

The Book of Haggai

*Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.” Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?
(Haggai 1:2-4 ESV)*

*And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God,
(Haggai 1:14 ESV)*

The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.” (Haggai 2:9 ESV)

The Book of Haggai: How to Keep First Things First

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Haggai

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Haggai.

This morning we are going to be looking at a short but very important book of the Bible. It doesn't get much airtime in our churches but as we will see this morning, it is of crucial importance and speaks *specifically* to the Church at this moment in history.

Haggai spoke to the people of God shortly after Cyrus King of Persia's declaration that exiled Israel could go home:

² “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:2-3 ESV)

Skip ahead 20 years or so and you enter the time Haggai spoke into. The Israelites had made their way home in several different waves. Excitement and hope would have filled them as they got to go home. For some, this was their **FIRST** time stepping foot into the land of Israel. Can you imagine that?

And yet, when they got home they realized they weren't really free. They were still living under the rule of the Persians. They were poor, faced with uncertain times and enemies close by. Simply put, it wasn't what the Israelites were envisioning when they found out they could go home. And I don't want to give away too much here, but the Israelites had already begun to get into some bad, bad habits. Putting their own little kingdoms ahead of God's.

This is the moment that Haggai spoke into: a complicated and crucial time for the people of God. A transition period that would be of UTMOST IMPORTANCE.

Would these bad habits they had taken up be put aside in favour of the right ones? Would the hope they had be squashed or reignited? Would God reassure them that He is still mighty to save?

With these things in mind, hear now from the Word of the Lord:

¹In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: ²“Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.” ³Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, ⁴“Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? (Haggai 1:1-4 ESV)

As I touched on, only 20 years into their return home and ALREADY God had sent a prophet to rebuke them. Why? Because they were already putting secondary things *first*. They were rebuilding their homes and leaving off building the temple for a later day. From what the Israelites knew about God and the recent judgment they had experienced, you would think they knew better wouldn't you? They had just come out of a time of judgement for abandoning God for lesser things and here they were playing with FIRE AGAIN.

Now imagine being the prophet Haggai. He had the job of rebuking his friends and family NOT because they were worshipping idols, but because they were REBUILDING THEIR HOMES. Couldn't you picture the people saying to him, 'Haggai, you got to be kidding? All we are doing is providing for our families?!?!' But the truth is, there was way more going on than simply providing for their families. They were neglecting the worship of their God which should have been their TOP PRIORITY. They were already on a dangerous path and needed to be set straight and Haggai had the tough job of bringing this word. They needed to set their hearts on rebuilding the Temple.

The Significance of the Temple

Now a good and fair question would be, *why the focus on the Temple? Why did God think it was so important that His people built His Temple before their homes?*

The answer is that the Temple was the CENTER of Israelite worship. God *dwelt* in the Temple. What set the Israelites apart from the nations? They were the people who lived with Yahweh! And the temple was the place where God condescended down to meet with His people.

It was meant to be the centre of their lives because it was where God's presence was. The ark of the covenant, the place of sacrifice, the Holy of Holies, they were in the Temple! The temple is where the people of God went to MEET GOD AND BE MADE RIGHT WITH HIM. Do you remember how King David LONGED to return to corporate worship?

¹ O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ² So I have looked upon you in the **sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.** (Psalm 63:1-2 ESV)

That was the way the people of God were meant to long for being in the Temple. It wasn't supposed to be something they could take or leave. It WAS supposed to be *everything* to them. Their lack of action exposed their hearts. God *wasn't* their top priority.

How to Keep First Things First

But praise God the book of Haggai is not only about the people of God going down the wrong path. It is also about showing how God's people learned to put *first things first, to prioritize what MATTERED MOST*. It is a blueprint for the people of God to build God's Kingdom the right way: GODS WAY.

We are not focused on a PHYSICAL TEMPLE like in Haggai's day, but we are focused on a SPIRITUAL KINGDOM. And doesn't this same problem plague us today? How often do we get our priorities mixed up and put what SHOULD be first *second*? How many times do we play with fire thinking we won't get burned? Friends, this is a needed word for the people of God ESPECIALLY at this moment in history. When we, just like the Israelites, have to decide whether our own glory of God's will be first.

So how does Haggai teach us to *keep first things first*? The first step is to:

1. Consider Your Ways

Isn't that always the first step in setting things right? To stop and see what you have been doing to get everything so wrong! God says through the prophet Haggai:

Consider your ways.⁶ You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. (Haggai 1:5B-6 ESV)

Stop and consider, has what you have been doing working? God says, 'are you experiencing all that I promised in Isaiah and Jeremiah? I promised blessing and restoration when you returned home!' The answer is that they hadn't been experiencing these things at all.

