

Haggai 1:1-15; 2:10-19 (1984 NIV)
Rebuilding God's Temple: Putting First Things First

Introduction

One time, I was walking past a man who seemed to be loitering outside a Toto betting outlet. He suddenly stopped me and said in a desperate tone, "Uncle! Uncle! Can you give me some money? I have lost my job. My wife has left me. My little girl is very sick. I need to bring her to see a doctor."

I looked at him suspiciously and said, "If I give you some money, you might go inside and make some Toto bets."

The man quickly responded without thinking, "Uncle, don't worry! It won't happen. I've enough money for that!"

Misplaced priorities—not putting first things first!

The Book of Haggai, second shortest in the Old Testament, has a potent message (shortest OT book is Obadiah with 1 chapter and 21 verses). It tells us to put first things first in our lives. It was written to people who would believe in the supremacy of God. But they had drifted into a way of life where their intellectual belief in the supremacy of God was not reflected in the way they were living. They professed the priority of God, but they lived with other priorities instead. God sent this prophet to help His people get their priorities in line with what they knew these should be.

The Book of Haggai consists of four precisely dated messages from the Lord. In the many years after Solomon, the people repeatedly turned away from God in favour of idolatry. That brings us to a very key year—586 B.C. That was when the Babylonian army—under King Nebuchadnezzar—defeated Judah, destroyed the walls of Jerusalem, laid waste to the city, and utterly destroyed Solomon's temple. Nothing was left when the Babylonians had finished.

After this devastation, the Jews themselves were taken into captivity in Babylon. Fifty long years passed and then God raised up Cyrus of Persia who permitted the Jews to return under the leadership of a man named Zerubbabel. In 538 B.C. he led about 50,000 people back to Judah.

Immediately the returnees set about to rebuild the temple in about 536 B.C. They re-laid the foundation amid a great celebration (see Ezra 3). Then suddenly the Samaritans (who hated the Jews) began to oppose them. Because of their constant opposition, the Jews stopped the rebuilding process. After all there was plenty of other work to do—they were trying to rebuild their own lives and homes from scratch. As the years passed slowly

but surely Jerusalem came to life again. Homes were built, stores opened, commerce established, fields planted, crops harvested, and life began to resemble something of a normal pattern.

There was only one problem. The temple still lay in ruins—overgrown with weeds. Every time the Jews passed it, it stood as a reminder of their failure to take care of God's house.

Sixteen years passed by. Now we come to the summer of 520 B.C. Enter Haggai, about whom we know nothing except what is in this book and a few verses in Ezra. God raised him up to deliver four brief messages in five months—from August to December, 520 B.C. When I say brief, I mean really brief. The whole book is only 38 verses long. You can easily read it in less than 10 minutes. The message of this little book is clear—"It's time to finish rebuilding the temple by putting first things first."

The Book of Haggai consists of four dated messages from the Lord:

- The FIRST (1:1-15) was on the first day of the sixth month in the second year of Darius (August 29, 520 B.C.).
- The SECOND (2:1-9) came on the 21st of the seventh month (October 17, 520 B.C.).
- The THIRD (2:10-19) and FOURTH (2:20-23) messages came on the same day, the 24th of the ninth month (December 18, 520 B.C.).

With that as background, let's take a big-picture overview of Haggai's 1st (1:1-15) and 3rd messages (2:10-19) today. The 1st message is God's call to put Him first (i.e. to rebuild the temple). The 3rd message is God's promised blessing for putting Him first.

I. Call to put God first: "... You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little ... Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house ..." (1:1-15)

Verse 2: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'"

To be fair, the people truly intended to rebuild God's house, but they just hadn't gotten around to it yet. They were afraid of the Samaritans, so they conveniently chose to build their own homes. Then they presumptuously claimed to know better than God when the temple should be rebuilt—"The time has not yet come ..."

Let's think of some excuses they might have offered for their delay:

- God brings us back and He wants us to first take care of our own homes.

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- The job is too big. We'll never finish it. So why even try.
- Don't worry. Some heroes of faith will do it even if we don't.
- We really need to pray about it some more.
- I don't think we need a temple anyway. After all, when we were in exile, we had no temple to go to.
- The time just isn't right. Construction materials too expensive at this time.
- It is a thing we should do, BUT we're just too busy!!!

They were looking for (a) a better time, and (b) an easier time. But the result was the same in every case—delay, delay, delay. It's always easy to make excuses when you don't want to obey God.

