

Lesson 11

Hope During the Post-Exilic Years

Introduction

Beginning in 536 BC, a small remnant of Jews made the long journey home. Under a decree by Cyrus, King of the Persians, God's people were allowed to return to their land and rebuild. Ezra and Nehemiah give us historical details that cover a little over a century (approximately 536-420 BC). Post-exilic refers to the time period after the Babylonian captivity. It is in this period that Haggai and Zechariah wrote their books encouraging those Jews who had returned. These books were written to both prophesy of the coming Messiah and to give hope amidst the rising opposition. During the time of Haggai and Zechariah, the Israelites had grown discouraged by the taunts of the people and were afraid to continue any of their building efforts. Ezra 3.3 says they set up an altar and *offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening*. God's answer to the people was to give them the prophets Haggai and Zechariah through which He revealed part of His plan of redemption, promising the Restoring Messiah as the future King.

By the time of Malachi (a century later), the people had lost all hope in the prophecies and the things of God. They were tired and apathetic. Malachi was written to urge the people to turn back to God and trust in His promises.

Haggai

Some have suggested that Haggai had personally seen the temple of Solomon before its destruction by the Babylonians in 587 B.C, Haggai 2.3. Now, some sixty-seven years later in 520 B.C., Haggai exhorts his people to service on rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. We know little about Haggai. He is mentioned only in three places: Ezra 5.1-2; 6.14-16 and in the book that bears his name. Of his home and background, we know nothing. We do know he was part of the remnant that returned to Babylon with Zerubbabel. His name means "festive" or "festival." Some believe he was born during one of the Jewish feast days.

Haggai's audience was the remnant. (They were not unbelievers.) Many Jews chose to remain in Babylon because during the exile there they had become prosperous merchants. Only the most spiritually committed desired to return to the ruins of Palestine to rebuild their nation and their temple. God never promised to bring back the entire nation. He promised to bring back those who had fully given their hearts to Him, Deuteronomy 30.1-10; Jeremiah 24.7. So, these were the right people, living in the right place, wanting to do the right work, and for the right reasons. But their priorities were not right. They were caught up in their own pursuits. They were living for themselves rather than for God's glory.

Upon their return to their homeland, the people of God found things in disorder. The land had been left barren fifty years earlier. The homes and communities of the past had been leveled. Foreigners inhabited

their land. Ezra 3.3 tells us of their first task: rebuilding the altar of the LORD. In the second-year construction of the temple began, Ezra 3.8. After a period of time, the foundation had been rebuilt. This caused a great emotional response among the people, Ezra 3.11-13. But what joy the people experienced would be short lived. Adversaries came in and discouraged the people of Judah and frightened them from building, Ezra 4.5. Ezra 4:4 says, *then the work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of Darius King of Persia.* This work stoppage lasted sixteen years.

Haggai's book contains one central message: **build the temple!** At thirty-eight verses, this book is the second shortest book in the Bible. Within these verses are four prophetic oracles that were to move the people to action after a long hiatus, stimulate courage, and generate hope.

In this lesson, we will focus on the second and last oracle.

The Second Oracle

As you read Haggai 2.6-9, you find God urging His people to envision the future glory of this place. This would instill in them a greater sense of purpose. The exact application of these verses is difficult and disputed among commentators. What is meant by shaking in 2.6? It was to occur once more. Some have taken this to mean that the religious order would be shaken one final time with the coming of Jesus Christ. (There was also physical shaking at the death of Jesus, Matthew 27.50-53.) Some feel the shaking in verse seven refers to the constant upheaval of the nations over the next few centuries. There was constant political turmoil among the world powers.

God said that the temple would once again be filled with glory. What could this mean? We know that before the destruction of Solomon's temple, it was filled with the glory of the Lord and was seen by the people in the form of a cloud, 2 Chronicles 7.1. But, in the second temple, the temple was never filled with this cloud indicating the presence of God. Some have taken the glory in 2.7 to refer to Jesus Christ when He would teach in its courts some five centuries later. In verses eight and nine, the encouragement continues. The people may have been discouraged by what little silver and gold they had to decorate the temple, but they needed to remember that these things already belonged to God, 2.8. The physical temple they were constructing could be viewed as a foreshadowing to the church, the spiritual body of believers, 2.9. The body of Christ is filled with peace.

