

## BUILD BACK BETTER?

### Three Better Ways to Build from the Prophet Haggai

BY TIM GOODALL

#### A BETTER WAY?

For a while last year the phrase ‘build back better’ was everywhere – on the lecterns of government Covid briefings, as a slogan for the Conservative Party generally, across all our screens, and even on the lips of some church leaders. Since then, omicron, ‘partygate’, the cost of living crisis, and Ukraine has rather punctured the motto.

Yet the work of building back following the destruction of the pandemic continues. Many churches and organisations have been working hard to build ministries out of varying degrees of ruins. ‘Build back better’ is sometimes the phrase used to give a sense of vision to this process.

But the word ‘better’ is ambiguous at best. Might there be a better vision than ‘better’? As I’ve reflected on that with my own church, I’ve found Haggai to be a faithful guide. Haggai is God’s prophet who spoke God’s word to the leaders of the returned people of Israel, following their exile in Babylon.

The word of God came to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, and Joshua, the high priest. This is God’s word to leaders of God’s people, learning to follow God in a new world, following a devastating and widespread event (the exile) – sound familiar?

I think Haggai offers us three better ways to build back as we continue through this next phase of the pandemic. But before you continue reading, Haggai is only 38 verses long, why not pause and read it?

#### 1. BUILD BACK OBEDIENT (HAGGAI 1:1-15)

When the people of Israel were brought out of exile and returned to the land of Judah, their first job was to

rebuild the temple, and they built the foundations almost immediately. But by Haggai’s time, about 15 years later, the work hadn’t gotten any further.

The people knew what they had to do, and in Haggai 1:2 God acknowledges that the people hadn’t said ‘no,’ but ‘not yet’. In reality, it amounts to the same thing. It’s easy to understand why they said that: there had been years of poor harvest (the price of food had gone up and was continuing to go up); the international scene was unsettled (the emperor’s son had committed suicide, there were troop movements through Palestine); and there was hostility from their neighbours (lies, death threats and discouragement).

The victorious return from exile had become barely a whimper.



How similar does this situation sound? Our cost of living is going up; our international scene is tumultuous; our media is hostile; we feel weak.

But what does God say through Haggai? Build back obedient. The Lord of the harvest held back the harvest to catch their attention – a ‘not yet’ to God comes with consequences.

For us, there is great comfort in the thought of ‘going back’ to the way things were. The nostalgia filters out all the challenges we faced pre-pandemic. Pursuing a ‘going back’ building policy is usually the path of least resistance – but isn’t obedient, nor realistic. The returned exiles went back to their own houses and built them up instead of obeying the instructions of God. It’s easier to withdraw and do my own thing than engage with the commands of God.

The question for us as leaders is: what has God been saying through the pandemic that it is easier to put on the ‘not yet’ shelf, now that restrictions have eased and things feel more ‘normal’? The way forward (1:12-15) is repent and return to the Lord, and hear the voice of the Lord say to you, ‘I am with you’ (1:13).

## **2. BUILD BACK MATURE (HAGGAI 2:1-9)**

When something is new, there can be that initial excitement and burst of energy. I imagine this was the case when the exiles returned and started on the foundations of the temple in Jerusalem. But that initial excitement quickly dissipates, and something more is needed to continue the work.

Disillusionment has set in amongst the returned exiles. The glory of the rebuilt temple is nothing compared to the glory of the old temple. The people were looking for the grandeur of the temple to be their proof that God was at work.

God doesn’t give them grandeur, but instead promises them his presence (2:4-5). The promise of presence will lead to God demonstrating more of his glory than was present in the old temple. That’s quite a claim! The people must look with eyes of faith, because what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).

