

VAIN TOIL

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"You have sown much, and bring in little; you eat, but do not have enough; you drink, but you are not filled with drink; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes." Haggai 1:6

A large emigration had taken place from the land of captivity to Jerusalem. The great purpose which the returning exiles had in view was the rebuilding of the Temple as the center-point of the restored nation. With true heroism and much noble and unselfish enthusiasm they began the work, postponing to it all considerations of personal convenience. But the usual fate of all great national enthusiasms attended this. Political difficulties, hard practical realities came in the way and the task was suspended for a time. A handful remained true to the original ideas; the rest fell away. Personal comfort, love of ease, the claims of domestic life, the greed of gain, all the ignoble motives which, like gravitation and friction, check such movements after the first impulse is exhausted, came into play. Like every great cause this one was launched amidst high hopes and honest zeal; but by degrees the hopes faded and became nothing better than 'godly imaginations.' The exiles took to building their own ceiled houses, and let the House of God lie waste. They began to think more of settling on the land than of building the Temple. No doubt they said all the things with which men are wont to hide their selfishness under the mask of duty: 'Men must live; we must take care of ourselves; it is mad enthusiasm to build a temple when we have not homes; we mean to build it some time, but we are practical men and must provide for our wants first.'

This wisdom of theirs turned out folly, as it generally does. There came, as we learn from this prophet, a season of distress in which the harvest, for which they had sacrificed their duties and their calling, failed. And in spite of their prudent diligence, or rather just because of their misplaced and selfish attention to their worldly well-being, they were poor and hungry. 'The heaven over them was stayed from dew, and the earth from her fruit.' Haggai was sent by God to interpret the calamity and to urge [them on] to the fulfillment of their earlier purposes.

His words apply to a supernatural condition of things with which he is dealing, but they contain truths illustrated by it and true forever. For us all, as truly as for those Jews, the first thing, the primary all-embracing duty, is to serve God, to obey, love, and live with Him. The same selfish and worldly excuses have force with us: 'We have business to look after; men must live; we have no time to think about religion; I have built a new mill that occupies my thoughts; I have found a new plaything, and I must try it; I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So God and His claims, Christ and His love, are hustled into a corner to be attended to when opportunity serves, but to be neglected in the meantime. And the same result follows, not by miracle, but by natural necessity. Haggai puts these results in our text with bitter, indignant amplification. His words are all the working out of one idea--the unprofitableness, on the whole and in the long-run, of a godless life. He illustrates this in the clauses of our text in various forms, and my purpose now is simply to apply each of these to the realities of a godless life.

1. It is a life of fruitless toil.

The Prophet pictures the sowing, the abundant seed thrown broadcast, the long waiting, and then, finally, a wretched harvest--a few prematurely yellow ears and short stalks. I remember a friend telling me that when he was a boy he went out reaping with his father in one of our years of great drought, and after a day's work threshed out all that he had cut and carried it home with him in his handkerchief. That is what Haggai saw realized in fact, because the sowing had been without God. It is what we may see in others and feel in ourselves. It is the very law and curse of godless toil with its unproductive harvest. The builders set out to build a tower whose top shall reach to heaven, and they never get higher than a story or two.

There is nothing more tragic than the contrast between what a man actually accomplishes in his life and what he planned when he began it. Many and many of our lives are like the half-built houses in Pompeii, where the stones are lying that had been all squared and polished and have never been lifted to their place in the unfinished walls. Much of the seed never comes up at all; and what we gather is always less than what we expected. The prize gleams before us; when we get it, is it as good as it looked when it hung tempting at the unreachd goal? A fox-brush is scarcely sufficient payment for riding over half a county. Ah! but you say, there is the enthusiasm and stir of the pursuit. Well, yes; it is something if it is *training* you for something, and if you can say that faculties worth the cultivating are developed in that way. And whether that is so depends on what you think a man is made for, and on whether these are faculties which will last and find their scope as long as you last. Consider what you are, what you seek, and then say whether the most fruitful harvest from which God and His love are left out is not little.

This fruitlessness of toil is inevitable unless it springs from a motive which in itself is sufficient, pursues a purpose which will surely be accomplished, and is done in hope of the world where 'our works do follow us.' If we are allied to Christ, then whether our work be great or small, apparently successful or frustrated, it will be all right. Though we do not see our fruit, we know that He will bless the springing thereof, and that no least deed done for Him but shall in the harvest-day be found waving a nodding head of multiplied results. 'God gives it a body as it has pleased Him;' and 'he who goes forth weeping shall doubtless return, bringing his sheaves with him.' 'Your labor is not in vain in the Lord.'

2. A godless life is one of unsatisfied hunger and thirst.

The poor results of the exiles' toil did not avail to stay gnawing hunger nor slake burning thirst, and the same result applies only too sadly to lives lived apart from God. There are a multitude of desires proper to the human soul besides those which belong to the bodily frame, and these have their proper objects. Is it true that the objects are sufficient to satisfy the desires? Does any one of the things for which we toil feed us full when we have it? Do we not always want just a little more? And is not that want accompanied with a real and sharp sense of hunger? Is it not true the appetite grows with what it feeds on? And even if a man schools himself to something like content, it comes not because the desire is satisfied, but because it is somehow bridled. Cerberus often breaks his chain, in spite of honeyed cakes that have been tossed into the wide mouths of his tripled heads. What do wealth and ambition do for their votaries? And even he who thirsts for nobler occupations and lives for higher aims is often obliged to admit, in weariness, that 'this also is vanity.'

