

How Lovely is Your Dwelling-Place O Lord of Hosts to Me?

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[0 : 0 0] Now, there are few more sorry sites, I think, in a town or city than an abandoned and derelict building site. That's one very sorry example in the town that I come from. This is a picture several years ago of what the developers set out to build, a very fresh and modern-looking new living complex. But for years, it has sat looking like this. Pretty far, I think, from what they had in mind when they set out. Because after a strong start, the developers ran out of money and had to stop work sitting on a big roundabout, you can see, right in the town center. And life kind of carries on all around it. And it sits there in the middle of the town as a testament, I guess, to the failure of people to complete what they set out to do. You can't see it in that picture. The development company is called Regency Homes, I guess, to build a house fit for a king. And that sets the scene really nicely as we come to this book of the prophet Haggai, because the people, God's people there and then, are very nearly in that situation. They have set out to build a house not fit simply for a king, but for God himself to come and live in. But after years and years, that house still sits unfinished in their city. It's an abandoned and derelict building site. Not, we find, because they have run out of money, but because they have run out of love for God. If you glance down at verse two there in chapter one, this is what the Lord Almighty says, these people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. So they're putting off, putting off, rebuilding

God's house. But if you've ever been in that position, procrastinating, you know that you find creative ways to put something off. And these people have turned procrastination into an art form. Because instead of building up God's house, they've thrown themselves into the rest of life with a passion. Verse three, then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai. Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses while this house remains a ruin? It's while we hold off on building up God's house, why don't we just get on and build our own nice posh houses to live in? And so for years, nearly two decades, a shiny new city has grown up around the rubble on the site that used to be God's house. So that in a city full of posh houses, well, God's house is the only one still a wreck. And God's

God sends Haggai, the prophet, to ask his people, is it really time for that? Is it really time for that? It's a piercing question because God sees through their deceit.

He sees into the heart where their priorities are simply wrong. And it's into that situation, God sends Haggai to call his people back to a fresh love for him and his being with them.

Now, I've preached from the book of Haggai several times in the year, new year, and coming out of lockdown as well, now in the summer. At every time, I've been tempted to say it's a really good time for us to hear the message of Haggai. What I've realized is that there is never a time that we don't need to hear the message of Haggai. Because in it, God comes to us, I guess in the thick of ordinary life. Your life goes on, doesn't it? And in this book, God is coming to us in the normal pressures and concerns and the busyness and weariness of everyday life and says to us again, I am with you. I am with you. And he asks, how much does that matter to you? How much does that matter to you? As he again calls us in our day-to-day lives full to save the pressures and cares of this world, to set our hearts on him and his presence and his promises afresh. And so Haggai is a book that challenges us, but it's not a bad challenge. Because here, God is challenging us to take hold again of something better than life. So this is a book for tired and weary saints. The point of giving up, seeking after God, seeking after God. It's a book for busy and distracted saints with a thousand other things in the diary and taking up our minds. In short, it's a book for ordinary Christians like me and ye, who, as we sang at the start of our service, are prone to wander, prone to wander, and need God to call us back time and time and time again to see his beauty and to trust his promises and learn to walk closely with him again. And so this book, brothers and sisters, I hope we'll see over the next few weeks is a book for us. As firstly and foremostly, God challenges us through Haggai to treasure his presence, to treasure God's presence. Now, to state the obvious, okay, God's house is where God lived. In the past, it's where he promised that he would meet his people, to be with them, to forgive them of their sins through the sacrifices, where he promised to hear their prayers.

[6 : 44] And so to get the weight of this situation they're in, we need to get a bit of the history of God's house. Where has this gone wrong? Well, the short answer is, it's gone wrong with his people's stubbornness. God literally left the building because of his people's unrelenting sin against him. And despite his calls for them to come home in their hearts to him, to his house, they went further and further away. And so in the year, we can put a time stamp on this, year 586 BC, God gave his people and their city and his house into the hands of their enemies, the Babylonians. And they destroyed the temple. They tore it down. And they took his people away out of the land and into exile. God promised that would not be the end. 70 years later, true to his word, he brought his people home again, back to their home. And we read in the book of Ezra, which is a great book to read, by the way, when you get home, if you want to read around this. We read in the book of Ezra, that when his people got home, they got straight on with rebuilding his house, putting it together again. Okay, so far so good. But we find that didn't last long. Their neighbors in the land, they put in a complaint to the council, if you like, and they stopped the work. So tools down, nothing could happen. And so we might say, well, there's nothing they could do about that.

