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Getting Our Priorities Right
Haggai 1 – 2

Priorities—the things we think are most important, what we give our first attention to. In the ultimate sense, priorities are what we order our lives around.

What are your priorities in life? Your family? Your job? Paying your bills? Accumulating possessions and wealth? Sports? Entertainment? Education? Your faith? Your church? Just where do God and his church fit into your priority list? Is he even on it?

Now often our intentions may be good. We intend to get our priorities right and focus on the things that are really important. But we get sidetracked. As a good friend of mine used to put it, “The immediate screams at us.” The things that are most important get pushed to the back burner by things that may or may not really be important, but clamor for our attention. Meanwhile, we delay or ignore or maybe even dismiss the things that really are *most* important.

This little prophetic book of Haggai we’re looking at this morning is about *getting our priorities right*.

To understand it better, let me give you a little bit of the historical background.

To Babylon and back

Around the year 587 B.C., the city of Jerusalem, and so the southern kingdom of Judah, had fallen to the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar’s army had conquered Judah about eleven years earlier, and had taken about 10,000 people into exile in Babylon. This included the king and his family, many officials, men of valor, and the craftsmen and smiths. Nebuchadnezzar also carried off the treasures of the temple and the king’s house. Only the poor were left in the land.

With King Jehoiachin deposed and taken captive, Nebuchadnezzar appointed Jehoiachin’s young uncle Mattaniah king, changing his name to Zedekiah. Later on he revolted against Babylon, so Nebuchadnezzar’s army laid siege to the city for nearly two years, starving the people and finally breaching the walls and destroying the city, even burning down the temple. They took most of the residents of Jerusalem to Babylon. All this happened around 587 B.C. (2 Kings 24 – 25).

Then in 539 B.C., Cyrus the Persian overthrew the Babylonian Empire, and reversed their policy toward their subjects. The Babylonians usually took captives back to Babylon and put them in the service of the empire. Before them, the Assyrians would move the people they had conquered in one land to another and move someone else they had conquered from another country into theirs. In the ancient way of thinking, this detached people from their land, their roots, and their gods. But the Persians took a much kinder, gentler approach. They allowed

exiles to return to their homelands and encouraged them to revive their cultures and their worship, so long as they continued to submit to Persian rule.

When Cyrus issued his decree allowing the Jews to return (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4), Sheshbazzar (a son of the former Jewish king Jehoiachin) led a group of Jews back home. About 536 B.C., his nephew Zerubbabel (also a descendant of King David), succeeded him as governor of Judah. Joshua was the high priest. They rebuilt the altar of sacrifice and laid the foundation-stone of the second temple.

But due to the protests of the Samaritans (the Jews had rejected their help), work stopped on the temple for many years. There was opposition, economic depression, and it didn't seem that urgent any more after all, since they continued to worship the LORD in the midst of the temple ruins.

Then in 521-520 B.C., there was a crisis of power in the Persian Empire, reviving the Jews' expectations of the Day of the LORD and the restoration of their kingdom. Zerubbabel was in the Davidic line, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah no doubt had high hopes that God was about to act. So rebuilding the temple now took on a much greater urgency.¹

Haggai's prophecies

The book of Haggai is made up of five oracles or messages from the LORD—messages of condemnation, challenge, encouragement, and promise. These messages came to Haggai over a period of about four months during the second year of the reign of the Persian King Darius.

In the first oracle (1:2-11), the LORD points to how the people were saying, "The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built" (1:2)². But the LORD asks, "Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Then he calls on them to "give careful thought" to their present conditions (1:5-6). They had planted much but harvested little. They ate and drank, but never had enough. They put on clothes but couldn't get warm. And though they were earning wages, it was as though they were putting them in a purse that had holes in it.

Does that sound familiar? Almost sounds like our current recession, doesn't it?

The LORD goes on to tell them to "give careful thought" to their ways (1:7-11). They could remedy the situation by changing their ways, especially in regard to the temple. Rebuilding the temple, giving this careful attention to the house of the LORD, would honor God, and he would take pleasure in it. It was because they had been so busy with their own houses and needs that they neglected the house of God, and it was because they had neglected it that they were experiencing drought and famine.

So how did the people respond to this message? The civil leader Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua and the people as a whole obeyed what God was saying through Haggai, and feared the LORD (1:12).

Haggai's second message was a simple one—a message of encouragement. The LORD simply said through him, "I am with you" (1:13).

And with that message the LORD stirred up the spirits of Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people so that they began to work on the rebuilding of the temple (1:14-15).

The third message also offered words of encouragement (2:1-9). Even though the rebuilt temple might seem to pale in comparison to the glory of Solomon's temple, they were to be

¹ Stephen Winward offers an excellent brief treatment of Haggai in his book *A Guide to the Prophets* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), 189-195. His work has been helpful in my interpretation of Haggai in this sermon.

² Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

strong. Just as he had covenanted with the Israelites when they had come out of Egypt, he was with them and would provide for them, even shaking the nations to bring what they desired to the temple. He would fill it with riches and more importantly, with his glory, so that the glory of this temple would be even greater than the glory of the first temple. And he would grant peace there.

The fourth message was a question for the priests about holiness, defilement, and blessing (2:10-19). Would something be consecrated if it were touched by something that had been consecrated? The priests answered, “No.” On the other hand, would it be defiled if it came into contact with someone who has been defiled by a dead body? The priests answered, “Yes.”

So the LORD declared that their service and their offerings to him were defiled. Before, when they had neglected the temple, their offerings and their service were considered by God to be defiled. But now that they had been obedient, he would bless them.

Until now, all the messages had been to the people or to the leaders Zerubbabel and Joshua along with the people. But the final oracle in 2:20-23 was a promise to Zerubbabel, that the LORD would overturn and overthrow other kingdoms and their armies, but would establish him, making him like his signet ring. God had chosen him for this moment, and would use him to lead his people.

It was a promise that had messianic overtones. Though this expected glorious kingdom never came in Zerubbabel, this promise would be eventually and ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ!

Examining our priorities

So what do these five messages from the LORD through the prophet Haggai have to do with us today? They were specifically about rebuilding the temple after they returned from the Exile in Babylon, something the people had put off too long. But at a deeper level, weren't they saying something more?

Isn't Haggai about *priorities*? Through Haggai, God commanded Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the Jewish people to make rebuilding the temple their top priority.

Why was this so important? Because the temple represented *the presence of God* among his people. It was his dwelling place. It was *where they were to worship God*. And the presence of God and the worship of God are the heart of his people's relationship with him.

By neglecting the temple, they were neglecting God's presence, taking it for granted. That's toxic to any relationship! To make rebuilding the temple their priority would be to demonstrate their love for God, their devotion to him, and their desire to be in a right relationship with him as his people.

So from that standpoint, Haggai's overall message has *everything* to do with us, doesn't it?

Whatever other priorities we may have, our relationship with God must come first. And on this side of Jesus' cross and resurrection, that relationship is expressed primarily in three ways.

First, it's expressed through our *worship*. There is no substitute for worship. It's at the very heart of our relationship with God. Everything in that relationship grows out of and leads back to worship—both in our individual relationship with God and in our corporate relationship with him as his people.

When we truly love God, we will naturally worship him, adoring him, glorifying him, offering ourselves—everything we are and have—to him! In worship we celebrate who God is, we remember what he has done for us in Jesus Christ, we give him our praise and thanks, we listen to his word to us, and we respond in obedience, submission, and gratitude. It's like

engaging in conversation with beloved family and friends, but it's *holy conversation* with the Creator and Lord of the universe!

And nothing we do is more important! You've probably heard me tell the story about Dr. Delos Miles, my seminary evangelism professor. A colleague asked him one day, "What is the one thing a church cannot do without?" Dr. Miles immediately answered, "Worship! A church can survive a generation without evangelism; but when a church ceases to worship, it ceases to be a church!"

Our relationship with God is also expressed through our relationship with his church. The church is the company of Jesus' disciples. It's the community of faith, of his followers. It's the family of God. It's the body of Christ. And since God is so bound to his church in this holy relationship, being in a right relationship with God means being in a right relationship with his church. You can't love Jesus and not love his body! You see, it's really about *discipleship*. As his disciples, we follow Jesus *together*. As Dale Moody used to put it, "There are no lone rangers in the kingdom of God." You alone can make your commitment to follow Jesus. But you can never follow him alone!

This love for Christ's church will manifest itself in our faithfulness—faithfulness in our participation, our prayers, our attendance, our stewardship of our time and talents and treasure, our generosity, and our constant concern for its well-being as the body builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16).

That commitment leads to the third expression—*mission*! God the Father sent the Son on his mission to redeem a people for himself out of a lost and dying world, and ultimately to bring all things together under him as the head of everything (John 3:16; Ephesians 1:10). Jesus calls us to join him in that mission. Through our worship, our witness, and our way of life, we embody his presence to the world around us, and in doing so we strive to make disciples of all the nations, helping others come into this right relationship with God.

Getting focused

When our relationship with God is our first priority, it will show in our worship, our discipleship within the church, and our commitment to Christ's mission.

But we get distracted so easily. Our everyday concerns clamor for our attention. Families have to be fed and cared for and educated. Bills have to be paid. In our hearts we say, "Things are tight, I have other concerns to worry about right now . . . God will understand . . ."

Do you remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:31-33)?

"So do not worry, saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

When our relationship with God, our submission to his rule, our seeking his kingdom and righteousness are our *first priority*, everything else falls into place—for us as individual disciples, and as a church.

Are our priorities right?

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