

The Consequences of Spiritual Apathy

Haggai 1:6-11

Slide 1

Haggai was called to address a particular spiritual condition that prevailed among the Israelites who had returned to Jerusalem after the 70 years of exile in Babylon, that spiritual condition being one of spiritual apathy.

Last week we looked at the root causes of their spiritual apathy – self-centeredness, worldly-mindedness and ungratefulness. This morning I want us to look at the consequences of their actions.

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The first consequence is found in verse 2, where we see that their relationship with God was marred.

Haggai 1:2, *“This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’”*

The NIV translates this verse, *“These people say...”* while I believe the King James Version renders it more accurately, *“This people says...”*

When we read verse 2 like this, we’re able to see how God actually referred to Haggai’s self-centered, ungrateful, worldly-minded, spiritually apathetic contemporaries.

God calls them “THIS” people. Not My people. There’s more than a hint of contempt in this cold form of address. It’s as if God doesn’t want to be associated with them. He’s had enough of their spiritual apathy.

This same form of address is found in Jeremiah 7:16, where God, because His people were given over to idolatry and immorality, said to the prophet *“Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them.”*

You also find the same thing a few chapters later in Jeremiah 14.

Jeremiah 14:10-11, *“This is what the Lord says about this people: “They greatly love to wander; they do not restrain their feet. So the Lord does not accept them; he will now remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins.” Then the Lord said to me, “Do not pray for the well-being of this people.”*

Likewise in Exodus 32:9, when the Israelites made a golden calf and were worshipping it, God tells Moses, *“I have seen THIS people and behold they are a stiff-necked people.”*

In each case the sin of the people aroused God’s anger against them. Their sin resulted in a marring, a breakdown in their special relationship with Him. That’s exactly what happened in Haggai’s day.

The people’s indifference to the ruined state of the temple, their unwillingness to apply themselves to the important work of rebuilding God’s House and their self-centered materialistic approach to life kindled God’s anger with the result that their relationship with Him was marred.

God no longer addressed them in gentle, lovingly affectionate tones that He had used when speaking of them or to them in the past, instead He used a contemptuous term spoken in a sharp, abrupt and cold tone of voice.

It’s almost as if God virtually disowned them. Of course, we know He didn’t. He couldn’t abandon His covenant relationship with them.

But there's no doubt that, while they were still God's people, they were out of favor with Him. Because of their sin, their relationship was marred.

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When a person is born again of God's Holy Spirit and through faith in Christ adopted into God's family that person is brought into a very special relationship with God.

God becomes their Father, they become His child, and one of the marvelous truths of the Gospel is that that Father/Child relationship cannot be broken and will never be dissolved.

However, the Christian's subjective experience of that relationship can be marred as a result of sin.

When a believer sins and refuses to confess and turn from their sin, choosing instead to live in a state of known disobedience to God, the closeness of their relationship with God is adversely affected.

God's still their Father, but there's something of a distance, something of a coldness in the relationship. There's much less of a felt sense of God's fatherly love.

The close, intimate fellowship that the believer once enjoyed when he or she was living in obedience to God disappears.

The relationship becomes tainted as a result of sin and it will remain that way until the believer turns from their sin.

It's like the relationship between parents and children. There can be a breakdown in the relationship as a result of disobedience on the part of the child, but the relationship doesn't change.

The child is still the son or daughter of those parents; they're still his or her parents, it's just that the closeness of that relationship is diminished while the child remains in a state of disobedience.

That was David's experience in the aftermath of his sin with Bathsheba. His sin, as terrible as it was, didn't dissolve his relationship with God. He was still God's child.

What it did do, however, was mar his subjective experience of that relationship. He didn't have the same sense of God's love for him. He didn't have the same sense of God's presence.

The joy of his salvation was replaced by sorrow. He felt as though God's hand was heavy upon him, which it was, because God, instead of blessing David, was chastening him.

It wasn't until David faced up to his sin, confessed it unto God, and cried out in repentance that David's relationship with God was restored. We see this in Psalm 51.

