

Chapter Twenty-four **God Is Jealous: Zephaniah, Haggai**

In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we are told of an occasion when Jesus went into the synagogue at Nazareth, His hometown. There was given to Him the book of the prophecy of Isaiah to read. Opening the scroll He found the place where it read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). The passage goes on to describe the ministry of the Messiah, and Jesus read it until He reached the sentence, "To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (v. 19). At this point Jesus stopped His reading and handed the scroll back to the attendant saying, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). The remarkable thing about this incident is that Jesus stopped His reading in the middle of a sentence, for Isaiah goes on to say "and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa. 61:2). Jesus did not read that last sentence because it was not yet time to proclaim the day of vengeance of God. That day of vengeance is coming and Jesus said much more about it in His great Olivet Discourse, but it was yet many centuries in the future from when Jesus read the verse in the synagogue.

It is this "day of vengeance" which is the theme of the prophecy of Zephaniah. The prophet's name means "hidden of the Lord" and he speaks as though he were a representative of the remnant of faith, those few people who remain true to God during the time of great trouble that is to come upon the earth. They will be hidden by God Himself and watched over by divine love to keep them during this time. It is of these people that the book of Zephaniah is written, and especially of the great day of the Lord which is vividly described in this prophecy.

The prophet identifies himself as a great, great grandson of Hezekiah, one of the great and godly kings of Judah. His ministry occurred during the days of Josiah, the last godly king of Judah. Perhaps the ministry of Zephaniah had much to do with the reforms which Josiah instituted during his reign. Since Josiah was also a descendant of Hezekiah, it meant that he and the prophet Zephaniah were related members of the royal family. Zephaniah begins his prophecy with a vivid description of the coming judgment under Nebuchadnezzar, though he describes it as "the day of the Lord." The detail of destruction which he envisions was clearly fulfilled by the Babylonian invasion.

We must recognize there is a great deal of difference between the day of the Lord and the Lord's day. Sunday is the Lord's day, for it was the day when our Lord arose from the dead. But the day of the Lord is the day of the manifestation of God's hand directly in human affairs. At the present hour even though God is working through the events of history bringing about overthrows, uprisings, and calamities as well as periods of prosperity and blessing, nevertheless His hand is hidden in the glove of history. But all the writers of Scripture agree that a day is coming when God will intervene directly in the affairs of men again. Notice how Zephaniah uses the personal pronoun throughout this passage: "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord." Again, "I will sweep away man and beast," etc.

Beginning with verse 14, as in many of the prophecies, the prophet's vision lifts to encompass another day far down the corridors of time which will be the last great judgment of God upon earth. He calls it "the great day of the Lord" and describes it thus: "A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements" (1:15, 16). This describes a time of such great and universal trouble that there will be nothing comparable to it in all the annals of history.

Zephaniah goes on to say, "I will bring distress on men, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the Lord; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. Neither their

silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the Lord" (1:17,18). We must always remember in reading passages like this that it is not easy for God to speak this way. He Himself declares that He takes no delight in the death of the wicked. Judgment, one prophet says, is His strange work, for His heart delights in mercy. But eventually, if His will is to be done, and if earth at last is to attain to the glorious freedom described in the prophets concerning mankind, if the dreams that lie hidden away in the hearts of men for a warless world and a great time of prosperity when joy will flood the earth--if that is ever to come, then God must deal with the entrenched evil of men. This is why the coming of a day of vengeance is absolutely certain. All the prophets warn of this and the New Testament writers refer frequently to it as well.

In Zephaniah's second chapter, he traces the extent of God's destruction. Certain nations are named outright. The ancient enemy of Israel, Philistia, will be made desolate. Moab and Ammon will be destroyed and their land become like Sodom and Gomorrah. The Ethiopians will be slain and the great nation of Assyria will be judged, with its capital, Nineveh, rendered a desolation and a dry waste in the desert.

Finally in chapter 3 the judgment centers upon the city of Jerusalem. Its case is hopeless from the human standpoint. Its evil is so widespread and so deeply imbedded that there is no likelihood of correction from within. All her leaders are corrupted and faithless so that the nation lies hopeless and helpless, awaiting its deserved judgment.

