

Haggai 1.1-15 / COB / 03.06.16

Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: Title]** How many of you have read all the Old Testament prophets? If you haven't, you should. You should read the entire Bible... at least once! Grab a good study Bible and get to it!
- I have never preached through a prophetic book, but today we will begin to change that. I have chosen for this adventure the book of Haggai; you can turn there and pull out your handout.
 - I read that the only time pastors preach Haggai is when they are having a building campaign. Well relax: though this lesson will nicely augment our recent discussions about materialism and money, we are not focused on raising money. Haggai has a more important message than that!
- † **[Slide 2: Timeline]** Let me sketch the scene. About 700BC, almost two centuries before Haggai gave his prophecy, the prophet Isaiah predicted destruction for the southern kingdom of Israel, known as Judah, destruction for even the capital city of Jerusalem, and destruction for even the sacred temple on Mount Zion in that city. But Isaiah also predicted that God would use some non-believer named Cyrus to facilitate the rebuilding of Jerusalem and reconstruction of the Temple.
- 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 later, Persia conquered Babylon. In 539BC, the Persian king – named... Cyrus! – allowed about 50,000 Jews to return to the land. We have archaeological evidence for all these events.
 - The returning Jews made a brave and faithful choice, giving up what is thought to have become a comfortable existence in Babylon to return to their devastated land in Judah. They found living back in Jerusalem brought many challenges, including challenges to their faith.
 - Before the exile, the Temple was essential to the nation's worship, so rebuilding it was an integral aspect 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 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 prophecy was the first direct communication from God to the postexilic community. As you will see, this prophecy dramatically altered their relationship with God and helped facilitate the rebuilding of the temple. Let's see what Haggai said...
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- † **[Slide 3: 1.1]** **Haggai 1.1 NET: On the first day of the sixth month of King Darius' second year, the LORD [Yahweh] spoke this message through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak:**
- The "first day of the sixth month of King Darius' second year" was August 29, 520BC in our calendar. The people might have been gathered where the altar was set up for the burnt offering which the Law required on the first day of the lunar month [Numbers 28.11].
 - Zerubbabel 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 was an ancestor of Jesus, and at this time he possibly was the rightful king of all Israel. The Persians made him the political overseer of the small area around Jerusalem, where the returning exiles lived.

- Joshua was a legitimate high priest, descended from the line of Aaron, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest who had been deported to Babylon. So the community had legitimate leadership politically and religiously, even though they were still a conquered nation under Persian rule.
- † **[Slide 4: 1.2]** To these two men, Haggai said in **Haggai 1.2**: **“The LORD who rules over all says this: ‘These people have said, “The time for rebuilding the LORD's temple has not yet come.””**
- Most English Bibles translate the Hebrew [יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת] as “the LORD of hosts” or “the Lord Almighty.” The word [צְבָא] referred to military troops, for God it meant angelic armies.
 - The Bible uses [יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת] to emphasize Yahweh as the all-powerful God. The prophets sometimes refer to Yahweh in this way to frighten people into respecting God, and sometimes 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”!] have said, “The time for rebuilding the LORD's temple has not yet come.””**
- We infer that God was not pleased with these people for this thought! There were external pressures against building 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.
- † **[Slide 5: 1.3-5]** Next Haggai spoke to the gathered people themselves. **Haggai 1.3-5**: **So the LORD spoke through the prophet Haggai as follows: “Is it right for you to live in richly paneled houses while my temple is in ruins?’ Here then is what the LORD who rules over all says: ‘Think carefully about what you are doing.’”**
- 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 in ruins while they had houses that were nicely finished.
 - God blessed them to return to the land, and they had been begging him for the blessings of protection and provision, but in order to build 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 not showing adequate devotion to God.
 - Also, there is irony in God’s diction. When David was king, he felt guilty 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 because he too lived in a palace with paneled walls [1 Kings 7.7].
 - Again Haggai used [יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת], emphasizing God’s authority and power. The all-powerful and sovereign God said **‘Think carefully about what you are doing.’** How would you feel if God said that to you? **‘Think carefully about what you are doing! Consider 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 proper reverence, submission, devotion to God.
 - I think Christians should think carefully about what we are doing every day. But I think most of us rarely think carefully about our priorities, and thus we often fail to please God.

† **[Slide 6: 1.6-7] Haggai 1.6-7:** [the message of God continued] **“You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but are never filled. You drink, but are still thirsty. You put on clothes, but are not warm. Those who earn wages end up with holes in their money bags.’ Moreover, the LORD who rules over all says: ‘Pay close attention to these things also.’”**

- Again [יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת] to emphasize God’s authority and power. Now God said to think carefully about what was happening to them. They neglected their duty, so God withdrew his blessing on their economy. Again God said, “Consider your ways!”
- The words God used in v.6 would have reminded them that the curses they were experiencing were outlined in the Mosaic Covenant for when the people were neglecting to live on the top-line by faith and obedience. They were to interpret these curses as a sign that they had strayed from God, so he was disciplining them to bring them back.
- All the warnings and promises the prophets gave were based on the curses and blessings outlined in God’s covenants with them. We should never forget that: God was consistent in his dealings with Israel: he had made covenants with them, and he stuck to them, bringing the promised blessings when they walked with him and the threatened curses when they did not.

