

THE CHOSEN RING Haggai 2:20-23

Late in the 19th century, there was a spectacular trial that attracted the attention of almost every newspaper reporter and journalist. 4 men had been stranded out in the ocean in a life-raft for a long period of time. They had caught rain water to drink, but eventually had come to the brink of starvation. Faced with their desperate situation, they had turned their eyes away from the Lord and made a heathen decision. They had decided that one of the four would be chosen by lot to sacrifice himself so that the others would not die from hunger. Unbeknown to the cabin boy named Richard Parker, the process was secretly rigged against him, and he was the one who was chosen by lot. 3 days later a steamer picked up the surviving 3 men. Of course, all 4 would have been rescued if they would have just had a little bit more patience. Their rescue caused a sensational stir on the mainland as people debated the morality of their actions. One can only surmise how our world would have rationalized their actions today, but morality in the late 19th century was still more Biblically based. It was determined that the men

would be brought to trial for murder. 2 men were convicted of murder, the 3rd was granted immunity as the only witness who could be used against them. The 2 men who were convicted had hatched the idea to sacrifice the cabin boy and had been the main aggressors in the plot while the witness had more passively gone along with it.

Many articles were written concerning this trial, but of all of them, perhaps the first one was the most interesting and in some ways the most thorough in its detail. It was an 152 page novel written by Edgar Allen Poe- the only novel he ever wrote. It is called the "Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym". In this novel, Poe describes the desperate situation of 4 men in great detail, telling of the water that they caught in their life-raft, telling of the deadly lots that they drew, even giving the name of the cabin boy, Richard Parker, who was sacrificed. What is most fascinating is the fact that this novel was published by Poe in 1838, almost a half a century before the actual event ever happened.

People have always been fascinated with anything that hints of being

prophetic in nature. Today large sums of money are paid to those who claim to be able to foretell the future. Sometimes predictions are made by coincidence- a guess happens to come true. Other times there is clearly some supernatural, demonic element involved as instruments of divination prohibited in the Scriptures are used. A growing number of people are reading their horoscopes trying to find prophetic predictions from the stars. Thousands are trying to predict economic trends so that they can make money on Wall Street. People in general, want to know what is going to happen in the future.

The Bible teaches us that there is only one certain source of prophecy- that is God himself. While human beings might try to guess the future, their knowledge is very limited indeed. While Satan has his plans and programs for the future, he is not omnipotent, he is not able to carry out those plans with absolute certainty. There is only one who has complete knowledge and who has the ability to carry out his will in all things, and that is God himself. So if we want to know what is going to happen in the future, we ultimately

must see what God has to say about it.

We have been studying the short book of Haggai, one of the books of the Old Testament designated as a prophetic book. Haggai is one of the 12 minor prophets. Now as we have been seeing, the major ministry of the Old Testament prophet was to speak God's word and God's will to the people of his day. A prophet spoke on behalf of God to the people. But every prophetic book in the Old Testament has a predictive element also- a foretelling of some future event. The normal pattern is for the predictive prophecy to be near the end of the book as the prophet looks towards the future. Haggai is not an exception to this normal pattern, for the final 4 verses of this short 2 chapter book focus attention on what is to come in the future.

Let's read this fourth and final message that Haggai delivers that contains a promise concerning Zerubbabel.

READ Haggai 2:20-23

HAG 2:20 The word of the LORD came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month:

21 "Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth.

22 I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.

HAG 2:23 " `On that day,' declares the LORD Almighty, `I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,' declares the LORD, `and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,' declares the LORD Almighty."

Now the first observation that we see concerning this last message from Haggai is that it is directed towards Zerubbabel alone. The first message was directed towards Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest, the second message was directed towards Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the high priest and to all the remnant in general, the third message was directed to the priests, and now this fourth message is directed towards Zerubbabel the governor alone. So we suspect immediately that this message has to do with

the leadership or the ruling of the nation of Israel. And then the second observation that we see in this message is that it must be predictive in nature. It cannot be speaking just of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah. The reason we know that it cannot be speaking simply of the historical Zerubbabel is because of the fact that the prophecies promised were not designed for his lifetime, and were not fulfilled in his lifetime- the royal thrones and foreign kingdoms were not overthrown- and Zerubbabel was never made king of Israel as the making of God's signet ring implies. Zerubbabel remained a governor working for the Persian King throughout his life. So then, we immediately suspect that Haggai is using Zerubbabel as a type of someone else. And as we compare Scriptures with Scriptures, this suspicion is confirmed.

