

Don't Look Back

Haggai 2:1-5

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How many of you can remember the “good old days”? Do you find yourself longing for what used to be and lamenting how bad things are today?

According to TIME magazine, the top discipline problems in high school in the 1940s were talking, chewing gum, making noise, running in the hallways, getting out of turn in line, and littering. Today we have drugs, alcohol, disrespect of teachers, disorder, gangs, sexting, bullying, robbery, assault and school shootings.

Some time ago I listened to someone in his 70s (he doesn't live around here) reminisce about the glory days 50 years ago. The life he described back then was a lot different than life today. But he didn't just compare, he also went on a tirade about how terrible things are today, taking potshots at both people and places. He was so sour that he couldn't see anything to celebrate in the here and now.

In our passage for today we're going to see that while the past is important it can keep us from the present if we make it all-important. We could say it like this: *We must remember the past while embracing the present so we can be faithful in the future.*

Last week Pastor Kyle reminded us that we're all called to live on mission by asking this question: *What has God specifically tasked you with, in the context He has placed you in, to do what only He can do through you?* Two weeks ago we learned from the closing verses of Haggai 1 how God's Spirit had stirred up the people of God to do the work of God. In chapter 1 Haggai addressed the people's indifference to God's work; and in chapter we will see how he dealt with their anxiety about doing God's work. Chapter one is a call to have the right priorities while chapter two is a call to perseverance.

Let's briefly recall the circumstances behind this brief book. After returning from exile in Babylon, God's people had been tasked with rebuilding God's Temple. They eagerly laid the foundation but because of opposition and selfish priorities, they stopped working for 16 years. Haggai was called on the scene to mobilize the people to get back to work. After putting God back at the center of their lives, they went to work doing what they were called to do. That's how chapter one ends.

Haggai 2:1 gives us the setting for Haggai's next sermon: ***“In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet.”*** This book has a number of time markers in it so we can determine exactly when something occurred and how much time has elapsed from the previous message. In Haggai 1:15, we read that they began to work on God's house ***“on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month”*** so we know that about a month has gone by and they are already discouraged.

It's important to note that the seventh month was a pretty busy time on the Jewish calendar. We learn from Ezra 3 that the sacrificial system and celebration feasts had been reinstated when the altar was reconstructed. There were three big feasts in this month called Tishri, which correspond with our months of September and October:

- The Feast of Trumpets took place on the first day of the month.
- The Day of Atonement was on the 10th.
- The Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated on the 15th through the 22nd.

Maybe they had a hard time staying focused on the work because of all the feasts going on. It's a bit like how we feel in the days between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Or perhaps these celebrations reminded them of how lame their labor was.

We know from verse 1 that Haggai is going to speak to them on the next to the last day of this feast, which celebrated the harvest. As they looked around their harvest was nothing. This particular celebration reminded the people of the time their ancestors lived in tents during the 40 years of wilderness wanderings. It was a yearly reminder that the people longed to be in the Promised Land. It was supposed to be a day of joy and praise. The people in Haggai's day were no doubt reliving this as they had just been allowed to return to the land. Back then, their people were many; now they were just a remnant. The people of old went into the land flowing with milk and honey; now they were struggling to even subsist on the land.

Let's unpack what happened at this feast. For seven days the people lived in booths or tents constructed from palm trees and branches, with beautiful fruit from the harvest decorating them. Every day there was a procession to the Gihon Spring, where the priest would fill a pitcher with water and pour the water upon the altar, symbolizing how God supernaturally provided water for them for 40 years while they wandered in the wilderness. This was to be a time of reflecting and

rejoicing but they had no temple to go to and no fruit with which to decorate their tents. Instead of praising, they were reminded of their problems. But God moves Haggai to bring the fresh water of His Word to satisfy the thirst in their souls.

This day also corresponds to another key date in Israel's history. 430 years earlier during this same festival on this exact day, King Solomon had dedicated the first Temple (1 Kings 8:2). As the people recounted the splendor of that building, they became discouraged by the puny plans in front of them.

