

Obedience Better Than Sacrifice

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I. The Context

- A. Remnant of Jews, having returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and encountering resistance, abandoned the work and turned their attention to the pursuit of their own prosperity.
- B. God intervened to bring a curse upon their productivity, sending Haggai to explain the reason for his curse: that the people's priorities were amiss.
- C. In one of a few rare instances recorded in Scripture, the people responded to God's correction through the prophet — they resumed work on the Temple.
- D. In our passage today, it has now been 3 months since they resumed work. The people have evidently been doing preparatory work because it is only now that they resume the actual work of laying foundation stones.¹

II. Haggai 2:10-19

- A. On the twenty-fourth [*day*] of the ninth [*month*], in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Now, ask the priests [*concerning the*] law, saying, "If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?'" Then the priests answered and said, "No." And Haggai said, "If [*one who is*] unclean [*because*] of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" So the priests answered and said, "It shall be unclean." Then Haggai answered and said, "So is this people, and so is this nation before Me," says the LORD, 'and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean. 'And now, carefully consider from this day forward: from before stone was laid upon stone in the temple of the LORD- 'since those [*days*], when [*one*] came to a heap of twenty ephahs, there were [*but*] ten; when [*one*] came to the wine vat to draw out fifty baths from the press, there were [*but*] twenty. 'I struck you with blight and mildew and hail in all the labors of your hands; yet you did not [*turn*] to Me,' says the LORD. 'Consider now from this day forward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, from the day that the foundation of the LORD'S temple was laid- consider it: 'Is the seed still in the barn? As yet the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have not yielded [*fruit. But*] from this day I will bless [*you*].'"

III. Exposition

- A. "twenty fourth day of the ninth month"
 1. After Haggai's call to repentance, the people have been actively working on the temple for three months.

¹ Preparations spanned from "the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month" (Hag. 1:15) to "the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month" (Hag. 2:10) of the 2nd year of Darius.

2. They had been offering sacrifices at the site for a considerably longer period.
 - a) Ezra 3:2-6
 - (1) First day of the seventh month of the 1st year of *Cyrus* (approximately 16 years earlier, [Merrill, 48]).²
 - (2) Set up an altar, offered burnt offerings, both morning and evening, kept the feast of Tabernacles, and took up a freewill offering.
- B. "holy meat" touching other food (Hag. 2:12).
 1. "holy meat" is meat that has been dedicated to God, either for sacrifice or for consumption by the priests.
 2. Sanctified: set apart, dedicated for God's specific purposeful.
 3. Once set apart by careful procedures, it could not touch anything common or it would no longer retain its dedicated character.
 4. Common food *does not* become sanctified by association with the holy meat.
- C. "unclean . . . because of a dead body" touching same food (Hag. 2:13).
 1. Law of Moses specified that anyone who touched a dead body became 'unclean'.
 2. When something unclean touches the common food, it also becomes unclean!
 3. Common food *does* become unclean by association with that which is unclean.
- D. The two examples are purposefully juxtaposed.
 1. Interaction of three elements.
 - a) That which is common: bread, stew, wine, oil.
 - b) That which is holy: holy meat dedicated to God.
 - c) That which is unclean: one who has touched a dead body.
 2. The common element is not affected in the same way by that which is holy vs. clean.
 - a) There is an overall "downward" pull toward uncleanness.
 - b) When something holy is mixed with something less, that which was holy is "pulled down" to a lower state in the eyes of God.
 - c) That which is holy or set apart does not 'uplift' that which is common or unclean and mixed with it.³
 - d) God is making two related points:
 - (1) Righteousness is not contagious.
 - (2) Wickedness or uncleanness *is* contagious!

² http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Book_of_Daniel/commentary/htm/topics/chronology.html

³ This is a general principle, although some exceptions occur where God is the cleansing agent (Isa. 6:5-7; Mat. 8:2-3; Mark 1:40-41; Luke 5:12-13) or in rare circumstances where the altar is said to sanctify that which is offered upon it (Ex. 29:37 cf. Mat. 23:19).

