

THE WORD OF THE LORD

After my message on living in light of the Father's compassion, I spoke with someone about the struggle to take the reality of God's love to heart. I remembered, in his autobiography, playwright Arthur Miller described life with Marilyn Monroe, his wife of several years. Miller told of a time when in his own words, he *"watched Marilyn descend into the depths of depression and despair."* He said he *"feared for her life as he watched her growing paranoia and dependence on drugs."* One night Miller stood watching her as she slept. He said: *"I found myself straining to imagine miracles. What if she were to wake up and I were able to say, 'God loves you, darling,' and she were able to believe it!"* So I was thinking about the love of God but also this question: Where do we find words that can speak with an authority that assures us of God's love? Of course, what we sometimes need is not more assurance of God's love but more clarity about God's will and wisdom.

We're all exposed to words and voices and claims that are not trustworthy. Some social commentators say many people don't even want trustworthy anymore. They would rather have their biases affirmed and reinforced and their hatred enflamed than their thinking challenged, even if it is with the truth. That's scary and dangerous. As Christians, we remember Jesus said *the truth will set you free*, so we want that. We hear the voices of trendy celebrities, agenda-driven media, and well-meaning but misguided friends. What if there was a single voice that would put all the other voices into quiet perspective? We might find that voice sometimes assuring us of God's love and presence with us. At other times that same voice might correct and challenge us. Would you be willing to hear a word that came to you with authority, even if it contradicted your emotions or preferences?

The book of Haggai begins with the word of God breaking into the lives of people with both encouragement and a call to action. It is timely for us because it is about starting over after a time of disruption. The ancient Israelites had persisted in indifference to God for many years and despite many warnings. Finally, as foretold by the prophets,

judgment came. The Babylonians devastated the land, plundered and destroyed the temple that represented the gracious presence of God.

They carried the people away as captives. In time, God allowed the Israelites to return to The Promised Land, and they began rebuilding the temple as a central place of worship but ran into difficulty, lost their motivation, and began to simply focus on their own lives. So while we do not have a physical temple to rebuild, I've been drawn to Haggai because it speaks to people who are being called to rebuild their lives with God at the center after an unusual time of disruption leading to the danger of diminished devotion.

While I was home sick last week, it became increasingly clear to me that this message of Haggai is so needed at this time in our history and our church that I want to wait until some of the summer attendance slump is over after Labor Day to begin the verse-by-verse messages on and from Haggai. I also noticed this, there is a theme in the book of Haggai that is so rich and so foundational to all of life that we can easily spend the weeks leading up to Labor day looking at this theme and still not exhaust it. The very first verse says *the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet*. Then **verse 2** begins with the phrase, *Thus says the LORD of hosts*. This tremendous emphasis in Haggai on his words being a revelation from God. Therefore the word of God continues throughout the whole book. Underlying the entire book of Haggai is the truth that **God has given us the gift of His revealed Word in Scripture. We should treasure that gift.**

The first thing that confronts us in Haggai is that...

I. THE GIFT OF GOD'S WORD IS CLEARLY DECLARED.

The book of the prophet Haggai consists of only thirty-eight verses. In thirty-eight verses, we are told twenty-six times that the message of Haggai is the word of the LORD. Look at the different ways the book of Haggai tells us that it is the Word of God. At least six different phrases are used.

1. *"the word of the LORD came"* 1:1,3,2:1,10,20

2. *"this is what the LORD Almighty says"* 1;2, 5,7; 2:6,11
3. *"...declares the LORD Almighty. 1:9,2:4,7,8, 9 [2x]. 23 [2x]"*
4. *"...says the LORD"* 1:8;2:4 [2x],14,17,23
5. *"the voice of the LORD their God"* 1:12
6. *"this message of the LORD"* 1:13

A. Sprinkled liberally throughout the Bible are frequent statements declaring the Bible's supernatural origin.

These were people whose own laws told them that death was the penalty for false prophecy. They revered the name of God and the Word of God, so they did not speak lightly about these things. And yet prophets, kings, and apostles take pen to paper, parchment, or papyrus and write, *"This is what the Lord told me to say.... this is what the Lord says to His people... hear the words of the Lord...."* The online Bible study site "Bible.org" says expressions like these occur some three thousand eight hundred times in the Bible.