Friends, it is very common to experience discouragement and even despondency after starting out strong with something. Many of us could give testimony to this as we try to remember what our New Year's resolutions even were. A good example of this is Elijah, who after experiencing an incredible power encounter on Mount Carmel, ended up running for his life and later wanted God to take his life.

In Haggai 2:2, God tells the prophet to preach to the leaders and to the remnant and he does so by asking three questions in verse 3: ***“Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?”*** In Haggai's first sermon he addresses the leaders but in this sermon he speaks to everyone. It's the right message for the right people at the right time. Would you notice that the word ***“you”*** or ***“your”*** is used three times? These questions are very personal and very direct.

Identify the Causes

The first step in dealing with discouragement is to identify the causes. It's good to just get it out and face it head on. God knew what they were feeling and so He wanted them to know that He understood. Are you aware that God knows what you are thinking right now? He understands and cares about the discouragement you may be facing. In Luke 11:17, we read, ***“Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them...”***

God puts into words three common causes that lead to discouragement.

1. Comparison with the past – “Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory?” There were probably some octogenarians who remembered what Solomon's temple looked like. There was no comparison to the good old days of Israel when people came from far and wide to see the Temple and to hear Solomon's wisdom and to sing praises to God in the courts. The past was

trumping the present. And because they thought the past was better they began to blast the task in front of them.

It's true that the new Temple was not going to be anything like the old one. The new Temple would not have the Ark of the Covenant; there would be no gold furnishings, no carved cherubim, and no Shekinah glory. There was a lack of good materials (they had used some of the prime products on their homes), there wasn't much money and there was much opposition.

Ezra is a contemporary of Haggai and the book that bears his name fills in what happened in the hearts of the people when the foundation was first laid. Please turn to Ezra 3:11-13: ***“And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.’ And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.”***

Here's what's happening. Those who had seen Solomon's temple wept out loud while those who didn't have that memory worshipped out loud. The older people were weeping while the younger were worshipping. One generation groaned and another gave glory to God. Those who remembered Solomon's temple filtered everything through the lens of past glory and whatever was going on in the present simply didn't measure up.

Guess what? That same tension exists today. Unfortunately the older tend to dismiss the younger, discounting what they're doing and how they're doing it. At the same time the younger look with disdain on the older, thinking we're just relics who are not fired up to do God's work like they are.

The older I get the easier it is to lament what's happening in Generation X, Y and Z. But then God reminds me that He's at work in every generation. Let me share what I experienced a week ago Wednesday.

Early in the morning I received an email from a 24-year-old woman who has been coming to EBC since January and is involved in our Mainspring Ministry. This is what she wrote:

In the mornings I set three alarms. One is to get up. One to begin reading the Bible and one to stop reading and finish any remaining items...before heading out the door for work. I started out with 15 minutes of Bible reading and every few weeks increased by 5 minutes. Now I'm at 30 minutes. I have a goal to get to an hour so we will see how that pans out as the months move along...I plan to continue this for a very long time as it has helped me improve my time in the Word.

About twenty minutes later I went into a McDonald's to get my senior coffee (stop laughing) and saw another young woman from Edgewood. When I went over to greet her I saw that she was studying her Bible. She had a three-ring binder so I asked what she was working on. She showed me about three pages of verses she has memorized and then she turned to multiple pages of handwritten text from the Book of Romans – she's copying the entire book of Romans word for word! She also held up the Edgewood Bible reading plan that she follows every day.

When I asked how long she spends doing this she told me that she studies at least 30 minutes a day but on days like Wednesday she was able to spend hours in the Word because she only worked half a day! BTW, Sarah Eiland is 20 years old.

As an official older person now, I'd like to think that I'm still forward thinking and able to celebrate and support new things and new ideas. But I'm sure I don't always get this right. I want to own the attitudes in my own heart that are sometimes skeptical of what the younger are doing. That's just wrong. And I ask your forgiveness for that. To those of us who are fifty or older, these words from the Application Commentary serve as a helpful corrective: *"It is easy to become trapped into evaluating the present experience of the church with past paradigms of spirituality rather than remaining open to the ways in which God is impacting the present in culturally relevant ways."* BTW, that's why *Mainspring*, our ministry for college and twenties, meets in the district in Rock Island. They're meeting again Sunday night at 6:00 pm.

