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Haggai 2:10-19: *Holy Hands*

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The Word of the Lord from the book of Haggai:

¹⁰ On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Haggai: ¹¹ “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘Ask the priests what the law says: ¹² If someone carries consecrated meat in the fold of their garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, olive oil or other food, does it become consecrated?’”

The priests answered, “No.”

¹³ Then Haggai said, “If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?”

“Yes,” the priests replied, “it becomes defiled.”

¹⁴ Then Haggai said, “‘So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,’ declares the Lord. ‘Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.

¹⁵ “‘Now give careful thought to this from this day on—consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the Lord’s temple.¹⁶ When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty. ¹⁷ I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord. ¹⁸ ‘From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the Lord’s temple was laid. Give careful thought: ¹⁹ Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit.

“‘From this day on I will bless you.’”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

In 2014, in a small village in Guinea, in West Africa, a 2 year old boy came into contact with a bat contaminated with the Ebola virus.

Soon after he contracted the virus the boy died.

The virus then spread to his 3 year old sister, his mother, and his grandmother...

Within a week, sadly all three of these also died.

Preparing the grandmother's body for the funeral...

2 people also contracted the virus.

They unknowingly carried the virus back to their villages.

Eventually the virus crossed the border into Liberia...

Where it reached the capital city.

It spread to Sierra Leone and its capital city of Freetown.

With the virus making it to major population centers it quickly spread.

After 2 ½ years the Ebola outbreak killed over 11,000 people in West Africa.

Ebola is a highly contagious virus that spreads through contact with bodily fluids...

It can enter the body through the eyes, nose, or mouth.

During the incubation period of the virus no symptoms appear...

So a person can be infected and still think everything is fine.

They then travel to the market to buy some food and come into contact with tens of people...

Maybe a hundred people.

A couple days later they start to experience soreness, fever, bleeding, and a loss of bodily fluids.

And very quickly they die.

If the body is not handled properly it too can spread the virus.

No wonder there were nearly 30,000 reported cases.

Everything they touched—or whatever touched them—had the potential to spread the virus.

Why do I tell you this?

It helps us understand a little bit of what's going on in our passage.

There wasn't an Ebola outbreak in Judah...

But we read in v. 14 that "Whatever the people do and whatever they offer is defiled."

Something contagious is spreading around the Israelites...

It's not a pathogen or a physical illness...

Rather, it's a status.

In Israel, back in ancient times, almost everything they did affected the status of their purity.

We can think about it being on a spectrum:

On one far end of the spectrum is Holy.

God is holy.

He is the supreme manifestation of holiness. (Alexander, 243)

He is the source of all that's holy...

If something is holy, it's because God made it holy.

God radiates holiness to all that's close to him.

To be holy is to be set apart.

All that are made holy by God are expected to stay holy...

They're not supposed to do anything that would compromise this holy status.

On the other end of the spectrum is being unclean or defiled...

It's the opposite of being holy.

Some of the things that make people unclean are natural...

Like skin diseases and bodily discharges.

But other things are actually under human control...

Like the things you touch (dead bodies);

And the things you do...

Like going against God's law.

The Israelites were on a spectrum...

They were forever in tension between the holy and the impure...

And in v. 11 the priests are asked to make a judgment on the law:

“If someone carries holy meat in the fold of their garment, and that fold touches some bread, stew, wine, or oil, does it too become holy?”

Haggai is asking:

“Is holiness contagious?”

“Can an object become holy by touching an item that has itself been made holy?”

A simple, straightforward answer is given: “No.”

Holiness is not contagious.

Anytime someone other than a priest touches a holy object in the temple, they die.

The holy can only be touched by that which has been made holy.

Holiness is not passed on from person to person...

That's not the way it worked.

Then Haggai asks:

“What about the defiled/unclean? Is that contagious?”

And the priest responds, “Well yes. As a matter of fact defilement is contagious.”

So Haggai says, “That's what's happening with these people.”

“Whatever they do—”

“The work of their hands...”

“Whatever they offer (sacrifice)—”

“Is defiled.”

Everything they touch becomes defiled.

What they're doing isn't bad in itself:

They're trying to grow crops so they can eat and offer sacrifices...

Raising livestock so they can eat and offer sacrifices...

They're trying to do what's right...

But try as they may, it's not working.

There isn't enough food in the storehouses...

The crops aren't producing enough fruit...

There's not enough wine to go around...

Instead, all they're doing is spreading defilement.

They're trying to make good things with their hands...

But whatever they do becomes defiled.

Working harder doesn't help...

It just produces more of the same defilement.

In a sense, I'm sure we can all relate.

Not too many of us set out to sin in life.

We don't wake up and say, "I think I'll be a jerk in traffic today."

Or, "I think I'll snap at my spouse today over something insignificant."

We don't wake up and say, "Today, I want to hurt someone."

Like the Israelites, I'm sure most of us want to do well.

We *want* to be kind to others;

We *want* to make good decisions;

We *want* to honor the Lord with what we do.

But what usually happens?

We fail.

It's inevitable that we will sin during the day...

In what we do or say, or in what we fail to do or say.

And instead of confessing our sin, and giving ourselves over to God's grace...

Most of us try to manage our sin.

We work harder at fixing our mistakes...