Psalm 51:1-3, *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me."*

Let me ask you this morning, as a Christian, do you feel that God is somewhat at a distance from you. Have you lost that sense of God's nearness and love you once enjoyed?

Is your fellowship with the Lord not what it used to be? Do you find that you can't speak to God as you once did, that your relationship isn't as close as it once was? Does there seem to be some sort of barrier between you and the Lord?

If so, perhaps it's because there's some sin in your life that you've been unwilling to face up to and deal with.

Maybe, like the people in Haggai's day, you've fallen into a state of spiritual apathy over the past months. Maybe you've become less disciplined in your Christian life.

Less disciplined in your attendance at worship, less disciplined in your reading of the scriptures, less disciplined in prayer, less disciplined in your speech, in your conduct.

Maybe you've allowed other things to become more important to you, taking preference in your life over the things and the work of God.

Maybe over time you've been slowly but surely pushing God from the center of your life where He should be and wants to be. Maybe you've been giving God the leftovers of your life.

If such is the case, is it any wonder that you that you've lost that sense of communion and personal fellowship with God that you once enjoyed.

Your sin has marred your relationship with God. Your sin has caused God to withdraw the sense of His nearness and His love from you. Until you confess and truly repent, your relationship with God will remain marred.

Where the first consequence of the people's spiritual apathy was a marred relationship, the second consequence was that the blessings of God were withheld.

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Haggai 1:6, *“You have planted much, but 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.”*

Haggai 1:9-11, *“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. 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.”*

Living as they did, in a rural setting, God’s people were dependent upon good harvests to provide sufficient food for themselves and a stable economy.

A stable economy provided the necessary financial income for the people to maintain their comfortable lifestyle. The problem was, however, that for a number of years the harvests had been poor.

It wasn’t because they didn’t try. Like all sensible, hardworking farmers, they had worked the land, doing all that was humanly possible to ensure a good harvest.

The ground had been ploughed up each year and prepared for sowing. They had sown plenty of seed but, despite having done all they could, the bumper year never materialize.

Not only did the rains not come, even the early morning dew, which in Israel was as plentiful and as important as the rains themselves, was in short supply.

Consequently, the harvests were terrible. They had sown with great expectation—but all their labor was in vain; all their hopes were dashed.

Like Haggai pointed out in verses 6 and 9, *“you have sown much but have harvested little...you expected much, but see it turned out to be little.”*

The continued pattern of drought and bad harvests resulted in the onslaught of an economic depression.

People, who in former years were able to spend their money on luxuries and even save and invest their money, found that with the ever-rising inflation all their savings were being used up.

What formerly had bought luxuries now had to be used to pay for the bare necessities of life. The money they earned didn't go as far as it used to.

It was as God described here in very graphic language: *“You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”*

The food they purchased wasn't sufficient to satisfy their hunger and, because of the drought conditions, they couldn't get enough drinking water to satisfy their thirst. Even the very clothes they wore were not sufficient to keep them warm.

Some commentators suggest this was due to the thinning of their blood and bad circulation as a result of a limited and unbalanced diet.

For years they had put all their effort into building beautiful houses for themselves and living a more than comfortable lifestyle, but now their savings are all gone, their barns empty, their fields bare and their wells dry.

What was happening. Why was this? Well, the answer is quite simple
- God was withholding His blessings from them because of their sin.

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Let me paraphrase verses 9-11. God told the people, *“Do you want to know the reason for your current problems? Well, let me tell you. It’s because of your self-centered, worldly-minded, ungrateful attitude that has driven you to put yourselves first and Me second.*

It is because you have allowed my house to lie in ruins all these years. It is because you have been making empty excuses for neglecting the work to which I called you and for which I brought you back to this land, the work of rebuilding the temple.

It is because for the last 16 years you’ve been saying, ‘We’ll get round to doing God’s work some day’ but you’ve spent all your time thinking about yourselves, and because of all this I’ve withheld my blessing from you.