But in the midst of this, there comes a gleam of hope: "Therefore, wait for me," says the Lord, "for the day when I arise as a witness. For my decision is to gather nations to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger; for in the fire of my jealous wrath all the earth shall be consumed" (3:8).

In the midst of this universal judgment, Jehovah promises to bring relief to the suffering of Judah, and He declares: "For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, those who are left in Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall pasture and lie down, and none shall make them afraid" (3:12,13). Thus even in the midst of His judgments, God would preserve Himself a people who would remain faithful to His cause. In beautiful language, the prophet depicts the character of those who will be redeemed. They shall be "humble and lowly" for they have been conquered by the sovereign grace of God.

The closing verses, from 14 on, constitute a command to the redeemed in Zion to break into praise to the Lord in song for the redemption He has brought about. This is the new order that follows the darkness, the gloom, and the slaughter. It is what God has been aiming at all along, that He might bring song instead of sorrow, service instead of selfishness, security instead of slavery. The prophet's picture is one of great beauty and glory. He describes the scene thus: "The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival" (3:17). It is the song of the redeemed in which the Lord Himself is present to lead them in glorious exultation.

All this is possible to believers at the level of the spirit right now. When God deals a death stroke against the flesh within us and brings us through the painful judgment of saying no to the ego and the self life, there follows a time of singing and of joy. That is the reason God takes us through the pain and the darkness. What we see to be true of the individual life today will ultimately be true on the whole wide canvas of history as God brings the evil of humanity to an end and ushers in the day of joy and gladness.

HAGGAI

Earlier in this volume we noted the fact that the Old Testament is naturally divided into two major sections, each one covering in general the same period of time. The Old Testament begins with Genesis and the account of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, but then narrows its vision to trace the family of Abraham through Moses and the Exodus with its new beginning, with entrance into the land of Canaan. The

history of Israel in the land is followed through the period of the judges, the beginning of the monarchy under, first, Saul and then David, and finally the story is traced through the succession of kings of both Israel and Judah to the final exile of Israel to Assyria and Judah to Babylon. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, which close the first half of the Old Testament, give us glimpses of life in Babylon and record the return from Babylon to Jerusalem and the beginnings of the worship of Jehovah again in a Temple in Jerusalem.

This second half of the Old Testament begins again with the period of the patriarchs, going back to the story of Job and his struggles to learn what God wanted him to know about God and himself. Through the books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon the inner life of the people of God is traced during the period roughly from Moses to David and Solomon. Then the prophets brought before us the struggles of the people of God during increasing declension and spiritual idolatry until at last the period of exile is reached.

Now once again we have come to the time of restoration from Babylon, and the ministry of the three post-exilic prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These three prophets ministered in Judah after the return from the Babylonian captivity as recounted in the book of Ezra when the people began to lay the foundations of the Temple. However, because of political and local problems, the work ceased and Haggai begins his ministry with one theme in view: "Let us arise and build the house of the Lord."

Because of this continuing emphasis the prophecy of Haggai has been a favorite book for all Preachers today who are trying to get their congregations to build adequate buildings. But it is a misuse and misunderstanding of Scripture to apply it in that way. In Haggai's day, the Lord's house was the Temple. Although the returned people were still under the domain and rule of the Babylonians, they had permission from the king of Babylon to begin work on the Temple. Haggai delivers four messages to the people, all uttered within the space of a year and a half, and all concerning the need to build the Temple. But this becomes for us a picture of our responsibility as believers today to build the true house of God, which is not a building, but people. Each believer is the Temple of God and collectively all believers form the great house of God which is the church, the place where God dwells. The proper application of the prophecy of Haggai to our own time is therefore to see it as an exhortation to the people of God everywhere concerning their responsibility to make the worship of God and the holiness of the church of God their first concern.

Haggai's four messages are carefully dated. The first one includes all of chapter 1. It was addressed to the civil governor, Zerubbabel, and to the religious head, Joshua, the chief priest. Each message reveals an excuse given by the people for not working on the Temple, and what God saw to be the real reason behind that excuse. So to the leaders of the people Haggai says, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: This people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord" (Haggai 1:2).

