

Haggai

1. Introduction

1. Background

(a) The exiles return and begin to rebuild the temple

With the prophets Haggai and Zechariah we enter the post-exilic period.

The first return of the Jews occurred under the Persian emperor Cyrus in 538 BC (Ezra 1:1-4). This was typical of the "enlightened" policy of Cyrus, who allowed freedom of religion and encouraged the cultures of subject peoples. The edict of Cyrus made four main provisions:

- any Jew who wished to return to Jerusalem was at liberty to do so (Ezra 1:3);
- the temple was to be rebuilt, the cost born by the royal treasury (Ezra 6:4b) though the Jews were also to contribute (Ezra 1:4);
- the dimensions of the temple were specified (Ezra 6:3-4);
- the gold and silver articles of the temple to be returned to Jerusalem and deposited in the house of God (Ezra 6:5).

Ezra 1-2 tells us that 42,360 exiles returned, plus 7,337 male and female servants, 200 male and female singers. (There were still many people left behind; they lived in good conditions, engaged in business and enjoyed status. 80 years later, when Ezra was organising the second return, he had difficulty getting support.) The leader of the returnees was Sheshbazzar. Zerubbabel probably took over upon the arrival of the exiles, perhaps after the death of Sheshbazzar.

Work on the restoration of the temple began in the seventh month of the second year after the return of the exiles, probably September 536 BC (Ezra 3).

(b) The exiles face problems and work on the temple stops

- **Opposition** The work on the temple and Jerusalem was opposed by the neighbouring provinces (Ezra 4). The opponents of the Jews began by attempting to infiltrate Jerusalem, but Zerubbabel allowed them no part in the construction. Then they tried intimidation: they hired counsellors to work against and frustrate the plans of the Jews. (Finally they sought to discredit the Jews by bringing accusations against them in the Persian court, but this happened during the reign of Ahasuerus, 486-465 BC, and falls outside the context of the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah).
- **Manpower** The Babylonians left the city in a state of ruin. Between the deportation of the population of Jerusalem in 586 BC and the return of the exiles in 538 BC, the ruins would have been grown through by weeds, grass and shrubs. Clearing the site of the temple was a task in itself. It also bears remembering that when Solomon built the temple 450 years previously, Israel had been in its golden era: there was adequate manpower for the task.

- **Agricultural** There was a succession of poor harvests (Hag. 1:6,10-11). The people were cold and hungry, and focused on their own needs (Hag. 1:4,9).
- **Economic** The first two years of the reign of Darius (reigned 522-486 BC) were characterised by revolts. In the ensuing uncertainty and destruction, trade among the provinces of the empire was inhibited. The Jews were poor (Hag. 1:6b). They probably reckoned that there wasn't enough money to build the temple (but look at Hag. 2:7-8).

So the work on the temple came to a standstill (Ezra 4:24).

(c) *The ministries of Haggai and Zechariah: work recommences*

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were sent by God to the Jews to stir them up to recommence the work on restoring the temple. Haggai's messages can be dated quite precisely to 29 August, 21 September, 17 October and 18 December 520 BC.

Their preaching achieved God's purpose. "Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD...And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God" (Haggai 1:12,14).

The temple was completed and dedicated in the sixth year of Darius, March 515 BC, 20 years after the laying of its foundation (Ezra 6:13-22).

2. Theme: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness"

Haggai points at the ruined temple and asks, "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways" (1:4-5). The command to "consider!" acts like a refrain in the prophecy, i.e. "Are you really putting God first in your lives? Are you concerned about the worship of God and the building of God's house? If you follow through with covenant obedience, then God will bestow covenant blessings."

"Haggai listed no catalogue of gross sins. The Jews who returned to Jerusalem appear to have been law-abiding at this time, restrained still by continuing memories of the exile. What was lacking was dissatisfaction with things as they were, and the consequent drive to initiate action. Resignation killed faith. The ruined skeleton of the temple was like a dead body decaying in Jerusalem and making everything contaminated (2:10-14). How could the offence be removed? By a concerted effort to rebuild, which would be proof and pledge of a change of attitude from resignation to faith. Once priorities had been put right the presence of the Lord among them would be evident from the prosperity that would

accompany both their building and their agriculture (2:9,19)” (Joyce Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, TOTC, p. 35).