Here's what I'm learning about myself. *When I remember the past as better than it was, the present will seem worse that it is. It's OK to look at the past, but I can't live in the past. We must remember the past while embracing the present so we can be faithful in the future.*

There may have been something else going on with the remnant. While some were focused on the good things of the past, others may have been feeling badly about

how much they had messed up. All they had to do was look around and see the consequences of their behavior. Some of you are so filled with guilt and shame about your past that you choose to not live in forgiveness and freedom in the present. Because you feel like you don't measure up, you've taken yourself out of the game.

On this Mother's Day weekend, some moms feel like they've messed up. Perhaps you feel like you've blown it. I talked to a mom this week that feels like she's failed because her child is not walking with Jesus. To her it seems like other parents are doing things right and everything she does is wrong. To moms who feels this way, and she's not alone, may these words from Ann Voskamp from her book, "The Broken Way," speak into you: *"What every mother wants, her most unspoken need – is a truckload of Grace. Grace that buries her fears that her faith wasn't enough, and that her faults were too many... Grace that says she doesn't have to try to measure up to anyone else because Jesus came down – and He measures her as good enough, as worthy enough, as loved more than enough. You don't have to be awesome and do everything. You simply have to believe that the One who is Awesome loves you through everything."*

Friends, whether you're locked into the glory of the good old days or you're replaying the pain of your past, it's time to put it all behind you. *We must remember the past while embracing the present so we can be faithful in the future.* We need to do what the Apostle did when he remembered his past accomplishments and his past failures as found in Philippians 3:13-14: ***"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."***

2. Focusing on flaws – "How do you see it now?" Have you ever noticed how easy it is to find fault in others? These older people were recalling the good old days and to see such a shabby structure being constructed made them want to stop working. Instead of looking at what was, they looked at what wasn't. They noticed the negative without applauding the positive. Some of us are like that. We find the flaws and are quick to criticize because in our minds something or someone just doesn't measure up to our standards.

3. Overstating issues – "Is it not as nothing in your eyes?" The word **"nothing"** means "to be nonexistent" or to treat like a zero. In Calvin's commentary on Haggai, he points out that the people thought of the new temple as an old shed. Many of us are experts in overstating how terrible something is. Do you ever hear

yourself using phrases like these: “*You always*” or “*You never*”? Or how about, “*So and so is worthless...he doesn't know anything.*” Or, “*They're out in left field. They're so out of touch.*” Do you write people or projects off just because you don't like something? Or does it bother you that it's not being done like you think it should be done or its not moving as quickly as you'd like?

Let's stop demonizing those we disagree with. It's easy to write off those who set us off. Don't treat people as if they are nothing and let's make sure we don't treat God's work as if it's nonexistent.

It would help us to remember Zechariah 4:10: “***For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice.***” God is always doing more than we see and what we might think as small and insignificant isn't small to the Lord of Hosts.

And so to those of us who are older, let's not quench the enthusiasm of the young. Here's a news flash. The old days aren't coming back! Ecclesiastes 7:10 offers us some wisdom, “***Say not, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.***” Let's celebrate what God is doing now. And to those of you who are younger, respect the older and listen to their wisdom – we may just have something to say.

Let's all watch our words because our complaining can discourage, our comparing can deflate and our criticizing can dampen others.

Charles Spurgeon said it like this: “*Satan is always doing his utmost work to stay the work of God. He hindered these Jews from building the temple, and today he endeavors to hinder the people of God from spreading the gospel.*” Satan has many weapons in his arsenal but his most effective may be discouragement.

It was advertised that the devil was going to put his tools up for sale. On the date of the sale the tools were placed for public inspection, each being marked with its sale price. There were a lot of implements for sale – Hatred, Envy, Jealousy, Lust, Bitterness, Doubt, Lying, Pride, and so on. Set apart from the rest of the pile was a harmless-looking tool, well-worn and priced very high.

