

If Not Now, When?

Haggai

By Iain Wright

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Covenant OPC

9340 W 147th Street

Orland Park, Illinois 60462

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/covenantopc

If you look in your bulletin you will see that every time there is a sermon there is a title given to it. I don't always stress that, but it is there for anyone to see. And later on, by God's grace, it will be on the website and others will be able to download that and, perhaps, if God is pleased, benefit from the preaching of his Word. And the question which I would bring to you this morning is: If not now, when?

In order for us really to grasp what is happening in the book of Haggai we need to know something of its background. I would point you to the beginning of chapter five of the book of Ezra. If you have time, perhaps, quietly you might pick up your Bibles and read through the opening chapters of the book of Ezra which set the scene for us here as we open up the book of Haggai.

The story of the children of Israel at the point in which Haggai is writing is that God has brought a great calamity upon the tribe of Judah. They have been taken off into captivity by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. Perhaps that much is familiar to us. And yet in God's gracious providence you read about Cyrus. He issues a decree to allow some of the people of God to return out of captivity to rebuild the temple. And so a portion of God's people come back in order to rebuild the temple.

As they return there are those who are still back in the land of Judea. This is the southern portion around Jerusalem and further to the south. Those who had remained behind and many others who had come into the empty land after the people of God many of them had been removed to Babylon. When those who returned started about the work of building up the temple, those who had been there all the time come to them and say, "Well, we would like to join with you."

But there was obviously something lacking in their sincerity which led those who had returned to say, "No, we will not have you. This is for God's people." Whatever the reason that prompted them to say, "No, we do not desire to have your assistance," it would prove to be an accurate assessment. The very people who had just been saying that they would like to be part of the work to build up the temple, then, because they are not allowed to, do their very best to stop the work. They write letters to those who are in authority in order to hinder the work and, sadly, they are successful.

A period of 18 years goes by and nothing has happened in the temple. And it is at that point that Haggai comes on the scene.

And so I want you to bear that in mind as the people of God are being challenged. Perhaps we might even say rebuked. They are certainly challenged. Haggai's basic point is: "You have been back since the decree of Cyrus 18 years and yet there is little progress on the building of the temple. What have you been doing with your time?"

It is in that context that the prophet Haggai comes to the people and he is given a word from the Lord. Here it is, right at the very beginning.

"Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people..."¹

And even the way in which God addresses them shows something of his displeasure. It is not my people. It is: "These people."

"These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD."²

If not now, when?

Well, as we examine this portion of God's Word, the opening verses of Haggai chapter one, I want you to see, first of all, their procrastination. Now, boys and girls, that may be a rather large word. It just simply means putting off some things until a later date.

Now there may be some things which they had to put off. There may be some things they were not able to do at a particular date. There are occasions—and I think we all recognize those—certainly all the older members will have recognized occasions when they have procrastinated; when they suddenly know that they really ought to be doing something, but they put it off and they really don't want to do it.

And I don't think you have to be an adult. You don't have to be in full time employment. Perhaps there are essays or assignments for school which you have been putting off. You have been procrastinating. You know that you have to do it, but rather than do it there are other things that are more attractive to you in terms of how you want to spend your time. Spend time with friends. Spend time playing, watching television. Just about anything seems a more attractive the use of your time than doing the tasks which are set before you.

As Haggai addresses the people of God he stops, to analyze what it is that is causing them to procrastinate. Why are they putting off doing what God has called them to do: to rebuild the temple?

These people say, "Today is not the day. Some time maybe next year."

¹ Haggai 1:2.

² Ibid.

As Haggai begins to unfold the purposes of God, he lays bare before them three elements that I want to bring to your attention.

First of all we have the procrastination, particularly in the way in which Haggai addresses the people of God. He questions their priorities. That is the first thing that he brings to their attention.

“Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?”³

It is as though Haggai says, “Today is not the day to build up the house of the Lord? You seem to find the time for the things that you really want to do. When it comes to building your own houses, the house of God lies in ruins, but you have managed to get cedar planks to line out your own houses so that your own houses are comfortable. They are draft free. You are able to do a lot of things.”

