If your heart is not in the work – YOU are CHEATING on the Lord, your first love – we need to ditch our EXCUSES and own up!! Confess our sins and repent.

SECONDLY – Our Cowardice (FEAR)

Secondly: taking the question that God poses to the Jews returned from exile engaged in building up his broken down temple – “How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?”

Maybe we have to hang our heads a little and nod!!

Our Christian courage is seriously shrunken, our expectations as to what our God will do, pretty low on any Richter Scale of Spiritual earth shaking activity!

Despicable Me 2

Let me end where I began – Despicable Me 2

Perhaps you have to own up before God this very morning and say back YES – Despicable - Me Too!!

We say, like Nathan to David after his sin with Bathsheba – You are the man.

If God has spoken to you this morning, if he has called time on your cheating
if he has nailed you on your cowardice
then tell Him you're sorry and ask for Him to stir up your spirit and to renew your passion.

Let's pray shall we...