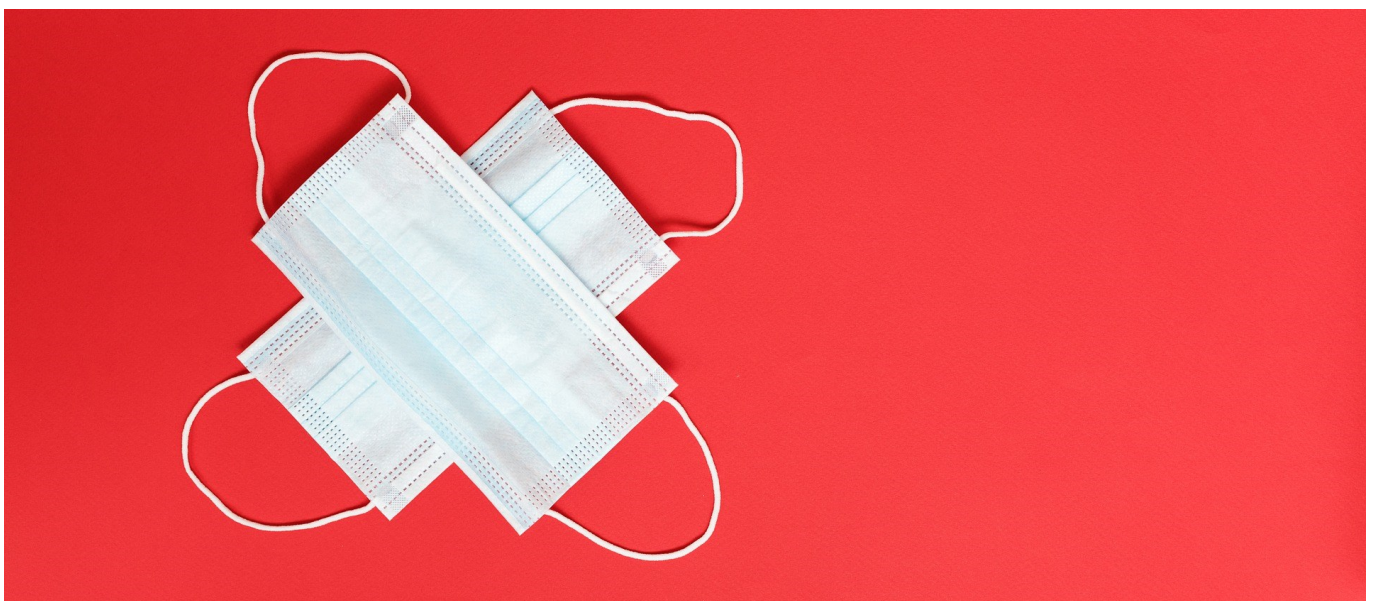
This is a call to build back mature. To mature in our faith in God. At this stage in the pandemic, what we see with our eyes might be disappointing. Yet what we know by faith is true and glorious. With many churches and organisations facing a shortage of finance and participation, building for mature faith in Jesus, in ourselves and our churches and organisations, is vital. Because God dwells with us by his Spirit, we need not be anxious about the way things look now.

Building back mature means trusting that God is with us in this moment in the pandemic. It means when things look to be declining, sinking, or struggling, we see them through the eyes of mature faith that trust that Jesus will build his Church.

The questions for us as leaders are: what areas of church or organisation life are you looking at with disappointment, because the former glory far outweighed what it looks like now? And what one thing can you do to help lead you and your church or organisation to mature in faith in Jesus Christ?

## **3. BUILD BACK HOLY (HAGGAI 2:10-19)**

The next word of the Lord through Haggai is a call to holiness. The back and forth between the priests and the Lord is about how things maintain holiness or become unclean. Jerusalem was awash with people from all over the empire, who worshipped all kinds of idols. The long history of God’s people dabbling in idolatry meant the



returning exiles needed reminding that they were God's holy, distinct, set apart people, and they worship God alone.

The pandemic has magnified the challenges and opportunities that existed pre-pandemic. The opportunities for evangelism have been magnified as people still ask questions about the meaning of life and death. But the challenge to remain the distinct people of God are also magnified.

Holiness is not about adopting a 'holier-than-thou' attitude but living distinctly as God's redeemed people. Building back holy not only honours God, but it also demonstrates the gospel. Larry Hurtado nails it when he says in his book *Slayer of the gods*: "It wasn't Christians' relevance and relatability that made the gospel so attractive in the ancient world, it was exactly their opposite, their distinctiveness and their difference."

For a world going through such turmoil, our distinctiveness demonstrates the gospel of Christ, and it is attractive.

The question to reflect on is: where is God calling you and your church or organisation back to a holy distinctiveness? Pray for the courage to make the necessary changes, and trust that God will bless you for doing so (Haggai 2:19).

### **CONCLUSION: GOD'S PROMISES NEVER FAIL (HAGGAI 2:20-23)**

The final few verses of Haggai are spoken directly to Zerubbabel. God is about to shake the heavens, to destroy kingdoms, to overthrow armies, and to choose Zerubbabel as if he was a signet ring.

Zerubbabel is a descendent of king David, and as well as personal encouragement, this word is a reaffirmation of the promise to David that God will raise up a king in David's line who will rule forever – God reaffirms his promise of Jesus.

Throughout the turmoil, disobedience and compromise of the returning people of God, God is faithful. He will place his Son, a son of David, on the throne. Jesus is that King. Amidst the devastation of exile and return, God declares to Zerubbabel, the leader in Jerusalem, his sovereignty and faithfulness.

The pandemic feels like it's turned our world upside-down. But the most fundamental shift in world history happened at the cross, when Jesus died and then rose again, and ascended to the throne at the Father's side.

These last few verses are a promise to us, too. God is sovereign and faithful – Jesus is King and building his Church. So, holding on to God's promises, let's build back obedient, mature, and holy.



### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. What has God been saying through the pandemic that it is easier to put on the 'not yet' shelf, now that restrictions have eased and things feel more 'normal'?
2. What areas of church or organisation life are you looking at with disappointment because the former glory far outweighed what it looks like now? And what one thing can you do to help lead you and your church or organisation to mature in faith in Jesus Christ?
3. Where is God calling you and your church or organisation back to a holy distinctiveness?