One commentator states that Haggai further develops the promise of a future temple stated in the book of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 40-48). With the construction of this second temple, it shows that the promises found in Ezekiel remained unfulfilled in Haggai's day and that there still remained a future temple to be built well beyond the days of the post-exilic prophets. **This future temple is God's people built up into a holy dwelling place for God.** Jesus began this work as the true temple and chief cornerstone (John 2.13-25; Acts 4.11; 1 Peter 2.4-6). The work of building this temple is continuing in the present age by the work of the Spirit (Ephesians 2.20; 1 Peter 2.5) and will be completed in the new heavens and new earth where God's redeemed from every nation will comprise an eternal kingdom untainted by sin, Revelation 21.1-22.5).

The Fourth Oracle

This is found in 2.20-23. It is a promise of hope and looks to the upcoming spiritual blessings that would come through Jesus Christ. Once again God speaks of shaking the heavens and the earth. Mighty kingdoms and their armies would fall. A study of world history in the five centuries leading up to Jesus bears this out. World powers came and went.

This oracle deals specifically with Zerubbabel. He had been chosen by the LORD, 2.23. He was God's leader among the people. This is interesting, especially when contrasting this with the words God spoke to his grandfather, Jehoiachin. In Jeremiah 22.24, God rejected Jehoiachin, but here Zerubbabel is used to reestablish the promise made to David. The Messiah would come through the seed of David and Zerubbabel is part of this heritage. Yahweh assured Zerubbabel: *I have chosen you*. This is not to be taken as a personal assurance only to Zerubbabel; he did not rise to any special prominence in the kingdoms of the world. The language reflects what was said of God's Servant in Isaiah 42.1. The fulfillment must be looked for in Christ, who was a descendant of Zerubbabel (Matthew 1.12; Luke 3.27). Promises are often made in scripture to individuals which are accomplished only in their descendants. Apparently, the grand promises made to David are here passed on to Zerubbabel and to his line. From him would spring the Messiah in who alone these wide predictions would find their fulfillment.¹

Zechariah

Zechariah may be best understood as a follow up of Haggai's writing. It is the longest writing in the book of twelve. Many have labeled it as the most difficult of the Minor Prophets. In the book, there are a number of references to the Messiah, in fact no other prophet but Isaiah seems to look forward to Jesus as much as Zechariah. It seems that those who returned to their homeland were more spiritual than those who stayed behind. But, even in this more spiritual group of people, there were those who lacked motivation to act and quickly wilted under the opposition to rebuilding the temple. Zechariah seems to reach out to those who were not in the spiritual leadership of the remnant.

Zechariah 6.11-15 - The Branch

The word of the LORD came to Zechariah telling him to take an offering from Babylonian exiles, make an ornate crown and set it on the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, 6.11. Under Old Testament law, high priests did not wear a crown, but a turban or headpiece, 3.5. Why this crown is to be placed on Joshua's head is seen throughout the rest of the chapter. It is interesting that Zerubbabel is not mentioned here. To place a crown on his head would have symbolized the return of power to the earthly Davidic kingdom. But, with the crown being placed on the head of Joshua, it symbolized a priestly-king and beginning in 6.12 we see some Messianic applications. Zechariah was to say, *Behold, a man whose name is Branch, for He will branch out from where He is; and He will build the temple of the LORD. Yes, it is He who will build the temple of the LORD, and He who will bear the honor and sit and rule on His throne. Thus, He will be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace will be between the two offices.*

The Branch mentioned in 6.12 is Jesus. He was going to build a temple. Not the physical temple being built by the people of Zechariah's day, but a spiritual temple, His church. These passages do not look ahead to a future literal temple built for Jesus in Jerusalem, but a spiritual temple built by Jesus where He

will bear the honor and sit and rule on His throne. Thus, He will be a priest on His throne, 6.13. There are a number of passages which demonstrate that this spiritual temple is in existence now. See 2 Corinthians 6.16; Ephesians 2.21; and 1 Peter 2.5. The crown Zechariah made was to be placed in the temple as a reminder. All that saw it would know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. And it will take place if you completely obey the LORD your God, 6:15.

