

The Minor Prophets
Lesson 14: Keeping The Work Alive
(Haggai 2)

Getting Started

It's one thing to get God's people back to work and quite another thing to keep them on the job. Someone once said the greatest ability a person can possess is dependability, but too often potential workers excuse themselves and say, "Here am I, Lord; send somebody else."

The rebuilding of the temple was a very special task, for it meant the restoring of true worship in Jerusalem. Completing the project would please the Lord and be a great testimony to the unbelieving nations who were watching the remnant in Jerusalem. Haggai delivered three more brief messages to encourage the laborers to complete their assignments. In each message, he asked them to look in a specific direction to learn what God wanted them to learn.

- Why was rebuilding the temple so important to the returning exiles? What symbolic purpose did it play in their faith story? How was the temple a testimony to the unbelieving nations?
- Choose one verse or phrase from Haggai 2 that stands out to you. This could be something you're intrigued by, something that makes you uncomfortable, something that puzzles you, something that resonates with you, or just something you want to examine further. Write that here.

Going Deeper

1. Look Up: God Is With Us (2:1-9)

When the foundation of the temple had been laid sixteen years before, some of the older men had looked back in sorrow as they remembered the glory and beauty of Solomon's temple (Ezra 3:8-13). It's likely that Haggai was member of the older generation and had seen the temple before it was destroyed, but he certainly didn't weep with the rest of his peers. He rejoiced that the work had begun, and he wanted to see it completed.

Discouragement (vv. 1-3). Rather than ignore the problem of discouragement that was sure to come when the people contrasted the two temples, the prophet faced the problem head-on. He picked an important day on which to deliver his message: October 17, the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. The feast was devoted to praising God for the harvest and remembering Israel's pilgrim days in the wilderness (Lev. 23:34-43).

But the important thing about the date was this: It was during the Feast of Tabernacles that King Solomon had dedicated the original temple (1 Kings 8: 1-2), and Haggai wanted the people to think about that. The restored building had nothing of the splendor of Solomon's temple, but it was still God's house, built according to His plan, and for His glory. The same ministry would be performed at its altars and the same worship presented to the Lord. Times change, but ministry goes on.

Encouragement: God's presence (vv. 4-9). Haggai didn't deny that the new temple was "as nothing" in comparison to what Solomon had built, but that wasn't important. The important thing was that this was God's work, and they could depend on Him to help them finish it. Haggai said, "Be strong!" to the governor, the high priest, and the people working on the building, and those two words would be very significant to them.

- a. During the Feast of Tabernacles, the Jews had the book of Deuteronomy read to them (Deut. 31:9-13), so they heard the record of the three times Moses told Joshua and the people to be strong (Deut. 31:6-7, 23).
- b. No doubt they remembered that three times the Lord told Joshua to be strong (Josh. 1:6-7, 9), and when King David charged Solomon with the task of building the original temple, three times he told his son to be strong (1 Chron. 22:13; 28:10, 20).
- c. "Be strong" wasn't an empty phrase; it was an important part of their own Jewish history.
- d. It's one thing to tell people to be strong and work and quite something else to give them a solid foundation for those words of encouragement. Haggai told them why they should be strong and work: because the Lord was with them (Hag. 2:4; see 1:13).
- e. The promise of God's presence was an encouragement to both Joshua (Josh. 1:5, 9; 3:7) and Solomon (1 Chron. 28:20).
- f. Believers today can claim the same promise as they serve the Lord, "For he Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Heb. 13:5 NKJV; and Deut. 31:6, 8).

Encouragement: God's covenant (v. 5). The promise of God's presence with His people is guaranteed by His unchanging Word (Hag. 2:5).

- a. When the tabernacle was dedicated by Moses, God's presence moved in (Ex. 40:34-38), for the Lord had promised to dwell with His people. "Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them" (Ex. 29:45-46 NIV).
- b. The same Holy Spirit who enabled Moses and the elders to lead the people (Num. 11:16-17, 25; Isa. 63:11) would enable the Jews to finish building the temple.
- c. The prophet Zechariah, who ministered with Haggai, also emphasized the importance of trusting the Holy Spirit for the enablement needed to do God's will: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6)

- How is God's presence represented in the Old Testament? How does that compare to God's presence after the coming of the Holy Spirit? Why was it important to trust God's presence in Haggai's time? How did that play out in the tabernacle's dedication?