Now it would be helpful to give a bit more background to the situation Israel was in. When the first wave of exiles returned to Israel, they began to rebuild the temple but stopped at the laying of the foundation because they were met with opposition, go read the book of Ezra to see this in detail. So now about 20 years have passed and no further work has been done on the Temple. Can you picture that? Weeds and overgrowth were probably all around the foundation while the people have been doing lots of work to their own homes and land.

Given their situation, you could say they had as good of an excuse as any to put off Temple building. There is nothing wrong with stating a fact. Hear what one commentator says about their position:

...these were difficult economic times for all. During this period, Darius was pushing through economic "reforms" (i.e., increased taxation), which would have added to their financial troubles. In such a context, there was a general lack of funds for an ambitious project like rebuilding the temple. Just keeping food on the table for one's family would have been hard enough. In addition to these specific factors, there seems also to have been a general discouragement about the future, born of long experience of difficult times.¹

Simply put, these were hard times and not what the people expected them to be. It is ok to say that. Sometimes life is hard and we convince ourselves that God's Kingdom can wait until our own is built up a bit more. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever given yourself a break

¹ Iain M. Duguid & Matthew P. Harmon, *Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi*, (Phillipsburg, P&R Publishing, 2018), (Digital).

from your Christian efforts because life was just too hard? I think we all have felt that in differing degrees. But what is God's reply to that?

He sends a drought! We see this a few verses down:

¹¹ And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors." (Haggai 1:11 ESV)

God gives His people some bad news! He is the One who has brought this bad season. Hear that! God sent the drought! Was God being unreasonable? Was He being too firm? We are tempted to think that aren't we? The truth is that God sees what the end will be when we place our own Kingdom above HIS. It will be ruinous. It will look like the Assyrians and Babylonians taking over their land AGAIN. So God says, STOP BUILDING MANS KINGDOM AND FOCUS ON ME. Get your priorities RIGHT.

Take an inventory, consider your ways. How many of you here need to hear that today? How many of you have let secondary things take the place of better things lately?

Friends, Haggai is here to help us see that God will have none of this. He knows that He MUST be the top priority in our lives or we will suffer. We need to be a people who regularly take an inventory of our ways and priorities. That's the first step in putting the first things first!

Then we learn that after we have considered our ways, we have to:

2. Make Radical Adjustments

Let's look again at Haggai 1 to see this:

¹² Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, **obeyed** the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord. ¹³ Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, "I am with you, declares the Lord." ¹⁴ And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. **And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God,** ¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king. (Haggai 1:12-15 ESV)

The people of God here model true and RADICAL obedience here. They looked at the evidence, they heard the words of God, and they obeyed God beautifully! You have the governor of the country, the high priest, and all of the people acting in unison obedience. It's truly a beautiful shot of God's people acting as they should.

Obedience, Fear, and God's stirring marked this wonderful turn around. All of the sudden, by God's grace, the misplaced priorities were put in their rightful place. The pretty and luxurious houses, the lavish gardens, all of these things were put aside in order to build what TRULY mattered. Secondary things were moved to their rightful place. Do you see that?

Now before we move on, we can't rush and miss the gravity of this moment. You remember the quote I read earlier? These men and women were not living in luxury. They were still under the rule of Persia, they had tried to build the temple earlier and gave up because they met opposition. My point is this, this was a *costly* obedience. In *faith*, these men and women put aside their own Kingdom for God's. It wasn't like they snapped their fingers and had BOTH the Temple AND their rebuilt homes. No, the people of God sacrificed in order to put get their *priorities right*.

Do you see that? In this difficult season we need to grasp the weight of this. Earthly treasures, even necessary ones, can never take the MAIN SPOT in our lives. Jesus said the same thing.

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek **FIRST** the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:31-33 ESV)

God's people had REAL needs. We can ALL empathise with this can't we? But the answer is not to neglect God's Kingdom for our own but to obey in FAITH even when we are up against the wall. To truly believe that He will make good on what He said.

Friends we need to be like the people of God were in Haggai's day! Who responded in IMMEDIATE obedience to God's call to make RADICAL ADJUSTMENTS. COSTLY adjustments. Ones that will seem extreme. Maybe its leaving a job, moving your family. Upping your givings to help with local and global missions. Leaving a relationship that you know is only causing you to sin.

Or maybe there are radical adjustments you need to make that no one else will see. Maybe its getting rid of things that make it easier for you to fall into that addiction time and time again.