The message of Haggai is not unlike that of Jesus in Matthew 6:25-34. Jesus rebukes the “little faith” of the disciples and says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

3. Structure and Content of Haggai

Part 1 (1:1-15a) *Consider your ways and build the temple*

- A. Chronological note (1:1)
- B. Build the Temple (1:2-11)
 - (i) The people do not want to build Temple (1:2)
 - (ii) The people improve their own houses (1:3)
 - (iii) The people’s poverty tied to disregard for God and Temple (1:4-11)
- C. The people begin work on Temple (1:12-15a)

Part 2 (1:15b-2:9) *Be strong and build the temple*

- A. Chronological note (1:15b-2:1)
- B. God will shake world (2:2-9)
 - (i) Do not be discouraged (2:2-3)
 - (ii) God is with the people (2:4-5)
 - (iii) God will bring great wealth to new Temple (2:6-9)

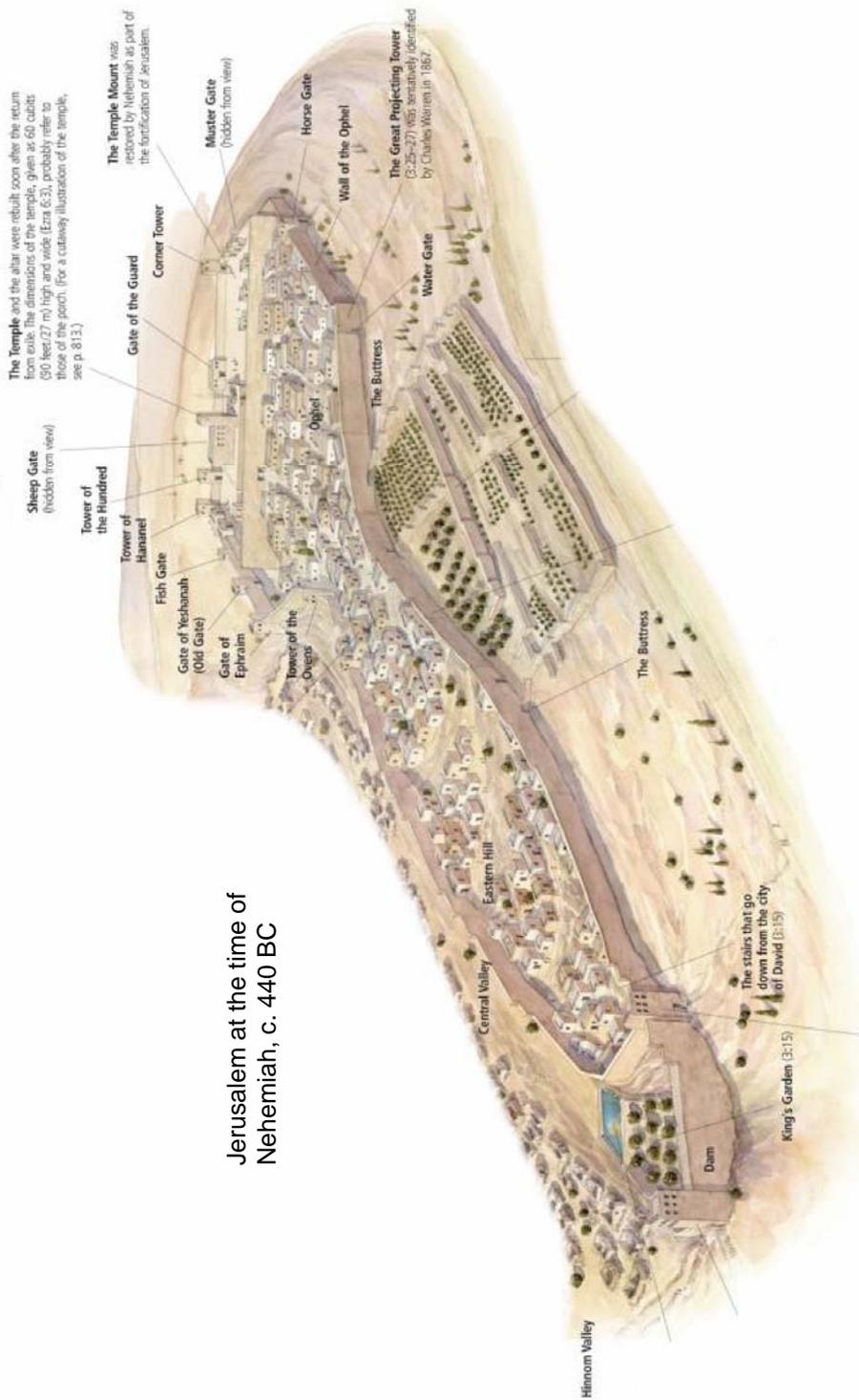
Part 3 (2:10-19) *Dedicate yourselves, trust the LORD and build the temple*