“*The name of the tool?*” asked one of the purchasers. “*Oh,*” said the adversary, “*that's Discouragement.*”

“*Why have you priced it so high?*” “*Because it's more useful to me than the others. I can pry open and get inside a person's heart with that one, when I cannot*

get near him with other tools. And once I get inside, I can make him do what I choose. It's a badly worn tool, because I use it on almost everyone since few people know it belongs to me."

The devil's price for Discouragement was set so high; he never sold it. It's still his major tool, and he uses it constantly on God's people.

Apply the Cure

After identifying the causes of discouragement it's really important to apply the cure. In verses 4-5, there are three things that we must do and three things that God will do. Let's stand and read this section together: ***"Yet now 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. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not."***

Do you see the two words ***"yet now"***? This refers to a point in time and serves as a powerful transition phrase that moves us from the past to the present. I'm reminded of Psalm 119:67: ***"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word."*** And I love what the man who was healed of his blindness said in John 9:25: ***"One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."***

1. What we must do. We have a responsibility to respond, even when, or especially when, we are discouraged.

- **Be strong.** In verse 4, God tells them to ***"be strong"*** three times: ***"But now be strong, O Zerubbabel...be strong O Joshua...be strong all you people of the land."*** The word ***"strong"*** can also be translated as courageous. He starts with the leaders and then he moves to the people. These are the same groups who obey in 1:12. By the way, notice that God calls them, ***"people of the land."*** They were now living in the land that God promised them. They were in the right place at the right time and they were experiencing the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham given centuries earlier. And now God speaks directly to them.

The directive to ***"be strong"*** is often used when individuals are called to enter a battle of some sort. We see this in Joshua 1:9: ***"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and***

do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”
I’m reminded of what David said to his son Solomon in 1 Chronicles 28:10:
“Be careful now, for the LORD has chosen you to build a house for the sanctuary; be strong and do it.”

- **Get to work.** We see this in verse 4 as well. After telling them to be strong he calls them to, “...**work.**” To work means to, “*complete, accomplish, and perform with a purpose.*” This is really the controlling command that is flanked by the challenge to be strong and to not fear. They were sent back to the land for a specific purpose. God wants us to work because He’s put each of us here with a job to do. We’ve been saved to serve as we seek to live out the mission the Master has given us.
- **Don’t fear.** The first two things we must do are positive – our attitude must be strong and our action must lead to work. The final one is a negative command and refers to what we must *not* do. Look at the very last phrase in verse 5: “*fear not.*”

I wonder if these commands caused the remnant to remember some more of David’s words to his son Solomon when he was preparing to build the first temple in 1 Chronicles 28:20: “*Then David said to Solomon his son, ‘Be strong and courageous and do it. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, for the LORD God, even my God, is with you. He will not leave you or forsake you, until all the work for the service of the house of the LORD is finished.’”*

2. What God will do. God now promises that He will do three things for the people. If God brings you to it, He will lead you through it. Notice how these three commands are linked by the word “**for**” in verse 4. We can be strong, get to work and not fear because of what God will do.

- **His personal presence is with us** – “*Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts.*” The main reason we do not have to fear is because the God of the Angel Armies is with us. We saw this in 1:13 as well. God Himself is with us, not an angel or a special agent. This is the silver thread that weaves throughout the Old Testament as in Exodus 33:14: “*My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest*” and then to Mary in Luke 1:28: “*The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’”* Jesus is given the name Immanuel in Matthew 1:23, which means “God with us.” And Jesus Himself promised that He would be with us as we go with the gospel in Matthew 28:30: “*And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age.*”

- **His personal promise is for us** – *“According to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt.”* The word covenant literally means, “to cut.” God has promised to be their protector and provider by reminding them of the covenant He had made with them. God stands by every promise He has ever made to His people. He had not forgotten them for the 900 years since this covenant was first made. According to Hebrews 8:6, the New Covenant is even better: *“But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.”*

Here’s the issue in a nutshell. The remnant had a good memory of the wrong things and a bad memory of the right things. They needed to remember God’s presence and His promise.