Someone might wonder why the temple was so important. Just remember that in the Old Testament the temple represented God's presence on earth. Thus God's reputation was at stake in the rebuilding. The pagans would draw wrong conclusions if the temple was never rebuilt. They would assume that the Jews didn't care about their God. How could they leave His temple in ruins? At the same time the Jews were also teaching their children (their next generation) by attitude and example that God didn't matter. Thus rebuilding the temple was a major concern to God—and should have been to the people as well.

Jesus said it this way in the NT, "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). We all know this, but ...

We all are prone to put our house above God's house. Humanly speaking, this is our default mode—we will naturally live for our priorities, not for God's. Note one thing about God's people in Haggai's time—those who put their house above God's house were actually committed believers.

We would be too quick to judge them if we forget that the people to whom Haggai was speaking had made the difficult commitment to leave their established way of life in Babylon.

- They made the dangerous journey back to the land of promise.
- They had homes and work in Babylon. Many of them had been born and raised there. But they knew that God's purpose for His people involved the Promised Land.
- By faith they had responded to the call to return and had committed themselves to the hardships of the return journey and of getting re-established in the land that had been devastated.

Shortly after returning, they had made an attempt to rebuild the Temple, but the opposition had stopped the project. Gradually, they had lost their vision and had drifted into a lifestyle where God's house was no longer the priority. They probably viewed it as nice but not necessary; extra but not essential.

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We need to see ourselves in this picture.

- If you know Christ, you recall a time when you made a personal commitment to Him. You decided to follow Jesus.
- At first, you were zealous for spiritual things. You read your Bible every day. You got involved with groups like Campus Crusade, Inter-Varsity, BSF, Precepts, etc.
- You got involved serving in a local church. But perhaps your efforts met with difficulties. You had a personality clash with another Christian, or you were disillusioned with the disappointing results, or you encountered personal trials that God didn't remove, even after much prayer.
- Meanwhile, life moved on. You started a career and a family.
- You had bills to pay and other demands on your time.
- The things of God then drifted into the background. You still try to do God's work as often as you can, but it has become something on the side, not in the centre.
- You tell yourself that you just don't have time to serve as you used to. Without deliberately rebelling against God, you have drifted into putting your house/priorities above God's house/priorities.

If you had asked God's people in Haggai's time why the temple had not been rebuilt, they would have responded, "Don't get us wrong! We are all for rebuilding the Temple. It's a great cause. But the timing just isn't right."

Verses 3-4 - Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Please understand. There's nothing wrong with having a nice, big house. This isn't an attack on nice, big houses. It is a warning against not putting God's things first; a caution against sidelining God's priorities in preference of our own.

Verses 5-6, 9-11 - Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." ... "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands."

Here we hear a sobering reminder that what happens in our heart affects every other area of our lives. Because the people had pushed God out of the centre of life, they were now sidetracked and struggling in every other area. They had ...

- Fields without produce—busy but no results.
- Action without satisfaction—busy but no sense of fulfilment.
- Labour without profit—busy but no gains.

This is not the Law of Sowing and Reaping. I call this the Law of Unproductive Busyness. Again, we must see ourselves here. We're all prone to make up excuses for why we are not putting God first with what He has entrusted to us. Sometimes we even use the Bible to support our excuses.

- "The Bible says in 1 Tim. 5:8 that if a man doesn't provide for his own family, he's worse than an unbeliever and has denied the faith!"
- "I'm just trying to obey this verse by providing for my family. But someday I'll have all the kids through university and the bills paid, and then I'll give more to the work of God."

The people in Haggai's day were having problems. What they didn't see was that God not only understood their circumstances, He had actually caused them! They were working harder yet going behind further, but they hadn't stop to consider that God was trying to tell them something.

Haggai came along and said, "Folks, it is God who controls the rain and the harvest. He is withholding His blessing because your priorities are not right! Put His house first and He will bless you. Seek first His kingdom and all these things will be added unto you."

Some of these people had a measure of material success. They lived in fine, panelled houses (1:4). But the point of verses 6 & 9-11 is, even if you get what you're working for, it never satisfies. Solomon, who had money, fame, knowledge, sensual pleasure, and everything a man could dream of, ended up cynically saying, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" (Eccl. 1:2).

The truth is, only God can satisfy your soul. As Jesus has promised, when we put God and His house first, He gives us all the things we need. But we have to fight constantly the drift towards wrong priorities.