† **[Slide 7: 1.8-11] Haggai 1.8-11:** [Haggai continued] **“Go up to the hill country and bring back timber to build the temple. Then I will be pleased and honored,’ says the LORD. ‘You expected a large harvest, but instead there was little, and when you brought it home it disappeared right away [literally in Hebrew, it says God blew it all away, showing the fragility of our efforts compared to his sovereignty and implying his judgment]. Why?’ asks the LORD who rules over all. ‘Because my temple remains in ruins, thanks to each of you favoring his own house! This is why the sky has held back its dew and the earth its produce. Moreover, I have called for a drought that will affect the fields, the hill country, the grain, new wine, fresh olive oil, and everything that grows from the ground; it also will harm people, animals, and everything they produce.’”**

- They were struggling with bad harvests and weak animals throughout the land – 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 disobedience; and how were they 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 ruins sound almost the same.
- The Temple was important, it was the central place of worship, where they brought their tithes and offerings, the visible marvel that called others to worship this true God, and indeed the place where in some sense God himself would dwell among his people. The temple was necessary for access to God through the priests and for pleasing God through sacrifices.
- Instead of investing in the ministry by rebuilding the temple, the people had used God’s blessings to indulge themselves, and the irony was that God could contrast his house in ruins with theirs in luxurious paneling. This was about honoring God instead of themselves, using their time, talent, and treasure to please God instead of themselves and to serve his purposes instead of their own.
- 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 instead of being guided by their sinful flesh – then God would restore their blessing. God gave them a specific step of repentance: go out 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 all in 586BC. If they took this step of gathering wood, then construction could proceed, and God would be pleased and honored by their obedience.

† **[Slide 8: 1.12] Haggai 1.12: Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak, along with the whole remnant of the people, obeyed the LORD their God. They responded favorably to the message of the prophet Haggai, who spoke just as the LORD their God had instructed him, and the people began to respect the LORD.**

- “Respect” maybe is too weak a translation. At the least, this is deep reverence. The Hebrew verb [יָרָא] literally means “to fear.” It is used often in the Old Testament to describe people’s response to God after a time of judgment: they saw God’s power, his pure righteousness, and his wrath about sin, so they feared him.
- In any case, what a great passage! 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 [a change of heart] and obedience [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.
- 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 and thus proved they were the believing remnant of God’s people as described by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos long ago.

† **[Slide 9: 1.13-15] Haggai 1.13-15: Then Haggai, the LORD’s messenger, spoke the LORD’s word to the people: “I am with you!” says the LORD. So the LORD energized and encouraged Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak, and the whole remnant of the people. They came and worked on the temple of their God, the LORD who rules over all. This took place on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month of King Darius’ second year.**

- 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 and prepare for action.
- 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 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.
- **[Slide 10: Jesus]** After the resurrection, before he ascended to Heaven, 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 Gentiles who had other gods. In human terms, it must have seemed

daunting, especially with Jesus leaving them; it still does. But then Jesus said in **Matthew 28.20 NET: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”**

- Jesus will empower us just as God energized and encouraged 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.

Conclusions

- † **[Slide 11: forth]** That’s the story! Can we learn from it, from a prophecy given 2500 years ago to a totally different community living under a totally 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.
 - Today the preacher teaches God’s revelation and calls you to respond with faith and obedience; hopefully you then have conviction you should walk with God, so you repent as needed, and we all end up stronger in faith and more determined to live as God’s image bearers.
 - Haggai’s prophecy contained a promise of God’s presence and empowerment. We hold on to that promise too. Jesus gave us the Great Commission to fulfill and we face adversity because of that and from the fallen nature of the world. But we take heart, because he is with us!
- † **[Slide 12: themes]** The people of Haggai’s community let life pressures deter them from doing what was right. Does that ever happen today? Oh yeah, that all too easily happens to us, right? At the same time, Haggai’s people were depending on themselves to handle the situation, they were taking bottom line [human] methods to rebuild their community. Do we ever make that mistake, relying on our own power and methods instead of God’s? Oh yes, 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 withdrew his protection and provision somewhat, 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 “think carefully about what you are doing” 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 do have a calling to evangelize among the lost, participate in the edification ministries of the church, and come to exalt God together every week. If we let children’s sports and hobbies, our own 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 start to play video games instead of having quiet time or we live to accumulate honors and wealth instead of pursuing his kingdom and his righteousness. This is about honoring God instead of ourselves, it is about using our time, talent, and treasure to serve

his purposes instead of our own self-indulgence. Like the people of Haggai's community, we get distracted by our worldly goals and materialistic desires, investing too much in them and not enough in worshipping God and doing his work.

- † A second theme in Haggai is that God deserves and demands our dependence. He is the Almighty, not only able to meet all provisional, protective, and empowerment needs presently, 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 called to think carefully and work hard, 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.
- † **[Slide 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 all 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 experience of the fruit of the Spirit like transcendent joy and peace, and from divine enlightenment and divine inspiration.
 - That is why I encourage you to learn to walk on what I call the top line, to live by faith and obedience in response to God's revelation, finding your values, goals, and methods in scripture instead of living on the bottom line by your own 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 culture, 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!
- † **[Slide 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 was 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 this New Covenant time period, we have the Holy Spirit within 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, walking 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. . .