Encouragement: God's promise (vv. 6-7, 9). With prophetic insight, Haggai looked ahead to the time when the Son of God would minister in this temple and bring the glory of God into its precincts (John 1:14).

- a. Herod's temple replaced the temple Zerubbabel built, but the Jews still considered it "the second temple." Certainly, the glory that Jesus brought into that temple was greater than the glory of the tabernacle or the temple Solomon built.
 - b. Then Haggai looked even further into the future and saw the end of the ages, when God would shake the nations and Jesus would return (Hag. 2:7). This verse is quoted in Hebrews 12:26-27 and applied to the return of Christ at the end of the age.
 - c. But today, God's people belong to a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:28), and they will share the glory of Christ when He establishes that kingdom on earth.
 - d. The glory referred to in Haggai 2:7 is the glory that Jesus brought to the temple in Jerusalem, but the glory in verse 9 refers to the glory of the millennial temple that will function during Christ's reign on earth (Ezek. 40-48; see 43:1-12).
 - e. God not only promised the coming of the Messiah and the glory of God in the future temples, but He also promised peace (Hag. 2:9).
 - f. Those who believe on Jesus today have peace with God (Rom. 5:1) because of His atoning death and victorious resurrection (Col. 1:20; John 20:19-21). They may also enjoy the "peace of God" as they yield to Christ and trust wholly in Him (Phil. 4:6-9).
- What promises did the remnant have of provision from the government? (See Ezra 1:4; 3:7; 6:4). To what extent were these promises kept? How do these promises line up with God's promises to take care of the people? How can we know which promises are from God and which are from humankind? What did trusting God to provide look like to the people in Haggai's time? What does that look like today?

Encouragement: God's provision (v. 8). Finally, the Lord assured them that, in spite of the bad economy and their lack of wealth, He was able to provide all they needed.

- a. "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine" (Hag. 2:8). True, the remnant had promises of provision from the government (Ezra 1:4; 3:7; 6:4), but government

grants are limited. God owns all the wealth, even the wealth stored in the king's treasury, and He can distribute it as He desires.

- b. God promises to supply all our needs according to His riches in glory (Phil. 4:19).
- c. It's better to fail in an endeavor you know will ultimately succeed than to succeed in an endeavor you know that will ultimately fail. The humble temple the Jewish remnant was constructing would not last, and even Herod's ornate temple would be destroyed by the Romans, but there would one day be a glorious temple that nobody could destroy or defile. Knowing this, the discouraged remnant could take courage and finish their work.

2. Look Within: Contamination (2:10-19)

About two months later (Dec. 18), the Lord spoke to Haggai again and gave him a message about sin. God couldn't bless the people the way He wanted to because they were defiled, so it was important that they keep themselves clean before the Lord. "Clean" and "unclean" were very important concepts to the Jews living under the old covenant; in fact, this is one of the major themes of the book of Leviticus. If a Jew became defiled, perhaps by touching a dead body or an open sore, he was separated from the rest of the camp and required to bathe before being allowed to return. In some instances, he had to offer a proper sacrifice to restore fellowship with the Lord.

Haggai went to the priests, who were authorities on this subject and asked them two questions, not for his own education (he certainly knew the law) but for the benefit of the people who were present.

Question # 1—holiness (vv. 11-12). When an animal was presented on the altar as a sacrifice, the meat was considered holy; that is, it belonged to the Lord and was set apart to be used only as He instructed. The priests and their families were permitted to eat portions of some of the sacrifices, but they had to be careful how they ate it, where they ate it, and what they did with the leftovers (Lev. 6:8-7:38).

"If a garment containing a piece of consecrated meat touches food," Haggai asked, "does the garment make the food holy?" The priests replied "No." Why? Because you can't transmit holiness in such a simple manner. Even though the garment is holy (set apart) because of the sanctified meat, this holiness can't be imparted to other objects by the garment.

Question # 2—defilement (v. 13). "Suppose somebody touches a dead body and became unclean," Haggai said. "Could that person touch another person and make him unclean?" The answer was obviously yes. Haggai had made his point: You can transmit defilement from one thing or person to another, but you can't transmit sanctity. The same principle applies in the area of health: You can transmit your sickness to healthy people and make them sick, but you can't share your health with them.