But even when the desire is satisfied, the man desiring is not. To feed their bodies men starve their souls. How many longings are crushed or neglected by him who pushes eagerly after any one longing! We have either to race from one course to another, splitting life into intolerable distractions, or we have to circumscribe and limit ourselves in order to devote all our power to securing one; and if we secure it, then a hundred others will bark like a kennel of hounds.

And if you say, 'I know nothing about all this; I have my aims, and on the whole I secure a tolerable satisfaction for them,' do you not know a nameless unrest? If you do not, then you are so much the poorer and the lower, and you have murdered part of yourself. Some one single tyrannous desire sits solitary in your heart. He has slain all his brethren that he may rule, as sultans used to in Constantinople. One big fish in the aquarium has eaten up all the others.

God only satisfies the soul. It is only the 'bread which came down from Heaven,' of which if we eat our souls shall live and be filled as with marrow and fatness. That One is all-sufficient

in His Oneness. Possessing Him we know no satiety; possessing Him we do not need to maim any part of our nature; possessing Him we shall not covet divers [various] multifarious objects. The loftiest powers of the soul find in Him their adequate, inexhaustible, eternal object. The lowest desires may, like the beasts of the forest, seek their meat from God. If we take Him for our own and live on Him by faith, our blessed experience will be, 'I am full. I have all and abound.'

3. The godless life is one of futile defenses.

'Ye clothe you, but there is none warm.' The clothing was to guard against the nipping air that blew shrewdly on their hills, and it failed to keep them from the weather. We may be indulging in fancy in this application of our text, but still raiment is as needful as food, and its failure to answer its purpose points to a real sorrow and insufficiency of a life lived without God. In it there is no real defense against the manifold evils which storm upon all of us. When the bitter, biting weather comes, what have you to shelter you from the cold blast? Some rags of stoical resignation or proverbial commonplaces?--'What is done cannot be helped'; 'What cannot be cured must be endured'; 'It is a long lane that has no turning,' and the like. But what are these? You may have other occupations to interest you, but these will not heal, though they may divert your attention from your gaping wounds. You have friends and the like, but though you have all these and much beside, these will not avail. 'The covering is shorter than that a man can wrap himself in it.' Naked and shivering, exposed to the pelting and the pitiless storm, with rags soaked through and chilled to the bone, what is there but death before the man in the wild weather on some trackless moor?

And what is there for us if we have to bear the storms and cold of life without God? No doubt most of us struggle through somehow. Time heals much; work does a great deal; to live is so much that no living being can be wholly miserable. Other cares and other occupations blossom and grow, and the brown mounds get covered with sweet springing grass. But how many lie down and die? How many for the rest of their lives go crushed and broken-spirited? How many carry about with them, deep in their hearts, a sleepless sorrow? How many have to bear passionate paroxysms of agony and bursts of angry grief, all of which might have been softened and soothed and made to gleam with the mellow light of hope as from a hidden sun, if only in stead of defiantly and weakly confronting the world alone they had found in the man Christ the refuge from the storm and the covert from the tempest. How can a man face all the awful possibilities and the solemn certainties of life without God and not go mad? It is impossible to work without Him; it is impossible to rejoice without Him. But more impossible still, if that could be, is it to endure without Him. It is in union with Jesus Christ, and with Him alone, that we shall receive 'the pure linen, clean and white,' which is a surer defense than the warrior's mail, and 'being clothed we shall not be found naked.'

4. A godless life is one of fleeting riches.

In Haggai's strong metaphor, the poor day-laborer earns his small wage and puts it into a ragged bag, or as we should say, a pocket with a hole in it. And when he comes to look for it, it is gone, and all his toil is for nothing. What a picture this is of the very experience that befalls all men who work for less wages than God's 'Well done.' Take an instance or two. Here is a man who works hard for a long time and puts his money into some bank, and one morning he gets a letter to tell him the bank's doors are closed and his savings gone--a bag with holes. Here is a man who climbs by slow degrees to the head of his profession and lives in popular admiration, and some day he sees a younger competitor shooting ahead of him, and all is lost--a bag with holes. Here is a man who has by some great discovery established his fame or his fortune, and a new man, standing on his shoulders, makes a greater [discovery], and his fame dwarfs and his trade runs into other channels--a bag with holes. Here is a man who, having amassed his riches and kept them without loss all his life, is dying. They cannot go with him. That would not matter; but unfortunately he has to live yonder, and

he will have 'nothing of all his labor that he can carry away in his hands'--a bag with holes.

Such loss and final separation befall us all. But he who loves God loses none of his real treasure when he parts from earthly treasures. Fortune may turn her wheel as she pleases, [but] his wealth cannot be taken from him. His riches are laid up in a sure storehouse, 'where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt.' We each live forever. Should we not have for our object in life that which is eternal as ourselves? Why should we fix our hopes on that which is not abiding--on things that can perish, on things that we must lose? Let us not run this awful risk. Do not impoverish or darken life here. Do not condemn yourselves to unfruitful toil, to unsatisfied desires, to unguarded calamities, to unstable possessions. But come, as sinful men ought to come, to Jesus Christ for pardon and for life. Then, in due season, you will reap if you faint not; and the harvest will not be little, but 'some sixty-fold and some a hundred-fold.' Then you will 'hunger no more, neither thirst any more,' but 'He that hath mercy on you will lead you to living fountains of water.' Then you will not have to draw your poor rags round you for warmth, but shall be clothed with the robe of righteousness and the garment of praise. Then you will never need to fear the loss of your riches, but [will] bear with you while you live your treasures beyond the reach of change, and will find them multiplied a thousand-fold when you die and go to God, your portion and your joy forever.