



*Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us*

WEEK 29

ZEPHANIAH - HAGGAI

JULY 16 - 20, 2007

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	Zephaniah 1-3, Psalm 141	Zephaniah 1:1-18, Psalm 141
Tuesday	Haggai 1-2, Psalm 142	Zephaniah 3:9-20, Psalm 142
Wednesday	Jeremiah 1-6, Psalm 143	Haggai 1:1-15, Psalm 143
Thursday	Jeremiah 7-12, Psalm 144	Haggai 2:1-9, Psalm 144
Friday	Jeremiah 13-20, Psalm 145	Haggai 2:10-23, Psalm 145

READ

Zephaniah 1: 1-18

Psalm 141

REFLECT

The prophet Zephaniah spoke during the reign of Josiah of Judah, the king famous for his effective reform of the Temple worship. There was no active prophecy from the time of Micah and Isaiah to the time of Zephaniah, Nahum, and Jeremiah, and Zephaniah found deep problems to address. Most scholars date his prophecy at around 622 BC, that is, just before the great reform accomplished by Josiah in 621 (see 2 Kings 22-23). In that case he probably helped to bring about this return to the Lord, temporary though it was. The structure of the book is clear, with a long section proclaiming judgment upon all the nations of the world and Judah among them (1:1 - 3:8), followed by a prophecy of forgiveness, joy, and fellowship with Judah before all the nations (3:9-20).

The book opens with an unusual four-generation attribution of forebears to Zephaniah, apparently going back to Hezekiah the king. This serves not only to link the prophet with a known servant of the Lord, but also seems to underline the fact that there has been no prophetic voice since that day.

The opening words of the prophecy are very harsh indeed. The Lord simply declares the end of life on the planet. The sequence of living things in verse 3 is a reverse of the order in which they appear in Genesis 1, suggesting a sort of destruction-in-reverse that would be horrifying for anyone to hear who was familiar with the language of the creation account. Perhaps more horrifying is the way the prophecy then just launches into the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah as if the Lord's people had no more claim on His mercy than any other earthly form of

life. On the other hand the destruction of Jerusalem is also described in very personal, even familiar, terms. The Lord knows all the details of the sinful behavior of the priests and the princes (1:4, 8). He knows the particular evils of the various quarters of the city (1:10-11). He is ready to search the alleys for evil in a very exacting way (1:12). The Lord's knowledge of Jerusalem now is turned against her for judgment.

Two images are used to describe the judgment itself. One is that of a sacrificial banquet, at which the invited guests are all consecrated for death. I think not even Stephen King has matched that one. The other image is found in many of the prophets: a "day of the Lord" that will bring about all the waiting wrath and judgment of God against sin, a holocaust of holiness. "In the fire of His jealousy He will make a complete end, a terrifying one, of all the inhabitants of the earth" (1:18).

The sin of Judah was simply to blur her vision of the Lord – in bowing before idols, in confusing Him with other gods, in losing interest in His commandments (1:4-5).

RESPOND

We are apt – I am apt – to distance myself from the extreme images of judgment depicted in such passages as this. The Lord knows me, and will use His knowledge for blessing and not judgment. On the other hand I must admit that the sins of Judah are also mine; it is easy on any day to find myself willing to blur my understanding of God's, intentionally. All who feel the same must shudder with me at the way God pursues sin to obliterate it, extensively and intensively. I am glad that for me, as a Christian, the judgment fell upon the crucified Lord. But I still shudder.

PRAY

Dear Lord, We pray with Psalm 141 that we find ourselves in the joyful way of obedience, learning afresh the joy of Your presence and love. Help us bring the good news of forgiveness in Jesus Christ to those who need to hear it today.

READ

Zephaniah 3:9-20

Psalm 142

REFLECT

OT scholar Palmer Robertson notes that whereas the first verses of Zephaniah provide “one of the most awesome descriptions of God’s wrath in judgment anywhere in Scripture,” this passage at the end of the same book gives us “one of the most moving descriptions of the love of God for his people.” With the close of 3:8, the final and all-consuming retribution of God is completed. Now something new begins.

Verses 9-13 describe the new community that God will create by His actions of judgment and forgiveness. It is characterized by the profound humility and truth of the members, and also by the fact that they come from everywhere. The themes, as well as the language itself, echo the story in Genesis 11:1-10 of the scattering of the peoples throughout the world by the introduction of diverse languages, to counteract their overweening pride. Here things are reversed: God has humbled, and has gathered people back. The problem was rooted not just in Israel but in human nature itself. So the solution actually addresses the problems of human nature itself. Peace with God (9) has brought humility to each person (12), which has resulted in true speaking and dealing with each other (13), which has resulted in the security of each home (13) and satisfying work (16). One is also reminded of the Ten Commandments, which are intended to create a community which first gives its allegiance to the Lord, and therefore also refrains from lying, stealing, and cheating. Zephaniah’s passage articulates what God has always intended human society to be, for the fullest flourishing of humanity itself.