They had to stop work. But when Haggai comes on the scene, 16 years have passed, which should leave us wondering, as it left Haggai wondering, and as it left God wondering, whether the problem at heart was not that they had in fact lost their first love.

Were they not thankful, as they were at the beginning, for God's rescue, that they would want to worship and thank him in the way that he would want to be worshiped and thanked?

And worst of all, had they forgotten perhaps how disastrous it had been when they took God for granted all those long years ago? So that's what Haggai sees when he looks at the wreckage of the temple. Okay, a horrible history in the past, but only that hard hearts in the present. It's not time to rebuild God's house yet, save God's people. And they think as they say that they can kind of pull the wool down over God's eyes. In fact, when Haggai comes, it turns out that in fact they have just been covering their own eyes and pretending that God can't see them. And so God asks them a penetrating question. There in verse 4, is it a time for yourselves to be living in your panelled houses while this house remains a ruin?

Now this is what the Lord Almighty says, give careful thought to your ways. Interesting, says God, that you have found time to build yourselves a nice house and yet have not found time to build my house. Okay, think about it. Consider your ways. You've busied yourself with the stuff of life. Yet, verse 5, think about it. Your new priorities, are they really working out for you? You've planted much but harvested little. You eat but never have enough. You drink but never have your fill. You put on clothes but you're not warm. You earn wages only to put them in a purse with holes in it. Consider, says the Lord, you've dreamed big. And yet, your lives are going down the drain. It's captured in that really crunchy image, isn't it, of them putting their hard-earned money into a pocket that's torn and ripped. And in short, their new priorities then are not paying off. Their self-interest is not giving them the happy and satisfied life that they have hoped for. And that is reality, isn't it?

[11 : 24] We can work hard to try and take control of our time, of our lives, and yet our plans can be overturned in an instant, can't they?

We can work hard. We can earn. We can earn. We can save. We can accumulate. And yet, the stuff of this world can be taken away.

We know that, don't we? And it's hard when that happens. But friends, things that can be put on hold, or overturned, or taken away, are not designed to deliver us the good life that we hope for. They can't give us lasting satisfaction, because they themselves do not last. And for these people who had invested their lives so heavily in fragile and light and temporary things, well, God is confronting them and graciously showing them these things for what they really were.

They are lighter than a breath. Verse 9, you expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. God blew away like dust off a shelf.

Now, perhaps that sounds harsh, but this is tough love. You see, this not having enough is part of God's covenant with his people.

[13 : 00] God lists curses, as he does further down the chapter in verse 10. The heavens have withheld their dew, the earth its crops. He calls for a drought.

We find all these things in God's covenant. Because woven through his relationship with his people is this kind of built-in mechanism for God to show his displeasure and to call his people back to him again.

Because his people have turned from loving God the giver to loving only his gifts. And so God's blowing those gifts away is, in fact, an act of covenant love.

In exposing the emptiness of what they had put their trust in and reminding them again who he is, that he is their God. The only God, the giver of every single good and perfect gift.

He alone gives. And he alone takes away. See, God loves his people enough that he doesn't leave us, brothers and sisters, to chase after the wind.

[14 : 13] Now, we don't have to live in the fear of those covenant curses, which are heavy as Christians today. Paul writes in Galatians chapter 3 that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

And so, as Paul writes in Ephesians, we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. We do not have to fear God's curse. But does God not sometimes still graciously interrupt our busyness and press pause on our plans and put things on hold?

Not because he is out to get us or to punish us for some secret sin, but because he loves us. Because he would love us too much to let us run after these things that cannot satisfy us.

