

**The Minor Prophets**  
**Lesson 13: Stirring Up God's People**  
**(Haggai 1)**

**Introduction To Haggai:**

- **Key People:** Haggai, Zerubbabel, Joshua
- **Date Written:** About 520 BC
- **Time of events:** 520 BC
- **Purpose:** To call the people to complete the rebuilding of the temple
- **Author:** Haggai
- **To whom written:** The people living in Jerusalem and those who had returned from exile.
- **Setting:** The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 586 BC. Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple in 538 BC. They began the work but were unable to complete it. Through the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah, the temple was completed (520-516 BC).
- **The Christ of Haggai:** The promise of Haggai 2:9 points ahead to the crucial role the second temple is to have in God's redemptive plan. Herod the Great later spent a fortune on the project of enlarging and enriching this temple, and it was filled with the Glory of God incarnated every time Christ came to Jerusalem.
- **The Key Verses:** 1:7-8; 2:7-9.

**Getting Started**

While their names aren't in the official lists, the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah were probably among the nearly 50,000 Jewish exiles who left Babylon for Judah in 537 BC, encouraged by the edict of King Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4; 5:1-2; 6:14). Haggai 2:3 suggests that Haggai had seen Solomon's temple before it was destroyed and therefore was an old man, while Zerubbabel is called a young man (Zech. 2:4). These two prophets belonged to different generations, but this didn't hinder them from working together to get the temple rebuilt.

We know nothing about Haggai's family background, call, or personal life. When the work on the temple had been stopped for sixteen years (536-520), Haggai and Zechariah suddenly began to preach and to encourage the people to put God first and get back to work (Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1).

- What was Haggai's primary message in Haggai 1:2-11? How did he remind the people of the covenant promises recorded in Deuteronomy 28?
- Choose one verse or phrase from Haggai 1 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**

When the foundations of the temple were laid in Jerusalem in the year 536 BC, the younger men shouted for joy while the older men wept (Ezra 3:8-13). Although Haggai probably had seen

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Solomon's temple in its glory (Hag. 2:3), he was undoubtedly among those who expressed joy, for the Lord was at work among His people.

But it doesn't take long for zeal to cool and God's people to grow apathetic, especially when opposition began an ominous growl that soon became a roar. The shout awakened the enemies of the Jews, aroused official opposition, and caused the work to stop (Ezra 4:1-6, 24). The temple lay unfinished from 526-520, when Haggai and Zechariah brought God's message to Zerubbabel and Joshua.

- Why was it important that the people finish building the temple? What did it reveal to the people about God's character? About God's priorities? About the people's priorities?

### **“Put God First In Your Lives” (1:1-4).**

The first statement in the divine message went right to the heart of the problem and exposed the hypocrisy and unbelief of the people.

#### **1. Excuses.**

- a. “It isn't time to rebuild the house of the Lord” was their defense of their inactivity. Someone once called an excuse “the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie,” and Benjamin Franklin wrote, “I never knew a man who was good at making excuses who was good at anything else.”

#### **2. Evidence.**

- a. What more evidence did the Jewish people need that God's time had come? How could they doubt that it was God's will for them to rebuild the temple and restore true worship in Jerusalem:
  - I. God had moved King Cyrus to free the exiles and commissioned them to return to Jerusalem for that very purpose.
  - II. Didn't the king generously give them the money and material they needed?
  - III. Didn't the Lord graciously protect the exiles carrying the temple treasures as they traveled from Babylon to Judah?
- b. The Jews certainly knew the words that the prophet Isaiah had recorded about Cyrus: “He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying Jerusalem, ‘You shall be built,’ and to the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid’” (Isa. 44:28 NKJV).
- c. By stopping their work, the Jews were admitting that they had no faith in God's Word or in God's power to perform it.
- d. In light of these facts, on what basis were the people refusing to obey God and build His house?
  - I. For one thing, both Isaiah and Jeremiah had predicted a national restoration that would amaze the Gentile nations and bring glory to Israel, but that wonderful event had not yet occurred (see Isa. 2:1-5; 11; 35; 60:1-5; Jer. 30-31).
  - II. The people had failed to understand that some of these promises would be fulfilled in the end times (“the last days”), and when the situation in Judah became worse, the people questioned the dependability of the Word of God.
- e. Perhaps some of the scribes studied Jeremiah's promise about the seventy years in captivity (25:1-14) and decided that the allotted time hadn't yet ended. Only fifty years had transpired since the temple had been destroyed in 586 BC, said the experts, so the Jews would have to wait another twenty years for the prophecy to be fulfilled.

f. God took them at their word, and the work stopped for sixteen years. The temple was completed in 515, so the scholars got their seventy years accounted for!

