

Judah's Priorities

Haggai 1:1-8

Haggai 1:1-8 – *"In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, ²"Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: 'This people says, "The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built."*

³ *Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ⁴"Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?"⁵ Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: "Consider your ways! ⁶"You have sown much, and bring in little. You eat, but do not have enough. You drink, but you are not filled with drink. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes."*

⁷ *Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Consider your ways! ⁸Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified," says the Lord."*

Background Notes

Haggai was a "post-exilic Minor Prophet." What does that mean? A prophet was not labeled as "minor" because he was less spiritual or less inspired than the "major" prophets, but because they wrote shorter books. Haggai wrote the second shortest book in the Old Testament. Obadiah, another minor prophet, wrote the shortest book. By the way, the "major" prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Haggai was a *post-exilic* prophet because he ministered *after the exile* – after the Jewish people returned from their 70-year captivity in Babylon. In 586BC, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians conquered the kingdom of Judah. They destroyed the magnificent Temple built by Solomon, and they took many Jews away into captivity to Babylon.

Babylon fell to the Persians in 539BC. In 538BC the Persian emperor, Cyrus, issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their Temple. About 50,000 Jews returned at that time under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua, the high priest (v1). Most likely the prophet Haggai returned to Jerusalem at that time.

When they returned to the Land, the first thing the people did was a very good thing: they rebuilt the altar of the Lord, and then they laid the foundation for rebuilding the Temple. This time of great rejoicing was described in the book of Ezra.

"When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel. And they

sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord: "For He is good, for His mercy endures forever toward Israel." Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid" (Ezra 3:10-11).

But opposition and threats from the surrounding Persian provinces soon caused fear and discouragement, and the rebuilding of the Temple was halted. Ezra 4:24: *"Thus the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem ceased, and it was discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia."*

The rebuilding of the Temple was delayed for about 15 years. Meanwhile, the people became more interested in building their own houses than in building the house of the Lord. Their priorities were backwards - like the priorities of many people today.

At this point God raised up Haggai to preach a series of fiery sermons. The sermons were designed to motivate the people: **reorder your priorities and finish rebuilding the Temple**. The prophet Zechariah also ministered at this time. Ezra 5:1: *"Then the prophet Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophets, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them."*

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. A believer's first priority should not be "dwelling in paneled houses."

"Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?" (v3-4).

Is the Bible teaching here that it's a sin to have a nice house, or that it's a sin to have paneling in your house? No! The point of the passage is **priorities, not paneling!** The people were building nice houses for themselves, but meanwhile the house of the Lord was lying in ruins. This was wrong. Didn't they care about the house and work of the Lord? Where were their hearts? It was time to straighten out their priorities.

The Lord would say the same thing to us today. Are you more concerned about building and beautifying your own home (and adding to your possessions) than in building the house of the Lord? Where is your heart? Where are your priorities?

When we speak about "the house of the Lord" for today, we mean more than just our physical church buildings. We're speaking about being concerned for the work of the Lord in general. In Haggai's day, the Temple was the focal point of the work of the Lord, but in application for today we mean we should be concerned about the work of the Lord both inside and outside the church building.

A few weeks ago, Margie and I were given a tour of a new house that a retired couple was building. It was a very nice home, and it was quite obvious that this new home was their top priority. Their life savings were going into this house. Because this was not a Christian couple, it was understandable why this house was their #1 priority. What more did they have to live for?

Unfortunately, however, many Christians have the same set of priorities. Their homes, their possessions, and “living the good life” are more important than the work of the Lord.

What are the priorities in your life? Not what you *think* your priorities are, but what they *really* are. We all like to think that our priorities are in order. We all like to think that the Lord is more important to us than our dwellings - but are we really?

What's a good way to assess our true priorities? We can easily evaluate our priorities by taking an honest look at how and where we spend our money. A believer's first priority should not be “dwelling in paneled houses.”

2. A believer's first priority should be doing the work of the Lord.

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: “Consider your ways! Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified,” says the Lord” (v7-8).

It wasn't wrong for the people to have nice houses (then or today). The Bible is not teaching here that all Christians should live in shacks! Again, it was the matter of their priorities. They were busily improving their homes, and they were **not** doing the work of the Lord. Beautiful houses were more important to them than serving the Lord.

What was the work of the Lord? The work of the Lord for them at that time was to go up to the mountains, chop down trees, bring the lumber to Jerusalem, and get on with the job of rebuilding the Temple, the house of the Lord. The Lord said if they would do this, He would be pleased, and He would be honored. *“Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified,” says the Lord”(v8).*

Do you want to please and glorify God? You can. How? Do the work of the Lord! Doing the work of the Lord means getting involved in some kind of service for the Lord. I know a lot of Christians who faithfully attend church, but they're not workers or servers.

As Christians, none of us should be so busy or programmed out that we can't find *some* time for *some* kind of service for the Lord! One day we'll all stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ to give an account of how we used our time and talents in our earthly lives. All believers will have to answer to the Lord for what we've done with our lives.

What about your family? Doing the work of the Lord means spending time building up your children in the faith. I know many Christians who spend time getting their kids involved in good things like music, soccer, Little League, and

computers. All of these things have their place - but what about time building your children up in the faith? And not just on Sunday! Are Bible lessons and family devotions a priority in your family?

Do you really want to please and honor God? A believer's first priority should be doing the work of the Lord.

Practical Application

Don't put your money into a bag with holes.

Verse 6 - *"You have sown much, and bring in little. You eat, but do not have enough. You drink, but you are not filled with drink. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes"* (v6).

Picture a person carrying a lot of hard earned money in a sack or backpack slung over their shoulders, not realizing that there are holes in the bag, and the money is slipping out! What a picture of **futility**! Is that you in Haggai's picture?

For a while, I was the person in that picture. After I finished graduate school I had a good paying job, and we bought a pretty nice house. I must confess that I got into the "beautifying the home" syndrome. I spent a lot of time working on our house – painting, landscaping, etc. In fact, I even installed paneling!

One day I was flying home from a business trip. As we neared our destination I was looking out the plane window, and I suddenly realized that we were about to fly right over our neighborhood. I strained my eyes to see if I could see our house - and there it was! But - ***it was so small!*** How could my precious house look so ***insignificant?***

Then it hit me. I'm sure the Lord was speaking: "Dave, you're putting all kinds of time and money into that little piece of real estate – a house that's so small you can hardly see it from this plane! You need to get the big picture! From the eternal viewpoint, that house is indeed small and insignificant. A hundred years from now, will the time and money you put into that house be worth anything? Will it matter at all? **So - don't put your money into a bag with holes!**" The Lord used that experience to get me more heavily involved in youth ministry, that had eternal value - rather than in a house that had only earthly, passing value!

1 John 2:17 says, *"The world and its strong desires are passing away; but he who does the will of God abides forever."* I will never forget that experience - and I hope you'll never forget the illustration. Don't put your money into a bag with holes!