

# Haggai 1.1-15 / FBC / 11.01.20

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## Introduction

- † **[1: Title]** How many of you have read all the Old Testament prophets? If you haven't, you should; you should read the whole Bible at least once! You should read it over and over, because God will continue to feed you from it. Grab a good study Bible and get started!
- How many of you love reading the Old Testament prophets? Not many people say they do. The prophets are filled with figurative language and arcane or obscure references, so they can be hard to understand and they can seem irrelevant for today.
  - When I first read through the prophets, I didn't understand much, but when I learned to study them more carefully, I found them valuable and fascinating. Today, we will study the first prophecy of Haggai; you can turn there in your Bible, if you want.
  - I have read that pastors preach Haggai only when they are having a building campaign. You can relax: the focus of this prophecy is not on raising money; Haggai has a more important message than that! But will you understand the message? will you find it relevant? I think when we are done, you will answer "yes!" to both those questions. Let's pray...
- † **[2: Timeline]** Before we get to the text, let me sketch the scene, to give you some historical context. Almost two centuries before Haggai gave this prophecy, about 700BC, the prophet Isaiah, predicted destruction of the southern kingdom of Israel, known as Judah, destruction of the capital city of Jerusalem, and destruction of even the sacred temple on Mount Zion in that city. But Isaiah also predicted that God would use a future non-believer named Cyrus to facilitate the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple.
- Over 100 years later, in 586BC, the Babylonians destroyed the temple and most of Jerusalem. Most Judeans suffered exile to Babylon or [like the prophet Jeremiah] drifted to Egypt.
  - Forty-six years after that, Persia conquered Babylon; and in 539BC, the Persian king – named Cyrus, just as Isaiah said – allowed about 50,000 Jews to return to the land around Jerusalem. These Jews who returned made a brave and faithful choice, giving up what is thought to have become a comfortable existence in Babylon to return to the devastated land around Jerusalem.
  - One thing we have to keep in mind is that before the exile, the Temple was essential to the nation's worship under the Mosaic Law. So rebuilding the temple was a necessary part of resettling Jerusalem, and something God had prophesied through Isaiah. The returning exiles quickly set up a functioning altar for sacrifices and within two years had fixed the stone foundation for the temple. Then work stopped for almost two decades.
  - That was the situation when Haggai received his first prophecy from God. As far as we know, this was the first communication from God to the postexilic community. As we will see, this prophecy altered their relationship with God and facilitated rebuilding of the temple.
  - Let's read the first chapter of Haggai; then we'll talk about what we can learn from it. I will be reading the NIV<sub>2011</sub>, but you can follow in your favorite translation; they all tell the same story.

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† **[3: 1.1]** We begin with the first verse. **Haggai 1.1 NIV: In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest:**

- Before we hear what God had to say, let me clarify a few things. The first day of the sixth month of King Darius' second year was August 29, 520BC in our calendar. We know exactly when this happened. Most likely, all the people were gathered at the alter on the temple mount, for the burnt offering which the Law required on the first day of the lunar month [Numbers 28.11].
- The Persians made Zerubbabel the political overseer of the small area around Jerusalem, where the returning exiles lived. He had a Babylonian name, since he was born in exile, but he was the grandson of King Jehoiachin, who surrendered Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Zerubbabel later is named as an ancestor of Jesus; at this time he probably was the rightful king of all Israel.
- Joshua was a legitimate high priest, descended from the line of Aaron, son of Jozadak [or Jehozadak], the high priest who had been deported to Babylon. So the community had legitimate leadership from God, politically and religiously, though they were still a conquered nation under Persian rule.

† **[4: 1.2]** Let's see what God said to the two leaders. **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 temple].'"**

- In Hebrew, Haggai called God [יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת], which most English Bibles translate as "the LORD of hosts" or "the Lord Almighty." The word [צְבָא] referred to military troops, for God it refers to angelic armies: so Haggai called God, "Yahweh of angelic armies."
- The Bible uses [יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת] to emphasize Yahweh as the all-powerful God. The prophets referred to God in this way to frighten people into revering God or to encourage people into trusting God. As we will see, both were necessary at this time.

† It is this God who says to the two leaders of the returning remnant in **Haggai 1.2: 'These people [not "my people"! ] say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house [the temple].'"**

- We can infer that God was not pleased with these people for this thought! We know from Ezra 1-6 that there were external pressures to not build the temple, but God identifies the real problem as internal to the people themselves: they have decided year after year to delay rebuilding the temple.

