

## God's House or Mine

*Tell God He Can Wait!*

By Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas

sermonaudio.com

**Bible Text:** Haggai 1:3-11  
**Preached on:** Sunday, July 12, 2020

### First Presbyterian Church

1324 Marion St  
Columbia, SC 29201

**Website:** [www.firstprescolumbia.org](http://www.firstprescolumbia.org)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia](http://www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia)

*Gracious God and ever blessed Father, as we turn now to the Scriptures we ask for the blessing of the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and engage our affections and resolve our wills so that we might live for you in praise and adoration and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Please be seated.

Now turn with me to the prophecy Haggai, the third prophet, the third book from the end of the Old Testament. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. And last week we were looking at the first two verses and this morning I want us to look at verses 3 through 11, but I'll begin to read at the first verse.

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."

Well, may God graciously add his blessing to the reading of his holy and inerrant word.

Now consider with me this morning some statements that Jesus made and that are recorded in the Gospels. First of all, in Luke 6, "Woe to you that are rich." Again in Luke 16, "You cannot serve God and mammon." Or again in Matthew 6, the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth." Or again in Matthew 18, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Now that's not a blanket condemnation of wealth, Abraham and Job were very very wealthy men, nor is it a prescription for some kind of forced redistribution of wealth. The point that Jesus is making and it's the point that the prophet Haggai is making here in this section that we're studying this morning, is that if you put money or anything else for that matter before God, you are desperately in trouble. That's the point. What is first? What is primary in your life? In your thinking? In your affectional life? In the life of your business? In the life of your home? What comes first of all? That's the point. Martin Luther famously said that we need three conversions, we need the conversion of the heart, and we need the conversion of the mind, and we need the conversion of the purse. He wasn't simply thinking about money, though that was certainly a part of what he was thinking about, but he was thinking about anything that comes before God, anything that we give a sense of priority to.

We have a very definite date here. It's August 29, 520 BC. We are 2,500 years in the past. The return from exile under the decree of Cyrus the Persia was in 537, so 17 years or so have passed by. Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, and Haggai was probably there too, he only receives mention now and after this very brief period of four months, he will almost disappear into the background again. He's a prophet. When he speaks, God speaks through him. His words are God's words. God's words are his words. He is their preacher, if you like. He was the one that the exiles would look to for counsel and direction and instruction and so on. They looked to him for a sense of direction in their lives and God has now sort of brought him into the very center of things. He's been quietly working for possibly 17 years, possibly before that in exile, we don't know.

We know very little about Haggai but now in this season, it's as though God has poured out the Holy Spirit upon him and suddenly his words have huge effect, motivating not just one or two people, not just 10 or 20 people, but motivating the entire congregation in Jerusalem and beyond to do a particular task, to rebuild the temple. Seventeen years has gone by and we saw last week that they'd been saying things like, "The time to build God's house is not now." You see, they had the audacity to think that they could read the mind of God, that they were like the men of Issachar in Chronicles who understood the times. They pretended to understand the times and what it said to them was that now was not the right time to build the temple, but it's worse than that. They had been, as we see in verses 4 and 9, they had been expending all of their energies building houses for themselves and not just houses but nice houses, good houses with panels. Their paneled houses.

Now this word in Hebrew has a root meaning of a covering and there a few commentators, not many but there are a few commentators that suggest that what Haggai is actually saying here is that they were building houses with roofs on them but the temple had no roof on it, but actually I think the majority of commentators take it a little further. It's not specifically mentioned here but if you read between the lines in Ezra and Nehemiah, as soon as they returned from exile and you have to remember that when they returned from exile they were not paupers, many of them made a fine living in exile and assumed wealth and so on, and we know from Ezra and Nehemiah that when Cyrus, the Persian, sent them back, they sent them back with Persian money to rebuild the temple; laborers, builders and carpenters would have been hired; wood would have been bought, cedar wood would have been bought from Tyre and Sidon up in the north in the hills of Judah. Now there's a suggestion here that these paneled houses have been built with the wood that was intended for the temple. Now we don't know that for sure but there's a hint that that is a very real possibility and if that is true, then it's even worse. Not only have they been looking after themselves but they've been using the wood that was destined for the construction of the temple to make their own houses look well and fine, and meanwhile the temple is in ruin, and the word "ruin" occurs twice here as though Haggai or God speaking through Haggai is emphasizing the point. There'd been, well, Malachi. Malachi comes a little later, I think. We're not exactly sure of the timing of Malachi but I think he's in the period of Ezra and Nehemiah and his ministry might be 50 years or more into Haggai's future, but Malachi, you remember he uses the verb "to rob." When you use things for yourself that were intended for God, you are robbing God. Well, it seems appropriate that that seems to be what is taking place here, putting one's own interests ahead of the interests of the kingdom of God.

