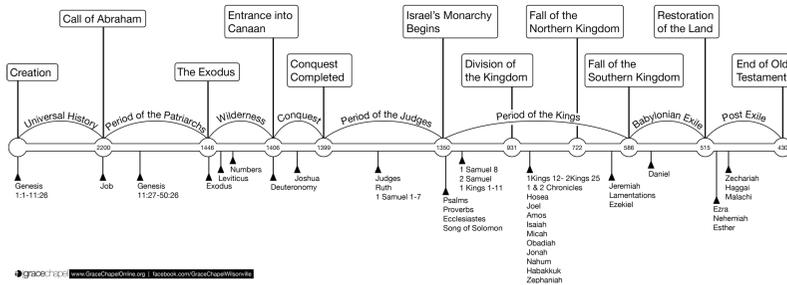


“MISPLACED PRIORITIES” (Haggai 1:1-12)

The last three books of the Old Testament were the post-Exilic prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. They spoke to the remnant who had returned from the 70 years exile in Babylon. This was a time of rebuilding. Boice points out, “Gone was the glory of the former kingdom and temple. Gone was the great population. All that was left was the rubble of Jerusalem, the remnant of the people, and the task of restoration.” Their objective was to encourage their spiritual and moral life of this remnant, now back in their home land, as they sought to rebuild the temple and the nation. Haggai and Zechariah dealt mostly with the spiritual needs, as they related to the rebuilding of the temple, and Malachi dealt primarily with the moral and social needs involved with the reconstruction of the nation itself.

OLD TESTAMENT TIMELINE



CONTEXT OF THE BOOK

In 536 B.C., a remnant of about 50,000 Jews had returned from Babylon to Judah under the decree of Cyrus, King of Persia (see 2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). Led by Zerubbabel and Joshua, the returned remnant quickly rebuilt the altar and began offering sacrifices. Two years after returning in 538 B.C., the returned remnant had laid the foundation to rebuild the temple. The older men wept and the younger men shouted for joy (Ezra 3:8-13). It seemed that a great spiritual awakening had occurred.

However, the initial zeal and joy soon declined. Opposition from their Samaritan enemies and others led to fear, discouragement, and apathy. The work stopped after two years (534 B.C.). The people soon lost interest in continuing the rebuilding of the temple. Instead, they pursued their own interests of building houses, cultivating farms, and raising their families. The Lord's work took a distant second place in their hearts. For 14 years the people sat on their hands and pursued their own interests. It was in that context, that the Lord then raised up Haggai and (two months later) Zechariah to proclaim His message to this backslidden remnant. Through their prophecies and encouragement, in 520 B.C. the work on the temple resumed and was finished four years later in 516 B.C.

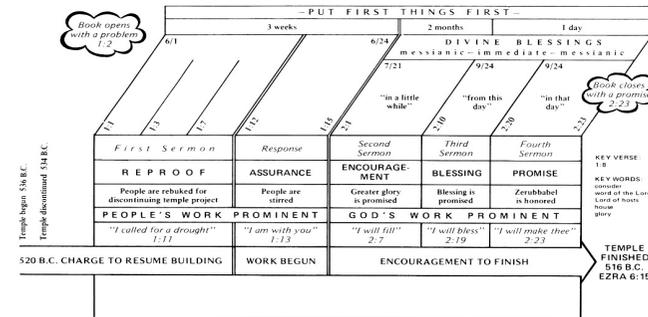
CONTENT OF THE BOOK

The Book of Haggai is the second shortest book in the Old Testament (only Obadiah is shorter). Haggai, the writer of this short book, is mentioned in Ezra 5:1-2 and 6:14 as the older of the two prophets who encouraged the remnant (that returned after the Babylonian captivity) to rebuild the Zerubbabel temple despite the difficulties.

Haggai's name means “festal” or “festive, which may suggest to some that he was born on one of the major feast days. The literary style of Haggai is simple and direct. One outstanding feature of Haggai's message is his strong awareness that his messages had their origin in God. Some 25 times he affirmed the divine authority of his messages. The great burden of Haggai concerns the temple and the reconstruction and refurbishing of the temple were the supreme passion of this prophet.

The content of the book is a report of four messages by this seemingly insignificant post-exilic prophet whose revival ministry to the returnees was apparently of limited duration of around four months. This shows his messages were very effective for it did not take too long to get the people moving. We don't know if he had any other ministry beyond these four months. The 4 messages may be outlined as follows:

- I. A Word of Rebuke (Hag 1:1-11).
- II. A Word of Encouragement (Hag 2:1-9).
- III. A Word of Blessing (Hag 2:10-19).
- IV. A Word of Promise (Hag 2:20-23).