- E. "So is this people and so is this nation . . . and so is every work of their hands" (Hag. 2:14).
1. Zechariah was also prophesying during this period, and in a parallel passage concerning the same event (Zec. 8:9) we come to understand why the work of the people's hands was considered unclean.
 - a) Zechariah 8:16-17
"These are the things you shall do: Speak each man the truth to his neighbor; Give judgment in your gates for truth, justice, and peace; Let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor; And do not love a false oath. For all these are things that I hate,' Says the LORD."
 - (1) Speaking lies.
 - (2) Perverse judgment.
 - (3) Lack of justice in the land.
 - (4) False oaths (broken promises, walking away from contracts).
 - b) Isn't it amazing how Zechariah's words almost 2500 years ago could be applied to our own nation?
 - (1) Our judges favor perversity.
 - (2) That which is right is declared wrong. Laws are not upheld by elected officials – there is a lack of justice in the land.
 - (3) Contracts and vows, at both a corporate and personal level, are routinely broken.
 - (a) How else can we explain the legions of lawyers and a society which is drowning in litigation?
 - (b) Marriage vows are evidently considered to be non-binding by more than ½ the population.
 - (c) Financial contracts are routinely violated: a person's word or signature evidently means little. Meanwhile, financial advice heard on Christian radio stations promotes an attitude of self-love, "spinning" things such that the one violating the contract can now consider himself the 'victim' in a vain attempt to justify what amounts to little more than robbery.
- F. "And now, carefully consider from this day forward" (Hag. 2:15).
1. What day? The day they finally resumed the actual work of laying foundation stones for the Temple!
 2. The day disobedience became obedience!
 - a) "Before stone was laid upon stone" - before this day, according to God, they remained in disobedience.
 - b) God measures obedience by *action*.

- (1) The best intentions in the world do not constitute obedience.
 - (2) Its not what we read, or think, or talk about,
 - (3) This is why James tells us to “be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James. 1:22)
 - (a) Notice the hearing must be translated into action!
 - (b) When we hear the Word, but don’t put it into action, James tells us that we are deceived!
 - (c) This explains, to a great degree, why deception often goes hand-in-hand with disobedience by believers.
 - (4) Are we simply “religious politicians” promising God what we know He wants to hear, but then simply failing to deliver on tangible action?
 - (5) This is the religious hypocrisy which God excoriates throughout the Bible—but nowhere perhaps more vehemently than the Words which Jesus spoke to the outwardly religious people of His day (e.g., Mat. 23:15-36).
3. Prior to the foundation being laid, the people remained in disobedience!
- a) But didn’t they offer sacrifices?
 - b) Didn’t they pray?
 - (1) Sometimes prayer can be an excuse to delay doing that which is obvious.
 - (2) [Illustration: itinerant Appalachian evangelist and preacher Robert Sheffey (1820-1902) and the need for a horse.]
 - c) Weren’t they doing “religious works”?
 - d) YES – but they were *still in disobedience*.
 - e) Their disobedience amounted to “unclean hands” in God’s sight and rendered their works unclean—even their religious works.
 - (1) This is the deceptive aspect which James mentioned: we can *think* we are doing acceptable works for God when, in fact, God is not accepting of our efforts.
4. While they remained in disobedience, God would not bless them.
- a) Twenty ephahs of grain became but ten.
 - b) Fifty baths of wine became but twenty.
 - c) Fruit of the people’s labor struck with blight and mildew.
 - (1) Blight – denotes ‘burning up’ or ‘drying out’. That which appears to begin to sprout up with the promise of future sustenance withered to nothing.
 - (2) Mildew – denotes ‘paleness’ or ‘yellowness’ concerning crops or grain that should be verdant.

(3) In both cases, that which the work of their hands brought forth — which initially appeared fruitful and would bring future benefit — wound up being devoid of life-giving qualities. Hope was dashed.

G. "From this day I will bless you" (Hag. 2:19).

1. "As yet the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have not yielded fruit"
 - a) There was no *visible, apparent change*.
 - (1) It is now near the end of December [Merrill, 53] and there is little to show in the way of harvest.
 - b) When Haggai spoke, things looked exactly the same as they did on the day before.
 - c) But from God's perspective, it was as if "switch" had been thrown in the heavenly realm.
 - (1) How often we see this in Scripture: important spiritual changes occur in advance of the resulting fruit.
 - (2) We see the fruit: usually too little and too late to appreciate the root cause.
 - (3) The cause and affect of our situation is often tenuous except we turn to Scripture and meditate upon its principles and see how they pertain to what we are experiencing.
 - d) God would not bring a *twofold* advantage in the people's favor.
 - (1) The removal of God's active curse leading to leanness.
 - (a) Cutting a "ball and chain" off of their productivity which was stealing from what should have been the natural results.
 - (2) The addition of God's productive blessing.
 - (a) Amplifying the work of their hands to produce more than natural.

