

# First Things First

*“Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?  
(Haggai 1:4 ESV)*

*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.  
(Matthew 6:33 ESV)*

## **First Things First**

**January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017**

**Haggai 1:1-15**

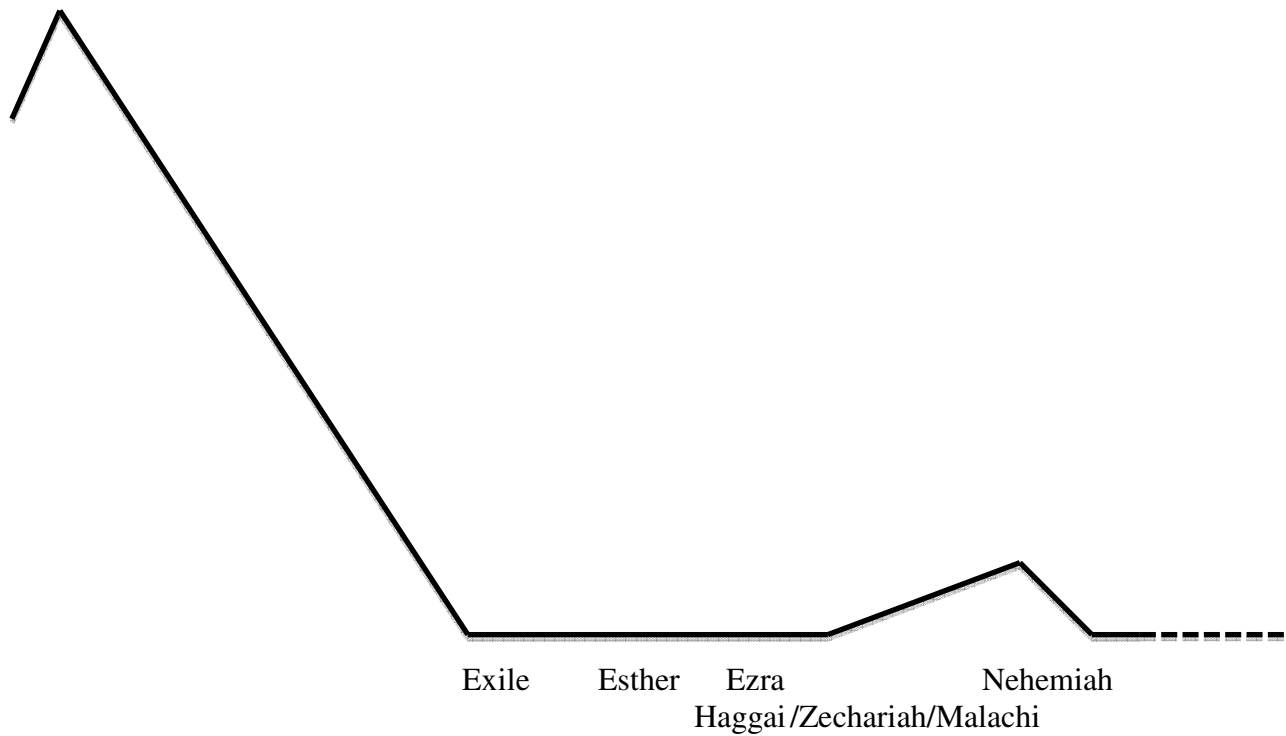
**Rev. Paul Carter**

### **Introduction:**

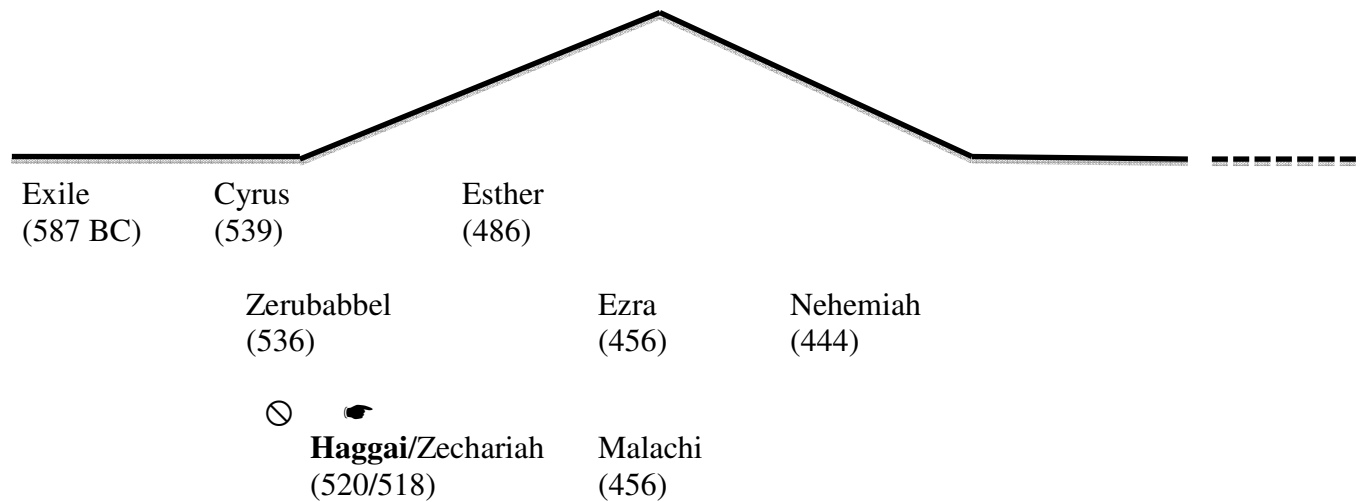
Good morning! Open your Bibles to Haggai 1:1-15; that’s on page 791 in your pew Bibles. If you are trying to look that up in your own Bible then just start where the Old Testament meets the New Testament and work backwards 3 books. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are the last three books of the Old Testament.

We touched on this passage a couple of weeks ago (December 18<sup>th</sup>) but I wanted to come back to it because it seems very appropriate for where we are this morning. This is New Year’s Day. As a pastor you only get to preach on New Year’s Day once every 7 years or so and so I wanted to seize the opportunity and to speak to you about FIRST and PRIMARY things.

Now let me just remind you of the context and circumstances behind the Book of Haggai. You will remember that Haggai was a contemporary of these people that we have been speaking about for the last 4 weeks. (Go to chart)



All of these characters are on the stage during the Last Act in the Old Testament narrative. Now let me zoom in on this timeline so that you can get a better idea of where Haggai fits into the story. (See chart below)



- Work on the temple begins around 536 BC. Foundation laid 535 BC.

⊖ - Work is halted shortly thereafter – around 535 BC.

☛ - Work is resumed in 520 BC and completed in 516.

So basically this whole period of rebuilding and revival and reformation began when Cyrus – the King of Persia – conquered Babylon in 539 BC. Unlike the kings of Assyria and Babylon who just wanted to grind their subject peoples into the dirt – Cyrus wanted his subject people to flourish and to worship their gods in their lands and to pray for the prosperity of Persia. So he sent the Jews in Babylon back to Jerusalem and he told them to rebuild the temple and to offer prayers and petitions for him and for the Empire and they did.

