A dream
WORTH BUILDING

week 6
group study guide

this week's big idea

God declared the community's work and offerings defiled because the people themselves were defiled.

getting started

What is something you "caught" from someone else without meaning to: a phrase, a habit, an attitude, even a cold? Why do bad things seem to spread more easily than good ones?

in the text

Read Haggai 2:10-14 aloud together

Observation

1. Verse 10 gives a date. Compare it with 1:15 and 2:18. What had happened three months earlier, and what was happening on this very day?

2. In verses 12–13, Haggai puts two cases to the priests. What happens in each case, and how do the priests answer? What is the difference between the two answers?

3. In verse 14, whom does God say is defiled, and what does the defilement spread to? Notice he calls them "this people… this nation," not "my people." What does that suggest?

4. Read Ezra 3:1–6. The altar was rebuilt and sacrifices were offered for about sixteen years while God's house lay in ruins. How can steady religious activity go on while the heart is somewhere else? Where might that be true of us?

5. On Sunday we traced five symptoms from this series: making ourselves the priority, leaving God out, trusting our own voice more than his, measuring God's work by what we can see, and working afraid without depending on his presence. Which do you recognize most in yourself? Why might God treat these as symptoms of something deeper?

6. Read Matthew 23:25–28. Jesus uses the same picture of dead bodies and uncleanness. What is the difference between looking clean and being clean?

7. Read Hebrews 9:13–14. Under the law, the ashes of a heifer cleansed someone defiled by a dead body (Numbers 19), but only "outwardly." On Sunday we said, "The ashes reached the body. Jesus reaches the conscience, the place where who we are lives." Why does that difference matter for what we offer God

8. Read Psalm 51:10, 16–17. God is not asking for more offerings but for "a broken and contrite heart." What would that look like for you this week? November 1 is Baptism Sunday: if you have never been baptized, what would it take for you to take that step?

celebrating transformation

The Christian life is all about change and growth. We mature in the faith. We constantly take off the old self, and put on the new self. Old, worldly ways of our lifestyles are transformed to new, godly ways, as we participate in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Pair up with another group member (and/or form triads if needed), read one of these lists of transformational work in the lives of God's people (Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Peter 1:5-9), and share with each other one example of how God has grown you (i.e. love, joy, peace; self-control, steadfastness, mutual affection, et al.). Then thank God and pray for one another that God would continue the good work of transformation already begun.

notes on the text

1. "Ask the priests what the law says" (v. 11). The word is תּוֹרָה (tôrâ), here a ruling on a specific case rather than "the Law" as a book. The priests give the ruling; then God turns their answer into his verdict on the people.
2. "Does it become consecrated?" (vv. 12–13). Holiness passed to what touched it directly (the garment) but not one step further (the food). Defilement passed on. As one scholar puts it, "uncleanness is more contagious than holiness."
3. "Whatever they offer there" (v. 14). "There" is most likely the altar. A defiled people defiled the altar, and the altar defiled every sacrifice laid on it: the same three steps as the priests' two cases.

Background

This word came on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, 18 December 520 BC, two months after last week's message and exactly three months after the work began (1:15). It was the day the temple's foundation was laid (2:18), a day of ceremony, and the last two messages of the book came the same day (2:15–23).

The returning exiles had rebuilt the altar about sixteen years earlier, before the temple foundation was laid, and offered sacrifices on it ever since (Ezra 3:1–6). The priests' job was to "distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean" and to teach the people (Leviticus 10:10–11). The meat in verse 12 was probably from a peace offering, the one sacrifice a worshiper could take home, which is why the list is ordinary kitchen food. Touching a dead body made a person unclean for seven days, and only the cleansing rite of Numbers 19 could remove it.