- Why did the people keep giving excuses for their inactivity? On what basis did they refuse to build? What excuses do people who refuse to obey God and build His house give today?

### 3. Evasion

- The people were terribly inconsistent: It wasn't time to build the house of God, but it was time to build their own houses! And some of the people had built, not just ordinary dwellings, but "paneled houses," the kind that kings built for themselves (1 Kings 7:3, 7; Jer. 22:14).
- "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [food, clothing, shelter] shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33 NKJV). Haggai's congregation had never heard that great promise, but the principle behind Christ's words was written into their law. "Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; so, your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Prov. 3:9-10 NKJV; and see Lev. 26:3-13; Deut. 16:17; 28:1-14; 30:3-9).
- It was obvious that the nation had its priorities confused, but are God's people today any different from those ancient Jews?

Local churches can't expand their budgets for world evangelism because the money isn't there, and yet many church members don't believe Matthew 6:33 and put God first in their giving. Measured by Third World standards, Christians in the Western world are living in luxury, yet their giving is low, and their debts are high because their wealth is being used for things that really don't matter

When we put God first and give Him what's rightfully His, we open the door to spiritual enrichment and the kind of stewardship that honors the Lord. A century after Haggai ministered, the prophet Malachi accused the people of robbing God of tithes and offerings and thereby robbing themselves of blessings (Mal. 3:7-12), and his word need to be heeded today.

### **"Believe God's Promises" (1:5-6,9-11).**

Haggai's second admonition invited the people to examine their lifestyle and actions in the light of the covenant God made with them before the nation entered the land of Canaan (Lev. 26; Deut. 27-28). The word translated "consider" in the KJV is translated "give careful thought to" in the NIV (Hag. 1:5). It was time for the people to do some serious self-examination before the Lord.

God's covenant stated clearly that He would bless them if they obeyed His law and discipline them if they disobeyed. "If you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. I will break the pride of your power; I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. And your strength shall be spent in vain; for your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit" (Lev. 26:18-20 NKJV; see Deut. 28:38-40).

Indeed, their strength was spent in vain! They sowed abundantly but reaped a meager harvest. When they ate and drank, they weren't filled or satisfied. Their clothing didn't keep them warm and their income didn't cover their expenses. As supplies became scarcer, prices got higher, and a shopper might as well have carried his wealth in a wallet filled with holes.

- In what ways did the people sow abundantly but reap a meager harvest? How was their strength spent in vain? How does this continue to happen in today's church? How do we confront this tendency?

While the Old Testament tithe is not demanded of the New Testament believer, it is a good place to start when it comes to systematic stewardship. After all, if an old covenant Jew under the law could gladly give tithes to the Lord, should a new covenant believer under grace do less? But the tithe is just a start! The principle laid down in 2 Corinthians 8-9 encourages us to give offerings to the Lord and trust Him for all that we need (see 2 Cor. 8:9).

Because the Jews returned to the land in obedience to the Lord, they thought He would give them special blessings because of their sacrifices, but they were disappointed (Hag. 1:9). Instead, the Lord called for a drought and withheld both the dew and the rain. He took His blessing away from the men who labored in the fields, vineyards, and orchards. In verse 11, Haggai named the basic products that the people needed to survive: water, grain, wine, and oil (Deut. 7:13; 11:14).

- What did the prophet reveal as the reason for the people's continued struggle (Hag. 1:9)? In what ways is this similar to Matthew 6:33? How would things have been different if the people had believed what God had promised in His covenants?

Once more, the prophet revealed the source of their trouble: The people were busy building their own houses and had no time for the house of the Lord (Hag. 1:9). It's Matthew 6:33 all over again! Had the nation believed what God promised in His covenants, they would have obeyed Him and enjoyed His blessing.

However, we must be careful not to turn giving into a business arrangement, for our obedience should be the evidence of our love and faith. The Lord never made a "*prosperity covenant*" with the church as He did with Israel. In fact, our Lord's first statement in the Sermon on the Mount is, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3; see Luke 6:20 NKJV). God has seen fit to bless some Christians with wealth, but it isn't a guarantee for every believer, in spite of what the contemporary "prosperity preachers" claim. God does promise to meet our needs (Phil. 4:10-20; 2 Cor. 9:6-11), but this isn't a pledge of material prosperity. No matter how much God gives us materially, we all must say with Paul, "as poor, yet making many rich" (2 Cor. 6:10).

### **"Honor God's Name" (1:7-8).**

When the Babylonian army set fire to the temple, this destroyed the great timbers that helped to hold the massive stonework together. The stones were still usable, but the interior woodwork had been demolished and burned and had to be replaced.