Maybe its time to repent of trusting your income more than you trust God. Isn't that something many of us have been tempted to feel these past 9 months? Or maybe its taking evangelism seriously, starting in your home, neighbourhood and workplace.

Some of these will seem extremely RADICAL and often God calls us to take some of these very steps. Radical adjustments will OFTEN be necessary for us to keep *first things first*.

But after the people of God are done considering their ways, and act in obedience, we learn that the people of God need to:

3. Remember Who is With You

Isn't that something we need to be constantly reminded of? God reminds His precious people of this at least twice in this little book. He says:

“I am with you, declares the Lord.” (Haggai 1:13 ESV)

and again:

Yet 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. Work, for **I am with you**, declares the Lord of hosts,⁵ according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. **My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not.** (Haggai 2:4-5 ESV)

The Israelites NEEDED to hear this as they put aside their homes for the Temple. They needed to hear that God would protect and be with them as they rebuilt the Temple. As they put *first things first*.

God will never leave or forsake His people. He didn't when the Israel brought their tools from their homes to the Temple and He won't when YOU put FIRST THINGS FIRST. When you put God's Kingdom ahead of yours. This is an important point to grasp friends. Because God did and *does* call His people to make radical adjustments. He did in Haggai's day didn't He? I am sure there were a lot of parents in Haggai's day who were nervous about this new plan.

So God draws His people's attention ALL THE WAY BACK to the Exodus. He says 'I am the SAME GOD WHO RESCUED YOUR ANCESTORS FROM EGYPT. Just as I destroyed Pharaoh and his 'so-called' gods, so I will make an end of your enemies. I am with you and will *keep* you. FEAR NOT.' Those are comforting words.

The Christian life is not for those who want an ‘easy’ life. And when God calls you to take a drastic and scary step, you need to remember and believe that YOUR God is WITH YOU. When you think that the radical adjustment He asks of you is *too* costly, you need to remember this.

After we have grasped that great promise, we have to be patient and:

4. Play the Long Game

This is such an important point we must remember because most of us are not good at seeing past what is directly before us. We don’t like waiting. We don’t like things that take time. Don’t we begin to reprioritize when things don’t seem to be going the way they should? When our efforts don’t seem to bring any visible fruit?

The people of God were tempted with the same thing after they began the rebuilding of the Temple. They witnessed this amazing transformation in their hearts and they began furiously building the Temple and EXPECTED IMMEDIATE results. But the fact is they were *underwhelmed* with their work. Let’s look at Haggai 2:3:

³ Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? (Haggai 2:3 ESV)

The people had begun the building but sadly, it was nothing like Solomon’s glorious Temple. And the people knew it. God KNEW IT! He tells them this very thing! This is the truth that God WILL build His Kingdom THROUGH His people but it will be in HIS time. Even the most RADICAL adjustments take time to bear visible fruit. But God’s Word is to stay the course and trust Him.

Hear how He encourages His People:

⁶ For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. ⁷ And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. ⁸ The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. ⁹ **The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former**, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts. (Haggai 2:6-9 ESV)

Simply put, God told His people that although they could not see it, He would accomplish ALL of these great promises. They needed to continue the work. He was with them and they didn’t need to fear. He reassures them that He will restore His people to glory again. Better than this, He says the coming glory will be GREATER THAN THE FORMER! The people of Israel would have been in awe at this statement as they remembered the inauguration of Solomon’s Temple:

And when the priests came out of the Holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the Lord. (1 Kings 8:10-11 ESV)

The people of Israel remembered this and then looked at their, for lack of a better phrase, *sad* Temple, and said, ‘*how can this be?*’ God’s answer to this was to be patient and play the long game.

Glory would come. Gods judgement on the surrounding nations would come. Restoration and Peace would come. Israel **WOULD BE REBUILT AND RESTORED**. But it would be in God’s time.

And one thing we **CAN’T** miss here is that these obedient and patient Israelites did *not* see these promises fulfilled. These folks did not leave to see this glorious promise fulfilled. They turned. They obeyed. And yet, it was generations before the blessing would come.

Some of us need to make some changes in our lives today. Priorities need to shift. Idols need to fall. And, there is no promise that those changes will make our immediate lives any easier. In fact, sometimes our obedience costs us **EVERYTHING!**

That’s why we need to play the long game. We need to see the next generation that learns from our example and that puts God first. We need to see great grandchildren that grow up never missing a Sunday and doing devotions around the table every night because 100 years ago, someone listened to God and put first things first. More than that, we need to see an eternity in glory. When we see that, we’ll recognize that these are light and momentary afflictions. We need to play the long game.