- A. Chronological note (2:10)
- B. Blessings come as result of holiness (2:11-19)
 - (i) Haggai questions priests regarding holiness (2:11-13)
 - (ii) The people’s unclean worship (2:14)
 - (iii) The people’s past poverty (2:15-17)
 - (iv) Future blessings (2:18-19)

Part 4 (2:20-23) *Encouragement for Zerubbabel the temple builder*

- A. Chronological note (2:20)
- B. God will shake world (2:21-23)
 - (i) God will destroy kingdoms (2:21-22)
 - (ii) Zerubbabel will be like a signet ring (2:23)

Jerusalem at the time of Nehemiah, c. 440 BC



Haggai 1:1-15a

2. Consider Your Ways and Build the Temple

1. Why was the Temple important?

(a) The Temple spoke of God's presence. It was his "house" – Haggai calls the Temple "this house" or "the house of the LORD" eight times. God desired to be "at home" in his house in Jerusalem. His presence in the Temple was real: the glory of the LORD came and filled the Temple at its dedication (1 Kings 8:10-11).

The Church is the place where God is actually present in the world. In Jesus, "the whole structure [the Church], being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:21-22).

(b) The Temple revealed God's glory. He says, "Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified" (1:8). The Temple was a three-dimensional answer to the first question of the catechism: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever."

The Church is for God's glory. "Through the church the manifold wisdom of God [is] now [being] made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:10). The Church is a living, breathing demonstration of God's eternal plan of reconciliation. If we say that we are committed to the Gospel, then we must also be committed to the welfare, unity, and edification of the Church.

(c) The Temple represented God's reign. The Temple was the focal point of the whole world. And Haggai foresaw a day when God's reign would radiate out of the Temple to the nations of the earth (2:6). The call to re-build the Temple was the call to seek first God's kingdom.

The Church is the sphere in which the kingdom of God operates, calling to people from every nation, and extending God's rule in all the earth (Matt. 28:18-20).

The Church is the only community on the face of the earth in which God dwells by his Spirit. The glory of God is seen in the Church. The Church is the place in which we experience the powers of the kingdom, the powers of the age to come. And outside the Church there is no salvation. Doesn't that cast a flood of light on Haggai's command to "consider your ways"? The Church is of incomparable importance and surely we will want to commit ourselves to building her up.

(d) But, the Temple's ruined condition spoke volumes about God's absence. The Temple was a visible symbol of the covenant relationship between God and his people. So the devastation of the Temple was a dreadful reminder of just how broken, just how dysfunctional that relationship had become. The returned exiles were in denial. But God wanted to talk about the broken relationship: when he breaks his silence in 1:2, he calls the Jews "this people", not "my people".

When we play "fast and loose" with the Church (consumerising her, or subordinating her service to their wants) we damage our relationship with God.