The Second Section of Zechariah

The first section of Zechariah is covered in chapters one through eight. It addresses the situation among the Jews at the time of the rebuilding of the temple between 520 and 518 B.C. Because Zechariah specifies the dates he received these visions we can date this part with little doubt. The second and final section of Zechariah is much more difficult to date. The authorship of these six chapters has also been questioned. The name Zechariah is mentioned three times in chapter's one through eight, but nowhere in chapters nine through fourteen. Some scholars have maintained that these chapters were written by Jeremiah. Others believe that the author must have lived just before or during the Maccabean uprising. This would place the second half of the book as being written sometime between 218-134 B.C. **I believe the best course is to appeal to Zechariah as having written the entire book.** *The language in the second section is highly apocalyptic.* There is much here that looks forward to the time of Jesus. In fact, this part of the book is the most quoted of the Minor Prophets in the gospels. It is believed that Zechariah wrote chapters nine through fourteen several decades after the completion of the temple. Finally, this section is best understood to focus on the times between the life of Zechariah and Jesus Christ. Homer Hailey writes: *(Zechariah 9-14 is) "interspersed with prophecies of the Messiah, which are quoted in the New Testament and applied to the Christ who came. In view of the admitted difficulty of these chapters, and in the light of Peter's claim that no prophecy of Scripture is of private interpretation, (2 Peter 1:20), it seems wise to build one's interpretation of these chapters around the passages that are quoted by Jesus and the New Testament writers. In following this policy one will avoid the pitfalls of speculation and some of the quagmires of error into which many have fallen."*²

Zechariah 9.9-11

Zechariah 9.9-11 speaks of a coming King. This king was just and endowed with salvation. He was *humble and would be mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey, 9.9.* This, of course, was fulfilled in Matthew 21.1-7, where Jesus enters Jerusalem in the triumphal entry. Jesus was to usher in a kingdom of peace, 9.10. His spiritual kingdom stretches from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth, 9.10. Those who had been outside of the covenant during the Old Testament time were now going to have hope of being delivered from spiritual bondage through Jesus. *I have set your prisoners free from the waterless pit, 9.11.*

Zechariah 10

While there is much in chapter ten that can certainly find best application to the intertestamental period, there are also some spiritual applications that can be made. Think of how 10.6-12 can be applied spiritually to the victory that is found in the kingdom of the Lord. Men from all nations would hear of the

promise of God through Jesus Christ and seek to become part of His spiritual kingdom. Remember, many of the prophecies in the Old Testament use the language of the day to confer a spiritual application. This could be the case in these verses. Think of the spiritual applications we see in these verses:

God would gather His people together because He redeemed them, 10.8. God calls people into the kingdom today through the gospel, Romans 10.9-17. *God promises His people spiritual life*, 10.9. It is through Jesus that we can truly live life through the new birth. *God seeks to enlarge His kingdom*, 10.10. The gospel is for all and should be taken to the entire world, Matthew 28.18. *God will bring his people out of the bondage of sin*, 10.11. It is here that Assyria and Egypt might be understood as standing for captivity and bondage. People have been made spiritually captive through sin, and it is through Jesus that we may receive forgiveness. *God wants those in His kingdom to walk in His name*, 10.12. Compare to Colossians 3.17.

Zechariah 11

The first three verses of chapter eleven give us details of an extreme destruction. But to what occasion does it refer? It seems that these verses point to the destruction of the Jewish system of religion, economy, and way of life after their rejection of the Savior, Jesus Christ. **Zechariah 11.4-14 symbolically describes the action of the shepherd (Jesus)**. Some believe Zechariah is relating a vision to his reading audience. If so, he was placed in the role of shepherd. He was to pasture the flock doomed to slaughter, 11.4. By the days of Jesus, many of the Jewish leaders had become rich off of the backs of the poor. They attributed their success to God, 11.5. The shepherds in 11.5 might be applied to foreign rulers (the Romans) during the time of Jesus. They cared only about themselves and not the welfare of the Jewish people. There would be a time when God would no longer have compassion and pity on the inhabitants of the land, 11.6. When the shepherd was rejected, then the people were rejected by God. The symbolism which applies to Jesus and His day continues in 11.7 where we see the shepherd reaching out to the afflicted of the flock. Zechariah 11.8 has caused no shortage of difficulty. Three "shepherds" were cut off in one month. Smith believes these shepherds may refer to the scribes, Pharisees, and Herodians, Matthew 23.13-33. These leaders despised Jesus. Their soul also was weary of me, 11.8. The next verse, 11.9, might be applied to the decision of God to let those who rejected the Savior go to their own devices. Could the second half of 11.9 refer to the events at the destruction of Jerusalem in 68-70 A.D.? The covenant was broken. The wall of protection that had surrounded the Jews had been removed and the afflicted of the flock who were watching me realized that it was the word of the Lord, 11.11. Could this refer to the first century Christians who were warned to flee Jerusalem prior to its destruction, Matthew 24.15-22?