Fifthly, in order to keep *first things first* we need to:

5. Prioritize Holiness

Working for a construction rental company has allowed me to see lots of different building projects and it is something when you meet a site super who cares about **EVERY** aspect of the project. Not just the outside, but the inside, and one who is proud of every aspect of the project. But on the flip side, an inexperienced builder will sacrifice quality for looks, or vice versa. Unfortunately, the Israelites were looking more like the latter.

They had done a great work in an obeying God's command to rebuild the Temple but they were not wholeheartedly following the Lord. Their sacrifices and offerings were tainted with a lack of true devotion. So He had Haggai the prophet ask the priests about ritual purity to make a point:

¹⁴ Then Haggai answered and said, "So is it with this people, and with this nation before me, declares the Lord, and so with every work of their hands. And what they offer there is unclean. (Haggai 2:14 ESV)

Joyce Baldwin comments on this passage:

Haggai's audience assumed that their **service** and **sacrificial offerings** were made pure and acceptable to God as a result of '**contact**' with the ordained priesthood and YHWH's holy temple. Here the prophet had to correct wrong thinking and bad theology!²

If we are honest, wouldn't you be inclined to give the Israelites a passing grade on this one? They really were TRYING HARD! But that wasn't good enough. God did not just care about outward obedience, He cared about their HOLINESS. Their sacrifices were not pleasing in His sight because they were not coming from pure and undivided hearts.

That is what God desired of His people. Not only outward obedience but hearts that well up in joy as they obey. But don't we often do the same as the Israelites? We come to Church, we open up the Bible a few times a week, we pray before meals and read our children Bible stories. But we neglect the pursuit of holiness that God made us for? Do we set aside time daily to pray and read God's Word? Do we prioritize Sunday gatherings above our hobbies or our kids hobbies? Do we actively stop and consider if the shows we watch, the people we listen to, and the conversation we have will make us look more like Jesus or not? This little book of Haggai teaches us demonstrably that God yearns for His people to look and act like Him.

Levi spoke about this in last week's sermon, and we need to hear it again, we need to be marked by holiness. And we need to be marked by caring about *each other's holiness*. We can't be a people who skirt this or settle for 'good enough.' We have to be a people who care, pursue, and prioritize *holiness*. Our own, and each others.

² Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Madison, WI: InterVarsity Press, 1978), (Digital).

And what will keep us pursuing this holiness will be to:

6. Watch for the Return of the King

Haggai's last recorded Word from the Lord is given to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, who was of the Kingly line of David. He encourages Him with these words:

“Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth,²² and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms. I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders. And the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his brother.²³ On that day, declares the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, declares the Lord, and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the Lord of hosts. (Haggai 2:21-23 ESV)

Those chariots, horses, and riders are meant to remind God's people of the decisive victory over Egypt in the Exodus. God is saying ‘redemption, a GREAT redemption is coming through My Chosen One.’ Israel's hope in the long awaited Davidic King, the Messiah, would be rewarded!

Do you see that? Although the land was not bearing crops in abundance, the people were poor, they were under the rule of the Persians, they had enemies within the land, NONE of this would stand against God and His people. As John Calvin said:

For whenever impediments and difficulties come in our way, calculated to drive us to despair, when we think of the restoration of the Church, this prophecy ought to come to our minds, which shows that it is in God's power, and that it is his purpose to overturn all the kingdoms of the earth, to break chariots in pieces, to cast down and lay prostrate all riders, rather than to allow them to prevent the restoration of his Church.³

God would not go back on His promise to bring about restoration through His chosen King. THAT is the final Word Haggai gives. The people had reason to hope. God would rebuild them into the people they were meant to be.

But again, like all these little books near the end of your Old Testament, they ALL looked FORWARD to a future day. To a day that none of Haggai's hearers would see. But we as the people of God *have* seen and tasted the first fruits of them.

³ John Calvin, *2 Thessalonians*, *Calvins Commentaries* (Digital).

We have seen Jesus, the true temple of God. The place where sinners are made righteous through Jesus' life, death and resurrection! We have tasted His victory as we have seen Satan and sins power gradually destroyed in us. And yet we still await His return when He will FULLY vanquish every one of His foes. When we see all sin and causes of sin, all wickedness put away FOREVER. We WILL see that day when Jesus returns. We will see what Haggai spoke about:

⁹ **The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former**, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts. (Haggai 2:9 ESV)

Is that what your hope is in? Is it in seeing God glorified and you enjoying Him forever? Or is it in building your own Kingdom? Are we truly putting *first things first*? That's the simple but all important question that we have to ask ourselves today.

And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.