

Consider Your Ways

Haggai 1:1-15, Luke 10:41-42, Matthew 6:33-34

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Who was Haggai? Some commentators believe he may have been one of the captives taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar.

Some commenters suggest he may have been an old man who had seen the previous temple before its destruction due to what he says about it.

But scarcely anything is known of his personal history. In fact, he is only mentioned in one other book of the Bible, the book of Ezra.

What we do know is that Haggai was one of the twelve minor prophets in the Bible with his ministry occurring during a pivotal time for the Jewish community.

After the Babylonian exile, Cyrus the Great allowed many Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild Temple.

However, due to opposition and apathy, the reconstruction had stalled for approximately 16 years.

Haggai's prophecies were delivered later in 520 BC, during the reign of Darius I. He was instrumental in motivating the people to resume and complete the work on the Temple.

The believers, in Haggai's day, had put off work on God's House and instead turned their focus to their own homes.

This corresponds to many believers today who have their priorities in life mixed up just like in Haggai's day.

These mixed-up priorities tend to rob us of personal satisfaction. It also hinders the flow of God's blessings in our lives just as it did the Israelites.

The Israelites, who had returned from captivity, came back to help rebuild Jerusalem and the temple but somewhere along the way their priorities got turned upside down.

They put God's House on the back burner and focused on their own personal interests.

Regardless if it was persecution from surrounding people, threats, criticism or the business of life, they had forgotten that God should always have first place in their lives.

Today we should check our own personal priority lists, that unwritten list on which we order our lives.

Every one of us has chosen to put certain things on the top of the list – things get our time, our money, our resources and our hearts.

So, let's see what the Book of Haggai has to say about this.

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First, we learn that the Book of Haggai deals with priorities. In Biblical times, the Temple was a sign of God's blessing on Israel and was, at one point, considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

At that time, God's presence dwelled in the Temple representing His dwelling place with the nation of Israel.

The Temple testified to God's presence, existence, supremacy, holiness, mercy and authority. It was a marvelous site to have looked upon... in its day.

Then, after Solomon died, the kingdom split and eventually both kingdoms were taken captive because of their rebellion and idolatry.

The Northern Kingdom, called Israel, was overtaken by the Assyrians and the Southern Kingdom, called Judah, was overtaken by the Babylonians.

When the Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 BC, the temple was destroyed and the Judean inhabitants were captured and taken to Babylon.

Then, in 538 BC, Cyrus, ruler of the Medo-Persian Empire, defeated the Babylonians and took charge.

Cyrus allowed conquered nations, including the Jews, to return to their homelands. So, in 536 BC, about 50,000 Israelites returned to their homeland.

In fact, Cyrus not only allowed the Israelites to return, he even agreed to finance the reconstruction of the Jewish temple.

The return of these Israelites was a sign of their faithfulness to God, but many Jews had become comfortable in Babylon and prospered.

They weren't interested in the difficult journey to the once-conquered homeland in order to undertake the difficult job of rebuilding Jerusalem or the Temple.

Their way of life was more important to them than re-instituting the public worship of God. Yet the faithful Jews made the journey and began the job.

Then, after they had laid the foundations of the temple, they encountered opposition, so they put the work on hold. The people convinced themselves that it wasn't time to build!

So, they focused on building their own homes, neglecting the house of the LORD.

In fact, the rebuilding of the temple was put on hold for sixteen years. That's why God raised up Haggai to be a prophet to His people.

Haggai warns them to take careful thought about their priorities, revealing to them why the house of the Lord still lay in ruins.

He told them that it wasn't because of opposition, nor the absence of God's blessings, it was because they had misplaced priorities in their choices.

They had abandoned their assignment and focused on their own homes, wants, and needs, not on what God wanted.

Haggai challenged them to look in their hearts and take careful thought about their actions.

The truth revealed through the prophet was that these believers were dishonoring God with their current priority lists! They had put their selfish desires before the Lord and that's idolatry!