Now let's explore this a little. What we have here, you see, is, first of all, a difficult truth. It's a difficult truth that the people of God who had experienced so much of God's mercy and tenderness and safe-keeping, who had watched over them during the exile, who had brought them back from exile, had provided for them, but they're looking after themselves. They're putting themselves first before God. Their religion, they had all the outward trappings of religion, the Jewish religion. They had all the outward trappings of being the people of God but their religion was a social religion. It was a cultural thing. There was little by way of life and zeal and the pursuit of God first; that kind of religion that puts God first, that demands sacrifice, that demands humility, that we are to bow before God and he is to lead us and direct us, him first and ourselves second. Him first, others second, and ourselves third, and that kind of religion would have been a burden to them. There's something here that lacks the zeal for the house of God. It doesn't involve any sacrifice. It was a relatively easy religion to follow. It was a religion that said you must first of all please yourself. It was a religion of comfort. "I must look after myself. I must look after my family. That's the first and primary thing and whatever's left, I'll give to God. You can have the leftovers." There's no "seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you." No, seek ye first your own kingdom, seek ye first your own pleasure, seek ye first your own comforts.

This is a difficult truth, isn't it? Sometimes when we read Scripture we just want to be comforted, we want reassurance that we're loved, and then we come across passages like this and it's as though the plow is plowing a furrow through your heart and through your conscience, and so I think we need to ask ourselves is this speaking to me in any way? Am I guilty of looking after myself first, my own comforts? What is the reason why we get so discouraged? What is the reason why we get so down and angry with society, with this virus, with all the brouhaha that's taking place in our country and in the world right now? And maybe, maybe the reason is we're not looking to God. We're not yielding to him. He has an expectation that we must worship him with all of our hearts, and with all of our minds, and with all of our souls, and with all of our strength. It's a difficult truth here that there's too much by way of comfort, there's too much by way of ease in their religion and Haggai and God speaking through Haggai is putting in the needle, as it were, making them feel uncomfortable.

Well, if there's a difficult truth, then secondly, there's an unexpected discovery. What happens if you ignore the principles of the kingdom of God? What happens if you ignore the principles of the Sermon on the Mount that my dear friend Gabe Flora is about to embark on a lengthy exegesis of? All the principles of the kingdom of God, those things that should mark us out as the people of God, what happens if you ignore them? Well, the answer of Haggai is dissatisfaction. You will only reap dissatisfaction.

He talks about it here, they sow much and harvest little. Verse 6, "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." You can have everything that you would ever desire, you could have everything that ever wished for, but if you haven't got Jesus, what have you got? What is the math? You've got absolutely nothing. You can have very little by way of the things of this world but if you have Jesus, what have you got? You've got everything.

There's something here that reminds me of the book of Ecclesiastes and Solomon, a very extraordinarily wealthy man. I mean, he was one of the wealthiest men in Scripture and yet he could tell you from his years of experience that all of that brought him absolutely no satisfaction whatsoever. Until he made his peace with God, until his heart was changed, until he came into subjection to the mind and will of God, everything about it just brought dissatisfaction. Everything under the sun, it just brought dissatisfaction. It's Mick Jagger's song, isn't it? "I can't get no satisfaction."

Paul speaks to Timothy in his final letter in 2 Timothy and he speaks about those who are lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. Well, there it is. That's what we have here. We have a group of people, they call themselves the people of God, they've been brought back from exile, they've been living in Jerusalem now and its environs for 17 years and they've been building fine houses, wonderful, beautiful homes for themselves, but the work of God is in ruins. Seventeen years. Almost half a generation, we might say.

It's staggering, isn't it, when you think about it. What had they been doing in exile all those years? Their parents, their grandparents, most of whom perhaps had died in exile,

what had they been longing for? What was the point in going back to Jerusalem? They were making a fine living in Babylon apparently, and what took them back to Jerusalem was that this was God's city, this is where the temple was. They hadn't worshiped God in a temple, they hadn't observed the Feast of Tabernacles for a century or more, and surely that's why they wanted to go back. But as soon as they went back, they forgot all about it. They put themselves first. They put their own comforts first.

There's a book, Phil Ryken in his wonderful commentary on Ecclesiastes draws attention to a book. It's written by a man called Gregg Easterbrook and the book is called "The Progress Paradox" and it's subtitled, "How life gets better while people feel worse." How life gets better and people feel worse. Life is better. I was telling the folks at 8:30 this morning, I grew up in a home, I think I was 15, I grew up in a home without an indoor bathroom. Imagine. I think I was 15 when we built an indoor bathroom. It was wonderful. It was like a palace. I felt like a king. I thank God for plumbing every day. I remember those times when you'd be trying to go somewhere and you were lost, you were completely lost and you'd get out of the car and you'd go to a gas station and you'd ask for directions, and then you'd get back in the car and then you couldn't remember what he said. Did he say second right or third right? So you'd have to go to another gas station because you didn't have the courage to go back to the same gas station. So you'd find another one and ask for directions and now all you do is press a few buttons on your dashboard and she takes you there. Now my wife constantly quarrels with her because she thinks this is not the right direction to go, there's an easier way, or there's a better way, or there's a more economical way, and I keep saying to her, "She's not real. She has no consciousness. This isn't artificial intelligence."