To let us chase after things that are not him. As C.S. Lewis rightly said, We're often far too easily pleased with our own lives, like a child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

How often have we settled for the empty promises of this world, rather than the fullness of God himself? And so, sometimes God gently but firmly lifts our heads again from staring at the ground to see him, and to see the horizon, the great horizon of his promises and his purposes.

[16 : 02] And so, the question that Haggai would put to us is, Well, what are our own hearts set on? And where are our own eyes fixed at the start of this new week?

What do we hope will give us life and strength and keep us going? Is it God the giver? Or really, is it only his gifts?

Gifts like work, like family, like a summer break? All good gifts. You and brothers and sisters, we're not called to neglect ourselves.

And yet, God calls us to hold all these gifts with an open hand, with the promise, Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you.

God is no man's debtor. And so, let us consider our ways. Let's ask ourselves, How am I planning, planning to spend time with and enjoy God this week?

[17 : 12] Well, this summer, it's an easy time, isn't it, to let our spiritual lives drift or take second place. Where perhaps have I drifted from loving him with my whole heart and soul and mind and strength?

Where perhaps am I holding on and clinging to the gifts rather than to the giver? How do we need to order our lives in order that we might grow in our relationship with God himself?

You deep, important questions, the questions that we need to be asking ourselves, I need to ask myself these questions, to take time to think it through, to consider our ways.

We might plan to rest in God himself. Because like God's people back then, we need to continually guard our hearts, don't we, against self-reliance, self-preservation, which is where we so easily drift.

Rather, let us prayerfully plan our time, our days, our weeks, with him at the center. Consider our ways. Because God was ultimately not calling his people back to a building, but to himself.

[18 : 36] You notice that God sent Haggai to call these returned exiles back to his delight and glory. If you look there at verse 8, the house was a proxy project.

Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house so that, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord.

So God does want people, his people back then, to devote themselves to building up his house. But why? Well, because it pleased him. And it honored him to have them do it.

It pleased God to have a place where his people could come back into his presence from the stench of their sins and be made right with him again and be forgiven.

And it brought God honor and glory to have a place on earth where his presence was visibly stamped like a king's signet ring pressed into wax.

[19 : 37] So the temple was a sign that God was with his people and his people were right with him. And that is something, friends, that God delights in.

God delights to be right with us and to be with us. God doesn't put up with being with us. And nor was it ever the physical fabric and the costly design of the temple that God delighted in.

God could have sent Haggai, couldn't he, with a construction crew and diggers to just throw up a temple in a week. Instead, God sent Haggai after the hearts of his people, not the bricks and the mortar.

Because what pleased and glorified God was dwelling with his people in their lives, among their houses, and in a house of his very own.

Did you notice as we read that actually the word temple is never used in this chapter? It's God's house and their houses. Now what does that say about the God that we worship?

[20 : 52] The one that highest heaven could not contain, that he would kneel down so far as to live in a house, among the houses of his people. That's how close he drew near.

We think, don't we, of the greatness and the beauty and the size and costliness of the temple, but for God to live there, well, he still had an infinite distance to stoop and crouch down to come to be with us.

The temple was not God's vanity project. Instead, instead it is an incredible display of his grace in condescending to live with people who were prone to wander from him.

And the amazing thing is that God says he takes pleasure in doing that. That is what glorifies and delights him.

And so if that was true of the temple, well, let us consider this. How much nearer has God come? How much lower has he stooped?

[21 : 59] And how much more was he pleased and glorified to come to us and dwell with us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ? John writes, the word was with God and the word was God and the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Jesus. Jesus. God himself has taken our very flesh and blood, our humanity to be God with us, not in a house among houses, but in the God man.

He walked the dust of the earth, whose eyes felt the sting of tears, whose hands felt the blow of nails. It was his sacrifice that pleased God by bringing us back into his presence.

It was his death that glorified him as he was lifted up on the cross. And so now God has raised him up that we would treasure him.

God with us. That he would have the supremacy and the priority in our lives. That our hearts would be set on him and he would be our satisfaction.

[23 : 14] The people of Haggai's day believed, didn't they, that they had everything that they could ever want at their fingertips. And yet God reveals to them that all the security that they had was ultimately to be found in him being with them.