It's like the story about a group of friends who went deer hunting and paired off in twos for the day. That night Shane returned alone, staggering back with an eight-point buck.

"Where's Jacob?" he was asked. "Jacob broke his leg. He's a couple of miles back up the trail." "You left Jacob laying there, and carried the deer back?" "Well," said Shane, "I figured no one was going to steal Jacob."

Many people today have their priorities upside down and don't see the danger. Their focus isn't on God and His House, it's on their homes, their wants and their wills.

The result is that many in the kingdom of God are in danger of having God's blessing in their lives removed!

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So, what happens to our life when our priorities get turned upside down with God?

The Israelites had deceived themselves into thinking that serving God and completing the House of the Lord wasn't that important. It could be completed later.

They probably said, *"We can't afford to build a house for God or put money into His Kingdom because our own house takes up all the money,"* or *"The timing's not right! When I have more money, then I'll give it to God's House."*

The truth is... the time is always right to do the right thing. Yet, the timing will never be right when the heart is in the wrong place!

The Scriptures are clear that if we withhold from God what's His, then we remove ourselves from His blessings.

The Israelites became caught up in the *"Pursuit of Happiness."* This mindset always rationalizes God out of the picture.

Remember, the people to whom Haggai's speaking were the ones who were faithful enough to leave their homes in Babylon and return to Jerusalem to rebuild.

These people were the ones committed to honoring God and placing Him first in their lives.

They chose to follow the call of God to return and to rebuild the house of the Lord, but self-deception crept in and stopped their mission.

Because of this self-deception, they became misguided and lost. They became like sheep. Sheep get lost by nibbling away at the grass and never looking up.

The same can be said for us. When we focus too much on what's immediately before us, we fail to see the big picture. This is what happened to the Israelites.

Evangelist Greg Ebie notes the following about our arch enemy Satan: *"Satan cannot destroy the church, nor can the devil stop the building of the church, BUT HE CAN SLOW IT DOWN. Satan can coerce or entice any of us to forget our role in the building of the church; the devil seeks to blur our perception and distort our priorities leading us away from Christ and His church."*

Satan is the master at deception, and he's relentless in trying to get us to buy into his deceiving ways. One of his goals is to take our focus off our purpose in life for God.

When deception and misdirection take root in the mind and heart then it doesn't take long for selfishness to move in and take over the priorities of our lives.

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The Israelites became selfish, convincing themselves that they needed to pursue their own personal goals first, rationalizing that God's desires could come later.

Haggai 1:2-4, *"This is what the Lord Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house.'"*

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?"

They became too busy with their own houses and pursuits of happiness so they put God's house or service in His Kingdom on the back burner.

It may not look like much on the surface, but to God this was huge. They wrongly thought that the pursuit of happiness and well-being superseded the pursuit of God and His call.

When our priorities get so messed up that we focus only on ourselves we miss the valuable lessons of life.

Matthews 6:33-34, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

An elementary school teacher was lecturing to her class on the dangers of not bundling up properly to face the winter cold.

She told them a dramatic story about a naughty little boy who disobeyed his mother and went sledding one afternoon without his mittens, cap, and snow suit. Because of it, he caught pneumonia and died.

When she finished her story, one boy raised his hand. *"Mrs. Johnson, may I ask two questions?"* *"Go ahead, Tommy,"* the teacher replied.

"Who has his sled now and could I have it?" This boy's focus was in the wrong place like the Israelites.

Their self-centered mindset failed to recognize that their expectations in life had not come to pass because they were actually robbing God to meet their own selfish goals.

Focusing on self-will never brings contentment or satisfaction in life. Focusing on me, myself and I results in a self-centered lifestyle which the Bible calls sin.

Remember, *“God never blesses sin!”* When you rob from God, you lose more than you gain. When you steal from God, you set yourself up for failure because you’ll lose what you already have.

