



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for May 4, 2008
Released on April 30, 2008**

"First Things First"

Printed Text: Haggai 1:1-10, 12-15

Background Scripture: Haggai 1; Ezra 5

Devotional Reading: Psalm 84:1-4

Haggai 1:1-10, 12-15

1 In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month, came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet unto Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest, saying,

2 Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.

3 Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet, saying,

4 Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste?

5 Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways.

6 Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages, earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes.

7 Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways.

8 Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord.

9 Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

10 Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit.

.....

12 Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Josedech, 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 did fear before the Lord.

13 Then spake Haggai the Lord's messenger in the Lord's message unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith 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 Josedech, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and did work in the house of the Lord of hosts, their God,

15 In the four and twentieth day of the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king.

How to Say It

HAGGAI. *Hag-eye* or *Hag-ay-eye*.

SHEALTIEL. *She-al-tee-el*.

ZERUBBABEL. *Zeh-rub-uh-bul*

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

Examine: describe how the cultural, economic, and religious climate in Haggai's day worked against the rebuilding of the temple.

Principle: to make it clear that building for God must go forward despite opposition.

Application: suggest a plan to correct one misplaced priority in order to obey God more fully.

Introduction - Priorities

There is not enough time in life to do everything that we would like to do, and some things in life are crucial to do, like it or not. For example, if we put off paying our electric bill long enough, the utility company will shut off the power. Paying that electric bill becomes an increasingly high priority as time goes by.

So how does a busy person make sure that the most important things actually get done? One efficient way is to write out a priority list. Of the things that could be done today, what is the most important one? That goes at the top of the list. Then come the second, third, and fourth most important items, and so on.

Once the list is made, one goes down the list and tries to accomplish as many items as time allows. Those things that cannot be accomplished then go on the next day's list. Low priority items at the bottom of the list may never get done, but this system makes sure that the most important things do get done.

But many times I do not operate in this efficient way. I start not with what is most important, but with what I want to do—no matter how trivial. I desperately need to pay the bills, but I watch the news or surf the Internet instead. As a result, some things that absolutely needed to be done that day may have failed to get done. The problem was that my priorities in action did not correspond with the real priorities in my life.

The same problem comes in the spiritual life. The Christian should have the things of God as a priority in life. But all too frequently other matters, both important and trivial, crowd out the things of God. The book of Haggai reminds us that we need to make God and His service our priority.

Lesson Background

Solomon began to build the temple around 966 bc. After its completion, it stood for nearly four centuries as the grand religious monument of Solomon's reign. The temple replaced the tabernacle as Israel's focal point for worship. The Israelites came to the temple for three annual feasts (Deuteronomy 16:16). Standing as the symbolic dwelling place of God in the midst of His people, the temple had a fond place in the hearts of pious Israelites. For example, in Psalm 84:1–4 the psalmist expresses some sentimental jealousy for the sparrows that built nests in the temple's structure, longing like them to remain always in its courts.

But a catastrophe befell the temple during the reign of Zedekiah. In 586 B.C. the Babylonians devastated Jerusalem. The temple was looted and burned (2 Kings 25). The period that followed is known as the Babylonian exile, a time in which large numbers of Jews were deported from Judah to live in Babylon.

The exile came to an end shortly after Cyrus, king of Persia and Media, conquered Babylon in 539 bc. In late 539 or early 538 B.C., Cyrus issued a decree allowing Jews who so wished to return to Judah and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1-4). About 50,000 went back.

The Jews who returned from exile were eager to take advantage of Cyrus's decree and rebuild the temple. They succeeded in rebuilding the altar and began once again to conduct sacrifices (Ezra 3:1-6). They even succeeded in laying the foundations for a new temple (Ezra 3:7-13), but the temple proper remained unfinished for the better part of two decades after Jewish exiles had returned with plans to rebuild it.

After this long time of inactivity, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah preached in the year 520 B.C. about the need to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5:1, 2). These are the same prophets who wrote the books of the Old Testament that bear their names. The book of Zechariah gives an account of his prophetic encouragement regarding the rebuilding of the temple (see Zechariah 1:16; 4:9). The book of Haggai gives that prophet's perspective on how he preached in this regard and how the people responded to his message.

The book of Haggai consists of four prophetic messages, dating from August to December of 520 B.C. Each prophecy begins with the declaration "came the word of the Lord" or "the word of the Lord came" (Haggai 1:1; 2:1, 10, 20). Today's lesson takes us to the first of these four.