† **[5: 1.3-5]** Next Haggai spoke to the gathered people themselves. **Haggai 1.3-5: 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 [the temple] remains a ruin?" Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways."**

- Here is the essence of God's complaint: the people had neglected to rebuild the temple, but they had worked to build nice houses for themselves. God's house was a ruin while they had houses that were nicely finished with wood paneling.
- God had blessed them to return to the land, and they had been begging him for the blessings of protection and provision, but while building themselves richly paneled houses, they neglected to rebuild the temple. The implication in God's question is that the people had misplaced priorities: they were living for themselves instead of for God.

- † There also is irony in God’s diction, and this is one of the things I love about the Bible. God the Father giving prophecy, Jesus when he walked the Earth, and the inspired authors of Scripture, all used wordplay, irony, and other literary devices to drive home their point.
- The irony God points out here is about the paneled houses the people have built for themselves. You see, when David was king, several hundred years earlier, he felt guilty about living in a paneled palace while the house of God was neglected, so he wanted to build the first temple himself [2 Samuel 7].
  - David’s son Solomon did construct that temple, and he made it magnificent inside, because he too lived in a palace with paneled walls [1 Kings 7.7-8].
  - Now the people have neglected to rebuild the Temple, though they have constructed for themselves not just shelters, but nicely paneled houses. God has a strong sense of irony; sometimes it shows up in humorous ways; but here it is a powerful tool for conviction.
- † Again Haggai referred to God as [יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת], emphasizing God’s authority and power. The all-powerful and sovereign God said **‘Give careful thought to your ways.’** The Hebrew calls for the utmost degree of prayerful reflection. God wanted them to sense conviction that they had neglected their duty, they had failed to show God proper reverence.
- **‘Give careful thought to your ways.’ ‘Think carefully about what you are doing!’** How would you feel if God said that to you? Maybe he is... We Christians should think carefully about our ways every day. Yet it is rare for most of us to prayerfully consider our ways, our priorities, and thus we often fail to please God.
  - I find it profitable to dedicate an entire morning now and then to Bible study, confession, worship, prayer for myself and others, and then prayerful examination of my life, plans, and schedule. It is amazing how clearly you can hear God if you really listen! I always am amazed at what God shows me during the times of confession and examination. I encourage you to try it.
- † [6: 1.6-7] Haggai 1.6-7: [the message of God continued] **“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.” This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways.”**
- Again [יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת] to emphasize God’s authority and power. Now God said to give careful thought to what was happening to them and why.
  - The words God used in v.6 would have reminded the people of the language in the Mosaic Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was clear: if the people of Israel walked with God, God would bless the nation in every way imaginable; but if they did not walk with God by faith and obedience [on the top line], but instead pursued their own path [on the bottom line], then God not only would withhold the blessings from which they walked away, he also would bring curses upon them, to bring them conviction of their wrongdoing, so they would repent, turn away from sin and return to walking with God.
  - Haggai’s audience were to interpret their struggles as a sign that they had strayed from God, thus facing his discipline to bring them back. This is even clearer in the following verses.

† **[7: 1.8-11]** Haggai 1.8-11: [Haggai continued] **“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 [God blew it away! That suggests the frailty of our efforts in the face of God’s sovereignty; and it implies God’s judgement]. 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.”**

- They were struggling with bad harvests and weak animals throughout the land – in the fields and the hill country; the grain, grape, olive, everything – and why were they struggling? because God had brought on a drought. And why had God done this, because the Mosaic Covenant called for it in times of general disobedience; and how were the people disobedient? they had left God’s temple in ruins because they wanted to focus on improving their own houses.
- In a touch of poetic irony, in Hebrew the words for drought and ruin are spelled with the same consonants. The people allowed the temple to be [תָּרַב], so God brought a [חֲרָב].
- Again, we have to remember that the Temple was vitally important; I think this is hard for us to understand, because we don’t have anything comparable today. The temple was the central place of worship and the visible marvel that called others to worship this true God; but it also was the place where in some sense God himself would dwell among his people. Without the temple, they could not access God through the priests or please God through sacrifices.
- Yet instead of investing in the ministry by rebuilding the temple, the people had used God’s blessings to indulge themselves, and now the irony was that after two decades God could contrast his house as a ruin with theirs of luxurious paneling. The people had made two mistakes: they put their selfish desires ahead of God’s desires; and they relied on their own reasoning and capabilities, instead of depending on God.
- What was the corrective then? Under the Mosaic Law, if the people repented – that is, if they turned away from sin and back to God, walking by faith and obedience to his revelation [on the top line] instead of being guided by their sinful flesh [on the bottom line] – then God would restore their blessing.
- Here God gave them a specific step of repentance: go into the hills and bring back the timber necessary to rebuild the temple. They already had all the stone they needed on site, but they would need wood, because the Babylonians had burned it in 586BC. If they gathered wood, then construction could proceed, and God would be pleased and honored by their obedience.

