

Clean and Unclean: A Guide to Haggai 2:10-19

Making Sense of the Hardest Passage in the Book

The third message in Haggai can stop a reader cold. In the middle of a book about building a temple, the prophet asks the priests two odd questions about meat, bread, and dead bodies. Then he tells the people that everything they touch is unclean, and a few sentences later he promises to bless them. This guide walks through Haggai 2:10-19 step by step so the passage makes sense.

When This Happened

The message is dated to the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of King Darius (Haggai 2:10). On our calendar that is the middle of December, 520 BC. The people had been back at work on the temple for about three months. The fall planting was done, the seed was in the ground, and nothing had come up yet.

Two Questions for the Priests

God tells Haggai to ask the priests for a ruling on the law. Part of a priest's job was to teach the people the difference between what was holy, clean, and unclean (Leviticus 10:10-11).

First question (verse 12). Suppose a man is carrying holy meat, meat set apart from a sacrifice, in the fold of his robe. The fold of his robe brushes against bread, or stew, or wine, or oil. Does that food become holy? The priests answer, “No.”

Second question (verse 13). Suppose a person who is unclean because he has touched a dead body touches any of those same foods. Does the food become unclean? The priests answer, “It shall be unclean.”

Both answers fit the Law of Moses. The law guarded what came into direct contact with a holy sacrifice (Leviticus 6:27), but nothing in it taught that holiness could be passed along from a garment to ordinary food. Uncleanness from a dead body was different. It spread to whatever the person touched (Numbers 19:22).

What “Clean” and “Unclean” Mean

These words are not about dirt or hygiene. In the Old Testament, to be unclean meant to be unfit, for a time, to come near God in worship. It was not the same thing as sin. A person became unclean through ordinary life: certain illnesses, childbirth, or burying a family member. The system was a daily picture lesson. God is holy, and coming near Him is not something to take lightly.

The Point: Holiness Does Not Rub Off

	What the priests said	What it means
Holiness	It does not spread by touch.	Being near holy things does not make a person holy.
Uncleanness	It does spread by touch.	A wrong heart spoils whatever it handles.

Then Haggai delivers God's verdict: "So is this people, and so is this nation before Me... and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean" (Haggai 2:14).

For sixteen years the people had lived in the holy city. They had an altar and offered sacrifices on it (Ezra 3:2-3). They may have assumed that all of that made them right with God. It did not. Living near holy things had not made them holy. Meanwhile their neglect of what God had asked had spread into everything: their work, their harvests, even their worship.

Consider the Days Behind You

Next God asks them to look back. "Consider" is the same word as in chapter 1. Before one stone was laid on another in the temple, what was life like (verses 15-17)?

- A man came to a heap of grain expecting twenty measures and found ten.
- He came to the wine vat expecting fifty and drew out twenty.
- Blight, mildew, and hail struck the work of their hands.

These were the very things God had warned would follow if His people turned from Him (Deuteronomy 28:22, 38-40). The saddest line is the last one: "yet you did not turn to Me" (Haggai 2:17). The hard years were meant to get their attention.

"From This Day I Will Bless You"

Then everything turns. God asks, "Is the seed still in the barn?" (verse 19). The answer is no. It is December. The seed is in the ground. The vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have not produced anything yet. There is nothing to see.

And God says, "But from this day I will bless you."

Notice the timing. The promise does not come at harvest, when the proof is in the barn. It comes in winter, on the day they are obeying, before a single sprout has appeared. God marks the date on the calendar and says, in effect, "Watch what happens from here."

How This Points to Jesus

Haggai's lesson leaves a hard question. If holiness cannot rub off on us, and our uncleanness spoils what we touch, how can anyone be made clean?

The Gospels answer with a scene that turns Haggai's rule around. A man with leprosy, unclean by every standard of the law, comes to Jesus. Jesus reaches out and touches him. By the rule the priests gave Haggai, Jesus should have become unclean. Instead the man is made clean (Mark 1:40-42). In Jesus, holiness is stronger than uncleanness. What we could never get by standing near holy things, He gives to those who come to Him (1 John 1:7, 9).

Questions to Think About

1. Where might I be counting on being near holy things, such as church, a Christian family, or good habits, in place of a heart that is right with God?
2. Is there an area of disobedience in my life that is quietly affecting everything else?
3. Looking back, has God been trying to get my attention through a hard season?
4. What would it look like to take God at His word “from this day,” before I can see any results?

All Scripture references follow the New King James Version (NKJV) unless noted otherwise.