

The Causes of Spiritual Apathy

Haggai 1:2-11

Slide 1

Haggai is one of the minor prophets we didn't study in my last series. It's also one of the less familiar books of the Bible.

The events we're looking at today center around the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586BC by the Babylonians under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Then, in 539BC, the Babylonian Empire was overthrown by the Persians.

It was at this time *"the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia"* to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem with specific instructions to rebuild the temple.

Ezra 1:2-3, *"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them.'"*

So, when the people arrived, they immediately began to do as instructed.

They cleared temple area of the rubble, rebuilt the altar, laid the foundation and restored the sacrificial system of worship, but gradually all work came to a halt.

For 18 years all work on the temple had ceased. Now, the people did meet with some opposition from the local Samaritans, but that wasn't the real reason work on the temple came to a standstill.

They had just become satisfied worshipping God amidst the rubble of the unfinished sanctuary. It took the ministry of Haggai to cause the people to examine themselves and recognize the real problem.

Haggai explained that it was because of their spiritual apathy that they had lost their initial vision and enthusiasm for God's work.

But they had soothed their conscience, for not completing the temple, by saying, *"The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house."*

In other words, they were saying, *"It's not that we're against rebuilding the Lord's house, its just that we don't think that now is the right time to do it."*

In their response, we see three symptoms of spiritual apathy:

- God's work is neglected.
- God's people are contented.
- God's people made excuses for not doing what He wanted them to do.

But seeing the symptoms of spiritual apathy and knowing why they were caused are two different things.

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So, what were some of the underlying causes of this spirit of indifference, this spirit of apathy towards rebuilding the temple that prevailed among the people in Haggai's day?

First, the people were overcome with a spirit of self-centeredness.

The people tried to justify why, for over 18 years, they hadn't been applying themselves to the work of rebuilding the temple, by saying, *"The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house."*

Then, through the prophet Haggai, God tore away this flimsy veneer of an excuse they used and exposed their self-centered disposition.

Haggai 1:4, *“Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”* and again in verse 9, *“Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.”*

That phrase *‘each of you is busy with your own house’* literally reads *‘is continually running after his own house.’*

This phrase conveys the idea of being completely preoccupied with something to the extent that one devotes all one’s time, energy and resources towards the thing that’s their chief concern.

It’s to regard something as being of primary importance; to give something top priority over and above everything else.

This is what the people were doing in relation to their own houses. They had little concern for the house of God because they were too concerned about their own houses.

They weren’t able to give time to God’s work was because they were too focused on their own work.

Yet, when they first arrived in Jerusalem from Babylon that wasn’t the case. At that time, the most important thing, as far as they were concerned, was seeing the temple restored.

The temple was central to their life as a nation. The temple was the visible symbol of the presence of God among His people.

Psalms 132:13-14, *“For the Lord has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling, saying, “This is my resting place for ever and ever; here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it.”*

The temple was connected with the Covenant God made with His people.

Ezekiel 37:25-27, “They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

The temple was connected with the promised coming of the Messiah.

Malachi 3:1, “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty.”

The people knew that rebuilding the temple was vitally important to the fulfilment of the promises of the covenant, especially in relation to the coming of the Messiah.

Knowing how central the temple was to their faith, to their divinely established system of worship and to the Covenant promises, they initially gave this project top priority when they returned.

But, with the passage of time, their priorities began to change. They started to put their own personal affairs and comforts first with the result that the work on God’s house slipped down the list of things to do.

They still intended to do it, but only after they’d seen to their own personal affairs. In short, they became self-centered instead of God-centered in their outlook.

They put themselves first and God second, and such a self-centered approach to life eventually spawned a spirit of apathy towards God's work.

Self-centeredness is a chief cause of spiritual apathy within the Church today. Because many Christians have their priorities in life all wrong, God's work is neglected.

They put themselves, their desires and their own needs first instead of putting God and the things of God first. They're like the people Paul described in his letter to the Philippian church.

Philippians 2:21, *"For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ."*

This is what happened to the Israelites. They became taken up with their own affairs, concerned with their own welfare, their own comforts, their own desires and their own ambitions.

They had little time to think of the things of God, and they definitely had no desire to get involved, in any meaningful way, in the work of God.

It's like some Christians today. They haven't abandoned the things of God completely, but they're so devoted to other things that God's given the left-overs of their time, their energy and their finances.

Philippians 2:21 again, *"For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ."*

It wouldn't surprise me to hear Paul, if he were to revisit the earth in our time, say of a large number of Christians, *"They seek their own interests not those of Jesus Christ."*

The second cause of spiritual apathy is worldly-mindedness

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Worldly-mindedness is the Siamese twin of self-centeredness. So, what evidence do we have that Haggai's contemporaries were worldly-minded?

Look at verse 4 again, *"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"*

When God referred to their *"paneled houses,"* He was highlighting the fact that the houses the people had built for themselves, and in which they were living, weren't just comfortable, they were luxurious.

A paneled house or room was one in which the walls were covered in cedar wood paneling, a feature usually only found in royal palaces.

In 1 Kings 7, one of the features of Solomon's Palace was that the throne was covered from floor to ceiling in cedar paneling.

1 Kings 7:7, *"He built the throne hall, the Hall of Justice, where he was to judge, and he covered it with cedar from floor to ceiling."*

In Jeremiah 22, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, described the self-indulgent luxurious lifestyle of Israel's Kings who had turned their back on the ways of God.

Jeremiah 22:14-15a, *"He says, 'I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.' So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red. 'Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar?'"*

The point being that cedar wood paneling was a sign of luxury; it was the décor of royalty. The people of Haggai's day decorated their homes with top-of-the-line materials, the best money could buy.

