

Get Back to Work

Haggai 1:1-12

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“Every day you exchange a day of your life for something. It’s as if at the start of life each of us were issued a certain number of coins. They’re hidden inside a large machine so that we don’t know how many we were issued or how many we have left. Each day, the machine issues us a new coin. It may be the last coin we get, or we may get many more. All we know is that the average person in America gets between 70 and 80 years’ worth, but some get far less; a few may get more.

You take each day’s coin and exchange it for something: a day at work or school, shopping, church, leisure, or whatever. Once spent, you can never get the coins back to spend them differently. The art of living wisely is largely a matter of spending your coins on the things that really matter in light of eternity and not frivolously wasting them. Living wisely is difficult because often the choice is not between the bad and the good, but between the good and the best.

The Book of Haggai, second shortest in the Old Testament, has a potent message. It tells us to *put first things first* in our lives. It was written to people, like us, who would have told you that God must be first. They believed that; we believe that. But, they had drifted into a way of life where their intellectual belief in the supremacy of God was not reflected in the way they were living. They gave lip service to the priority of God, but in fact they lived with other priorities. God sent this prophet to help His people get their priorities in line with what they knew they should be.” (Steven J. Cole, Pastor of Flagstaff Christian Fellowship)

And so, as they did in Haggai’s time, many of us proclaim the Gospel, defend our faith, and take strong polemic stances on doctrine – yet our lives are picture of functional atheism when it comes to practice.

The story really begins more than 50 years earlier when Nebuchadnezzar’s forces attack the city of Jerusalem and destroy the temple. Nebuchadnezzar takes the temple priests hostage and many of them are executed. Reading from Daniel chapter one:

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. 3 Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, 4 youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. 5 The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. 6 Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. 7 And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego. (Daniel 1:1-8, ESV)

And so, Nebuchadnezzar captured the capital city, he took the temple and the temple elements (this would be a real blow to the Hebrews, because in essence the Chaldean god defeated Yahweh), he took their children, and he took their culture.

Fast forward about 50 years and King Cyrus now sits on the throne. God stirs his heart to send the exiles back to their homeland to build a temple for their God...just as had been prophesied. He issues an edict permitting those Jews who wished to do so to return to their homeland and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus showed his interest in the project by sending back with them the sacred vessels which had been taken from the First Temple and a considerable sum of money with which to buy building materials.

Many Jews returned to the land and shortly thereafter some progress was made on restoring the temple in Jerusalem.

Can you imagine the excitement among the people of Israel? They are returning to Jerusalem and they are given permission and resources to rebuild the temple of God. The temple is the dwelling place of God. It is where the ark of the covenant resides. It is, for Judah, the presence of God. They are going to prepare for the presence of God!

Sixteen years have passed and here we are today.

As we walk around the city today, we continue to hear the sounds of hammer and saw. Construction is at a high point. Oxen teams are pulling the final cap stones to the wall and they being lifted up and settled into place by the stone masons. The streets through the city are all cleared now. Many, many businesses are opening and the market is starting to buzz. Some of the herds and flocks are just coming to market. There is a great sense of expectancy as the first harvest was good, despite the seventy years that the land was not worked. But we do hear many saying that this year's harvest is not as good.

The progress that has been made since they have returned to the land is remarkable for all to see. Under the good leadership of Nehemiah and Zerubbabel, we have seen the people pour their hearts into the work. Many work all day long on the city and then break in the evenings and work on their homes. We have toured around in city where the rubble is cleared and many, many new homes are going up. Outside the city, new villages are springing up as small market centers but mostly as people stake out their familial land and build their homes.

Ezra and the priests have been working to remind them of the Scriptures and have often encouraged them when they struggled and exhorted them when they failed. We are seeing more and more the enthusiasm for rebuilding reaching a real crescendo. The long years in Babylon where the people often grieved their loss have now been turned into joyous strength to rebuild what was destroyed.

We look to the old Temple site where many of the priests have been working. The rubble has been cleared, for the most part. But here, the reconstruction seems to lag. The people have built homes for their families, but the Temple is still in rubble. What ever happened to all that cedar lumber that was sent back with the people to rebuild the temple?

Two new prophets have emerged with a message from God. Zechariah and Haggai have been collaborating with Ezra and Zerubbabel.