- Why were “clean” and “unclean” such important concepts to the Jews living under the old covenant? (See Lev. 14). Why did they have such specific rules about what defined “clean” and “unclean”? How did those rules help preserve the integrity of the temple? How did those rules later become an obstacle for believers?

The application (vv. 14-19). “What is Haggai driving at?” The people no doubt were asking, so he told them. The people working on the temple couldn’t impart any holiness to it, but they could defile it by their sins. Not only was it important that they do God’s work, but it was important that they do His work from hearts that were pure and devoted to God.

- a. The prophet reviewed their recent history. During the years when they were selfish, they experienced the discipline of the Lord (1:1-11).
- b. The Jews weren’t keeping the terms of the covenant, so God couldn’t bless them as He promised, and their economy fell apart. When the grain was in the fields, God smote it with mildew and hail, and after the grain had been harvested, the supply didn’t last (Deut. 28:22).
- c. Why had God done this to His people? To get them to turn back to Him with all their hearts. “Yet you did not turn to me” (Hag. 2:17 NIV).
- d. They were so concerned to build their own houses that they ignored the house of God, and yet the rebuilding of the temple was the task that had brought them back to Jerusalem.

Haggai was issuing a call to repentance, and with that call came the assurance of God’s blessing (vv. 18-19). He was reminding the people of the promise God gave Solomon after the dedication of the temple: “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14).

- a. Had the workers been devoted to the Lord when the foundation of the temple was laid, God’s blessing would have followed immediately, but the people were sinful at heart, and their sin grieved the Lord and defiled their work.
- b. “Is the seed yet in the barn?” he asked his congregation (Hag. 2:19), and they would have had to answer, “No.”
- c. It was late December and the men had just plowed the fields for the winter crops. Haggai was calling on them to trust God for the future harvest. It was another example of Matthew 6:33: Put God’s interest first and He’ll take care of the rest. “From this day will I bless you” (Hag. 2:19).

Many local church constitutions (bylaws) assign to the deacons the spiritual direction of the church and to the trustees the “material” aspects of the ministry. For organizational purposes, this may be convenient but the separation of “material” and “spiritual” is not biblical.

One of the best ways to show our spiritual devotion to the Lord is by using material things to His glory, including money and buildings. The managing of the material blessings demands as much sanctity as the managing of the spiritual ministries of the church.

It must always be that sin hinders the work of God and robs us of the blessings of God. It was the sins of the people that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of the nation, and their sins could hinder the rebuilding of the temple and the renewing of the Jewish nation in their own land. **“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people”** (Prov. 14:34 NKJV).

Haggai has asked the people to look back and then to look within. They’ve learned about God’s glory and God’s holiness. There is now a third look and a third lesson to learn.

3. Look Ahead: Coronation (2:20-23)

Haggai has encouraged the Jewish people to stay on the job and finish God’s house. Now he has a special word of encouragement for Zerubbabel the governor, and it was delivered on the same day as the third message, December 18. Being a faithful preacher of the Word, Haggai was always listening for God’s voice and sensitive to whatever the Lord wanted him to say or do.

Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin (Jeconiah, Matt. 1:12; Coniah, Jer. 22:24, 28), and therefore of the royal line of David. But instead of wearing a crown and sitting on a throne, Zerubbabel was the humble governor of a struggling remnant of the Jewish nation, trying to complete the building of a rather inglorious temple. What a discouraging situation for a royal prince to be in!

- a. So, God gave His servant Haggai a special word of encouragement for the governor.
- b. Were the nations around Jerusalem larger and stronger? Rest assured that the Lord will care for His people Israel as He has always done in the past. The same God that enabled Moses to defeat Egypt, and Joshua to conquer the nations of Canaan, would protect His people so that His purposes could be fulfilled through them.
- c. The Lord called Zerubbabel “my servant,” an exclusive title reserved for specially chosen people, and Zerubbabel was indeed chosen by the Lord.
- d. God compared him to a royal signet ring. The signet ring was used by kings to put their official “signature” on documents (Esth. 3:10; 8:8,10), the guarantee that the king would keep his promise and fulfill the terms of the document.
- e. Zerubbabel’s ancestor, King Jehoiachin (Coniah), had been rejected by God, but Zerubbabel was accepted by God. God was reversing the judgment and renewing His promise that the Davidic line would not die out but would one day give the world a Savior.