What does Haggai bring to the attention? Where are your priorities? What really is important for you? Why? Because your priorities will show you what really is important to you.

Or, to put it another way, we always find time to do the things that we want to do.

The people of God are being challenged here. What truly is the most important thing for you? And what God is saying to them is that their *real* response to God is that today is not the day. This is not the time for rebuilding the house. But while they are saying that about the work of God, they are quite happy to spend that time making sure that their own homes are quite comfortable. The first thing is: What are your priorities?

The second thing that he brings to their attention is their productivity. Look how it is reported here.

“You have sown much, and harvested little.”⁴

We would call it spinning our wheels. It is not a biblical metaphor, but it is an appropriate one. You see, it is not that the people of God are just sitting back being idle. They are, in fact, busying themselves about a number of things. They are sowing a lot and yet they are not reaping very much.

Boys and girls, perhaps you have had experience of that where you have been very busy all day long, but you have nothing to show for it. And certainly if you ask your mother and father they will tell you that they have had days in which they have been busy all day long. But when they look back upon the day, well, they don't know where the hours have gone. “I certainly can't show you anything for all the hours that I have spent today.” It is

³ Haggai 1:4.

⁴ Haggai 1:6.

not that they could say, “I have accomplished this and I have accomplished something else.”

And so, God calling upon the His people to use the time wisely: to be productive. It is not just about being busy and being occupied all day long so that I can say. “I have been busy. I have worked hard.” Yes, but what do you have to show for it? The people of God had little to show for it. They had been busy. They had been sowing, but they had not been reaping. A collective spinning of the wheels for the people of God. A lot of effort, but not much to show for it.

And there is a third element which Haggai brings out speaking under the influence of the Spirit of God.

“You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm.”⁵

What is it that Haggai is bringing to our attention here? It is what is the purpose. You set about all manner of work in order to accomplish something, but the very purposes that you are setting about to accomplish are not being realized. You are eating, but you are still hungry. You are drinking, but you are still thirsty. You are clothing yourself, but you are still cold.

Now what is Haggai doing? He is confronting them with the reality of the situation. Here is where the people of God are. For 18 years they have had an opportunity to be busy about the work of the kingdom and have precious little to show for it. The work is stopped and they have stagnated. They have grown to accept that as the status.

Today is not the day to be about the work of the kingdom. No, we have got other things that we have to do. Our priorities are somewhat different. And it is not just the priorities. It is the productivity. They are not using their time or their resources well and even in their own terms it is not that they are able to say, “We will accomplish an awful lot. It may not be what God wants us to do, but at least we have accomplished what we wanted to do.”

Notice, says Haggai, “You just look at yourselves. You are not even successful by your own terms. You have these things... you are still hungry and you are still thirsty and you are still cold. You have really neither pleased God nor, at the end of the day, have you really pleased yourselves.”

That is the problem, isn't it?

So procrastination has not borne much fruit for the children of Israel. What is the next thing that we see in Haggai chapter one? There is a positive.

What is Haggai doing? He says, “I want you to consider your ways.”

⁵ Ibid.

He does this, first of all, by showing all the negative things and he says, “Consider your ways,”⁶ a second time. And he is encouraged to say, “Well, look, I am showing to you where you are going wrong.”

Now, boys and girls, I want you to see that this is a gracious word from the Lord. It is not to chastise. It is not to beat the children of Israel, but to encourage them. In effect what he is saying is, “Now open your eyes. Consider your ways and look where it has got you.”

It is no kindness to the people of God just to let them continue in the direction that they are going when they are failing. They are not only failing God which is bad enough, but they are failing themselves in so many ways. It is not a kindness to allow them to continue along the track which bears no fruit either for time or for eternity. And so, first of all, Haggai says, “Consider your ways.” Consider how fruitless it is. Consider where your procrastination has got you when you say that this is not the day. It shows your priorities. It shows your productivity. It shows your purpose. But consider your ways again, says Haggai, and do something about it.

First of all he wants to point us to the process of verse seven.

“Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways.”⁷

That is the second time he says it.

“Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house.”⁸

Now we are blessed with a number of builders in our congregation. Here is a word that you will understand much more readily than I do, but it doesn't require you to be a builder. We can see what the Word of God is saying here. It is an obvious thing. If you are going to build a house, then go to the lumberyard and get the basic things in order to be able to build the house. Go to the hills. Chop down the trees. Prepare the wood. Bring it back and start the process.

You are not going to be able to build a house unless you start with the most elemental things. Right, let's go right back to absolute basics. Go to the lumberyard and start picking out your wood and let's get this underway.

That is what Haggai is saying. Consider your ways. Look at what you have been doing wrong and think about how you can be doing it right. Go to the lumberyard. Get your wood.

⁶ Haggai 1:5,7.

⁷ Haggai 1:7.

⁸ Haggai 1:8.

But it is not just about the process that Haggai is concerned. It is also about the principles.

“Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that...”⁹

Now, boys and girls, that simple word there is just making a connection for us and this is what you have to go to do and this is why you have to go and do it.

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD.¹⁰

There it is. Busy yourself about the work. You know, Haggai would not have known these words, but we will use it. “This is not rocket science,” he is saying. He is not saying, “I want you to construct a space vessel so that you can shoot for the stars.” Those are not his words. Just the opposite. Chop down a few trees. Prepare them and bring them back, because God wants to have pleasure in this. Something that you do, God can take pleasure in that.

Boys and girls, I want you just to ponder that and think how remarkable it is that something that I can do or that you can do God can take pleasure in. Isn't it wonderful? Something I can do God can take pleasure in.

Well, even as we think about that we think, “I wonder what has been happening for the last 18 years then when the people of God came back from exile.” God has raised up Cyrus and set in the heart of this king to release the captives and let them return home so they can rebuild the temple? Does this does surprise us. Why? Because God tells us in his Word that in the hand of God are the hearts of kings and princes.¹¹ It is God who is in control of the nations and when God appoints a particular time and says, “Right, Cyrus is my man to do my will.” Cyrus returns at least some of those who are in exile in order to be about the work of the building of the temple. And for 18 years they have hesitated.

Today is not the day. Not now.

If not now, when?

God has moved the heart of the most powerful man on earth at that time and returned his people back to Jerusalem to build up the temple so that he might take delight in it and that his name should be glorified. And the people of God have folded their arms.

These people say, “Not today.”

⁹ Haggai 1:8.

¹⁰ Haggai 1:7-8.

¹¹ Proverbs 21:1.

And yet we are able, by the grace of God, to do something in which he will take pleasure; something from which he will get glory. Why are you not doing it then?

As we see something of the procrastination, and something with the positive that is set before us in Haggai. We see it also, thirdly and finally, the paradox.

Boys and girls, perhaps the word “paradox” may not be in your every day vocabulary, but I make no apology for it. You are here to learn. So you learn a new word, “paradox”. It is something which seems to be a contradiction.

The Christian life is full of paradoxes. It is when we are weakest that God uses us. We are strongest because we are used of God. The weakest Christian can be used the most greatly. That is a paradox.

Ask your parents. Ask your grandparents if they have not experienced that when, as it were, they were at the end of their resources and God graciously stepped in and changed things around. Now that is a paradox here in the words of Haggai. Listen to the words once more.

Verse 10.

Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. 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.¹²

How would we after the flesh respond to such a situation? Here is painted before us this catalog of natural disasters. They used to be referred to as acts of God. Accurately so, if we are taking the Word of God seriously. What sort of response would the world make and, truth be told, what sort of response would we make. “Well, you know, it has been a poor harvest. We don’t have the resources to be able to do it. And, you know, ok, Haggai, you have got a point here. We haven’t done much, but now do you see just how poor the harvest has been?”

Build the temple? Not today. That is why. But here is the paradox. Look at what is happening among the people of God. We consider the history of the children of Israel in the decades or so before God raises up Haggai. It has been almost two decades since God changed the heart of Cyrus and sent His people back, or at least a portion of them to rebuild the temple. So what are we saying in all that? We are saying that God is in control of the kings of the earth. He does what pleases him.¹³

And quite clearly here upon the pages of Scripture it is not just the hearts of kings and princes that are in the hands of God. All the elements are in the hands of God also. It is

¹² Haggai 1:10-11.