Throughout the month of April, will be covering the prophetic message delivered by Haggai.

Haggai 1:1-12

1 In 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.” 3 Then 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 paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? 5 Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: 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.

7 “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. 8 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. 9 You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. 10 Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. 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.”

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.

We see first an exhortation to the people: **GET BACK TO WORK ON THE TEMPLE!**

In verse two, the leaders are challenged first. The political and religious leaders are addressed. Zerubbabel and Joshua are responsible for the attitudes of the people, either by their own example or by a failure to confront those attitudes.

The leaders are confronted with their people’s attitudes. Those heart attitudes are demonstrated in a simple statement. The people say, “It is not the time to build the house of the Lord.”

Haggai then moves to directly address the people. He has confronted the leaders who it appears later were humbled and repentant. Now, the word comes to those who must do the work.

He confronts them indirectly. He shames them.

- How can you possibly live comfortably while the house of the Lord lies in ruins?
- Where are your priorities?
- Are you focused on your own comfort?
- The paneled houses here probably refer, not to basic housing, but to large, expensive and possibly even extravagant excesses.

The people had their reasons for not building. Their enthusiasm had waned, their enemies had attacked, and the economy had suffered. These were more excuses than reasons.

Needless to say, the Lord was unimpressed with their excuses. He attributed their misplaced priorities to 3 things.

In verse 3-4 we see their selfishness. The people were concerned about the wrong houses. In the beginning, the people had thrown up rough houses to shield themselves from the elements, then turned their attention to the temple. But in no time at all, they began focusing on improving their own living conditions.

Haggai asks how it could be that the time was wrong for building the temple, but right for building their private dwellings.

Whose interests were most important to them? Theirs' or God's?

I am grateful we do not have to deal with this same attitude today.

Look at what is happening to them in verses 5 and 6. Their lives have become unproductive. They are investing time, energy, money and effort with little real return and certainly, little real satisfaction.

- How can they continue to be oblivious to what is happening to them?
- They are living unobserved lives.
- They need to carefully look at where they have invested their treasure and how it is being ruined and wasted.

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They are stubborn. God had tried every way possible to wake them up. The difficulties the people experienced were not simply coincidental. Their problems were the result of the Lord's discipline directed against them due to their misplaced priorities.

- God had not left them to their problems. He was causing their problems.
- What little they could gain, they brought to the wrong house. They were set on taking care of themselves and their families, and so God pressed them harder.
- The disasters being currently experienced were due to nothing less than wrong priorities.

I am grateful we do not have to deal with this same attitude today.

Now in verses 7 to 11, God is clear in what needs to be done. Get the resources you need, bring them to the house of the Lord and get the job done. There is where the pleasure of the Lord is. He will be glorified when the work is being done. But they have busied themselves with their concerns and have let the house of God languish.

Could it be about stewardship?

- Approximately 15 years before Haggai's message, the returnees had brought in cedar from Lebanon for the temple. Now God is telling them to go up, cut wood, and bring it down again. So what happened to the wood?
- Could it be that the people used the cedar for their homes.

- Their bad stewardship had delayed the rebuilding of God's house.
- What a sad testimony and demonstration of their faith in God. Our stewardship is a testimony of our faith.

I am grateful we do not have to deal with this same attitude today.

Because their priorities were wrong, God is actively opposing their prosperity. They are experiencing the chastening of God. This chastening was supposed to give them pause that something was wrong. It is amazing that a people just returned from seventy years of exile and chastening can be so insensible to God in their present trouble.

And so, the lack of progress wasn't due to bad timing. It all went back to wrong priorities.

- Their priorities consisted of their homes, their finances, their safety, and their families.
- They would get around to the work of God after those priorities had first been settled.
- But because their priorities were out of order, they could never get their life in order.
- All of their hard work was reduced to nothing, so did they get their priorities right? No, they worked harder. And it turned into a vicious cycle.

The people responded immediately and decisively to Haggai's message.

- They recognized that this was God's man, sent to open their eyes
- And they responded by repenting of their sin and restructuring their priorities

Reflect and Respond

- How are we selfish or self-focused? We all have time demands, resource demands, and family demands. But are we too busy or do we have misplaced priorities?
- How is God trying to get our attention? Are we sure we are right, or are we just presuming upon God?
- What are our priorities? How are we good or poor stewards of God's.