B. Jesus lived and taught the truth that Scripture is God's word.

Luke 11:28 is one of several places where He called the Bible "the word of God." It says; *He said, "Blessed ... are those who hear the word of God and obey it."* 1 In **Matthew 4:4** Jesus says; *"Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."* Jesus said the written words of the Bible are words that come God. For Jesus, whenever this is an issue, or an argument, an intellectual issue or a practical concern for him the ultimate and final authority is *"it is written."* His ultimate and final question was, *"What does the Bible teach?"*

A Scholar from Oxford in England named John Wenham wrote a book titled: *Christ and the Bible*. In it, he said, even if you don't begin by believing the Bible is the inspired word of God, there is tremendous historical evidence that the gospels are substantially true in what they tell us about Jesus. You have to be very biased to deny that. The reality of Jesus, his major themes in teaching, and his miraculous life are evident. Even if you were to wonder if some of the things the gospels say Jesus said or did were added later and aren't original; you

can't say that about his teaching on the Bible. Why? Because, it is repeated over and over in different places, and in different contexts. It is not only taught directly. It comes up in passing when he is addressing other issues. Jesus is continually quoting Scripture, alluding to it and asking, *What does the Scripture say?* It is embedded in his whole approach to life. It is echoed convincingly in the teachings of his followers. The conclusion he came to is even if you don't *start* by believing in the divine inspiration of the Bible if you come to believe in Jesus, it becomes inconsistent not to believe the Bible is the Word of God because that was what Jesus believed and how he lived. He says: *"To Christ, the Bible is true, authoritative, inspired. To Him, the God of the Bible is the Living God, and the teaching of the Bible is the teaching of the living God. To Him what Scripture says, God says."* 2

Paul sums it all up in **2 Timothy 3:16-17** *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

As simple as it may seem, to be able to say of your Bible, this is the *Word of God* is one of the most significant and positively powerful things you can do in life. Nothing has more potential to be life-changing than this conviction about Scripture.

The Gift of God's word is clearly declared, but

II. THE GIFT OF GOD'S WORD IS SPIRITUALLY RECEIVED.

When Haggai brought the Word of God, the people of God recognized it came *through* Haggai but *from* God. **Verse 12**, *Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.*

A. The outward revelation of God's word is accompanied by an inward recognition of its divine origin.

The word of God resonated within them, and they heard his voice and obeyed, the voice of the LORD. Look at **verse 14**, *And the LORD stirred*

up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God. God stirred their spirits confirming the word they have heard.

When I was a young man feeling pretty empty, I became interested in reading on religious and philosophical themes. I read books on a wide variety of subjects. Herman Hesse's on the search for self-knowledge and spiritual enlightenment. I read a little of the mystical, psychological work of Karl Jung. I read Aldous Huxley's "*The Doors of Perception*" about expanding your consciousness through psychedelic drugs. I read a little bit of Buddhism and some Hindu Scriptures, "*The Bhagavadgita*. All of that was intriguing, but I still remember one afternoon I was rummaging around in the garage when I found a Bible. I had been exposed to portions of the Bible as a child, but I had never in my life, with any seriousness or sincerity, opened the Bible and read for myself the words of Jesus Christ. As I read the gospels, the words of Jesus seemed to me in a completely different class from all the other books I had been reading about spiritual life. It seemed alive and compelling in a way that nothing else did. Despite my skeptical mindset and my wide exposure to a variety of religious beliefs, I found myself responding to the word of Jesus in the gospel in a way that changed my life.

B. Jesus taught that one of the characteristics of his people is that they recognize his voice.

John 10:25-28 *Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*

Imagine I hear a knock on my door a voice says, "It's your Father." Maybe, I haven't heard that voice for a long time, but I know my Father's voice when I hear it. I wouldn't mistake it for any other voice. So now, along with the outward witness of his assertion, the

claim *“this is your Father”* I also have the internal witness of my own recognition of his voice. That is what we have in the gift of God’s Word. We read where the Bible says it is the Word of God, *and* we recognize the voice that is speaking. That was my experience.

It doesn’t have to be dramatic or immediate. It doesn’t mean we never have doubts. It also doesn’t mean there aren’t other demonstrations of the divine inspiration of Scripture. We can look into its unique unity over multiple centuries and with many authors, its miraculous preservation, its many clear and compelling fulfilled prophecies, its life-changing beauty, and impact. We can study the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus and what that means in light of *his* affirmation of the Bible’s nature and authority. Nevertheless, the Gift of God’s word is spiritually received.

The last thing we should consider this morning is that....

III. THE GIFT OF GOD’S WORD IS INCOMPARABLY VALUABLE.

If there is no God who made us in his image, we have nothing. There is just chance and chaos and meaninglessness. We have no valid reason to trust our thoughts, feelings, or observations. We have no basis for morality or dignity. We’re just like the cockroaches or rust on a tin roof. The Bible assures us of a different story. There is a God who made us in his image. It makes sense that he would want to reveal himself to us and would do so not only in the artistry of creation but in words that we can read and reflect on to better know him and ourselves. That’s what we have in Scripture, and it is precious.

You see the value in this story. Sometimes...

A. The word of God shows us where we need to change our thinking.

Verse 2, *“Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.”* They weren’t saying it shouldn’t be done. They were just saying *not yet*. God knows what we say in our hearts, what we say to our closest confidants.

One of the most valuable gifts of Scripture is the gift of correction. People today often say things like, *“I don’t want anyone telling me what to do.”* or, *“follow your own heart.”* What if the very thing that needs to be adjusted, corrected, enlightened is down in our hearts?