Let me explain more what "God's house" means, especially in our body life context. In our text, of course, it refers to the temple in Jerusalem, which was the centre for worshiping God. Although God is everywhere, the temple was the place on earth where God dwelled in a special sense.

- He revealed His glory there.

- The sacrifices offered there pointed ahead to the coming of God's Messiah, Jesus, who would offer Himself as God's final and complete sacrifice for our sins.

To allow the Temple to be in ruins was to neglect the worship of God. It was to have misplaced priorities.

In the church age, God's house is not so much a physical building, but rather His people, both individually and corporately:

- 1 Cor 3:16—"Don't you know that you yourselves (NOT a building BUT yourselves) are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?"
- 1 Cor 6:19—"Do you not know that your bodies (NOT a building BUT your bodies) are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own ..."
- 2 Cor 6:16—"What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we (NOT a building BUT we) are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.'"
- Eph 2:21—"In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord." Building and temple in this verse refer NOT to a physical structure, BUT the body of believers.
- 1 Pet 2:5—"... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." The word "house" here is *oikos*—which is the root for the word translated as "family" in English.

All these verses point out to us that the house or temple of God is not so much a physical building. Rather, it is very much the believers individually and together who are being built into the house/family of God as God dwells in each of us and collectively among us.

In the OT, the Holy Spirit has not come to dwell in every worshipper of Yahweh. So, these believers and worshippers of Yahweh are not called God's temple or God's house, but the people of God.

In the NT on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in every believer individually, and in all believers who are in fellowship with one another. That's why Paul and others in the NT can say that all believers, individually and together, are God's temple or God's house.

There are many huge church buildings in Europe that are now run down and deserted. Can you honestly say that any of these is really God's house? No! That's why many of these have been converted into shopping malls and other things.

Today, we gather together as God's people. In a strict NT sense, this building is not God's house. WE are God's house. We are God's house worshipping in this building. Now, imagine suddenly all of City Hub 2 Complex disappears, and we find ourselves in the middle of an open space with no walls and roofs. When this happens, has the house of God gone according to NT understanding? No, God's house is still here because WE are still here.

To make God's house a priority in life in the NT sense means that one of our key concerns is to make ourselves a dwelling fit for the Holy Spirit, and to devote to building ourselves and one another in Christ, so that our lives together are a proper dwelling for God. This means it is important for us to keep ourselves and help others grow in family intimacy with God and with one another as God's household.

What does this imply? It implies that our outreach/evangelism to others outside the church must be as strong as our fellowship with one another inside the church. Very often, we work very hard on our outreach/evangelism, but slacken in building our fellowship bonds. Strong outreach/evangelism may bring people to us. But it is strong fellowship that keeps them staying with us. Fellowship is about God's people coming together as the house/family of God, building bonds to live, serve, worship, and belong together.

When I was a student in seminary, I took a course on church worship. One of the assignments was to visit a church of a tradition different from your own and write a report of your worship experience there.

One Sunday, I went to this church that was totally new to me. After the service, three men spotted me and gathered around me to extend their welcome. They led me to a table and offered me snacks and a cup of coffee.

They started off with introductions of themselves and their church, followed by some small talks. I could sense that they thought I was an unbeliever seeking for the truth, and so they were working towards sharing the Gospel with me. For some reasons, I did not want to disappoint them, and so decided to "play along".

When one of them noticed that I had finished my cup of coffee, he seemed concerned that I might leave soon. In order to keep me longer, he offered to get me another cup of coffee. When I hesitated, he said, "Don't be shy. Our church coffee is best and it is free." Then he got me another cupful.

Soon, the must-ask question popped up, "Have you heard of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?"

I answered, "Yes, of course! I am a Christian ... and I am now in seminary."

When I said that, I could see that all three of them had this same uneasy look on their faces. It's as if they were responding, "Oh ... what a disappointment. No fish to catch today. You are a believer. More than that, you are a soon-to-be pastor."

From then on, I could sense that they were slowly making their retreat from me. Soon there was only one left. When I raised my cup to ask for some water, the last one with me said, "So sorry. I need to hurry to my Bible study class. The water is over there. Please feel free to help yourself."

Our outreach/evangelism to unbelievers must be as strong as our fellowship with fellow believers. Strong outreach/evangelism may bring people to us. But it is strong fellowship that keeps them staying with us. Fellowship is about God's people coming together as the house/family of God, building bonds to live, serve, worship, and belong together.