2. Why were the Jews slow to rebuild the Temple?

They said that circumstances weren't right. That's how the prophecy opens: "Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD" (1:2). They faced problems with hostile neighbours, manpower, poor harvests and failing economy (see Introduction).

This is about priorities. Priorities become evident when we are under pressure. Under pressure we shed the things we don't really care about in order to preserve the things we do. Under pressure the Jews gave up their dream of a restored Temple in order to look after themselves.

What are our priorities: money (1 Tim. 6:17-19); status (Jas. 4:1-12); personal peace (Phil. 2:19-22); dignity (1 Cor. 6:1-11)? What do they reveal about our concern for the Church? "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore....: Consider your ways."

3. What did God do because the Temple remained a ruin?

In vv. 6 and 9-11 God says that he chastened the Jews with poor crops because of their neglect of the Temple: "You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house" (v. 9).

Some believers in Corinth abused congregational worship, especially the Lord's Supper. God chastened them with weakness, illness and death (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

What chastisements have befallen the churches of Ireland because professing believers are looking to their own interests and not those of Jesus Christ?

4. When did work on the Temple restart?

Verses 12-14 report the response of faith and obedience which resulted in recommencement of the work on the Temple. The passage's shape is significant:

- A. Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people obey and fear the LORD (v. 12).
- B. God says, "I am with you" (v. 13)
- A'. God stirs up the spirit of Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people, and they come and work on the Temple (v. 14).

Notice the human and the divine aspects to the response (vv. 12 and 14)! We cannot duck our responsibility to respond to God's Word with faith and obedience.

It's hugely significant that when the Jews respond positively to God's rebuke, then God responds positively to them: "I am with you, declares the LORD" (1:13). The words "I am with you" run through the whole story of the Bible as the words of commission and encouragement (Ex. 3:12; Josh. 1:5; 2 Sam. 7:9; Matt. 28:20).

They say to us that no matter how sinfully we may have abused the Church, if we will honour God by responding to his call to serve his Church, then he will forgive and restore – "From this day on I will bless you" (2:19).

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

3. *Be Strong and Build the Temple*

This message is dated to the 21st day of the seventh month, the penultimate day of Tabernacles. Four weeks had passed since work on the temple had recommenced, but it had been interrupted by the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. During this time the people realised the sheer magnitude of the task (it would eventually take four years to complete). The builders needed encouragement. So God says, “Be strong...Work, for I am with you” (v. 4).

1. **Former glory**

Discouragement arises when the present compares unfavourably with the past.

The Feast of Tabernacles focused attention on the temple (now a “bombsite”). Some of the people were old enough to remember the former glory of the temple (v. 3) (destroyed 66 years previously). The glory had departed: (a) God had removed his presence; then (b) Nebuchadnezzar had taken the gold and bronze vessels and the ark of the covenant, stripped and burned the ornate panelling and pulled down the stonework. The temple was now “nothing”.

The Church has lost much of her former status. People do not flock to church on Sunday – church does not entertain them well enough. Politicians do not look to “church leaders” for moral advice. Pastors no longer have the automatic prestige that once was theirs. “Christendom” is a thing of the past.

2. **Fear and weakness**

The unfavourable comparison of the present with the past wasn’t a case of “rose tinted spectacles”. The temple was a ruin. The question was, how were the people going to respond? With fear and weakness?

Weakness and fear feed off one another. The magnitude of the task saps our mental and emotional energy before we even begin. We are paralyzed with fear.

Enthusiasm is not enough. It is a limited resource which boils off all too soon. Even the enthusiasm of Zerubbabel and Joshua (1:12-15) seems to have waned after a month. The spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:41) – as Peter and John Mark (Acts 13:13; 15:38) quickly learned.

3. **Formidable opposition**

The period after the accession of Darius in 522 BC was a time of shaking among the nations. Darius’ rival, Bardiya, was strong, and revolts broke out in Elam and Babylonia. Then Bactria, a satrapy which had supported Darius, rebelled; and this was followed by insurrections in Persis (Darius’ homeland), Media, Parthia, Assyria, and Egypt. The empire was in turmoil.