According to Ezra 3:7, the Jews purchased wood from Tyre and Sidon, just as Solomon had done when he built the original temple (1 Kings 5:6-12). Now Haggai commanded the men to go into the forests on the mountains and cut down timber to be used for repairing and rebuilding the temple. What happened to the original supply of wood? Did the people use it for themselves? Did some clever entrepreneur profit by selling wood that had been bought with the king's grant? We don't

know, but we wonder where the people got the wood for their paneled houses when no wood was available for God's house.

Do Christians today in some churches give God's house and God's work, the broken, the torn, the worn-out, or the leftovers. Like the priest in the book of Malachi, do we bring to the Lord gifts we'd be embarrassed to give to our family and friends (Mal. 1:6:8)? When we do this, we commit two sins: (1) we displease the Lord, and (2) we disgrace His name. The Lord told the people through Haggai, "Build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored" (Hag. 1:8 NIV). God delights in the obedient service of His people, and His name is glorified when we sacrifice for Him and serve Him.

- Review Haggai 1:7-8. Why did the people have to replace inferior material? Why is it common for people to purchase the best for themselves and give to the Lord whatever is left over? (See Mal. 1:6-8.) How do we commit a sin when we give God our second best?

"Hallowed be thy name" is the first petition in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9), but it is often the last thing we think about as we seek to serve God. Jesus said, "I do always those things that please him [the Father]" (John 8:29), and that's a good example for us to follow.

### **"Obey His Command" (1:12-15).**

When God speaks to us by His Word, there's only one acceptable response, and that's obedience. We don't weigh the options, we don't examine the alternatives, and we don't negotiate the terms. We simply do what God tells us to do and leave the rest with Him. "Faith is not believing in spite of evidence," said British preacher Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy; "it's obeying in spite of the consequences."

- Review Haggai 1:12-15. What motivated the people to obedience? How does obedience lead to further truth? (See John 7:17.)

The leaders and all the people united in obeying God's instructions, and they were motivated by a reverent fear of the Lord (v. 12). After all, He is the "Lord of hosts," which means "the Lord of the armies," the God who is in supreme command of the armies of heaven (stars and angels) and of earth. Obedience always brings further truth (John 7:17), and the prophet assured them that God was with them in their endeavors (Hag. 1:13; see 2:4). Other scriptures to consider are (Ps.46:7, 11; Phil. 2:13 NKJV). The obedience of the leaders and people was the result of God working in their hearts, just as He had worked in the heart of King Cyrus and in the hearts of the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:5).

Haggai delivered this first message on August 29, 520 BC, but it wasn't until September 21 that the people resumed their work on the temple. Why was there a three-week delay? For one thing, it was the month when figs and grapes were harvested, and the people didn't want to lose their crops. Also, before they could build, the Jews had to remove the debris from the temple site, take inventory of their supplies, and organize their work crews. It would have been foolish to rush ahead totally unprepared. Its also possible that they took time to confess their sins and purify themselves so that their work would be pleasing to the Lord (Ps. 51:16-19).

The church today can learn a lesson from the Jewish remnant of Haggai's day. Too often we make excuses when we ought to be making confessions and obeying the Lord. We say, "It's not time for an evangelistic crusade"; "It's not time for the Spirit to bring revival"; "It's not time to expand the ministry". We act as though we fully understand "the times and the seasons", that God has ordained for His people, but we don't understand them (Acts 1:6-7).

Any interpretation of the Bible that limits God and encourages His people to be lazy instead of busy in ministry is a false interpretation and must be abandoned. If the Lord is to be pleased with us and glorified before an unbelieving world, we must hear His Word, believe it, and act upon it, no matter what the circumstances may be. After all, God is with us, and "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

### Looking Inward

- Take a moment to reflect on all that you've explored thus far in this study of **Haggai 1**. Review your notes and answers and think about how each of these things matter in your life today.
- Describe a time when you offered up excuses instead of doing what you knew God wanted you to do. Why did you avoid what you knew was right? How do those excuses look to you now? What did you learn through that experience?
- How do you prioritize your life? What role does God play in setting those priorities? Do Your priorities change over time? What is your top priority in your relationship with God? With others?
- Some of the returning exiles gave their second best to God and took the best for themselves. Have you ever been tempted to do this? Explain. Why is it so difficult to give your best to God? What role does trust play in this decision?

### 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 examine your priorities and make changes if necessary? Be specific. Go back through Haggai 1 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 Haggai 2**. Next week we will look at "**Keeping The Work Alive.**"