And in the process we end up creating a bigger mess than before.

So we get caught up in cycles of sinning and trying to fix sin...

We try hard to resolve our own problems.

But like the Israelites all we do is spread defilement...

In our lives and in the lives of those around us.

There are days when no matter what we do...

All we seem to do is spread brokenness.

No matter what we touch...

Not matter what we're involved with...

It seems to come out broken or impure...

The Israelites knew that what they were doing wasn't working...

Their crops and livestock were failing—

No matter how hard they tried—

But they didn't know how to change things...

They didn't know how to stop being contagious...

How to stop spreading defilement.

See what they were doing was offering sacrifices on a defiled altar.

The temple was defiled and destroyed by the Babylonians when they were sent into exile...

Non-Jews entered the temple, which desecrated its holiness.

The temple and the altar went from holy all the way over to defiled.

The people come back home to the temple...

They start to rebuild...

They start offering sacrifices there...

But all of this is before the temple is reconsecrated...

Before God made the temple and altar holy again.

Everything they offered in sacrifice to God was defiled.

The place where they offered it was no longer holy.

They were spreading defilement...

Impurity was contagious.

“Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.”

But *today* is different.

“Now,” says the Lord, “give careful thought from *this day* on.”

“From this day on I will bless you.”

What's so significant about *this day*?

This is the day when one stone was laid on another (2:15).

When the foundation stone was set in place (2:18).

On *this day*, the temple is reconsecrated...

It was rededicated and recommitted to the Lord.

What had been destroyed and made unclean was now made holy again.

Because the Lord came to his people—

Because the temple was readied for his presence—
 The spreading of defilement and impurity could end.
 The people thought they were doing well bringing their sacrifices to the temple...

But apart from the Lord, nothing is clean...

Apart from the Lord, nothing is holy.

The people could labor and toil all day...
 Planting seed and protecting their livestock...
 But their work was futile and defiled apart from the Lord.
 All they did was spread impurity.

As people cleansed from sin—

Purified by the blood of Christ—

We know a little bit about being holy.

Time and again the New Testament refers to God's people as "saints."

"To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, *saints* by calling..." (1 Cor 1:2)

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. To the *saints* who are in Ephesus..." (Eph 1:1)

"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the *saints* in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi..." (Phil 1:1)

All that this word "saints" means is God's holy people.

The people whom God has set apart.

We are told that Jesus Christ makes people holy (Hebrews 2:11).

Just like the Israelites, we too live on the spectrum...

On one end is holiness and on the other end is defiled.

But *our* status is no longer one in tension.

On *this* day...

The day that Christ offered up his body on the cross...

Pouring out his precious blood for the cleansing of sins.

The day that Christ was raised from the dead...

On *this* day our status changed.

We are no longer people tainted by impurities.

We are no longer dirty with the stain of sin.

We are no longer contaminated, contagious, and spreading defilement.

Our identity is now “God’s holy people.”

God’s saints.

Look around at your brothers and sisters...

In Christ you are all saints.

Cleansed by the precious blood of Christ.

You are holy and set apart.

People may tell you that you are no good.

People may tell you that you are sick and spread defilement...

That whatever you touch becomes unclean...

You may believe them and tell yourself that you are dirty...

That you are not worthy of life or anything good.

But these are lies.

Because in Christ, you are clean.

In Christ, you are holy—you are way down on this end of the spectrum.

Set apart and loved by God.

In Christ, you are one of the saints.

The Spirit of God lives in you, making you holy.

And so now look at your hands...

Hold them up in front of you.

These are holy hands...

Holy hands—a part of a holy body.

No longer are these hands contagious...spreading brokenness and ruin wherever we go.

These hands are holy—capable of being used by the living God for his purposes.

Rebecca Johnson was a 28-year old Sierra Leonean nurse during the time of the Ebola outbreak.

She was caring for patients with Ebola when she contracted the virus herself.

Even with all of the PPE, training, and precautions the highly contagious virus made it from a patient into her system.

She was paralyzed with vomiting for days;

There was a time when the doctors needed to resuscitate her;

The virus even caused a temporary blindness in her.

After 4 weeks of struggle and treatment Rebecca pulled through...

She was given a certificate of health and was allowed to leave.

While there was much joy for her in staying alive...

Not everyone was warm towards her.

There is a stigma around people who survive the virus.

Rebecca says, "In my community, I am stigmatized and people talk about me. They say 'there she is, she's the one with Ebola.' I sometimes still sit in quiet places and cry."

Instead of fleeing from the stigma...

Instead of running in fear from the virus...

Rebecca went back to work treating Ebola infected patients...

Offering them care and support as a nurse and survivor...

No longer as someone spreading the virus...

But as someone cleansed, using her holy hands to bring healing.

(story from WHO <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/events/2015/eb136/speech-rebecca-johnson/en/>)

The Lord has made us clean.

In Christ, we are holy.

No longer does the work of our hands spread disease.

No longer does it spread brokenness.

We have these holy bodies with holy hands and we're sent out into a broken world.

We're sent out into a world ravaged by sin...

To bring peace.

The Spirit of God is working in us to point people back to the source of all holiness...

To the source of all life.

To the only one who makes holy.

People of God, consider this day what the Lord has done.