- f. That's why we find Zerubbabel named in the genealogies of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:12; Luke 3:27).

This message must have encouraged Zerubbabel to stay on the job and finish the work God gave him to do. He was special to God, chosen by God, the servant of God! He was near and dear to God as a king's signet ring. The people of Israel would have many centuries of struggle and suffering before them, but the Messiah would come, and one day, Israel's' enemies would be defeated, and the glorious kingdom established.

- How would this message have encouraged Zerubbabel? What does it mean to be called by God for a special work? How can knowing that God sees each of us as uniquely qualified affect the way we pursue His kingdom works?

We can't leave Haggai without noting some practical lessons for God's people today.

1. **The work of God is begun, sustained, and encouraged by the Word of God.** "So, the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo" (Ezra 6:14 NIV). When God's servants proclaim God's Word in the power of the Spirit, things begin to happen. "Is it not clear, as you take a bird's-eye view of church history," said Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "that the decadent periods and eras in the history of the church have always been those periods when preaching had declined? What is it that always heralds the dawn of a Reformation or of a revival? It is renewed preaching."
2. **God's servants must work together to build God's temple.** Haggai and Zechariah, an older man and younger man, both ministered the Word to the Jewish remnant, and God blessed their mutual efforts. It's tragic when preachers and churches compare with one another and even carry on public disputes that gives the enemy ammunition to oppose the gospel. "For we are laborers together with God" (1 Cor.3:9).
3. **When the outlook is bleak, try the uplook.** Apart from God's promises, we have no hope. As Vance Havner (an American evangelist) used to say, "Faith sees the invisible, chooses the imperishable, and does the impossible." Our work today is part of God's work in the future, and we want to do our best.
4. **Putting God first is the guarantee of God's blessing.** Why should God's work suffer while we pursue pleasure and comfort for ourselves? An affluent generation of Christians that is wasting God's generous gifts on trivia and toys will have much to answer for when the Lord returns. Matthew 6:33 is still in the Bible, and so is Romans 14:12.
5. **Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, our labors are in vain.** "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13 NKJV). God still demonstrates His power and receives great glory through the weak things of this world (1 Cor. 1:26-31). If we're too strong in ourselves, the Lord

can't use us. That's what ruined King Uzziah, "for he was greatly helped until he became powerful" (2 Chron. 26:15 NIV).

- How did each of the themes listed above apply to Haggai's situation? How do they apply to the body of Christ today? What does each of these look like in everyday practical terms?

Looking Inward

- Take a moment to reflect on all that you've explored thus far in this study of **Haggai 2**. Review your notes and answers and think about how each of these things matter in your life today.
- Think of a challenge you recently faced. Where did you find your strength to face that challenge? If you struggled to find that strength, what could you have done to be more confident? What does it look like to you to count on the Holy Spirit for strength? Is that easy for you? Explain.
- God's promises are many, though they may not always seem specific to your current circumstances. Where do you turn to find God's promises? How do you apply them to your own life? What are the promises you have a hard time accepting or believing?
- In the Old Testament world, cleanness was a requirement for all who might approach God in the temple. But today, Jesus invites us to come to Him just as we are. Do you ever hesitate to reach out to God when you feel "unclean"? Why? Why do you think you need to look a certain way or act a certain way to stand before God? What does it mean to you that Jesus cleared a path so you can stand before Him no matter what your story is?

Going Forward

- Think of one or two things that you have learned that you'd like to work on in the coming week. Remember, this is all about quality, not quantity. It's better to work on one specific area of life and do it well than to work on many and do poorly (or to be so overwhelmed that you simply don't try).
- Do you want to rely on the strength of the Holy Spirit in a difficult circumstance? Be specific. Go back through Haggai 2 and put a star next to the phrase or verse that is most encouraging to you. Consider memorizing this verse.

Seeking Help

- Write a prayer below (or simply pray one in silence), inviting God to work on your mind and heart in those areas you've noted in the Going Forward section. Be honest about your desires and fears.

Homework: **Read Zechariah 1-2.** Next week we will look at "**God and His People.**"