And so has God called his people back then to throw all the weight of their hope and desire and longing upon him and treasure his presence. So he calls us tonight to come and throw the whole weight of our being upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

For them back then, of course, that longing and desire meant for them to rebuild God's house. But we don't have anything like that, do we, to build or to rebuild.

Let's remind ourselves that the Bible never ever draws a line between the temple and church buildings. This is a great facility that we have that God has given us, isn't it?

But it's not God's house. Biblically, it's not. For us today, God calls us to treasure the Lord Jesus.

[24 : 25] The Bible reminds us that God's house is no longer in ruins because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. Destroy this temple, he said, and in three days he would raise it up.

Of course, as John reminds us, he was speaking of the temple of his body. And so if Haggai were here today, he would ask us, do we treasure him?

Do we treasure him? As we consider our ways this coming week, let's ask ourselves, what place does Jesus have in our lives day to day?

You look at the diary, see, is he bolted on, perhaps, to the side of whatever it is that we are busy doing? Or rather, does the rest of our lives take shape around him?

Is it him who's setting the agenda for our calendar, our plans, our work? Is being with him, time with him, our priority around which everything else revolves?

[25 : 40] For God calls us to treasure us being with him, him being with us in Jesus Christ. For, says Jesus, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

And so what does it look like for us to treasure God being with us in Jesus? Well, in this case, and this is our second point, what it looks like is that we build up God's house.

Build up God's house. As the people have heard the message of Haggai, and so, verse 12, now, how do they respond? We read then, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, Joshua, son of Josedach, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai.

Now, this really does stand out in our Bibles because the prophets had been ignored for so long in Israel's history. But now, in response to God's word, we see God's people come together again to work on God's house and under a dream team.

Haggai the prophet, Joshua the priest, and Zerubbabel, the governor, he's the would-be king. Well, together, they head up the work on God's house and lead all God's people in it because as they listened to Haggai's words, well, they recognized a familiar but forgotten voice.

[27 : 20] The voice of the one that they had drifted away from. They obeyed the voice of the Lord their God. And what does God say to them to stir them up for this work?

Well, I think we are in for a shock. It's not what we'd expect, verse 13, is it? Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people.

I am with ye, declares the Lord. I'm with ye. Now, what's surprising about that? Well, God says he is with them before they have built his house.

They were not working to build a house so that God would come to be with them, to kind of win back his presence. God was not waiting for them to rebuild his house before he came to be with them.

The house was only ever a sign of his presence with them. God doesn't need a house. It sounds obvious when we think about it, but we often kind of overlook this, don't we?

[28 : 26] He doesn't need somewhere to sleep or to sit or to rest. He called his people to work with him, to build his house, not because he needs us or needs anything, but because he has chosen for us to be part of his plans in this world.

It's like when a child comes to help with the cleaning up and the tidying and they kind of toddle along and they grab an end of the heaviest piece of furniture and you kind of smile inside, don't you?

You help them and you carry it. You're the one carrying it and they're just toddling along. But you value your relationship with that child. You love their heart and that is a lovely thing.

And our work with God is like that. He loves it when we grab an end of the thing, but he is the one carrying it. It is his work.

We are never ever working, brothers and sisters, for his presence. His presence is what makes our work for him possible. And so we stumble along, don't we, together in his loving strength.

[29 : 41] I'm with you, declares the Lord. And remember that this is coming after nearly two decades, okay, of their disinterest, their coldness.

They've drifted away from him for 16 long years and yet here God comes to them in grace. And he doesn't say, does he, now you're in for it.

Now I'm coming. He does not come to them to push them away. But he draws near to them and draws them near to himself.

It's a reminder, isn't it, of God's incredible patience. That he is slow to anger. He is quick to forgive. And perhaps that's what you need to see in this chapter this evening.

Perhaps you are here today and you have wandered long and far. But God says, however far and however long that you have wandered, there is grace for you in Jesus.

[30 : 43] This book reminds us that we cannot drift so far into sin that God will not have us back and give us work in his kingdom. And so, as the Lord stirred up the spirit of the people under this dream team, we read verse 14, that they came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God.