I’m giving you a taste of your own medicine. I’ve shut up the heavens so that the rain and dew haven’t fallen. I’ve caused the land not to produce a crop. Instead of blessing you, I’m afflicting you. Instead of being the objects of my bountiful provision, now you’re the objects of my chastening displeasure.”

When God gave them the Law, He warned His people that He would remove His blessings from them and send them hard times if they sinned against Him.

Leviticus 26:18-20, *“If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over. I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze. Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of your land yield their fruit.”*

The same warning is found in Deuteronomy 28:24, *“The Lord will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder; it will come down from the skies until you are destroyed.”*

Haggai specifically mentioned corn, wine and oil. These are the three basic crops of Israel. They were part and parcel of their staple diet and upon which their whole economy was based.

In Deuteronomy 11, God promised that, if they loved and served Him with all their heart and with all their soul, He would abundantly bless them.

Deuteronomy 11:13-15, *“So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul—then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and olive oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.”*

But the people hadn’t loved the Lord their God with all their heart and soul; they had put themselves first. They became indifferent to God and to His work.

They looked at the ruined temple and said, *“We’ll get round to fixing it up some day.”* So, because of their spiritual apathy, God withdrew His blessings and chastened them for their sin.

The adverse circumstances the people faced were a direct consequence of their sin. God was dealing with them in very real, practical, and observable ways. Ways that ought to have caused them to see that He was displeased.

No doubt the bad weather could have been explained in meteorological and scientific terms, but behind all the human, scientific, and meteorological explanations there was another more important and more simple explanation.

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God, who controls the wind, the rain, the atmospheric pressure and the sunshine, had decided that the clouds wouldn't gather over Israel.

He determined that no rain would fall. He had resolved that the Sun would shine brilliantly in the sky from morning until night. All this was a form of chastening against His people on account of their sin.

Now, God delights to pour out blessing upon His children. He delights in blessing us as individuals, as families and as congregations.

But when His people become so self-centered and so worldly-minded in their attitudes and conduct that they put themselves and their own interests first and push God to some place of lesser importance in their life...

Or when spiritual apathy begins to settle in and become a regular feature of a believer's or of a congregation's life, God often responds to such sin by not only withholding His blessing from them but also actively pursuing a chastening policy against them.

God does this to get us back on the right track spiritually so He can do what He wants to do, which is to bless us once again.

But sometimes He must lay His heavy hand upon us in order to get us to take time out to reassess our priorities in life.

Maybe a person has a well paying job, maybe there are two wages coming into their home, where they were able to buy what they wanted without a second thought. Able to afford a nice vacation and so on.

Yet, despite the fact that God had greatly blessed them materially, they stopped giving God the primary place in their life that He demands and deserves. So, God withdraws that blessing.

Their circumstances suddenly change, things become tight financially and they struggle to make ends meet. They have to dip into their savings to pay bills. They have to count every penny in order to get by.

Of course the loss of their job can be explained in terms of the current difficulties in the economic climate or whatever.

But behind all these things there's another explanation, God's withholding His blessing to chasten that Christian for their sin.

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Conclusion

God called the Israelites to give serious thought to what was happening to them and to weigh what He was doing in their life, "*Give careful thought to your ways.*" God spoke to them in their everyday experiences and they needed to listen.

Maybe God's been speaking to some of you in this way. Maybe you haven't been putting God first in your life. Maybe you haven't been as committed to God and to His service as you should be.

Maybe God has touched your life by withholding blessings from you and bringing you into some adversity in life.

Did you ever think to yourself, "*Why has this happened? Why have we hit such hard times? Why have I got these problems?*"

You see, God doesn't allow those who are truly His children to go on in sin unchecked.

He'll make a point of dealing with them with a view to bringing them back to Himself. That's what He did to the people in Haggai's day.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us "*Whom the Lord loves He chastens.*" No chastening seems pleasant at the time.

However, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who've been trained by it.

This is what God did in the lives of Haggai's contemporaries, and it wasn't pleasant but they did learn from it.

God's chastening, and their positive response to it, produced a harvest of righteousness in their lives.

As they returned to the Lord and put Him first, they subsequently experienced His blessings.