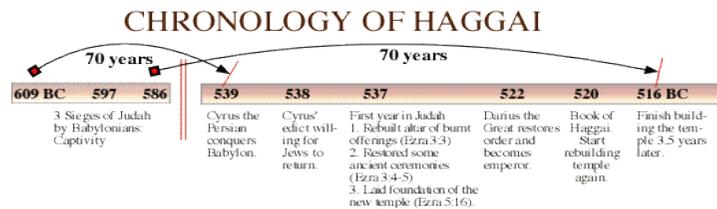


Haggai wrote primarily to encourage and exhort the returned remnant to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. He not only rebuked the people for their delay in rebuilding the temple, but he also encouraged them and helped them in this enterprise. In the process of this he taught:

- (1) God blesses His people when they put Him first;
- (2) We should not grow weary in the service of the Lord; and that
- (3) God's promises for tomorrow become the foundation for our confidence for today.

*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 (v1)*

The Lord sovereignly chose two prophets to bring prophetic words to the remnant at Jerusalem at this time – Haggai and Zechariah. These two contemporaries may well have been among the first exiles from Babylon who returned with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem. Haggai seems to be a much older man for he hints in Haggai 2:3 that he had seen the glory of Solomon’s Temple, which was destroyed 70 years before. By contrast, Zechariah was a young man (Zech. 2:4). Two other leading men of that time are introduced here – Zerubbabel and Joshua. Zerubbabel was the governor of Jerusalem, and a direct descendant of the last legitimate ruler of Judah (Jeconiah). Joshua was the high priest descended from Aaron.



The first message of Haggai was given on the first day of the sixth month of Elul in 520 B.C. in the second year of King Darius. Three more will quickly follow on the 21<sup>st</sup> of the seventh month (2:1), and then the third (2:10-19) and fourth (2:20-23) messages came on the same day, the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the ninth month (2:10, 20).

*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. (v2)*

The returned remnant of the Jews started to rebuild the temple with enthusiasm. Despite the delay, most still believed that one day they would finish the work but they didn't want to do it yet, "This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." They dare not speak against the *command* to build the temple, so they spoke against its *timing*. Such procrastination is part of the weakness of fallen humanity. We must remember that these were not natural rebels. For they had made the long and arduous journey back some 14 years before to repopulate and rebuild Jerusalem. They had even built an altar and laid the foundations for the temple.

The Lord reveals here that He was fully aware of the thoughts and the words of the people about His work. This is a solemn warning to us all not to assume that God doesn't observe us today. Revelation 1:13 makes clear that the Lord Jesus Christ walks up and down all of His churches observing everything and everyone there. They made feeble excuses, "The time is not come." The time is never right for God's work, from our perspective. But it always is, from God's perspective. What types of excuses are you hiding behind to avoid doing the Lord's work?

*Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste? Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways (v3-5)*

The Lord now speaks. He has been patient for a long time with them. But now enough is enough. For God will never allow His children to sin successfully. We cannot disrespect God forever and get away with it. Many of the Jews were certainly taking care of themselves. God reveals here through Haggai they had erected elaborate "ceiled houses." These were beautified panelled mansions that kings built for themselves (1 Kings 7:3, 7; Jer. 22:14). So these Jews ensured that their own homes got dedicated attention. It was not a matter of poor resources, but rather of misplaced priorities.



God's message is that they must repent and change, "Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways." The word translated "consider" means "to give very careful thought to something." God was calling them to carefully audit their lives. They had to get back to putting God first in their lives. Steve Cole observes,

"Again, we must see ourselves here! We're all prone to make up excuses for why we are not obedient to put God first with the time and money He entrusts to us. Sometimes we even use the Bible to support our excuses. "The Bible says 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 that verse by providing for my family. But someday I'll have all the kids through college and the bills paid, and then we'll give more to the Lord's work." Or, "This is a hectic time in our family life. The kids demand so much attention. Every day is taken up with meeting their needs. But someday we'll be through this phase, and then we'll get involved in the church."

*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. (v6)*

Tough times for God's people is not a coincidence. For the hand of God had already judged them for their lack of regard for Him. The Lord had hit them in their wallets with a double curse. First, they earned less than they expected in their harvests, "Ye have sown much, and bring in little" and, secondly, the little that they earned disappeared without meeting their needs, "and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes." No matter how hard they worked or how shrewd their investments were, they never seemed to come out ahead.

These people were like the proverbial cat chasing its tail. Their lives were that of perpetual disappointment and dissatisfaction. In trying to rob God we only end up robbing ourselves. There was nothing new in this revelation. For God had previously warned that He would materially judge them if they disobeyed His word,

**And if ye will not yet for all this hearken unto me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. And I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass: And your strength shall be spent in vain: for your land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruits. (Lev. 26:18-20; cf. Deut. 28:38-40)**



Adrian Rogers notes,

“Now, what had happened to these people was this: that God had blessed therein. They were in a fix; they’d been carried away captive into Babylon. And they cried out to God, and said, “God, have mercy. God, throw off the yoke of the oppressor.” And, God threw off the yoke of the oppressor. And, God brought them into their land. And, God gave them the things that they needed. And, God gave them a commission. And, God gave them a plan. And, God said, “Now, go to work for me.” But, rather than going to work for God, they went to work for themselves. They lived for self, and self alone—and they had forgotten the Word of God. And, rather than being humbly grateful, they were grumbly hateful. And, they did not serve the Lord God. And, God says, “All right, consider your ways. You sow much, but you bring in little” (Haggai 1:5–6), and there was economic disaster.”

*Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways. (v7)*

The Lord repeated His command to change, “*Consider your ways.*” This phrase is like a spiritual alarm clock – unwelcome but necessary.

*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. 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. Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit. And I called for a drought upon the land, and upon the mountains, and upon the corn, and upon the new wine, and upon the oil, and upon that which the ground bringeth forth, and upon men, and upon cattle, and upon all the labour of the hands. (v8-11)*

The Lord ordered them to start the rebuilding work, “*Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house.*” The people had no problem sourcing wood for their panelled homes so the Lord tells them to go and source some for His house. They had energy for their own needs but not for the needs of the Lord. This command had a great promise to encourage them to make haste to complete the work, “*and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord.*”



The Lord reveals another area of chastisement He had inflicted on them for their carelessness and apathy, “*Ye looked for much, and, lo it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it.*” He lists a number of physical judgments He inflicted upon them. Clearly, some people wrote off the tough times as bad luck, an attack of the devil, or an economic downturn! But God was trying to get their attention, “*Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.*” Rogers points out,

“Now, why did God do this? Why did God say, “I’m going to hold back the rain?” Why did God say, “When you get your money, it’s going to be put into a bag with holes?” Why are there recession, depression, and a slowdown in the national productivity? And, why were there unfathomable weather patterns that caused drought? God did it. God did it. No one else did it—the God of love was behind it all.”

When God is neglected, nothing will work right in our lives, “*Ye looked for much, and, lo it came to little.*” How many times has the Lord had to blow upon our efforts to teach us a lesson about our attitudes and actions? It is foolish to cheat anyone but even more foolish to cheat Almighty God! John Piper is right to note,

“The first message in chapter 1 reveals to the governor and priest and people that the reason they are all frustrated is that they have tried to make their own lives comfortable while neglecting the temple of God. . . So they lived in perpetual frustration and discontentment. Nothing satisfied. We can’t pass over this lesson easily. It’s for us, too. If you devote yourself to sowing and eating and drinking and clothing yourselves and earning wages but neglect your ministry in the body of Christ (the temple of God, 1 Cor. 3:16,17), you will live in constant frustration. If you spend your time and energy seeking comfort and security from the world and do not spend yourself for the glory of God

every pleasure will leave its sour aftertaste of depression and guilt and frustration. . . Both then and now the real problem is not the neglect of a building but indifference to the glory of God. The temple of the Old Testament existed for the glory of God. And the Church today exists for the glory of God (Eph. 1:6,12,14). Indifference to the growth and spiritual prosperity of the Church and its mission is always a sign of failure to love the glory of God. And the sour fruit of this failure is a life of chronic frustration. He who seeks to save his life will lose it to continual frustrations; but he who loses his life for the glory of God and the good of His cause will find life, deep and fulfilling.”

### CONCLUSION

To put anything over God is a great sin. James Boice puts it, “in the final analysis all inverted priorities are idolatry. They put the creation before the Creator.” The message of Haggai has abiding relevance to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Lord is still calling us all to re-examine our priorities, “*But seek ye first the kingdom of God...*” (Matt. 6:33). It is all too easy to have misplaced priorities. We cannot tell the unsaved that today is the day to get right with God and then live as Christians that we can serve God tomorrow only! We must learn to keep the main thing the main thing.

The NT local Church of Jesus Christ is the Temple of God today, “*Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?*” (1 Cor. 3:16) It is not a building but a spiritual building of God’s people. When we are gathered together, we also form a “Temple.” To neglect that NT Temple to pursue our own interest is to make the same mistake as those people who Haggai condemned in his day. It is just as roundly condemned, “*And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works; Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.*” (Heb. 10:24-25) Steve Cole makes a helpful application,

“Twice the Lord tells the people, “Consider your ways” (1:5, 7). That means to stop long enough in your busy schedule to evaluate your life in the light of God’s Word and fearing Him (1:12).

(1) *How are you spending your time?* These people had plenty of time for themselves, but they didn’t have time for God. Rearrange your schedule!

(2) *How are you spending your money, which is really God’s money?* These folks claimed that they had to get their own houses built first, and then they could build God’s house. That was backwards. God says that we are to give Him the first fruits, off the top. We are to give Him the best. We are managers of all that He has given us, to invest it profitably for His kingdom.

(3) *What are your goals?* What is it that you’re aiming at in life? If you live to an old age, what do you want to look back on as far as accomplishments?

(4) *What do you think about the most?* What secretly occupies your thought life? Do you dream of getting rich, of achieving fame, of some hobby or leisure pursuit, or do you think about the Lord and how He wants you to spend your life?

(5) *Who are your heroes or models?* Whom do you most admire? Whom would you like to be like? Why?

(6) *Who are your friends?* Whom do you like to spend time with? Why do you like to be with them?

(7) *How do you spend your leisure time?* When you have time off, how do you spend it? Do you watch TV? Do you live for sports? Do you hang out with friends? How does your leisure time reflect and affect your devotion to Jesus Christ?”