

Bethel

Pulpit

The Lord's Abiding Presence

Sermon Number 483

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 7th October, 2018**

Text: *“For I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts: according to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not” (Haggai 2. 4, 5).*

The Book of Haggai has just one subject: the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem. As I remind you so often, the temple meant so much – it meant everything – to God's ancient people. It was the mark, the assurance of God's presence with them, and in the priesthood and the blood-shedding and the sacrifices, it all pointed to gospel days; it all pointed to Christ.

But now that glorious temple that Solomon had built had been completely destroyed. It was desolation, and it is hard for us to imagine what it felt like, what it meant to God's ancient people. But now, after seventy years in captivity, a little band had arrived back from Babylon, and the first thing they were going to do was to seek to rebuild that temple. They came with great hope and high aspiration, and the work started wonderfully well, but then everything seemed to go wrong. They had enemies who called in all the power of the state to stop them, and then they lost interest themselves.

So the work had been started, and then for sixteen years not a single stone was laid in the building. It seemed that God's work, God's purpose, was going to be overthrown. But the Lord will never have His work overthrown, and so these two godly prophets were raised up, Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai only prophesied for about four months, but under the power of the Holy Spirit, his prophesying did the deed, and in a short time the temple was rebuilt.

Chapter 1 started off with solemn rebukes. They were told in the name of the Lord to return and begin building the temple, and the work went on remarkably well. Then at the beginning of this chapter, there seemed to be another difficulty which they had not known before. There were some of the older men who could just remember the glories of Solomon's temple,

and this new work was going on wonderfully well, but as they saw it going up, it seemed such a poor, mean building compared with what they had once known. “Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?” The people were disappointed. They were discouraged. They wondered if it was worthwhile going on after all, if it was just going to be this poor, mean building.

Now I just pause here for a moment for an aside. We older ones do need to be careful that we do not discourage our younger ones. It is so easy for us to say, If only you had heard Mr. So-and-so preach, or, If only you had been present on this occasion, or, If you had only been there when those things were happening. There is a rebuke in Ecclesiastes on that: “Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these?” We have to leave all that.

But here you have a people discouraged, disappointed, sad. Of course, the important question is going to be asked: This is all very well, it is very interesting. It is ancient history. What has it to do with you and me this morning? Especially what has it to do with our young people? I say, beloved friends, everything! You say, Why? Because God is eternally the same – the same God of the Book of Haggai, the same God we hope is with us this morning – and we are the same. I know things are so different. There never have been such changes – what the world calls improvements, inventions – but man is still the same in his sin and in his need.

I would not be a bit surprised if there are quite a few here this morning in a similar situation to God’s ancient people in the Book of Haggai. What do I mean? Well, things have happened in your life and you are disappointed, or something has come and you are discouraged. These things are casting you down. These things are making you sad. Perhaps you are feeling like God’s people here: how is it possible for us to go on? So in a sense, our situation today is a similar situation to God’s people in those far-off days.

Now the Lord gives them a word of encouragement. Really it is this. This was the substance of God’s word to them then; it is the substance of God’s word to us this morning:

“Jesus Christ, your Father’s Son,
Bids you undismayed go on.”

They were full of dismay.

“Jesus Christ, your Father’s Son,
Bids you undismayed go on.”

Now what was the ground upon which they were to go on? Really it was this: the Lord’s gracious presence with them. The Lord was still with them. The Lord had not changed. The Lord was going to help them. The Lord was going to be with them. The Lord was going to supply their needs. The Lord was going to give them strength. The Lord was going to bring them safely through.

So this was the answer: “I am with you.” O what a word that is! Of course, we have it many times in Scripture – the great, almighty God with poor, unworthy sinners. And when you see it in the gospel, it is in Christ, and it is for Jesus’ sake. Now that is your foundation, beloved friends, and it is a foundation that cannot be shaken, and that is the ground on which you cannot give up, the ground on which you must still continue.

And this word at the beginning of this verse, that they had to be strong. Well, they did not feel strong; they felt weak. “For I am with you.” That is where your strength is going to come from. “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.” How the Lord emphasises it: “Be strong.” Yes, Zerubbabel the governor; yes, Joshua the high priest. “Be strong, all ye people.”