It was perhaps this that provided a window of opportunity for work on the temple to recommence. But remember that work had been stopped by the opposition of the

enemies of Judah (Ezra 4:1-5). It was a daring action to begin building again – it could easily have been interpreted as a politically motivated rebellion. Indeed, Ezra 5:3-17 indicates that that is how it was read by Tattenai the governor of the Province Beyond the River (who was probably covering his own back).

Worldwide, the active opposition to the Church has never been stronger. There are more people suffering more hardship for the sake of Christ than ever before. In our own land, the cost of discipleship is increasing. Of course, it is not presented that way – Biblical Christianity is portrayed as unscientific (only ignorant people don't believe in evolution!) and bigoted (an informed pro-life, pro-marriage conscience is intolerable!). It is tempting to withdraw into our church buildings and cease all interaction with the world.

4. The word of the LORD addresses the builders' discouragement

(a) Work...because God is with you

First of all God addresses weakness and fear with the command “Be strong...Be strong...Be strong...Fear not” (vv. 4-5). But mere exhortation isn't enough (enthusiasm soon evaporates). So God continues, “Work, for I am with you...My Spirit remains in your midst” (v. 5).

As we saw in the previous study, the words “I am with you” are the words of commission and encouragement, e.g. to Moses (Ex. 3:12), Joshua (Josh. 1:5), David (2 Sam. 7:9) and the apostles (Matt. 28:20). Paul experienced extreme weakness (2 Cor. 11:23-12:10); but he learned that strength was found only in the Lord (Phil. 4:12-13).

This promise is fundamental to anything we do to build for the kingdom of God. We depend on the presence of the Spirit – we lack nothing, and so have to work!

(b) Work...because God is working

God addresses the formidable opposition of the world with the promise “I will shake all nations...” (v. 7). This is the language of holy war. The verb “to shake” is used in Psalm 68:9 to describe the marching of God before his people to dispossess the nations of Canaan; and in Judges 5:4 Deborah uses it to depict the way God saved his people from the overwhelmingly superior forces of Sisera.

God isn't just present among his people – he is also active among the nations. So our building for the kingdom must include mission to the nations.

(c) Work...because God promises success

Finally, God addresses the lost glory by promising “I will fill this house with glory” and “the latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former glory” (vv. 7,9). The “glory” is not the divine glory but wealth (gold and silver) “shaken” out of the nations and deposited in the temple (acting like a central bank for the world!). Compare this with Rev. 21:26.

Our building for the kingdom by working among the nations (mission) can be done with confidence because we know that our labour in the Lord is never in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). The nations will come in, and God's house will be filled with glory.

Haggai 2:10-23

4. *Trust the LORD and Build the Temple*

Haggai's final two messages come on the same day, 18 December 520 BC.

These messages set up three contrasts, between: (a) holiness and uncleanness; (b) blighted land and productive land; and (c) falling thrones and God's chosen ruler. We hear in these the central themes of the kingdom: the people, the land and the throne. The messages also look at the past, the present, the near future and the far future.

The messages are meant to give the Jews hope: the repeated "from this day" (vv. 15, 18, 19) shows that the Jews have come to a watershed in their experience: yesterday is in the past, and a new day beckons. But each of the messages tests their faith and obedience: will they accept God's rebuke of their ritual impurity? will they rely on his promise about agricultural blessing as a result of covenant repentance? will they wait for the fulfilment of the word to Zerubbabel about the elect "signet ring"? will they trust the LORD and build the temple?

1. **Holiness and uncleanness (2:10-14)**

The main contrast in this section is between holiness and ritual uncleanness – the holiness that God's people were meant to exhibit, and the uncleanness they actually carried because of their unconcern regarding the temple.

According to the ritual system established by God in the Law, holiness is not contagious (vv. 11-12), but uncleanness is (v. 13).