Zerubbabel led a group of Jews back to the promised land in around the year 536. They started building the temple right way; they laid the foundation and they cleansed the alter and began offering sacrifices but then in 535 BC the work stopped. Some rivals had sent a letter to the capital city requesting verification for the project and these letters could not have arrived at a worse time. Cyrus had been killed in battle and his Empire was falling into chaos. Several years of civil war followed during which time the work on the temple completely ceased. They had not heard back and they feared to move forward with the project. And then, finally, the Empire sorted itself out. A man named Darius took the throne and he began to re-establish order throughout the Empire. Part of that process obviously involved sorting through official correspondence and he found the letter and he read the letter – and he located the original mandate for the temple project in Jerusalem and he not only re-authorized the project, he reinvested in the project and sent additional funds and resources. There was now no reason whatsoever for the work not to go forward.

However, during the long delay the people had lost enthusiasm for their calling. They were now busy with other things. There were houses to build, fields to plough and businesses to manage and it just didn't seem like a good time. And so despite the permission of the King, despite his generous investment the temple lay in ruins. Until the year 520 BC when for the first time since the return from exile a prophet of God was sent to speak to the people. And this is what he said. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

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. 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 1:1–15 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

My intention this morning is not to go word by word and line by line through this text – I think the story itself is fairly straightforward. Rather I want to take a big picture look at what this text says about God and how he engages with his people and in order to draw them back into their original design and calling. The first thing we discover about God in this passage is that he:

## Discovering God In Haggai Chapter 1

### 1. God remains committed to his original plan for humanity

Way back in the beginning of the Bible we discover that God has a plan for humanity. In Genesis 1:26 God says:

“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion  
(Genesis 1:26 ESV)

Humanity is supposed to be LIKE GOD, UNDER GOD and OVER ALL CREATION – it’s a pretty simple plan! But as you know, we rebelled against the plan because we wanted to be over everything and under nothing and reaching up we fell DOWN. And now the world itself resists us, the cosmos does not even recognize us as the sons and daughters of God that we are. We are not kings – we are born captives now; slaves of the devil and of sin.