“Be strong,” he says, “and work.” Of course, there it was to carry on with the Lord’s work. The Lord’s work cannot come to an end. That must come first, even if you have to leave other things. They had to go on with the building of the temple. If you want the background to all this, you have the history of it in the Book of Ezra, and you see how very soon the temple was completed, and the reason: “For I am with you.”

Now the verse does not end there. “Saith the Lord of hosts.” If you read the prophecy of Zechariah, the book which goes along with Haggai, you find this little phrase, “The Lord of hosts,” keeps coming in, and it keeps coming in, and it keeps coming in again. It is as if someone would

raise a difficulty – but God is the Lord of hosts. But we cannot go on – but God is the Lord of hosts, which of course is the mighty God. They had hosts of enemies against them and they had hosts of fears, hosts of anxieties against them, but they had the Lord of hosts with them and for them. “If God be for us, who can be against us?” “The Lord of hosts” – hosts of angels obeying Him, hosts of devils obeying Him, hosts of circumstances. He is the Lord of hosts.

Of course, in the well-known Psalm, Luther’s Psalm, the Psalm of the Reformation, Psalm 46, you have it like this: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” The Lord of hosts, Almighty God; the God of Jacob, the God of all grace, the God of poor, unworthy sinners. “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” Then,

“Jesus Christ, your Father’s Son,
Bids you undismayed go on.”

“For I am with you.” When the Lord gives an exhortation, He gives a reason for it. Your best friend may say, I think you should try to go on. They do not give a reason for it. Someone might say, I think it will be alright. They do not give a reason. Now the Lord tells them to go on, and He gives a reason: “For I am with you,” and that silences all their difficulties and their doubts and all their anxieties.

“For I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts.” They were willing to go, they were willing to be obedient, they did go on, but they still had this problem, and it *was* a problem, and you can understand it. “Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?” Now the Lord has an answer to that problem, and the Lord has an answer to every problem. He has an answer to your problems this morning, whether they are spiritual or providential, whether they are yourself or your family, whether it is those you love, whether it is your health. Whatever it is, the Lord has an answer. So often we do not. Don’t you find so often you have a problem, and you just do not know the answer? Now the Lord does.

This was His answer: “The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts” – which was blessedly fulfilled in the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who Himself walked in

this second temple, this meaner temple, so He glorified it and He made the place of His feet glorious. “I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts.... The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace” – because the Prince of peace will be there – “saith the Lord of hosts.” Which teaches us it is not outward things, it is not outward circumstances, it is certainly not just an outward building. The glory of that house of God is the presence of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as He dwells among His people and as He makes the place of His feet glorious.

If you go to some of these magnificent cathedrals, they are beautiful buildings, and they are so interesting, but there is no glory there. You could have a large chapel, and it is Ichabod. We have seen it. The glory of the Lord is departed. And there could be a mean little building with two or three poor, old, godly saints, and do you believe what you do believe? The Lord is there, and the glory of that poor, despised house is greater than the glory of this magnificent building. Now may grace teach us to see the difference. “The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former.”

“For I am with you” – the Lord’s gracious presence. “I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts: according to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt.” There were many occasions when the Lord reminded His people in time of need what He did for them when He brought them out of Egypt. Surely it was but overthrowing the Egyptians; surely it was bringing them through the Red Sea, but here He reminds them of a promise He made to them. It is as if Haggai says, The Lord has never broken His promise; the Lord never will break His promise. But he puts it stronger than a *promise*. He puts it as a *covenant*. I suppose you know someone who has promised to do something for you. If you enter into a covenant, it is very much stronger.

Well, there is a covenant here, but it takes us back to an everlasting covenant. In our early days we used to love to speak about it. I do hope our young people might be led into the beauties and glories of the everlasting covenant. David said, “Although my house be not so with God.” That was the complaint in Haggai’s day. It is often our feeling, our complaint: my house is not so with God, not as it should be, not as I would have it to be,

not as I pray for it to be. Well, with David, his kingdom, his family, his soul, his sins – “not so with God.” And then this glorious *yet*. David had it before he died. Haggai and the people had it here, and it still stands today. “Although my house be not so with God; *yet* He hath made with me” – even me, even such a sinner as me – “an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure.” And may some of you sweetly be enabled to say, “This is all my salvation, and all my desire.”