Their love to him is renewed and so their hands return to work. And so, as we kind of bring this to a close together, let's ask you, what is the work or the service that this book would call us to this evening as we respond to God's word?

Well, it's still housework, but it is housework of an entirely different kind that we read earlier in our service from Ephesians chapter 2 where Paul describes the church as a holy temple in the Lord.

He writes, in him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by his spirit. God is still building a house and his house is still not finished.

Okay, not a brick and mortar house, a house made up of ordinary Christians, people like me and you who've put our trust in the Lord Jesus.

[32 : 16] So Paul's showing us a picture of us. He's holding up a mirror, but in the mirror we see a temple, a place where God lives. You are now the house of God, he says.

By his spirit, he dwells in us. You lots of people, don't they rightly want to know, where in the world is God?

Where is God in the pain, the darkness? Perhaps that's you this evening asking that question. Well, the Bible's answer is that on earth, God lives in and among his people.

not in the physical fabric of a building, but with us. And so if the church is God's house, then what is our work?

Well, it is the same work that God called his people to through the prophet Haggai. Jesus says, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

[33 : 18] and God calls us into that work to toil and graft with the Lord Jesus to build his house, to build his church.

As we pray for one another and serve one another and encourage one another, as we build one another up, we share the word with one another, as we embrace all that one-anothering that God calls us to in the New Testament.

Well, God says he is at work building a house for himself to live in. Above all, it's as we speak the truth in love to one another, says Paul, that the body builds itself up in love.

And so, we are called, brothers and sisters, to kind of spiritual bodybuilding, not in our own self-interest, but together, stirred up, knit together by God's spirit.

Because whatever God is building for his glory, well, that's what we want to be part of, isn't it? That's where the good stuff is. And God says he is building his church.

[34 : 31] And so, that is where our hands get to work. Now, that can be frustrating, can be disappointing. We'll get to that next week in the book of Haggai.

Okay, church life is not always easy. We grow weary. Our hearts turn to other things. But in those moments, let us hear again God's message.

I am with you. I am with you. We think so often about Emmanuel at Christmas, don't we? God with us.

Well, Jesus is no longer the baby in the stable. But he is the risen and reigning king of the universe. He's the chief builder. He is the lead architect.

And he is building this church. Bon Accord. He knows your names. He knows that we are here. He is among us. He is building us up together tonight.

[35 : 32] And so, brothers and sisters, are we working with him? Are we, over these summer months even, finding simple ways to encourage one another, to point one another to Christ, to keep one another going with him?

You have this dream team of Haggai the prophet and Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the would-be king. Well, together, they point us to the work of the Lord Jesus who leads us in this work.

He is our prophet, the very word of God with us. And he is our priest, the one who brings us into the presence of God. And he is our king who so lovingly reigns over all things for his church.

And he, the risen Christ, says to us today, I am with you even to the end of the age. And so, let us treasure him and let us build his house, his church.

Let's pray together. Amen. God, our Father, how we thank you for your grace, that you, the living God and the Holy One would draw near to us and dwell among us.

[36 : 59] How we thank you that you would be with us and in that being with us, you would delight and take pleasure. Father, we remember that this is what we were made for, to be with you, to dwell all our days in your presence.

Our God, in our hearts, we see that longing that cannot be snuffed out, that cannot be suppressed, the longing to be with our creator and right with you.

How we thank you that in the Lord Jesus you have done that for us, that you drew near. that he came, that he dwelt among us and that above all he brought us to you, that he made us right with you through his death and his resurrection.

Father, we thank you that he lives and we thank you that he reigns and works together all things for the good of those who love him. Father, we pray you'd help us please to trust in his sovereignty.

Lord, when our plans don't go the way we want, Lord, when things don't go the way we think they should, Father, how we pray that you would set our hearts on him again, to trust him, to hope in him and to long for him.

[38 : 19] Father, we pray that you would help us to trust in him. Lord, for any here who have not as yet settled their faith in Christ, that by your spirit you would do so.

Lord, we know that in him there is contentment and satisfaction for our souls. Lord, grant that to each of us we pray this evening. Help us to love him and to treasure him all our days.

We pray in his name. Amen.