Temple Neglected – Hag. 1:1-4

1. Who were the political and religious leaders of the returned captives from Babylon? (Hag. 1:1)

Judah's return from Babylon came in three stages. The first group returned in the year 538 B.C. under the leadership of Zerubbabel, who became their governor, and Joshua, their high priest. With both political and religious leaders in place, everything was set for a successful reestablishment of their nation and its system of worship. But after the opposition, the temple stood in its uncompleted condition for many years. Then God raised Haggai with a challenge.

2. How do we know the time of Haggai's message to his people? (v. 2)

Haggai's first message is very specifically dated. Reference to the second year of Darius is used because there was no current king in Israel to reckon by. The sixth month, Elul, corresponds to parts of our August and September. Historians tell us that the first day would be the same as our twenty-ninth day of August and that the year was 520 B.C. It was the day of the new moon, so it might well have been a festival day in Jerusalem. Many people would have been there, giving Haggai a ready audience for his message.

3. What was the main message Haggai had for the leaders and the people, and what were they doing wrong? (vs. 2-4)

In verse 2, God breaks His silence by sending a message to Zerubbabel and Joshua. Notice that He refers to His people as "this people." This emphasizes the displeasure that God had for his people. His people were not doing what they should have been doing. They were making excuses for not rebuilding God's temple. Haggai states that the people thought it was not time for them to start building God's temple.

However, they may have been suffering from a spiritual problem: they simply didn't care whether God's house ever got rebuilt, as long as their own living conditions were comfortable. Either way, their excuse was wrong and without validity to God's ears.

4. Why was it important for Judah to have a temple for God?

Throughout the Old Testament, the tabernacle and the temple represented the presence of God. The temple was essential for Judah to have a right relationship with God. One of the events that occurred in the temple was the sin offering. Whenever someone needed forgiveness of sin, an animal had to be brought to the priest, who would sacrifice the animal so that the person's sins would be covered. In addition, the high priest would have to sacrifice an animal for the entire nation once a year so that the sins of the nation would be covered. Without the temple, it was impossible for Judah's sins to be forgiven.

There was no temple at all. The people's priorities had become skewed and needed reorganizing. How could the people of Judah build and live in homes of luxury while neglecting God's temple? That temple should have been the focal point of their relationship with Him. It had been when Solomon built it. And prior to that, the tabernacle had been the center of their spiritual lives for many generations. But it did not seem so important to this group of Jews to reestablish that same importance. Initially, fear of opposition had stopped the work, but that was no longer a valid excuse.

Blessings Forfeited -Haggai 1:5-10

5. What evidence was there that the blessing of God had ceased to be upon these returned captives? (vs. 5, 6 not in lesson text)

Haggai 1:5-6 reveals that as a result of their misplaced priorities, God was withholding his blessing from them. They worked to accumulate food, drink, clothing, and income, but there was never enough. If they were to stop and realize what was happening, they would understand that God was opposing them instead of blessing them. On the other hand, they might have been so far away from God that they may have forgotten who God was. Sometimes, we experience similar circumstances when we fail to put God first in our lives. God must be first priority in our lives if we want to be fully blessed by Him.

6. What are some personal priorities that you have allowed to displace God's priorities? How do you stay alert to this danger?

People can get their priorities mixed up, as in the case of those living in Haggai's day. Jesus seemed to be talking about mixed up priorities when He addressed the problem of becoming anxious about basic needs. To allow one's thinking to become consumed by such worries is to show a lack of faith that God is able to provide (Matthew 6:25-34).

Sometimes our priorities are not even *needs* but merely self-centered *desires*. This problem seems all too common in a culture that looks out for self instead of following God and trusting Him to provide. Regular study of the Word of God allows Him to speak to us about priorities.

7. What did God specifically want the people to consider (vs. 7,8)?

This is the second time God called upon the people to consider their ways (v. 5). The idea is that they needed to give very careful thought to and reevaluate how they were living. Things needed to change drastically right away if they wanted to please God.

This kind of consideration on their part was to lead them to an attitude of repentance. Repentance is not just confession. Rather, it is a change of thinking that leads to a different life direction. God gave them specific instructions about what that direction should be. He did not just say, "Get to work on the temple and finish it." He gave detailed instructions. They were to begin by going up into the mountains to get wood for the temple project. This would start them on the path to pleasing God and becoming worthy of His blessings.

It should always be our desire to please God and in doing so to give Him glory. It is encouraging to realize that what we do can give God genuine pleasure. If we take time to think about God watching us and experiencing pleasure the way we do when something is fully enjoyable, perhaps we will be motivated to be more consistent in endeavoring to live for Him.

Change Explained—Hag. 1:7-10

8. How did God describe what He did when they attempted to get ahead? (vs. 9, 10)

Here we find God reiterating what was stated earlier. Although the people continually strove for increased wealth, they continued to experience a marginal existence. God said this was because He repeatedly blew away what they brought home. The Hebrew word that was translated "blow" means to "breathe upon," along with various implications associated with doing so. The idea represented here is of a scourging wind that laid waste to whatever they brought home and scattered it away from them, leaving very little.