Verses 14-20 follow with a pulsating cry of joy! The realization – even just the promise – of this perfect future evokes whole-hearted relief and happiness. We are talking about an emotional response to promises that are almost too good to bear hearing; and yet the Lord would have us

humans, a context that includes wonderful relationships and satisfying activities. The challenge will be to enjoy the good things of life without comparing them to the bad things, since there will be no bad things for comparison! And God adds to our joy, his own joy. The crown of this wonderful new community is the Lord Himself, His presence in our midst, exulting with us in our satisfaction and joy, resting with us, shouting with us, luxuriating in the overflow of the love of God and humanity.

As with so much of OT prophecy, as Christians we see the fulfillment of so much, and so much yet to be fulfilled. We have seen humility and plain dealing in the lives of Christians, and we have been deeply blessed by it, but consistency remains a problem, not least in our own lives. But we have seen a huge change since the times of Zephaniah, with the powerful personal impact of Jesus Christ, His preaching of the love of God, His self-offering as sacrifice for the sins of the world, and the outpouring of the Spirit upon His people. We know the joy, because we know His deliverance. And we have glimpsed His own joy, in private times of prayer, and especially as we stand “shoulder to shoulder to serve Him” (3:9) on a Sunday morning.

RESPOND

This passage is about God’s grace, that is, God’s knowledge that the best things about human life are the things that only He can give, and He gives them freely. It’s a whole package, including worship, obedience, spirituality, and readiness to live for others; we can’t break it up, or opt for a lesser “easy-install” version. Our response can only be to accept these wonderful gifts on the terms God gives them. And rejoice.

PRAY

“Bring my soul out of prison, so that I may give thanks to Your name; the righteous will gather about me, for Thou will deal bountifully with me.”
(Psalm 142:7)

- D.D.

READ

Haggai 1:1-15

Psalm 143

REFLECT

The book of Haggai plunges us into the history of Israel at the exciting time of the return of the exiles from Babylon. The year was 520 BC, and it had been some 20 years since Cyrus conquered the failing empire of Babylon and instituted his new humane policies. In 538 (we count backwards, since this is “BC”) he had decreed that the Judeans should return to their homeland, from which they had been deported 70 years earlier, and that they should renew the worship of their God, and rebuild their temple. This wonderful news was of course greeted with great excitement, but once the first straggling group had resettled in Judah, neighboring peoples began making trouble for them, sapping their energy and instilling fear. The resettled company reinstated the daily sacrifices in the ruins of the Temple, but did not proceed to rebuild it. (The story is told in Ezra, chapters 1, 3-6.) It was at this time that Haggai sternly prophesied to the people, and particularly to the two national leaders, Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the high priest. The Lord declared that the building of the Temple needed to be given first priority, and that the healing of the land would follow that first necessary step.

In the book of Haggai we find a sequence of five prophecies, with a storyline tying them together. All four were given in 520 BC. The first was Haggai’s announcement on August 29 (Haggai 1:1) that it was time to build. The people responded well, and Haggai brought affirmation on September 21 (1:15): less than a month later, good progress had already been made. This book testifies, then, not only to the word of the Lord, but to the admirable effect it had on Israel! But on October 17

(2:1), and twice on December 18 (2:10 and 2:20), Haggai had further words of admonition and assurance, mid-course corrections in the task of rebuilding the Temple. Haggai’s ministry as a prophet, then, in this matter, lasted a mere four months. (The theme is picked up by Zechariah, whose book notes the further dates of February 519 and December 518, in Zech 1:7 and 7:1.)

Who was this man who was able to rouse the small nation to this huge task, a hugely rewarding one as it proved to be? The fact that he is frequently called a prophet, and was able to speak so confidently to the people, the governor, and the high priest, and was able to secure their assent so readily, indicates that he had an acknowledged role in the Jerusalem leadership. We might say that in this case the system worked, of having a division of responsibility among the leaders: one person was able to move the others as they all responded to the Lord in their particular areas of authority.

RESPOND

The Church, as it is described in the NT, also provides for a working team that operates in dynamic of leadership on behalf of the ways of the Lord. Our Presbyterian churches, for instance, recognize that the strength of the community comes from the individual gifting of the members as well as from the way those gifts are woven together into a balanced missional vision by the work of the pastors, the elders, the deacons, and so many other workers. What a difference it makes to be a part of a community that believes in the contributions of its members, and believes also in the command of God to come together in a unified dynamic of real service.

PRAY

Lord, Thank You for the gifts You give each one of us, allowing us to be real contributors to the joyous work of the church, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

- D.D.

READ

Haggai 2:1-9

Psalm 144

REFLECT

Haggai spoke the word of the Lord to Judah during tough times. The resettling of the people in the land after an absence of 70 years meant that both time and resources were at a premium. But the word from the Lord was insistent and practical: “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house [of God] lies desolate? . . . Go up to the mountains, bring wood, and rebuild the Temple, that I may be pleased with it, and be glorified” (1:4, 8). It is a message that sounds as fresh today as when it was first spoken: what right do we have as God’s people to pad our homes with luxury, if our place of worship does not reflect the same intentionality and care? Haggai gives us a great image for a healthy community: let the contributions of each individual, and the strengths of each home, become the beauty of the place of our worship of God. Certainly his message was immediately accessible to the Judeans, who responded immediately, completely, and joyfully.