† **[8: 1.12]** How would they respond to this prophecy? **Haggai 1.12: Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.**

- Some English translations say the people respected God, but that is too weak as a translation. At the least, this is deep reverence. The Hebrew verb [יָרָא] literally means “to fear.” It is used in the Old Testament to describe people’s response to God after a time of judgment: they saw God’s power, his pure righteousness, his wrath about sin, so they feared him enough to repent.

- This is how it is supposed to work! The prophet calls the people back to the covenant relationship with God, the people and particularly their leaders repent to get back walking with God, and thus God is glorified through the people's reverence or fear [which is a change of heart] and obedience [which is a change of behavior].
- This was a much better response than prophets usually got before the exile! God's people did not always respond well to rebuke, but these people, with the memory of exile still present, had a desire to please the Lord. They were willing to see their error and correct it.
- So I think the term "remnant" not only refers to them as the remnant who returned to the land, but also as those who responded to the prophet's revelation, proving they were the believing remnant of God's people as described by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos long ago.

† **[9: 1.13-15]** Let's finish our passage. **Haggai 1.13-15: Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD. So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.**

- Twenty-three days after God spoke angrily, he spoke again. Since the first prophesy came during the harvest, probably the people took that time to prayerfully consider God's words, to think carefully about their ways, and to prepare for action.
- Now God said, "I am with you!" Why was this important? First, it showed God's unconditional love and relationship. God does not reject his people, even when he disciplines them; in fact, he disciplines them to bring them back to him. The believing remnant always will emerge from discipline further sanctified [or purified] for walking with God and doing his work.
- A second reason this is important is that it indicated God's provision and empowerment amidst human adversity. Ezra tells us that there were still external cultural pressures to not build the temple, but God assured the people he was with them, he would empower them to complete his work despite the obstructions of the world that might seem insurmountable to them.
- **[10: Jesus]** This reminds me of when, after the resurrection, Jesus commanded his disciples to go make more disciples for him amidst great adversity. They would be arrested, beaten, jailed, even killed to share a message of grace from the Messiah among Jews who had rejected the Messiah and among Gentiles who had other gods. In human terms, it must have seemed daunting, especially with Jesus leaving them. But then Jesus said in **Matthew 28.20 NIV: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."**
- Jesus will empower us to do his work, just as God energized the postexilic community. After decades of apathy toward the ministry of God, they sprang into action because of the prophecy of Haggai! We look for the same internal response and divine reassurance today.

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## Conclusions

† **[11: forth]** That's the story! Can we learn from it, from a prophecy given 2500 years ago to a different community living under different circumstances and a different covenant? I think we can.