Let me now jump to the last two verses of Chapter 1 to help us capture a very encouraging picture.

Verses 14-15 - So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius.

Haggai preached one message and 24 days later the people began to rebuild the temple. Note that this happened because the Lord stirred up the spirits of the people. This is an important note because it reminds us that God's work ultimately depends on God. He must give the orders, He must give the energy, He must give the desire, and then He must stir up the spirits of His people. Everything depends on Him, yet He holds us fully responsible to do His will, BUT with His enabling.

I find tremendous encouragement in this. After all, it's hard to get started again after 16 long years. I'm sure the Jews never meant to let the temple lie in ruins that long. But after a few months the weeds began to overgrow the site and at that point, it was easier just to let it go.

Perhaps some of you feel stuck today (your "spiritual engine" cannot start!). You need to get started again; you need a new direction in your spiritual life; you want to begin again. But you don't know how; you don't know where; you don't know what to do.

This simple thought comes to mind. It goes like this:

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- I can't go back.
- I can't stay here.
- I must go forward.

The people of Haggai's day meant well but good intentions don't matter when it comes to obeying God. Remember—it's always easy to find excuses when you don't want to obey God. We all have our excuses for not doing what we know we ought to do. Our excuses keep us from the hard road of obedience. But once we stop making excuses, we're then ready to obey God. Until then, we will always be stuck in "spiritual neutral".

Summary of 1st message: When the Word of God confronts the way we live, we can either resist it by making up excuses, or we can obey it. In putting first things first, we deliberately and continually choose to obey, and seek God's enabling to keep His concerns as our priorities.

Let me now lead you to ...

II. Promise for putting God first: "... From this day on I will bless you." (2:10-19)

There were people who wondered if it was worth to obey God. So Haggai delivered his third message to the people in 2:10-19. In it God spoke directly to people who wondered why things weren't getting better and faster. It's an important message for anyone who has ever wondered if it's worth it to put God's things first.

Verses 10-13 - On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius (which happens to be December 18, 520 B.C.) , the word of the LORD came to the prophet Haggai: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?'" The priests answered, "No." Then Haggai said, "If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?" "Yes," the priests replied, "it becomes defiled."

These verses sound rather strange to us. But everything Haggai said would have made perfect sense to the Jews then. They had hundreds of laws governing all aspects of life. Most of those laws had to do with understanding what was holy and what was not. Holy things were objects that had been set apart for God's use—usually in the temple worship. Because God is holy, only holy objects could come into His presence. Contrary to this idea of holiness, dead bodies were defiled or unclean; anyone touching a dead body became unclean himself.

With this background, two questions come into focus:

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- What if something holy touches something unholy, does the unholy thing become holy? The answer is no.
- But what if an unholy thing touches a holy thing? The holy thing becomes defiled.

This is really a truth about the pervasive power of sin. Consider sin like a contagious disease. Suppose a person with a cold kisses a person in perfect health. Will the sick person catch health from the healthy person? No. However, the healthy person can easily catch the cold from the sick person.

Verse 14 - "... So it is with this people and this nation in my sight, declares the LORD. Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled."

Here is the application. When your heart isn't right with God, whatever you do will be questionable. You see, God wanted more than a temple rebuilt. He wanted the hearts of the people to be fully devoted to Him. God didn't want a big house filled with empty hearts. He didn't want animal sacrifice unless it was accompanied by a living sacrifice of the people. This implies that holiness begins in the heart. That's the whole point. God wants your heart because if He has your heart, He'll soon have every other area of your life.

So how about your heart? Many of us are concerned about heart disease, and rightly so. What about spiritual heart disease that is just as insidious?

You won't catch godliness by merely joining a godly group of people. You must personally get right with God by repenting of your sins and trusting in Jesus Christ, and you must walk in personal holiness before Him. Of course, being close with godly people will help in your walk with God, but you won't catch holiness by transference.

God will not bless a cause, no matter how great, unless the people involved in it are holy. The temple was the greatest cause on earth in that day. God would manifest His presence and His glory to His people there. Sacrifices for sins would be offered there. The various feasts and celebrations took place there. However, these people were offering sacrifices and going through the prescribed rituals, but their hearts were not right before God. The contamination of their disobedient hearts was defiling the very sacrifices that they offered, just as those who touched a dead body contaminated themselves and others who touched them (2:14).

Haggai was saying something like this to God's people in his time—"To live in sin during the week and then come to the temple to worship is like dragging a corpse into the temple. It defiles everything."