Zechariah 11.12-13 is fulfilled in Matthew 26:15 as thirty shekels was the price paid to deliver Jesus into the hands of His enemies. These verses are also fulfilled in Matthew 27.7-9 where this amount was paid to purchase the field where Judas was buried. Who is the worthless shepherd mentioned in 11.15-17? Some say it refers to the Roman Pope and the rise of the Catholic Church. Others point to a more distant application and say this has yet to be fulfilled. James Burton Coffman writes, "It is not important to identify the person meant by this. It means any worthless leader that God's people follow when they

reject their true King. Significantly, Israel cried out upon the occasion of their formal rejection of Christ and said, 'We have no king but Caesar.' The wretched history of the reprobate emperors of Rome is comment enough upon how 'foolish' such 'shepherds' were. This passage 'foreshadows the terrible afflictions of the Jews following their rejection of the Messiah.'"

Malachi

We know of only one Malachi in the entire Bible, and that is the one who is the author of the last book of the Old Testament. Malachi was the last of the prophets, working among God's people between 430 and 450 B.C. Of his personal life and family we know almost nothing. Tradition says that he was a member of the Great Synagogue and a Levite from Zebulun. Malachi's work as a prophet comes at a time when the Jewish people had been back in Israel for almost a century. Governed by initial zeal and excitement the Jews quickly initiated work on rebuilding the walls to the temple only to be stymied by Samaritans and other peoples who lived around them. Fifteen years later, Haggai and Zechariah were effective in motivating God's people to complete the temple project. It was completed on March 12, 515 B.C., Ezra 6.15. The subsequent generations had once again become discouraged. Joy, happiness, and enthusiasm were absent from Jewish religious life. Malachi's primary job was to correct this problem.

Obviously, most of the book has a direct application to the people of Malachi's day, but there are glimpses of a coming Savior and Kingdom. This is seen in the last section of the book, which begins in 2.17 and concludes with the last verse of chapter four. Here, the people in general are addressed.

Malachi 2.17-3.5

They had wearied God, 2.17. The people believed that the wicked were prospering at the expense of the good. They felt that God was not going to hand out justice to evil doers. They had become skeptical of God. God refutes this beginning in chapter three. In doing so, we have a prophecy concerning a *messenger*. This messenger was John the Baptist, who cleared the way before (the Lord), 3.1. The Lord, Jesus, would come suddenly or without expectation. He would come as a judge, 3.2. He would cast out all impurity through refinement and cleansing. The Messiah would be a cleanser, one who would purge sin from the lives of His people. When Jesus came, He would *purify the sons of Levi and refined them like gold and silver so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness*, 3.3. Does this have reference to the cleansing of the temple by Jesus? Perhaps. More likely, it has a spiritual meaning. Through Jesus Christ, Christians have become part of a holy priesthood, 1 Peter 2.9. Their offerings are pleasing to the Lord, 3.4-5, Philippians 4.18.

Malachi 4.4-6

These are the final words of the Old Testament. It is fitting here that God calls His people to remember the words of Moses and the Law. The people were to pay attention to and live their lives according to it. *Elijah would come before the great and terrible day of the LORD*, 4:5. Who is the Elijah here? Elijah refers to John the Baptist. See Matthew 11.14 and Luke 7.27. What is the *great and terrible day of the LORD*? Most likely it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. John the Baptist's message was received

by a large number of Jews. Many of these Jews converted to Christianity. At the destruction of Jerusalem, these Christians escaped because of the clear warning of Jesus in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. And thus, the Old Testament ends. The next messenger would be John the Baptist, sent some four hundred years later to prepare the way for the grand fulfillment of God's great plan – the giving of Jesus on the cross for the remission of sin.

For Thought and Reflection

1. Write down a few things we know about Haggai.
2. What were the conditions of the homeland when the people returned? What is the central message of Haggai?
3. To what does the *shaking* of Haggai 2.6 refer?
4. How would the temple once again be filled with glory?
5. What is the ultimate application of the temple mentioned in these verses?
6. What is the supreme fulfillment of Haggai 2.23?
7. Who is the *branch* in Zechariah 6.11-15? What type of temple will the Branch build?
8. Does this temple presently exist? How?

9. Who is the coming king in Zechariah 9.9-11? What other references to Jesus do you see here?

10. How can Zechariah 10.6-12 be applied to events inside the spiritual kingdom of Christ?

11. Who is the Shepherd of Zechariah 11 and what is He doing?

12. Do you think Zechariah 11.11 could be connected to Matthew 24.15-22? Explain.

13. Who is the worthless shepherd in Zechariah 11.15-17?

14. Who is the *messenger* in Malachi 3.1? What was his purpose?

15. In what way does Malachi 3.2-5 have application to Christ & His kingdom?

16. Who is *Elijah* in Malachi 4.3-6?