We have fallen, we have failed, but this passage reminds us that God has not given up on the plan – and he has not given up on us. When God saves people he restores them to their original design

and purpose. We read about that last week in the prophecy of Zechariah concerning the baby Jesus. Zechariah said that Jesus had come:

that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:74–75 ESV)

Zechariah said that Jesus had come to defeat our enemies and to restore our ministry – so Old Testament and New God’s people are **SAVED TO SERVE!**

We see that same theme in this story. Once again God has saved his people from their enemy. Babylon has been defeated, his people have been set free and sent with money and permission to be the people of God as they were created to be. But now, after all that has happened the people aren’t sure that they want to be God’s people. Not to that extent. They really just want to be free. They just want to be like everybody else. They want to build houses, have families, put a little money aside and maybe retire for a few years and enjoy the grandchildren – they don’t want to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, under God and over everything else, they just want to be regular people.

But God made them for more than that – God saved them for more than that.

Now, stop right here and understand something. This is the threshold between the life of faith and the life of the flesh. The Apostle Paul talked about that. He said that worldly people – regular people - people who are not people of faith – live for earthly things. They are basically animalistic. He says:

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:19–20 ESV)

That’s human life apart from the salvation and calling of God! It is all about food and drink and sex and pleasure. It is **ONE STEP ABOVE THE LIFE OF A PIG** – but it is so alluring and so enticing to the sons and daughters of God. We just want to be regular people! We just want to eat, drink, have sex and die! But you were made for more. You were saved for more. Humanity may have given up on its exalted calling, but this passage reminds us, that God has not. He still has plans for you.

The second thing we learn about God in this very interesting story is that:

## 2. God will oppose our efforts to lead lesser lives

Look at verses 9-11:

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.” (Haggai 1:9–11 ESV)

I mean that is crazy! God actively opposes the efforts of these people to walk away from their original design and calling. Its almost like he does not respect our freedom! He says, “You can go, but I’m not going to make it easy for you. I’m going to oppose you, I’m going to mess with you, I’m going to trip you up and knock you down, I’m going to humble you and bring you back to me and back to your original design and calling. That’s what he says and that’s what he does in this story!

Now in case that sounds too Old Testament for you, you might want to remember that Jesus made the same point in his parable of the Prodigal Son. Do you remember that? He spoke about a son who didn’t want to be his father’s son. He wanted to be a citizen of the world – he wanted to be regular people, he wanted to live free and to suck the marrow out of life and to enjoy all the good things that he thought he was missing. So he asked his father for his inheritance and he abandoned his family, his land and his calling. But then something interesting happened – do you remember that? The Bible says:

And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

All of the sudden, for no apparent reason, the world conspired against him! There was a famine in the land – there was a hole in his purse – it was as if someone had BLOWN ALL HIS MONEY AWAY. He had looked for much but he had come to ruin – he had left his father’s house chasing idols and delusions but they had all of them come to nothing. And that was the turning point in this man’s life. The Bible says:

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father (Luke 15:14–18 ESV)

Do you see that? That is pretty much EXACTLY the same story as the one we just read in Haggai! He cut a hole in their purse, he BLEW AWAY THEIR MONEY and through various hardships, difficulties and trials he CAUSED THEM to come to their senses. That’s what God does – that’s who God is! He is the God who will not just let us walk away into baseness, worldliness and ruin! He contends with us, he pursues us, he enlightens us and he brings us back to himself and back to our original design and calling – thanks be to God!

Now as we continue reading in the story we see that they responded really well. They got the message, obviously! They listened to the Word of God from the mouth of the prophet, they responded to the Spirit of God as it stirred up the leaders and the people and they re-engaged the work of God as they had been created and saved to do.

### **Application And Response: Worshipping God With Our Time, Talent And Treasure**

That’s the story – and as I said it’s a pretty straightforward story. I don’t think you have to be a rocket scientist to transpose this story and its implications into a New Testament key. In this story God is basically telling his people – worship me first, serve me first, attend to your duty and calling first and then trust me to supply what you need for yourself. God isn’t going to let his servants go hungry. Remember in the prodigal son story – the son remembered that his father takes good care of his servants, well so it is here. Look at what God promises in chapter 2:

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. (Haggai 2:7–8 ESV)

God is not poor and he doesn’t want you to be poor but he is working a plan here and so he tells his people to stick with the plan. Be the people he made them to be. Be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and trust God to supply what you need – that’s the challenge and the principle in this story. And this same basic principle is repeated and affirmed by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Jesus said:

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:33

ESV)

First things first, Jesus says. Be who God created you to be, do what God has called you to do and God will be with you in everything else.

