

“Work, for I Am with You”

Haggai 2:1-9 On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ² "Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, ³ 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?' ⁴ But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty. ⁵ 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.' ⁶ "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. ⁷ I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. ⁸ 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. ⁹ 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."

Luke 20:27-38 ²⁷ Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. ²⁸ "Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. ³⁰ The second ³¹ and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. ³² Finally, the woman died too. ³³ Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?" ³⁴ Jesus replied, "The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. ³⁵ But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, ³⁶ and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection. ³⁷ But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' {37 Exodus 3:6} ³⁸ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."

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I have a pretty weird sense of humor, as you may know, and part of my problem lies in my imagination. For example, one night at fiddle jam somebody thought a Gospel Bluegrass song would be appropriate as we were in a church. They played an old classic, “Mother’s Not Dead; She’s Only a-Sleeping”. Besides the title of the song being pretty bizarre, my imagination had to take it a bit further. The timing of the song is waltz time and so I began to imagine people waltzing to this tune, but they weren’t ordinary people. They were from back in the 1700’s. If you can imagine a ball from way back then with the women in big poofy, frilly dresses and white powdered beehive wigs. Men dressed in knickers and coattails with the big powdered wigs on. Waltzing but only touching hands. Everything is very serious and proper except...they’re dancing to “Mother’s not dead, she’s only a-sleeping; just patiently waiting for Jesus to come. The birds will be singing while mother lies sleeping. They will sing o’er her as the grave fades away.” Well, I guess you had to be there.

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There is a reason for me mentioning this. You see, I have noticed that there are a lot, if not most gospel songs, and not just of the Bluegrass variety, that seem to know more about heaven than the Bible does. And, they do get as ridiculous as an 18th century ball with people waltzing to a sappy Gospel Bluegrass song. Many old Gospel songs paint a picture of what happens to us after death that's just not Biblically accurate. They say we have an immortal soul that leaves our body at death and goes to spend eternity in heaven. The Bible never claims we have an immortal soul. In fact, nothing about us is immortal. Only Christ has immortality (1 Tim. 6:13-16). Rather, it says that because of God's grace extended to us in Jesus Christ by the gift of his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, in us, we will live for a time in paradise or heaven with Christ without bodies until the new creation and resurrection. It is the Holy Spirit in us by, with, and through whom we live past death. This is from Romans Chapters 6 and 8 and particularly Rom. 8:11 which reads: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” Biblical inaccuracy is why a lot of very popular Gospel hymns were removed from our hymnals over the years and why certain popular Gospel songs will never be in our hymnals.

Well, to show you that I'm not all down on Gospel Bluegrass, I'd like to play you one that I think is quite accurate as to what the Bible says about heaven. It imagines the New Jerusalem that comes down to earth from heaven when all things are made new as accounted in the Book of Revelation Chapter's 21 and 22. It's a Carter Family tune called “Fifty Miles of Elbow Room”.

Twelve-hundred miles, it's length and breadth that four-square city stands.

Its gem-set walls of jasper shine. They're not made by human hands.

One-hundred miles it's gates are wide; abundant entrance there,
with fifty miles of elbow room on either side to spare

When the gates swing wide on the other side just beyond the sunset sea.

There'll be room to spare as we enter there. There'll be room for you and room for me.

For the gates are wide on the other side, where the fairest flowers bloom,
on the right hand and on the left hand, fifty miles of elbow room

Sometimes I'm cramped and I'm crowded here and I long for elbow room.

I long to reach for altitude where the fairest flowers bloom.

It won't be long before I pass into that city fair,
with fifty miles of elbow room on either side to spare.

Well, in our passage here from Luke something similar to me poking fun at Gospel songs is going on. We find Jesus being grilled by Sadducees who didn't believe in resurrection and were trying to use the Law of Moses to show Jesus that he was being scripturally inaccurate. You know the question they ask: A man dies leaving behind a wife and no children. According to the Law his brother must marry her. The brothers keep dying. You would think that after a while the next brother in line would be afraid to marry her. All seven brothers die and then she dies; in the resurrection whose wife will she be? Jesus answers saying that there won't be marriage in the resurrection. He then goes on to say that there will be resurrection because Moses refers to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac,

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and Jacob not the God who was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The way it's worded makes it seem that they are still alive.