The 2 leaders mentioned by Haggai at this time were Zerubbabel and Joshua. Zerubbabel was the governor, the political leader. Joshua was the high priest, the spiritual leader. But it is interesting that Zechariah, a contemporary prophet to Haggai speaks of Joshua the high priest as a type of

the Messiah who was to come.

"Take the silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of the high priest, Joshua son of Jehozadak. Tell him this is what the Lord Almighty says: Here is the man whose name is the branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord. It is he who will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two." Zechariah 6:11-13.

Now we could trace this term "the branch" through the writings of the prophets to see that it was a term used of the Messiah who was to come. The term branch is used 14 times by the prophets. It is clear that it is used as a Messianic term. Let me just give you one clear example found in the opening verses of Isaiah 11:

ISA 11:1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a **Branch** will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,

or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. (Isaiah 11:1-5)

Isaiah then goes on to give characteristics of the period that we often call the Millennial Kingdom of Christ where the wolf lies down with the lamb in peace, children play with cobra's, etc. The title "Branch" is obviously being used in a Messianic way.

So it is generally accepted that Zechariah in referring to Joshua, the high priest, as the branch was speaking of him as a type or picture of the Messiah who is yet to come. That was the reason for the crown being symbolically placed on his head. Joshua never ruled, Zerubbabel was the governor and the Persians were the ones who appointed Zerubbabel. But as Joshua was rebuilding the temple, he was picturing one who would rebuild the temple again in the last days, the Messiah himself, and the Messiah would serve as both King and Priest- a dual function.

Now it appears to also be clear that as Zechariah used Joshua as a type of the Messiah being the perfect high priest who would rebuild the temple in the last days, so Haggai now is using Zerubbabel, the other Jewish leader of the time, as a picture of the Messiah as well. And it is quite obvious from the overall context why Haggai would choose Zerubbabel. Whereas Zechariah was speaking of the religious functions that would make Joshua his natural choice, Haggai in his final words is speaking of the political restoration of Israel making Zerubbabel the political leader his natural choice. So then, Haggai's final message is given to Zerubbabel. But from the context we can know that like Zechariah, Haggai is using the Jewish leader as a type or picture of the Messiah who is going to come to finally restore the nation of Israel politically.

Now what is the message that Haggai gives in the closing verses of his prophecy? Notice his 3 fold message with me:

1. First of all, royal thrones and foreign kingdoms will be overthrown.

READ Hagg. 2:20-22.

HAG 2:20 The word of the LORD came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: ²¹ "Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. ²² I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.

Now the language that is used here by Haggai is very strong and leaves little doubt that a complete collapse of the political power of the nations of the world lies in the future. The only other times the Hebrew word translated "overthrow" here is used in the Old Testament is either in connection with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or the complete conquest of the Promised Land by the Israelites. Since this prophecy was not fulfilled in Zerubbabel's day, and has not been fulfilled to this point, and because the word of God is trustworthy and true, we know that there is coming a day when God will bring about the downfall of all nations that oppose him.

We live in a day when great security is placed in power of weaponry. We

boast of nuclear weapons that can annihilate cities in one explosion. We have smart bombs that can be launched from hundreds of miles to land within 3 feet of their intended target. We spend billions of dollars on our national defense. And certainly defensive might is necessary in our day to maintain a balance of power and give some stability to this earth. But we must realize that all of the might and power that man can muster is nothing when compared to God's might and power. And there is coming a day when the promised Messiah will return. When that happens the very heavens and earth will shake and the might and power of the nations that have opposed God and His will will be completely crushed. So then, the first part of Haggai's message speaks to the prediction of royal thrones and foreign powers being overthrown.

2. But notice now with me the second part. God's Messiah will be established, and Israel the nation will be blessed. We must remember that this entire paragraph comes after the phrase "From this day on I will bless you", and it really explains how God is going to bless Israel in the future.

The importance of the signet ring in the O.T. culture must be seen to see the significance of what Haggai is saying to Zerubbabel. He said, "I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel, and I will make you like my signet ring for I have chosen you."

The signet ring was a special ring that the king would wear that would contain his seal on it. It was so valuable that it was either worn on the right hand or hung around the neck on a chain so that it would never be lost. Whenever the king was going to send forth a letter giving an important message, or when he passed a law or decree, or when he did anything else that represented his office and authority, the king would set his seal in wax so that there could be no doubt as to its authenticity. Now if the king wanted to allow someone else to use the ring, he could, but he had to recognize that that person then would act with the authority of the king himself. You will recall that the wicked king Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard, but Naboth would not sell it to him even for a price more than it was worth for he respected God's law and the requirement to pass on land to the heir of the family. Well, while

Ahab was sulking and pouting, the Bible says that Jezebel "wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him." (I Kings 21:8). When the elders and nobles of the city received the letter, they acted immediately and shortly Naboth had been accused falsely and executed. The letter with the king's signet seal carried with it all of the king's power and authority. Even if he had not sent it, it was recognized as coming from him.