¹³ Psalm 115:3.

God who gives the increase. Although you have been so busy, children of Israel, sowing your seeds, you haven't got much of a harvest, have you?

Is it not God who gives the harvest? So here is where the Word of God changes and stands on its head the logic of the world. The logic of the world says, "Well, my harvest hasn't been very good and therefore we can't do much about the building up of the temple."

The child of God looks at these verses and says, "Well, I have to build up the temple in order for the harvest to be good. I have got it the wrong way around. I want to make what I see in this world an excuse for not doing what God has called me to do. What I should be doing is what God tells me to do. It is as a result of doing what God has told me to do that God will send the blessing."

God is in control then, not just of King Cyrus, but of the harvests, the fruit of our labors. You see, there is a lesson that Haggai was pressing upon his hearers. It is not a lack of effort on the part of God's people, but their effort was misdirected and ineffective. You wonder why you haven't got the resources because you have been spinning your wheels and using your energies in an unproductive way. People of God, listen! Set your eyes upon the things of God. Seek that and then the blessings will flow.

And it is not just that the other blessings will flow, the blessings will come from just being busy about the work of the kingdom. But I, even I, you, even you can do something which will be pleasing to God, which will bring him glory.

And we trust God, then, that God knows his own business and the way in which he is accomplishing these things. It is for his pleasure and for his glory. And let me be a part of that.

That is all in the context of Haggai. It would be very tempting for me to make lots of applications as to how you could be about the work of the kingdom. No, we are not building up a temple, but perhaps some of the applications already are not lost on you. What about how you are conducting your life either as you are leading your family if you are a head of a household or how you are about the work of the kingdom in some other way. Well, may the Spirit of the living God be pleased to write upon your heart such lessons as He is pleased to do.

But there is one further application that I do wish to make concerning this as we ponder and lay it up in our hearts.

If not now, when?

I remember hearing a story. I think it was told by Cliff Richard. There are very few people who are old enough to remember Cliff Richard, but a few here may just remember him. Anyway, he was a Christian singer. He told the story in one of his concerts of the three devils. They were just about to graduate from devil high school, whatever that

would be. And the principal teacher brings them out into the office and says to the first one, “What are you going to do to stop people from getting to heaven?”

And the first one thought about it for a moment. He said, “I am going to tell them that Jesus never existed.”

The principal looked at him and shook his head. He said, “Have you learned nothing all the years of being at devil high school? There are a number of people that bear testimony to the fact that Jesus did live. That line of argument might have worked one time, but, you know, I am not sure you are ready to graduate just yet. I think we need to hold you back. You are not going to graduate this year.”

Then the second one comes in and the same question was asked: “What are you going to tell people to stop them from getting to heaven.”

Now the second devil had spoken to his friend. Do devils have friends? I don’t know. In the story they do! So he thinks to himself, “I can’t say what he said.” So the second one says, “Well, I am going to tell them that Jesus did exist, but he was just a good man.”

The principal says, “That is a whole lot better than the first one. But anybody who examines the evidence knows that Jesus has to be who he claims to be; or, he was insane, or he was made. But he can’t be a good man and still claim to be the Son of God. Those things don’t go together. People would see through that very quickly.”

So he brings in the third one. The two obvious possibilities have been used up. You can’t just say that Jesus never existed. It is far too well attested. And you can’t say that he was just a good man because that is just philosophically unsustainable.

“No,” says the third one, “I have a different plan. I am going to tell the sinner that Jesus did exist. I am even going to tell him that he is the Son of God. I will even tell him that by trusting in Jesus and by trusting in Jesus alone he can have eternal life.”

The principal started to get worried by now. What is going to come next?

“But I am also going to tell him that tomorrow will do.”

How many have gone to a lost eternity not because they had never heard of Jesus Christ. Not because they had been failing to pay attention in sermons or in Sunday school or around their father’s table. Not because they didn’t actually in some sense believe it, but because it really wasn’t that important to them?

Tomorrow will do.

And what is it that Paul said? Now is the favorable time. Today is the day of salvation.¹⁴

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 6:2.

If not now, when?