The problem that the Sadducees had with resurrection was multi-faceted. They believed that when you died, you died. This life was the only shot you got. There was no spirit that lived on. Only God is immortal and the closest we can come to immortality is to have lots of male descendents through whom the family name will live on. I think they saw a huge problem inherent in believing in an afterlife: a person could spend all their time getting and keeping themselves ready for the next life while ignoring the needs of this life. The Pharisees were guilty of this mistake. They spent their time trying to appear righteous and getting converts to their way of believing all the while ignoring the Bible's demands for justice and equity.

Many Christians today make the same mistake by saying that all that matters is trusting in Jesus so you can go to heaven and doing everything you can to get as many people converted so they can go with you. They get so caught up in being a Christian, going to church, and getting others to go to church and learning about how the Bible says they should be stronger in faith so that they can feel the Spirit always and see God work wonderful miracles. They get so caught up in feeling good with Jesus that it appears not to matter what happens to the environment because of our lifestyles or that sixty children die from poverty during the two minutes we impatiently sat in the Tim Horton's drive thru for a coffee that wasn't the product of fair trade. I shouldn't say that it doesn't matter. It's just too big a problem for us to think about and it seems there's nothing we can really do about it. So, we just go on with our way of life knowing that this evil world is coming to an end and I and my Christian friends are going to heaven if we just keep trusting Jesus.

The fact that this world will come to an end and that there will be resurrection and new creation does not get us off the hook for how we live our lives now and that our lifestyles have consequences. It is the way that we live our lives that create the conditions of poverty in this world and which destroy the environment. We get so caught up in trying to trust God with every little detail of our lives that we don't see beyond God-and-me to the larger problems evil and our participation in it causes in God's good creation.

Sometimes people do catch a glimpse of the bigger picture and go to the other extreme of believing activism and progress will make things better. These folks put a lot of hope into the hands of politicians thinking that if you get the right people in the right form of government the world's problems will disappear by means of progress. In Jesus day it was the Sadducees who held this position or something similar to it. Sadduceeism was the branch of Israelite faith that most of the wealthy and the temple priests held to. Because of their wealth and position they had it pretty good and probably believed that they were doing things just the way God wanted them to. All they had to do was support the temple and the priests and God would continue to bless them and those who had it bad were bad off because they deserved it. Political power, having the right people in the right form of government will not heal humanity's ills. Activism in the form of

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protesting and even of revolution will not heal things. Activism can not change the fact that in each one of us there is good and EVIL.

I've presented you with two extremes. The first is that of this world is coming to an end why bother to make anything better. The second is that activism and progress will bring in the Kingdom of God without God having to do anything but rely on our obedience. Neither one of these extremes is the way we who live with the hope of resurrection are to live now in the present. God's way is more like the word that God gave to Haggai to give to Joshua and Zerubbabel; “Work, for I am with you.” This word came to the small yet faithful remnant who returned to Judah at the end of the Babylonian exile. When they got back they decided to build their own houses, lavishly I might add, to the neglect of the temple and as a result they did not find fulfillment for never having enough. God eventually had to send drought to get their attention. God told them to build the temple and even though it might not be what it was in its former days, in that place, in that temple he would grant peace. The Hebrew word for peace is Shalom and it is more than simply the absence of enmity. It means contentment, friendship, prosperity, and mental and emotional soundness.

We too are to involve ourselves in the work of building the temple. Paul in 1 Corinthians rhetorically asks them; “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you (3:16)?” We are the temple; God's Spirit dwells in us and is evident in our fellowship. One thing to know about the temple in the Bible, it was not simply a place where people came to sing hymns and hear a sermon. It was the place where human sin was dealt with and forgiven. It was the place where God and humanity were reconciled. It was the place where there was Shalom. Therefore, as those who are now made alive in Christ, who have the hope of resurrection, as the Holy Spirit is in us, our first order of work is to be the temple; the place where God and humanity are reconciled, where human sin is dealt with and forgiven, where there is Shalom. Our first order of work is to let the gift of the peace of Christ become a reality in our midst. We do this by confronting sin; first the sin in our own lives by prayer and avoiding it. Then, we deal with the sin our midst by holding one another accountable to the teachings of Scripture. In both cases, healing and reconciliation is the goal. If there is evil in our midst, it must be confronted and named for what it is and forgiveness offered. If the offender does not own up and accept the forgiveness, they must be cast out. Our second order of work is to bring reconciliation to the world; first, by announcing God's forgiveness, then by working as mediators seeking reconciliation in the brokenness of human community around us and in the world. We are those who name sin and evil for what it is and then strive to heal the brokenness bringing forth reconciliation. Friends, let us not neglect the temple in which we by God's grace freely live. Amen.