Ordinary, run of the mill furnishings weren't good enough for them. They wanted the most elegant, the most luxurious and the best they could get. No expense was spared.

The cedar-clad roofs and the floor to ceiling paneling were evidence of their materialistic, worldly-minded outlook on life.

What a contrast between their houses and the house of God. It lay in ruins while they dwelt in luxury. They didn't have time to work on God's house, but they had plenty of time to build their own.

They didn't have money to give to the building fund for the reconstruction of the temple, but they had enough money to decorate their homes in the style of kings.

They were so concerned about earthly things they had become increasingly indifferent to spiritual things.

There are many Christians today who, like the people in Haggai's day, have little concern for spiritual things. They have a worldly-minded outlook on life, concerned mainly about material things.

Instead of setting their affections on things above, they set them on things below. Jesus said in Luke 12, that a man's *"life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."*

Yet to look at many Christians today you'd think that this is exactly what they think life should consist of. They'll spend thousands of dollars in order to make their lifestyle more comfortable and enjoyable.

Their houses are stylishly decorated and furnished with quality items. They see the latest piece of electronic gadgetry advertised, whether it's some appliance or some entertainment system and before you know it, they've bought one for their home.

But ask them to make a meaningful financial contribution to the work of the Lord or ask them to give towards the improvement of church property and they cry poverty.

Now, don't misunderstand what I'm saying, or should I say, what God's Word is saying.

God wasn't pointing an accusing finger at the people just because they had built lovely houses for themselves and were living comfortably. That in and of itself wasn't wrong or sinful.

What God condemned was the sinful materialistic, worldly-minded, self-centered attitude by which those people were driven to desire such things for themselves while caring little about His work.

It was the fact that their heart was set more upon material things than spiritual things that God was condemning. They had their priorities all wrong.

There's nothing wrong or sinful about living in a lovely, comfortable, well-furnished, well-equipped house. There's nothing wrong with making improvements to your property.

There's nothing wrong with changing your car every three or four years or whenever. There's nothing wrong with having a nice vacation each year.

Such things are not wrong and sinful in and of themselves, they only become such if one's heart is set upon them to the extent that the acquiring of such things are more important to you than the things of God and the work of God.

Matthew 6:19-21, *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

The third cause of spiritual apathy is that of ungratefulness.

Slide 4

We find ungratefulness in verse 4, *“Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”*

In this phrase that’s translated in the NIV *“you yourselves”* and in the KJV *“for you, O ye,”* there is a repetition of the personal pronoun “you”.

When that happens in the Hebrew language it’s usually done for the purpose of emphasis.

John Calvin captures the sense very well. He translates it, *“Is it a time for you, YOU, to dwell in covered houses and this house to lie desolate.”*

The point being made by God is this: *“How could you, you of all people allow such a thing to happen. You who have enjoyed so many privileges and so many blessings from my hand. You, the people upon whom I set my love. You, the people that I chose for myself out of all the people’s of the earth. You, the people over whom I spread my protecting wings to preserve you while you were in exile. You, whom I brought back again to your own land according to my promise.”*

How could you do this? Is this the measure of your gratitude in view of all that I have done for you? Has all that I have done for you meant so little?

John Calvin comments: *“We see how great is the ingratitude of men. The kindness of God had been especially worthy of being remembered, the glory of which ought to have been borne in mind to the end of time: they had been restored from exile in a manner beyond what they could have expected. What ought they to have done but to have devoted themselves entirely to the service of their deliverer...”*

Of course, when they first returned things were different. In those early weeks and months, immediately after they set foot once again on the home soil, they were full of wonderment and gratitude to God for what he had done for them.

Psalm 126:1-2, *“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.”*

They showed their gratitude by getting into the work of clearing the site and laying the foundation.

But with the passage of time, their sense of gratitude diminished considerably, and this was reflected in their lack of commitment to God’s work.

This is also another cause of spiritual apathy among Christians today. Our sense of gratitude to God for all that He has done for us has become dull with the passing of time.

In the early days, we were deeply impressed with a sense of wonder and thanksgiving to God for the fact that He, in His sovereign grace, had set His saving love upon us.

That He had chosen us in Christ, forgiven us of our sins, saved us from eternal damnation and assured us of a place in heaven.

Considering all that God had done for us, we determined to serve Him wholeheartedly and do anything He wanted us to do. We wanted to glorify God in a life of faithful service.

But as time went on our sense of gratitude diminished, our priorities changed and we became less committed and less devoted to serving God. Slowly but surely, we became more and more intent on doing our own thing.

We have become like the Church at Ephesus of whom it was said, *'you have left your first love.'*

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Conclusion

Is that true? Has our sense of gratitude to God for what He has done for us, in saving us from our sin, diminished over the years to the extent that it no longer motivates us to serve Him?

If such is the case, then I suggest that you take yourself to the scriptures and remind yourself of the horrors of Hell from which you've been rescued.

I suggest you take time to stand, in your mind's eye, on the brink of Hell's abyss and ponder that terrifying sight.

And having done that, I suggest you take a walk, again in your mind's eye, as you read through the Gospel narratives, to Calvary and there look upon the One Who was wounded for your transgressions and pierced for your iniquities.

As you do so, remind yourself – *'no man has greater love than this, that a man lays down his life for his friends.'*

We need to stand once again under the shadow of the cross and ponder the fact that Jesus gave His all for us.

We need to stay there until the sense of gratitude returns, until self-centeredness is destroyed, until the worldly-mindedness is overcome and our spiritual apathy is replaced by a renewed spiritual fervor.