That's the principle; now let me suggest some very straightforward application. Our grandparents used to talk about worshipping God with our time, talent and treasure. What would it look like if we gave God the FIRST FRUITS – the first part and the very best of our time, talent and treasure in 2017? That's the question I want to end with this morning.

## **1. Time**

Well first of all, and very practically, with respect to time I think it would involve being here on the first day of the week with God's people when they gather for corporate worship. Decide this year in 2017 to give God the first DAY of your week – EVERY WEEK. That's what they did in the New Testament. The Corinthians were meeting for worship on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2), the Apostle Paul met with the believers on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7) and the Apostle John was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day – the first day of the week (Revelation 1:10) – these people understood that worship has to come FIRST! Worship is priority #1. Before mission, before family, before charity – before anything; we were made for worship! God is worthy of our worship and we can't DO anything of value for God or anyone else until we have received mercy and grace from his hand. So resolve this year to worship God with the first day of your week.

Now obviously you are going to be sick from time to time – don't come and bring your germs with you. You are going to miss 2-3 Sundays a year with the flu – that's not a problem. And I understand that humans need rest. So you are going to miss 2-3 weeks each year for vacation. That's fine too. But other than that you should be here or in some other house of worship with God's people on the Lord's Day 46 weeks out of the year. Not taking an 14 week break during the baseball season, not 1 week out of 4 in the summer. Every week. This is what you were made for and God will oppose whatever else you would do instead of this.

Now secondarily in terms of time I think this means giving God the first hour of your day. The



first hour of the day should be the hour of prayer. It was for Jesus. Mark 1:35 says:

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. (Mark 1:35 ESV)

If Jesus needed to do that than you need to do that. Now by prayer I mean both hearing from and talking to God through the Word of God and in the Spirit of God. I mean reading the Word of God – hearing from him - and I mean responding to God – speaking to him. Prayer and Bible reading go together and ideally they should happen first before we engage the world. You've got to be with God before you go to be with other people.

## **2. Talent**

Alright secondly, with respect to talent I think it means making space in your life to use your gifts for the service of God and for the good of God's people. It is so easy to fill the calendar with work and play and recreation and other good things that we just don't have any time to serve the Lord. Now, I want to be clear, I am not saying that you can only serve God by serving a shift in the nursery or setting up chairs at RCC – those are good ways to serve the Lord, but they are not the only ways. The church offers many ways for you to use your gifts to serve God and others – but there are also ministries to the Lord and to other people outside the church. God may have called you to a ministry of evangelism in the workplace or in your neighbourhood – that's great! But still, let us know so that we can pray for you, resource you and hold you accountable. Make sure to carve out time so that you can do that ministry. Ministry requires MARGIN whether you do it in the church, in your neighbourhood or in your workplace. You have to carve out the time and attention to do it as unto the Lord. Resolve to do that in 2017. Give the Lord the best of your talent and service.

## **3. Treasure**

Thirdly and finally we want to worship the Lord with our treasure. One of my favourite verses about that comes from Proverbs chapter 3:

Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; 10 then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. (Proverbs 3:9–10 ESV)

That's one of the passages from which we get the idea of tithing. We give to God the first fruits – the first part, the first 10<sup>th</sup> of our income – right, first things first - so that we can be the people of God together. Ministry is expensive! But that's ok because God is rich! The gold is his, the silver is his – the cattle on a thousand hills are his – God has lots of money and he has entrusted that money to his sons and daughters so that they can release that money into ministry for his glory and our everlasting good.

But you say pastor, what about my needs? What about my clothing? My car? My mortgage and my kids? What about them? Jesus talked about that kind of stuff too; right before he said to seek first the kingdom of God he said:

do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? 28 And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? (Matthew 6:25–30 ESV)

Don't you worry, don't be anxious - the Father knows how to take care of his servants. You just worry about his house and he will take care of your house. You worship him and he will take care of you.

seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matthew 6:33 KJV)

So let's put the Big Rocks in first. Let's be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation before we are anything else; let's offer our bodies – the sum total of who we are – our TIME, TALENT and TREASURE – as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God as our reasonable service of worship. This is what we were made for – this is what we were saved for – and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.