Today’s passage tells of a subsequent prophecy delivered less than two months later, in October of 520 BC. It comes during the festival of Booths, the celebration of the deliverance from Egypt (see 2:5). There is discouragement abroad, and while the new work was clearly on the shoulders of the young, the older members of the community, those who could remember (or remember stories about) the Temple destroyed 70 years earlier, were critical about the new structure. Haggai agrees: the Temple at the current state of construction bears no comparison to the glory of the old Temple (2:3). But he has two things to say. First, the Lord is in their midst, which means it is the present moment that counts, and not the past; the seeds of the future lie in what is done today, more

so than in yesterday. Second, the Lord remains the Lord of all the nations, not just the local God of a small struggling tribe; and the wealth of the world, which He owns, will be used to beautify the Temple as it grows. (The phrase in 2:7 translated in the King James Version “the Desire of all nations shall come” – and put to music with such great effect by Handel – is probably best rendered “the wealth of all nations shall come.”) Certainly the lavishness of this Temple as we find it in Jesus’ day, 550 years later, testifies to the fulfillment of Haggai’s prophecy. We have hindsight in this matter, and can wonder at the prescience of this prophet; the Judeans of the day, with their hammers and boards and cynical bystanders, had only the word of the Lord.

RESPOND

As the Dad of a cast member, it’s been my privilege to glimpse one or two of the early rehearsals of this summer’s musical, *Oklahoma!* What a great visual experience of the very things that concerned Haggai, to see the diverse talents – the excellence – of so many individuals being offered together into a whole that transcends the sum of its parts. And ultimate achievement lies in success of each day of effort, in entering fully into the present moment so that the future can build through it and from it. As the church enters into the challenges of each day in this way, the Lord promises astonishing things: His glory, His presence, and His peace (2:9).

PRAY

Thank you, Lord, for the call to participate in Your work, and for the promise that the future will not disappoint. “Happy are the people to whom such blessings fall; happy are the people whose God is the Lord.” (Psalm 144:15)

- D.D.

READ

Haggai 2:10-23

Psalm 145

REFLECT

Today's passage narrates two prophecies given on the same day by Haggai, one to the people in general, and one to the governor, Zerubbabel. They are given on December 18, 520 BC, which seems to be the day when the main cornerstone of the Temple or of the altar was finally set in place.

For Haggai it represented the moment in which the future was finally beginning to unfold. It is the very day, he prophesies, that the Lord reverses the fortunes of Judah, so that all the need and loss of the recent years will be superseded by abundance and blessing. Oddly, it is also a day on which not much at all must actually have happened. The foretelling of abundance focuses on the various seeds kept in store by the Judeans; these will now be much more fruitful than expected (2:16, 19). But this word came in December, when the seed would already have been planted in Judah, and it would be months before anyone would see results. It seems what is intended is the same lesson taught by Paul in 1 Corinthians: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who provides the growth."

The promise of fruitfulness is set within a conversation about the nature of holiness and cleanliness. Haggai formally asks the priests questions that elicit the truth that sinfulness contaminates everything, whereas holiness is a far more delicate matter. All of their efforts, even their good works in response to the Lord's command, are tainted by the sinfulness that is endemic to humanity. This is the source of the loss and decay that they have been experiencing. But with the proper laying of one foundation stone (perhaps with attendant prayers and worship, as in Ezra 3:10-13) the "curse" is lifted. What is implied is that the Lord has

established His own holy presence in the physical Temple in a way that no mere human work could coerce or accomplish on its own. This new season of blessing is not the result of human religion, but is rather a sovereign work of God who, at this time, on this date, proclaims a reversal of fortunes.

Holiness is a tricky thing, as anyone knows who has tried pursuing it for any length of time. The trickiness comes partly from the fact that biblically there are two aspects of holiness, both of which are represented in the passage today. One is "set-apart holiness"; the stone of the Temple was set apart as holy for the purposes of worship, and in a deeper sense the Israelites as a whole were set apart as God's people in a way they couldn't really escape. The other aspect is "behavioral holiness," that is, living according to God's will and wishes. The people of God ARE holy (set aside), and should therefore BE holy (in behavior). The tricky part is negotiating the "should." Paul articulates a solution to this admitted problem, in Romans 6:2-11. He affirms that as we give ourselves to the Lord, the Lord causes something within to change: He puts something to death within us that belonged to sin (6:6), and starts a new principle of life that is "alive to God" (6:11). As in the day of Haggai, the fresh germination is essentially underground; it is something we "see" only obliquely, and in the long run. But it is real: a new creative work of God that promises hope and happiness. As we hear and accept the word of His gospel, we are not only forgiven. We are truly born again.

RESPOND

Have you committed your life to the Lord? Have you accepted His forgiveness? Have you begun to walk in newness of life?

PRAY

Lord, Thank You for the blessings of relationship with you. Help me today to be ready to share them joyfully with all I meet.

- Dave Dorman