After the laying of the foundation, the work of building the Temple had been abandoned for 15 years. The reason the people gave was that some mistake had been made in figuring the 70 years that Jeremiah prophesied. They were suggesting there was no use doing anything because God was not yet ready to move. But God answered their excuse in these words, "Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, 'Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared'" (1:4,5). Ironically, God suggests that the real reason the work of building has lagged is that they are all wrapped up in their own affairs. They did not feel it was time to build God's house, but they had no doubt that it was time for God to help them build theirs! Clearly they had forgotten that the fact they were in the land at all proves that God's time had come. They would not have been back in Palestine had the 70 years not been fulfilled. The real reason for their indolence was that they were not willing to put God's concerns first.

So the prophet invites them to consider what the results have been in their lives. Twice he uses the phrase "Consider how you have fared" (vv. 5, 9). Their harvests were poor, their clothing inadequate, their returns could not keep pace with inflation. Furthermore, they were neglecting the Temple while adequate supplies of wood were available on the hillsides of Israel to build the house of the Lord. So the Lord reminds them, "Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought upon the land and the hills, upon the grain, the new wine, the oil, upon what the ground brings forth, upon men and cattle, and upon all their labors" (1:10, 11).

Why did God do this? Was He trying to punish them? No, God does not punish in that sense; He was trying to wake them up. He was attempting to recall them to a reappraisal of their priorities and a remembrance of a rule which runs through all of Scripture and through life, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matt. 6:33).

The result of this forceful reminder was that the people began work immediately upon the Temple, and Haggai was sent to encourage them with the word of the Lord, "I am with you, says the Lord" (Hag. 1:13).

How long did the work last? Three weeks; then it ground to a halt again. Twenty-one days after his first message, the word of the Lord came to Haggai once more. "Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, 'Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?'" (2:2,3).

A comparison of this passage with Ezra 3 indicates that Jehovah was simply repeating here what the people had been using as a further excuse to stop work on the Temple. Certain old men had come down to watch the work who had been but children when they were carried captive into Babylon. They had seen the Temple of Solomon in all its glory and, as old men sometimes do, they were living in the past. They said to the people, "Do you call this a Temple, this heap of ruins here? We saw Solomon's Temple and what you are building is nothing compared to that. We remember the gold and silver that was in his Temple and you do not have any gold or silver. How are you going to decorate this Temple?" The people grew discouraged at this and said in effect, "You know, they're right. We don't have any gold or silver, we don't have anything to make this Temple beautiful. What's the use? Why work?" So they quit.

Once again the word of the Lord was, "Work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise I made you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit abides among you; fear not" (2:4, 5). Jehovah goes on to promise He would shake the political powers of the day so that they would pour gold and silver into the land. But even more significantly He says, "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts" (v. 9).

These words were fulfilled after 400 years when the same Temple, changed and altered by Herod the Great but the same essential building, was entered by Jesus of Nazareth and was filled with the glory of His teaching, standing in the midst of the Temple and saying things that the people had never heard before. By those words He utterly changed the life of that nation and every nation in the world since. Thus the glory of the second Temple was a greater and different glory than that of Solomon's.

But the people quit work again and two months later a third message was given to the prophet Haggai: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Ask the priests to decide this question, 'If one carries holy flesh in the skirt of his garment, and touches with his skirt bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any kind of food, does it become holy?' " (2:11, 12). To this question the priests properly answered no. The prophet then pointed out that any person who is unclean contaminates everything he touches, and by this the people were to learn that the ruined and neglected Temple had been the cause for all the economic difficulties which they had experienced for so long. But now that they had begun to build, the prophet reassured them that divine blessing would not be far behind.

The final word of Haggai is a personal message to Zerubbabel, the governor. It is a reminder that the Lord is in charge of all the nations of the earth, and promises to shake the kingdoms of earth so that continual instability will mark the days of Zerubbabel's governorship, but he himself is given reassurance: "On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts" (2:23). This was undoubtedly a great personal encouragement to the governor, but it clearly views him also as typifying the messianic King who, as the chosen of God, would bear the signet ring of authority upon His hand and would build a Temple not made with hands, which would remain when all earthly kingdoms and governments are shaken and destroyed.

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