We've made great progress in all manner of ways. The luxuries that we have that we take for granted. Well, what about the luxury of corporate worship? When will we ever see these pews full again? When will we see that? It was just four months ago and these pews were full at 8:30 and 11:15. Full. When will we see that again? We enjoyed all of the trappings of corporate worship to the full. Wonderful music. The choir, when are we going to have the choir back singing those offertories that move us to the core of our being? They were luxuries that we took for granted. How often did we go home and say, "Lord, that was absolutely wonderful and I don't deserve it"? No, we took it for granted, perhaps, and God took it away.

Look at verse 9. There's a little twist here, "You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away." Where did this virus come from? Well, God did it. In his sovereign providence he brought it about. I was talking to my mother, she's nearly 92. We were Facetimeing and my mother, I was walking on the beach this week and my phone goes off and it's my mother and she says as she often says, "Oh, I didn't mean to talk to you. I wanted to talk to Rosemary." I'm her son but she prefers to talk to my wife but Rosemary wasn't there so we talked and she said at the end of the conversation, she said something quite remarkable. She said, "God is teaching us something with this virus and we'd better be listening and we'd better do whatever it is he's trying to tell us." And I thought, "Yes, right on. That's absolutely correct. God is

saying something, teaching us something." I wouldn't have your job for all the tea in China.

What a difficult time. What a horribly difficult time but let's focus on the church. "I blew it away." That's what happened four months ago. I remember having a conversation with Lee, I think that's you. I can hardly recognize anybody. All I can see are you're like owls. I remember the conversation driving up to Charlotte and saying on the way up, "No, no, no, no. We can't possibly close down." And then as I was driving down, we had another conversation and we can't possibly not close down. Who could have predicted 4-5 months ago that we would be where we are right now? "I blew it away," God said. "I blew it away. You took it for granted. You didn't treasure it. You found your treasures and your pleasures somewhere else." Is that what God is saying?

Well, there's a difficult truth and there's an unexpected discovery and then there's an urgent call and you see it there in verses 5 and 7. "Consider your ways." Interesting that the verb that's employed there is a verb that involves the processes of reason and rationality. Consider. Ponder. Reckon on it. Think about it. Reason. You see, Christianity isn't first of all a religion about emotions and affections. Now of course, they're vitally important. That's why we sense dissatisfaction but the way to satisfaction is to reason. Consider your ways. Ask yourself some questions. What is my ultimate priority? Why am I here? What does God want me to do? What does God want us collectively as a congregation to do right now?

Consider your ways. And then he gives them instruction and he tells them to go and purchase wood, to go to the hills of Judah and possibly Tyre and Sidon where there were wonderful cedar trees, and purchase wood and begin the task of rebuilding the temple. Why is this temple so important? It was bricks and mortar and stones, large, those of you who have been to Jerusalem, massive stones, because God had made a promise in the Old Testament, in the old covenant, God had made a promise that there in the temple he, himself, would reside in all of his glory, the Shekinah glory, in the Holy of Holies. God would be in the midst of his people. But they had taken it all for granted and God had brought his house to ruins, to rubble, and it's time to rebuild.

Well, my dear friends, as I think about the future and I think about the next few months and I can't see it clearly, we have some rebuilding to do. There are ministries that will have to be rebuilt from the very bottom. There will be work to do to fill our congregations morning and evening again. We fear that some of us may have learned some very bad habits. Necessary in this season, to be sure.

You see, Haggai is facing something, well, let me use an illustration from Jim Packer and after the 8:30 service, a friend of mine from Jackson texted me and said that Jim Packer was in his home editing the book that I'm about to refer to, and it was called "Hot Tub Religion." Now that wasn't the title Packer gave the book but those of you who are in the business of publishing know that, you know, publisher will almost always change the title that you thought was a great title and they'll come back with something else. And they called it "Hot Tub Religion," and the cover of the book had a picture of a man, a young

man, and he's on one of these plastic things in a pool and he's got a little thing beside him with a drink and it's got a little, you know, umbrella and straw, and he's got a sun visor on and dark glasses and so on, and then he's got a sort of cross around his neck, and the picture was simply trying to demonstrate far too many people's view of what Christianity is, that it's a religion of pleasure and pleasure for one's self. And he used a word in the book that I'd never seen before, although I suspected what it meant because it's a word that's coined from the Greek word, eudaimon, which means happy, and he coined the phrase eudaimonism, a religion that puts first of all personal pleasure.

What's the lesson of this passage? Seek ye first the kingdom of God. Seek ye first the kingdom of God. Put God first and foremost. Make Jesus the center of everything that you do. Remind yourself every morning when you get up. My duty today, and it's my pleasurable duty in response to the Gospel, my duty this morning is to serve the Lord Jesus Christ no matter what it costs. I must put him first. And only that way will you be happy and content.

*Father, we thank you, thank you for your word, amazing word written 2,500 years ago. Almost impossible for us to imagine what 2,500 years means but it might as well have been written this morning to speak to us. Father, we ask for grace to do whatever it is you are asking us to do and to do it with joy and to do it with pleasure, and then we'll find greater joy and greater pleasure. And we ask it all in Jesus' name.*