IV. Application – What Have We Learned From Haggai?

A. The "Gravity of Sin" – the downward affects of sin.

1. That which is originally holy, when mixed with that which is unholy, becomes unholy.
2. Holiness is not gained through mere association with holy things.
3. Religious syncretism will always be an abomination to God.
 - a) "Syncretism" derives from modern [Latin](#) *syncretismus*, drawing on [Greek](#) συγκρητισμός (*synkretismos*), meaning "Cretan federation."
 - b) It is the introduction of Cretan (or pagan) practices or viewpoints into what was once pure Scriptural truth.
 - c) Isaiah mentions such a practice by Israel.

(1) Isaiah 2:5-8

O house of Jacob, come and let us walk in the light of the LORD. For You [God] have forsaken Your people, the house of Jacob, because they are filled with eastern ways; They are soothsayers like the Philistines . . . Their land is also full of idols; They worship the work of their own hands, That which their own fingers have made.

(2) The "light of the LORD" had been mixed with "eastern ways" - this is syncretism.

d) Syncretism most frequently results from a failure of complete conversion in belief or practice.

(1) In the process of Christian conversion, previous beliefs or practices which are incompatible with the "light of the LORD" are retained.

(2) These incompatible beliefs and practices are not completely purged by the Word of God and often smolder beneath the surface for long periods of time before sprouting forth again to corrupt holy living.

(3) This happens both on a corporate and *personal level*— where believers who experience an immediate and strong conversion to the Lord subsequently 'cool' in their zeal and relapse to their old ways.

(4) The result is something that can often be more dangerous than if Christian influence had not occurred because that which results appears to be one thing, but is, in fact, something quite different.

(a) This is the aspect of deception which characterizes disobedience.

(b) [Example: native American church with totem themes in the stained glass windows.]

B. Sacrifice, or religious dedication, is rejected apart from a demonstrated Obedience

1. This is why 'good works' by those who reject Christ are not accepted as meritorious by God.

a) John 3:16-18

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. . . . He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

b) The rejection of the one way which God has established for man to approach Him — through the blood of Jesus — is supreme disobedience rendering all other good works of no account.

2. Religious actions and displays — even of great cost and dedication — are worthless when obedience is lacking.

- a) Proverbs 15:8
The sacrifice of the wicked [*is*] an abomination to the LORD, But the prayer of the upright [*is*] His delight.
3. How does God see "holy works" offered up from a position of disobedience?
 - a) Amos 5:21-24
"I hate, I despise your feast days, And I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept [*them*], Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, For I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, And righteousness like a mighty stream.
 - b) Isaiah 1:11-17
To what purpose [*is*] the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" Says the LORD. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, Or of lambs or goats. "When you come to appear before Me, Who has required this from your hand, To trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; Incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies-I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; They are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing [*them*]. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow.
 - c) In each case we see God placing obedience before sacrifice. Walk-the-walk, don't just talk-the-talk!
4. If obedience is more important than sacrifice, we would do well to consider the ways in which as Christians may be unwittingly walking in disobedience.
 - a) Disobeying the principles established by God. (Christian in name only.)
 - (1) Superficial familiarity with the Scriptures won't cut it.
 - (2) We need to plumb God's heart and intent below the mere surface.
 - (3) There will always be situations which are not precisely spelled out in Scripture where we have to go beyond wrote rules to apply the heart of what Scripture intends.
 - (4) Where this occurs, are we walking in a manner which denies Biblical principles?
 - b) Out of fellowship, unwilling to be under authority.
 - (1) Rebellious – walking in the way of Cain who offered goods to God but evidently would not submit to God's proscribed way of offering.
 - (2) Deceived

(a) Isaiah 66:3-4

"He who kills a bull [*is as if*] he slays a man; He who sacrifices a lamb, [*as if*] he breaks a dog's neck; He who offers a grain offering, [*as if he offers*] swine's blood; He who burns incense, [*as if*] he blesses an idol. Just as they have chosen their own ways, And their soul delights in their abominations, So will I choose their delusions . . ."

C. Obedience brings blessing and restoration.

1. It is the first step in rectifying our lack of fellowship with and response from God.
2. God always responds to repentance leading to obedience with His blessing.
3. We should be diligent . . .
 - a) In the Scriptures – so that we continue to grow in an understanding of the principles and practices which are acceptable to God (and abandon those which are not).
 - b) In prayer – that He would reveal to us practices or beliefs which are out-of-step with the "light of the LORD."
 - c) In fellowship – that we would participate in a local body of believers where we are under authority and experience the safety and growth made possible by other believers who can speak correction into our lives.

Merrill

Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible Institute, 1994). ISBN 0-8024-9266-5