- **His personal power is within us** – *“My Spirit remains in your midst.”* This is one of the few references to the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament and is a reminder that whatever we do is done by God’s power, not by ours as stated in Zechariah 4:6: *“...Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.”* Abraham is gone. Moses is gone. David is gone. Solomon is gone. But God is in their midst! Exodus 29:45: *“I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God.”*

We also have another huge advantage over the Old Testament believers because Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would not just be among us but He will dwell within us. John 14:16-17: *“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”*

Courage comes from knowing God is with us, for us and within us! This truth should help us see possibilities not problems. *We must remember the past while embracing the present so we can be faithful in the future.*

Putting into Practice

On this Mother’s Day weekend, I want to celebrate some persevering moms. Here are some missional moms that I know.

- A single mom who came to Christ during our first year in Pontiac persevered as she parented her three children. Her youngest just graduated from college this week.
- Another single mom is persevering as she longs to have more time with her kids.
- A young mom persevered through health struggles this past year.
- A mom our age is persevering while a grown child refuses to talk to her.
- Many moms who are homeschooling are persevering while pouring into their kids.
- A young widow is persevering while raising her daughters.
- A young woman who is a new Christian is persevering as she parents her kids while her husband won't allow her to attend church.
- Another mom is persevering in her parenting of teens and twenty-somethings.
- A mom and grandmother is preserving in prayer for her grandkids to come to Christ.
- A young mom is persevering while parenting a young boy with a genetic condition.
- Another mom is persevering while earnestly fighting for the hearts of her children.
- A mom is dealing with significant health issues in her children while persevering in her faith.

Here are some ways we can put this passage into practice.

1. Let go. If you stay in the past, whether locked into the good or the bad, you will look down on the present and you'll forget God's promises for the future. It's been said that if you're still talking about what you did yesterday, you haven't done much today. *We must remember the past while embracing the present so we can be faithful in the future.*

2. Look up. Isaiah 43:19: ***“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”*** Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why we call it the present.

3. Lean forward. You can't bring history back but you can bring God back. God only sends His people in one direction: *Forward!* These days are the glory days! With Christ at the center of your life, these can be the good “now” days. Someone has said that these are the “good old days” we're going to miss in the days ahead.

Take the next step. And then the next step. Discipleship has been defined as a long obedience in the same direction.

What is God calling you to do?

Several years ago Grace Baptist Church in Philadelphia had to turn away a little girl named Hattie May Wiatt from children's ministry because of overcrowding. That day Hattie May started saving her pennies to help the church make more room for their children's ministry. Two years later, Hattie May tragically died. In her pocketbook next to her bed her parents found 57 pennies and a piece of paper with a note saying that the money was to help the church build a children's ministry wing.

At Hattie May's funeral, her mother gave the 57 cents and the note to their pastor. That Sunday, he shared Hattie May's story with his congregation. People's hearts were touched; a realtor gave the church a piece of land to expand the children's ministry, asking for 57 cents for a down payment. A local newspaper carried the story, and soon news about Hattie May's 57 cents spread across the country.

The pennies grew far beyond Hattie May's initial 57 cents. Grace Baptist Church not only built a new children's ministry wing, but also a new sanctuary, today seating over 3,000 people. Out of that movement of generosity from Hattie May's example the church built Temple University in Philadelphia, and Good Samaritan Hospital. In fact, you can visit Temple University today and find a picture on the wall of Hattie May, a little girl whose 57 pennies were used by God far beyond the limits of her life.

She remembered the past while embracing the present and her faithfulness impacted the future.

We can do something similar by putting our change in a Baby Bottle to support the life-affirming ministry of Pregnancy Resources. By the way, we rejoice that Iowa passed the Heartbeat Bill that bans abortions after an unborn child's heartbeat can be detected!

And we can build off our great past as a church as we give toward our facility project in the present so we can impact future generations with the gospel.

We must remember the past while embracing the present so we can be faithful in the future.

Membership

Saturday Night – Sue Hoon