Many people, to some degree, live their lives under the influence of fears, desires, reactions, and pressures of all kinds. One person can't get along with people or get past a hurtful interaction or experience. One person is a slave to work and the ambition for success that crowds out family and fills life with unhealthy stress levels. Another is a slave to some harmful coping strategy. The Bible says we are all vulnerable to the world (*culture*), the flesh (*our own desires*), and the devil (*spiritual forces that tempt us*). If we don't come under the truth of God, we end up dominated by our own misguided ideas, hurt feelings, unbalanced desires, ignorance, and weaknesses. **Psalm 19:7** says *the statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.*

B. The word of God shows us where we forfeit God’s blessings.

Look at **verses 5-6**, *Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. ⁶ You have sown much and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.”* The Word of God not only shows us where our thinking is off but how, as a result, we forfeit blessings that could be ours. That is a precious gift from a loving God. God is gracious, and Jesus paid for our sins, but there is still a law of sowing and reaping at work in this world. God's word is a gracious gift to help us escape the sad and futile, too often toxic consequences of our misguided thinking. We need that. I need that. You need that too. Listen again to **Psalm 19:9-11** *the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. ¹¹ Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.* The Word of God is a gift of great value.

Conclusion

Are you listening to it, letting it challenge your thinking, confront your feelings, and set you free from emptiness? Make time for it. Support the faithful preaching of it. Get into it. Get it into your heart. Absorb its truths, believe its promises, obey its commands, and be encouraged by its assurances.

The people who were originally being addressed in the book of Haggai had been graciously redeemed and brought back from exile in Babylon. God was calling them to build, in the midst of their shared lives, a place of worship. That rebuilt temple would be a reminder for them that God was with them and God was for them. The temple itself, the priests, the praise, the worship, the sacrifices. It would stand central in their midst a pageant-filled picture, a concrete, visible picture of the promise of salvation. And one day, God would send a Savior who would embody in his life everything the temple represented. Beauty, grace, sacrifice, and God with us, present to save and bless us. Of all the truths and themes revealed in Scripture, the word of God, that which is most central is the truth about the Savior.

That first day I took that little Bible I had found in the garage back into my bedroom, I noticed someone, I don't know who had written on the flyleaf the words; *"Turn to page..."* and there was a page number. When I turned to that page, I saw a verse was underlined. This is what it said; *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life."* That, if you don't know it, is **John 3:16**.

Think of it. Our ethical, moral, and spiritual flaws, failures, and sins separate us from God and deserve his judgment. But he comes after us with the voice that calls us back. And in Jesus, the word becomes flesh and dwells among us. Almighty God entered our world and became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. He perfectly kept all of the precepts of God's word for us. Then he offered himself as a sacrifice and died on the cross to pay the penalty for all our sins and failures. The first step in receiving God's word is turning to Christ and trusting him as your Savior. His word invites you to come to him and receive him as your Savior and your Lord. When you do you will

discover he has much to teach you. He has wisdom to guide and promises to strengthen. Hear his voice.

Amen.

Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Almighty God, LORD of Hosts, you have we have so often treated your Word with indifference. We have disregarded your commandments, and refused to trust your promises. Forgive us. You have graciously revealed the good news of a Savior who lived all of life in perfect obedience to your word and then suffered in our place to pay for our sins. He rose again and I receive and rest in him alone for my redemption. Grant me the assurance of eternal life promised to all who come to him in faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Lord Jesus, May I grow to increasingly realize and reverence the Scriptures. May I *surrender arrogance and embrace dependence and submission to your word*. May I learn to be attentive, receptive, and submissive to your wisdom, your ways, your will, your assurances revealed in Holy Scripture to enable and equip me to walk in the light, led by your Spirit and blessed by your presence. Amen

1 Jesus endorsed the New Testament differently from his endorsement of the Old Testament (because, of course, the New Testament had not yet been written). He chose the apostles to be the recipients of the new revelation. On His last night with his disciples, He promised a unique gifting of the Holy Spirit so that they would remember, understand and be able to record the truths concerning his ministry. In **John 14:25-26**, He said, "*All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*" If we accept that Jesus affirmed the whole of Scripture that preceded and led up to his life as the Word of God, it shouldn't be hard to believe his promise to continue to unfold the revelation we now call *The New Testament*. As prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures, Jesus came, lived, died, and rose again! As Prophesied by Jesus, God, through his Spirit, then inspired the writings that comprise the four gospels, the epistles, and the final book of revelation. If God inspired and preserved the entire Old Testament so that Jesus could speak of it and affirm all of it as the "Word of God," then it seems only reasonable that he would do the same for the New

Testament Scriptures. They contain the foundational gospel accounts, the history of the birth and expansion of the church, and the apostolic teaching.

2 John Wenham, "Christ and The Bible" 186-187