Now when the Lord Almighty says to Zerubbabel, "I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you", this statement would indicate God giving to him all of his power and authority to rule and reign. Because this didn't happen in Zerubbabel's lifetime, we realize that God's statement is prophetic in nature and that it will be fulfilled in Zerubbabel's antitype, the Messiah himself. And this is, of course, confirmed by numerous other Scriptures . One day the Messiah will return, and he will rule and reign with God's own authority, for he himself will be the son of God. Haggai's contemporary Zechariah said it most clearly in Zechariah 14:1-9:

"A day of the Lord is coming when your plunder will be divided among you. I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it, the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city (remember this was written after the Babylonian Exile so it could not be referring to this event). Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. On that day there will be no light, no cold or frost. It will be a unique day, without daytime or nighttime- a day known to the Lord. When evening comes, there will be light. On that day, living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in

summer and in winter. The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name."

So then Haggai agrees with Zechariah that a day would be coming when the Messiah would come, and he would defeat the world powers and set up his own kingdom. Zerubbabel is a type or picture of this great event to come.

3. But I would like to notice a third point in closing this morning. The signet ring, or seal was not only recognized as the authority or power of the king, but it was also seen as a guarantee or down payment that a promise would be fulfilled. When people received a letter from the king sealed with his ring, they could be assured that the promises made in that letter would be fulfilled. If a reward for service were promised, for instance, that reward was as good as given if the sealed letter were received. In our former illustration, the elders and nobles of Naboth's village acted upon the letter received from Jezebel with Ahab's seal in full assurance that the promises given to them in that letter would be fulfilled, because the letter was signed with Ahab's seal. So then in these Old Testament days, the seal came to be recognized as a

down payment or guarantee.

This picture is picked up in the New Testament in the teaching concerning the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit being God's seal given to believers as a down payment, guaranteeing them all of the future blessings of redemption (Eph. 4:30).

Now Haggai says that Zerubbabel is like God's signet ring to the nation of Israel. And this is somewhat significant when you consider the times in which these people were living. The Jewish people had been taken away from their homeland into a foreign nation as exiles. They had no opportunity to regroup or rebuild their strength. They had no army or power as a nation. It was really unrealistic for them to think that they would ever be under self rule again. The Babylonians had now been conquered by the Persians, but the Persians were at the peak of their power and the prospects for the nation of Israel had not changed.

Yet out of an apparently hopeless situation, God had brought about a miracle, and the Jewish people had been given a small measure of autonomy

again. Zerubbabel whose very name means the seed of Babylon had lead a remnant out of captivity and he was overseeing the rebuilding of the temple again. Zerubbabel had been given authority to rule as governor under the Persian umbrella of power. And God says that Zerubbabel was to these people a seal or a guarantee that God's future promises would be fulfilled to them. For Zerubbabel was a picture of a greater one who was to come in the future- the Messiah himself. He would also come during an apparently hopeless time, when the nations of the world were united in heart against Israel. But he would overthrow those foreign powers, the temple would again be rebuilt, and God's chosen people would be lead out of bondage into both physical and spiritual freedom. Haggai's message brought hope and encouragement to this believing remnant who were laboring with great odds stacked against them.

God's character has not changed in 2,500 years. He is the same God yesterday, today and forever. So then, the message that Haggai gave to these people of old is still relevant to us today. If our priorities are right, if we are

giving proper time in building God's houses in our lives and not devoting all of our strength and energies to our own selfish houses, then God's blessing will rest upon us and our families. That's the message of chapter 1. If we keep on pursuing the will of God, working for him, not becoming discouraged with the former glory of the temple, then God will give to us a new perspective and we will see that our labors for him are going to result in far greater glory than we can imagine in the future. That's the message of 2:1-9. If we confess our basic tendencies towards sinfulness and wickedness and are careful to follow God's commands in sincere obedience, then we will live pure lives before him and we can be used as vessels for his glory. That's the message of 2:10-19. And if we realize God's character and His mighty power, then his promises will give us hope and encouragement for the future. That's the message of 2:20-23. So Haggai's message has been one of priorities, perspective, purity and prophecy. And so our priorities and perspective and purity and confidence in God's prophecy remain critical as foundational blocks in our lives today. God's character is changeless;

therefore, His word in true. We can trust it forever.