But God did not merely describe His actions without explaining His reasons. Anticipating the question that would come from the people upon hearing this, God Himself asked why and followed with a precise explanation. Everything came back to the fact that they continued to neglect the rebuilding project while leaving the temple in ruins. The temple lay in ruins while the people enjoyed their luxurious homes. God described them as running to their own homes to avoid any thought of responsibility for the condition of His temple.

God has decided not to bless them materially. In particular, rains have not come in a timely way, so the crops are meager (see also v. 11, not in today's text). But obedience will mean that God will reverse that according to the promises of blessings in Deuteronomy 28.

As Christians, we must remember that we cannot hide from God. When God asks us to do something through His Word or revelation, we must be willing to follow His instructions. God withholds blessings from those who are not willing to serve Him fully.

Work Started – Hag. 1:12-15

9. What was the response of both the leaders and the people of Haggai's message? (vs. 12, 13)

The two leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua, along with the people, immediately responded to Haggai's message. Two verbs in Haggai 1:12 describe the response: Everyone "obeyed" and the people "did fear" the presence of God. This was exactly the effect God had in mind, and it brought a quick response from Him. Notice the repeated emphasis on the Lord in verse 13: Haggai was "the Lord's messenger" who brought "the Lord's message" to the people, promising that the Lord's presence would be with them from then on. This indicates God's great pleasure at seeing the obedient response of His people. Their repentance led to His blessing.

10. How long did it take for the work on the temple to get started, and how do we know God was in it? (vs. 14-15)

Using the dating referred to earlier in this lesson, we find that the work on the temple began on the twenty-first of September 520 B.C., just twenty-three days after Haggai's message. God was sovereignly moving in the hearts of the people to accomplish His work: "The Lord stirred up the spirit." He did this in Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant of the people. Reference to the remnant reminds us that God has always preserved a remnant of Israel because He still has a future for them. We can almost sense the excitement and enthusiasm projected when we read that once the Lord stirred up their spirits, they came and began the work on the house of the sovereign Lord, their God.

11. What can we learn about priorities from the lesson?

Jesus taught from the Sermon on the Mount that we should all first seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness. As a result, all of our needs will be met (cf. Mat. 6:33). This lesson emphasizes the importance of putting God's will before our will. We should strive to serve God, even to the point where it is uncomfortable for us to do so. If we choose to pursue our agenda instead of God's agenda, then He will withhold blessings from us. We should remember that God will reward our sacrifice on earth and/or Heaven, so we should not worry (cf. Luke 12:23-31).

Conclusion - Our Priorities or God's

Although God is not calling us to build Him a temple of stone and wood, He certainly calls us to worship and serve Him. Often, however, we fail to make God and the things of God a priority in our lives. It is easy to fall into laziness, selfishness, or a life of comfortable self-indulgence.

The book of Haggai reminds us of the need to put God first, not ourselves. It exhorts us to be willing to make the sacrifices and the effort necessary to glorify God and further His work in the world. That sometimes involves the bricks and mortar of building physical buildings, such as churches or housing for the poor. Or it can take the form of building God's spiritual building, the church, by evangelizing and making disciples. Both kinds of work require putting God's priorities above our selfish desires.

For larger tasks on behalf of God, there is also the importance of good leadership. Had the prophets Haggai and Zechariah not stepped up to preach and exhort others to action, no temple would have been built. If the people refused to follow the leadership of their governor, Zerubbabel, and their high priest, Joshua, the temple would not have been built.

Each of us has a role to play. God calls some to lead and others to follow in order that greater works can be accomplished for Him. Part of our setting priorities is determining what God is calling us to do as individuals: to lead or follow others whom God has raised up. Then our priority must be to live out that calling.

Prayer

Lord, help us to set aside our sinful selfishness and make You and Your work in the world a priority in our lives. Like Haggai, help us to encourage others to do Your will, and like the people of his day help us respond to Your exhortations conveyed through others. Raise up leaders with the courage of Haggai, Zechariah, Zerubbabel, and Joshua to help Your church accomplish great things. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

If we do not make God our priority, He won't make blessing us His priority.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

A rebuilt temple in Jerusalem would be open to attack if the walls of the city remained broken down. It was the mission of Nehemiah to urge his people to restore the stone walls and the gates, which the Babylonians had burned. The Jewish remnant needed Nehemiah's visionary leadership to rise to the occasion. Study "Following a Visionary Leader" Nehemiah 2:1-8, 11, 17, 18.

Lesson Summarized By

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