Speaking through the Prophet Haggai, God told the Israelites that they’ll never get ahead as long as they put God on the back burner and focus on themselves.

Haggai 1:7-10, *“This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord. “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 your own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops.”*

When we dishonor God, we lose His help and His blessings! The Israelites were experiencing famine, storms, and calamities. Why?

Because their selfish ways caused the Lord to take away His blessing on their lives and they suffered as a result.

Through the prophet Haggai, the Lord helped the nation of Israel to re-assess their current situation. No matter what these people did, God was working against it.

When they build it up and God tore it down. When they planted it; God didn't water it. When they watered it; God wouldn't let it grow.

No matter what it was, you name it and God was working against those people all because they had turned away from Him and the building of His house.

Not only did not re-building the Temple communicate that they didn't need Him, but it also indicated they didn't want Him. Because of this they never had enough resources.

The people in Israel at this time were facing a severe famine and it was the result of their own selfish ways.

Haggai 1:11, *"I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands."*

Selfishness causes us to lose what we already have. Greed causes us to be in need.

Psalms 34:9-10, *"Fear the Lord, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing."*

God has the ability to withhold His blessings to the disobedient, but He'll always send wake-up calls in our life to get us to examine our situation.

These people were missing the blessings of God because their priorities were turned around.

They weren't serving the Lord. They weren't following His plan, His will, or His way, instead they were following their plan, their will, and their own way!

Mother Teresa, after winning the Nobel Peace Prize, decided that she wouldn't travel to accept any more recognition, because the accolades were beginning to interfere with her work.

She knew that she was not in the business of accepting prizes and making speeches; her calling was to serve the poor of Calcutta.

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So, what happens when the Spirit stirs up a foolish individual and reveals their misguided priorities in life? They became obedient.

When their eyes were opened to the downward cycle of their lives, the Israelites repented and obeyed. Obedience to God brings a return on what you do. Obedience leads to revival.

The Lord stirred up the Spirit to open their eyes. The Spirit's stirring took the blinders off their deception. The Lord challenged the people.

Haggai 1:7-8, *"This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the Lord."*

The Spirit's stirring awakened the believers. They honored the Word of the Lord and went back to work.

They re-acquired a healthy fear of the Lord and, when they went back to work to fulfill God's call, they discovered His blessings again.

The stirring of the spirit opened their blinded eyes to realized that they needed to work for God not for themselves because when the focus was on themselves, they never had enough; their pockets seemed to have holes in the bottom.

The stirring of the Spirit helped them to reprioritize their lives. They put things in proper order. Their relationship with God became a priority.

The nation not only neglected God's house, the people neglected their relationship with God. They had put God on the back burner.

Yes, their families were important; their creature comforts were important, but it led them to everything except personal satisfaction.

They had acquired luxury homes, delicate food and drink, and had money in their pockets, but nothing satisfied them. Our generation is the same. It's filled with full lives running on empty.

The more they had, the more miserable they became. Anxiety, depression, addiction, and bondage was the order of the day. The one thing missing was the one thing they needed.

We are a generation that's running everywhere for satisfaction, except to God. We've increased our entertainment, before one game ends, another begins.

We have increased gambling opportunities, invented new drinks and pills, added more counselors and mental health professions, and still, many are disillusioned and depressed.

Our best efforts are failing. We, God's church, can be the difference that's needed, but we must choose to be different. We have the Good News solution and that solution is: God is with us.

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Conclusion

It's time to rebuild our relationship with God. It's time to return to church and commit to doing His work. No more excuses.

God has only given us 24 hours in a day. It's time to put first things first in our lives.

Put God first, follow His call and get to work, because when you get back to work for God, the first thing you'll receive is satisfaction.

Then His blessings will come again on your efforts, and things will begin to work out.

It's a violation to work hard and not prosper; it's a violation, to eat and still be hungry or to drink and still be thirsty.

Psalm 103:2-5, *"Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."*

God is a God who satisfies our desires with good things. We must consider our ways!