Haggai's word to God's people today is something like this—"You can be busily involved in the local church; you can give big money to the church, but if your heart is not right before God, you're defiling everything you do!"

God looks at the heart. Do we do what we do with clean hands and pure hearts? It's not enough to build His house; we must build it with clean hands and pure hearts.

Verses 18-19 - "From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid. Give careful thought: Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit. From this day on I will bless you."

Notice that the phrase "From this day on" is repeated twice. It's as if God is stressing, "The past is the past and we can't change that. But things are going to be different from this day on." Let's draw two simple conclusions from this truth:

- i. Blessings begin the moment we obey. After delaying for 16 long years the Jews had finally started to rebuild the temple. But they had a long way to go and their fields were still barren. I think some of them were wondering if all this talk about rebuilding the temple was worth the effort.

Many of us look at our problems the same way. We feel like we're so far away from what we should be that it's easier to say, "What's the use? Why bother trying? Things will never be different."

But you've got to take those little steps every day in the right direction. So be encouraged. God's blessings begin the moment we begin to obey Him.

- ii. The harvest will come eventually. All farmers understand this principle. You don't plant today and harvest tomorrow. It took the Jews four years to finish rebuilding the temple. No doubt they faced continued opposition and discouragement along the way. But by starting to rebuild they were planting fresh seed in the ground. It hadn't come up yet, but God was saying, "Don't worry. You're going to reap an abundant harvest eventually. Just be faithful and I promise the harvest will come."

This is important for God's people to remember. Sometimes we grow weary in our faith and faithfulness to the Lord, and wonder if our efforts are in vain. God says, "You plant the seed and let me take care of the harvest."

In Haggai, the first message (1:1-15) challenges us to put God's concerns as our first priorities. The third message (2:10-19) shows that not only should we do God's things first, but we must do so with pure hearts. God will grant true blessing when we put His house first. Even more than that, God will grant true blessing when we put His house first with righteous lives.

But what about godly people who are truly seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness, but they have to face many trials?

Please understand this—true blessing does not mean that God removes all our problems, but rather He grants His presence in our problems and His promises for eternity.

- The Jews in Haggai's time were still under Persian rule.
- They were still surrounded by hostile nations.
- They were still just a small remnant in the land.
- Not all of them lived long enough to see God's glory rest on this temple in greater splendour than it had on Solomon's temple.

In other words, the greatest blessings are not temporal blessings that come and go, but the abiding joy and satisfaction that come to God's obedient people through good and bad times, and throughout all eternity. While God often blesses His obedient people on earth with material things (as He promised the Jews here), His greatest blessings are beyond the material and reserved for them in heaven.

Summary of 3rd message: Earthly priorities may bring temporal gains, but God's priorities will harvest eternal blessings. If we prefer the eternal to the temporal, we must then live according to what we want most in God and not what we want now for ourselves.

Conclusion

Today, we are called to put God's things above our own. What God wants us to consider is, if we seek first His kingdom with clean hands and pure hearts, He will bless. So we need to take frequent inventory of our lives, beginning at the heart level.

- Do I immediately confess any known sin and turn from it in genuine repentance, without blaming or excuses?
- Do I build into my life protection and accountability in order not to make any provision for the sins that so easily entangle me?
- Am I completely truthful in my closest relationships, or do I put on a mask of hypocrisy through deception?

As I close, let me point out a call from the Lord given five times in 1:5, 7 and 2:15, 18a&b – “Give careful thought ...” The Lord is calling the people in Haggai's time and us today to be thoughtful about putting Him and His things

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first in life. Five times the Lord said this through Haggai. That's how much He wants His people to hear it and heed it.

And when we today hear and heed it, we can claim with thankful hearts the same promise that the Lord gave to the people in Haggai's time in 2:19—"From this day on I will bless you."

Let's decide today to give thought to putting God and His things first, and to give thanks as He blesses us for so obeying Him.

Putting first things first—whose house are we building today? The Lord helps us choose to put His house above our own. Amen!

Reflection Questions

1. "Strong outreach/evangelism may bring people to us. But it is strong fellowship that keeps them staying with us. Fellowship is about God's people coming together as the house/family of God, building bonds to live, serve, worship, and belong together." Reflect on this and draw out some application principles in the context of your church.
2. When God's concerns and your life priorities are in conflict, how can you align them with each other? Reflect on this and draw out some application principles.