This is a teaching aid – it teaches that when the people adopted the wrong attitude to the service of God, everything they did became "unclean" (v. 14). The wrong attitude of the people was evident in their approach to the temple, which they had left unrestored since 536 BC. The temple's ruined condition was like a dead body in the midst of Jerusalem; regular contact with the "corpse" (during worship!) desecrated the service of the Jews.

The church at Laodicea also learned that ritual service without a heart for God is "unclean" (Rev. 2:15-22). But all is not lost – God calls for repentance...

2. **Blighted land and productive land (2:15-19)**

...and when the people repent, God restores: the second contrast in this passage is between the poor harvests the Jews had endured in recent years with the promise that "from this day" they would enjoy agricultural blessing. This message comes one month after Zechariah commenced his ministry (Zech. 1:1). In the eighth month (November 520 BC) there had still been a need for repentance (Zech. 1:4). It would appear that the people did repent, and the promise of blessing is meant to bring them encouragement.

Previous harvests had been disappointing: grain and wine production was not what it should have been (v. 16). Blight (shrivelling by hot winds) and mildew (rot

caused by damp conditions) had destroyed crops (v. 17). This was consistent with the covenant curses (Deut. 28:22).

But the covenant included a provision for restoration when the people repented (Deut. 30:8-10). So, because the people had now changed their attitude toward the temple (i.e. their relationship with God, see Study 2), God promised to bless their agricultural labours (v. 19).

This promise tested the faith of the people. They had already sown their seed (this was done in Oct-Nov; v. 19a means that the seed was in the soil rather than the barn); and it was too early to see any fruit on the vine etc. (v. 19b). So, without any evidence other than the word of God, the people had to trust and obey.

We want to be fruitful disciples. The only way this is possible is if God blesses us. But such blessing is contingent on our faith and obedience (John 15:1-11).

3. Falling thrones and a chosen servant (2:20-23)

In the last section Haggai speaks to Zerubbabel about future (eschatological) events – the overthrow of kingdoms and the falling of thrones – and he contrasts these with the choice that God has made of Zerubbabel his “servant” and his “signet ring” (v. 23).

The language of these verses recalls God’s great acts of judgement and salvation: his appearing causes convulsions in creation (v. 21); he overthrows kingdom (c.f. overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah); he destroys the strength of kingdoms (c.f. destruction of Pharaoh’s strength); he casts horse and rider down (c.f. the Red Sea crossing); and he sets allies against one another (c.f. the rout of Midian at the start of Gideon’s period as judge).

In contrast, Zerubbabel is promised security. God calls him “my servant” (c.f. Moses, Joshua, David), and his chosen “signet ring”. Zerubbabel’s grandfather Jehoiachin had been rejected as a “signet ring” and “hurled” into the land of Babylon (Jer. 22:24). So Zerubbabel’s election is a gracious re-foundation of David’s royal dynasty.

Matthew traces this promise down to the birth of Jesus the Messiah (Matt. 1:12-16). In Jesus the uncleanness of the people is removed, and they become holy and able to give God holy service (1 Pet. 2:5). In Jesus the blighting of the land ends, and blessing begins (John 15:1-2). In Jesus the dynasty of David has been restored and the kingdom has come (Luke 1:32; Matt. 28:18).

But the fulfilment of the promises made to Zerubbabel and the Jews has yet to be consummated. “God’s future purpose will be achieved and will prove to be more glorious in fulfilment than in prospect by the degree to which Jesus Christ was more glorious than the temple” (Baldwin, TOTC, p. 59).

So we are in the condition of the people at the end of Hebrews 11! We must wait for the fulfilment of the promise. The question that Haggai asks is, will we wait the way God wants us to wait, with faith and obedience? Will we wait as people who delight in the Church of Jesus Christ? Will we be “passive waiters”, i.e. people for whom the Church is a dead body they don’t want to touch, or “active waiters”, people who, in dependence on divine grace, seek to build up the Church?