“For I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts: according to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt.” That covenant stands secure. Its bonds can never be broken. Its promises can never be broken, whatever the Lord has promised concerning the everlasting salvation of all His people, but here concerning His abiding presence with His people. “For He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” It is on this ground, this solid foundation, that we can say, “Thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.” Because the promise stands secure and the covenant stands secure, and the Lord’s presence with His people is secure, and sin, Satan and the world can never destroy it.

“For I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts: according to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth among you.” We do not read so much about the Holy Spirit’s work in the Old Testament. There was not such a full, remarkable display, but the Holy Spirit was present in the Old Testament and He was present here in stirring up the people to work. He was present sending Haggai to preach to them. He was present blessing Haggai’s ministry. He was present giving that spirit of obedience. He was present helping them, and He was still with them. He was not going to be taken away from them. He was not going to depart from them. Though they were discouraged now, He is going to abide with them; He is going to help them; He is going to bring them through.

Now what a subject this: the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the church of God. It is a subject that touches us very closely at Bethel. We have a sweet hope, and on a good foundation, that the Holy Spirit still remains among us. Now may we value this. We cannot command the Holy Spirit, we have no authority over the Holy Spirit, but we can grieve the Holy

Spirit, and we can quench the Holy Spirit, and then He withdraws – often in mercy not for ever – but He withdraws His gracious influence and then there is no blessing.

Of course, there are once-favoured churches and the Holy Spirit is finally withdrawn from them. Ichabod is written over the roof. Some of them are closed, some of them are pulled down, some of them continue. Many of these lovely church buildings in the Church of England – the faithful ministry which they have known at times over the years, but then there is a grieving of the Spirit, a quenching of the Spirit, and a departing of the Spirit.

So there is a solemn warning here and a solemn point for us to consider. I notice that often the brethren pray, and rightly so – may the Lord answer it – “Take not Thy Holy Spirit from us.” O but what a blessing! What a blessing it was in the rebuilding of the temple. What a blessing it is today.

“So My Spirit remaineth among you.” We want the Holy Spirit to remain amongst us, to quicken sinners into newness of life in the new birth. Only He can do these things. We need Him to open blind eyes. We need Him to establish us in the truth. We need Him to command the blessing. Only He can do these things. The preacher cannot do it. We need Him to fulfil that blessed office. Jesus said, “He shall glorify Me: for He shall receive of Mine, and shall shew it unto you.” What a subject then, the teaching of the Holy Spirit is! Do you believe that none teacheth like Him? We hope we began in the things of God, but there is so little we know, so much we need to know, so much we long to know, and the Holy Spirit is that gracious Teacher, teaching us in the way of righteousness, teaching us those lessons we need to know.

And then His gracious work in leading. He leads forth by the right way. Now there are many false spirits that lead forth by the wrong way, and we have our own wrong spirit which would lead us forth by the wrong way. The Holy Spirit makes no mistakes in His gracious leading.

It is a vast subject, a vital subject, the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. He is a Person, not just an influence. He is a divine Person. He is

almighty. He is God. He is one of the three Persons in the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. He is equal, He is co-eternal with the Father and the Son. Let us have right, believing views of the Holy Spirit. He inspired the holy Scriptures. His greatest work was in the mysterious incarnation and birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and He ever abides in His beloved church to the end of time. O what a word this is, and concerning the true, blood-bought church of God, this is a word that can never be disannulled.

“So My Spirit remaineth among you.” O but may it still be so at Bethel. May it ever be so at Bethel. May we realise the value. May we seek to honour the work of the Holy Spirit. There is no substitute for it. Every blessing we ever know at Bethel comes from this gracious work of the Holy Spirit of God.

“According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth among you.” And then He puts a gracious conclusion on it all: “Fear ye not.” Well, they had many fears, and you can understand their many fears, but this One who speaks – the kind, the gracious, the all-loving, the almighty God – He says, “Fear ye not.” And when the Lord says, “Fear ye not,” then you have no cause to fear. But may these things not just belong to that generation in Haggai’s day. May they belong to us at Bethel and in our homes and in our families, in our circumstances; especially in our souls.

But do not forget where we began. These words were spoken to those who were disappointed, those who were cast down, those who were discouraged – this encouragement for them to go on. The Lord was still with them. He was not going to leave them. He was going to bring them safely through. And this final word to them, and may it be the Lord’s word to you and me this morning: “Fear ye not.”