- This first prophecy from Haggai did not foretell anything about the future; did you notice that? Rather than foretelling anything, it was what scholars call forthtelling: in other words, this prophecy was about calling the people back into right covenant relationship with God.
  - Pastors today teach God's revelation and call you to respond with faith and obedience, hoping you will desire to walk with God, so you will repent as needed, and we all end up stronger in faith and more determined to live as God's image bearers.
- † **[12: themes]** The people of Haggai's community let life pressures deter them from doing what was right. Does that ever happen today? That all too easily happens to us, right? At the same time, Haggai's people were depending on themselves, relying on human methods to rebuild their community. Do we ever make that mistake, relying on our own efforts instead of God? Sure we do.
- Haggai's people needed to remember that the Lord Almighty, the Lord of Hosts, had all power and authority: they should have made God their priority, they should have trusted in his protection while doing what was right, they should have depended on him to provide for them. Since they had not, God partially withdrew his protection and provision, to call them back.
- † One theme in Haggai is that God deserves and demands our devotion, to be our priority. There is no excuse for neglecting our relationship with God or his will for us. Under the Mosaic Covenant, people could expect great blessings from God when keeping their part of the covenant, but the covenant also included curses for disobedience. Haggai warned "Give careful thought to your ways," and informed the people that their recent struggles were due to their neglect of God's will.
- You and I must not let life pressures deter us from doing what is right. We do not have a temple to build, but we have a calling to evangelize among the lost, to participate in the edification ministries of the church, and to come together to exalt God every week. If we let children, leisure, school, work, social pressure, or improving our own houses take priority over our God-given callings, then we are making the same mistake of not showing God adequate devotion.
  - Another way we fail to show God devotion is if we allow something other than God to be our desire, for then we watch tv or surf the web instead of having quiet time, or we live to accumulate honors and wealth instead of pursuing his kingdom and righteousness. This is about using our resources – the blessings God gave us – to serve his purposes instead of our own. Like the people of Haggai's community, we get distracted by worldly goals and materialistic desires, investing too much in them and not enough in worship and ministry.
- † A second theme in Haggai is that God deserves and demands our dependence. He is the Almighty, not only able to meet all our provisional, protective, and empowerment needs, but also completely sovereign over future world events, which he will manipulate to bring about his will for Messianic judgment and rule. Believing in his promises and trusting in his faithfulness, we can have hope and encouragement to carry on despite whatever challenges exist in our lives. Haggai communicated God's name as the "Lord of Hosts" or "Lord Almighty" multiple times, and informed the people that their attempts at self-reliance had been futile and sinful.
- You and I must not rely only on our own ideas and efforts. We are to think and work, but God wants us to depend on him for protection and provision. When we depend only on ourselves, we start to rationalize cutting corners, using white lies, cheating the system a little, breaking small laws, so we fail to reflect God's character or represent him well.

- Depending on ourselves too much also leads to either hopelessness or arrogance, depending on your personality and circumstances. We have to remember daily that we need God's blessing for salvation, we need God's blessing for spiritual growth, and we need God's blessing just to survive and thrive in life without falling into fleshly, worldly ways. Like the people of Haggai's community, we need to find our courage in God and trust in his provision and empowerment.

† **[13: blessing]** In the present dispensation, in our biblical time period, we do not have the same covenant as the people in Haggai's day, with its specific promises of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience. So it is not as easy to identify sin as the source of our struggles.

- But consider, when we do not live God's way and do not make him our priority, then we remove ourselves from his blessing in many ways. Walking away from God to pursue our own path in sin means walking away from intimacy with him, spiritual empowerment, spiritual growth; walking away from the full experience of the fruit of the Spirit like transcendent joy and peace.
- That is why we must learn to live by faith and obedience in response to God's revelation, finding our values, goals, and methods in scripture instead of living by our own or the world's fleshly ideas. Whatever we have to give up in the world to walk with God, it is worthwhile to give it up! The path of ultimate blessing is walking with God, in his will.
- When we struggle, we like to blame others, our society, or even God, but God said these people should consider their own ways; after all, most often we dig our own holes. As pastor and scholar Donald Leggett said, "There is need for the godly process of examining our lives in light of Scripture. Are we missing out in our Christian life by not walking each day closely with the Lord Jesus?" [*Loving God and Disturbing Men*, 147]. So this week, consider your ways! Examine your life, how you allocate your time and your money, what are your priorities, attitudes, goals. Be ready to confess and repent, be willing to see your error and correct how you live.

† **[14: inspiration]** One more thought. Under the Mosaic Covenant, people did not have the Holy Spirit within them. This was one reason it was impossible to overcome their corrupted human natures to avoid sin and always walk with God. But there were times God would inspire and motivate, energize and encourage, so that his people would respond with faith and obedience.

- One promise about the New Covenant we have today is that God would protect his people by writing his law on their hearts; he would make it spiritually possible for his people to walk with him in faith and obedience at all times. In our time period, we have the Holy Spirit within, providing moment by moment guidance and empowerment, and we experience new spiritual birth and then progressive sanctification [transformation of our character] so that we become less corrupted, more like Christ.
- So like this remnant of believers 2500 years ago, we as God's people in a covenant relationship with him should eagerly respond to God's revelation with faith and obedience, because more than anything we want to be in his will, in his light, in close relationship with him. We too should be motivated by fearful reverence for God, the authority of his revelation for our life, our hope and assurance from his promises, and his Spirit moving in us to bring us to pursue his kingdom and his righteousness in relationship with him.
- Let's pray. . .

† **[15: website]** If you would like a devotion that goes with this sermon, you can find it on my website at [www.groben.com](http://www.groben.com).