

## Chapter 55 Haggai 1-2

### Haggai: The Material God

*“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 remains a ruin?’”* Haggai 1:3-4

We can't seem to get away from the fact that we need to show our love to God and others in physical and material ways. Words and good intentions are not enough. There is a physical side to spirituality. My father was a mathematician by profession and a carpenter by avocation. He loved working with numbers and wood. Sometimes when our preacher would take to shouting my father would take out a sheet of paper and start working on a math problem. “Preachers who need to shout,” he would say, “haven't done their homework.” He had a tenor voice and he often sang his faith, but he seldom preached. He was more inclined to materialize his faith in Christ than to verbalize his faith.

When our church needed a large brick and mortar sign, my father, who was more comfortable with wood than with words, volunteered to build it. I was very young at the time, but I have a mental picture of my father hauling bricks into a large tented enclosure, equipped with space heaters and flood lights. Perhaps the most unusual thing about the construction of this sign was its timing. It was built in the dead of winter. My father taught math all day at a community college and then he drove to church to work on the sign until nine or ten at night. I tagged along for a few nights, but I was too young to be much help. You would have to know my father, his work ethic, his love for building, and his love for the Lord, to realize that building a sign in January in Buffalo, NY, made sense to him, even if it didn't make sense to anyone else. I think the obstacles and challenges only made the work more interesting and meaningful for him.

A true passion for God always finds expression in tangible, concrete ways. This is the singular message that the prophet Haggai brought home to the returning exiles in 520 BC. He delivered three carefully crafted and precisely dated messages. The first came on August 29<sup>th</sup> (the first day of the sixth month – 1:1) and focused on the delay in reconstructing the temple (1:1-11). The second message was delivered on October 17<sup>th</sup> (the twenty-first day of the seventh month – 2:1) and addressed the people's discouragement and their disheartening situation (2:1-9). The third message came on December 18<sup>th</sup> (the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month (2:10, 20) and confronted the people's defilement (2:10-23). Haggai took on three major issues and their negative impact on God's renewal movement. He preached against *delay*, *discouragement* and *defilement* by promising the Lord's presence (1:13), the Lord's strength (2:4) and the Lord's blessing (2:19).

#### The Prophet

Haggai had “a consuming passion for God's cause” (Baldwin, 28). He comes on the scene in the midst of a crisis to deliver a powerful message calling God's people to passionate service. His message was unambiguous, no one could miss it: “Half-hearted allegiance is no allegiance” (Baldwin, 55). For Haggai, spirituality was bound to have an impact on our material reality.

There is a physical and material consequence to belonging to God. Spirituality is not based on our subjective feelings, but on the objective Word of God. Knowing and doing the will of God is worked out in the course of our ordinary daily life. Haggai's message resonates with the apostle Paul's counsel "to work [our] salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13). Haggai offers an important word for those who say, "I'll get serious with God when life settles down, or when the children get older, or when work isn't so pressured." Believers who say, "I'll give more when I have more to give," should listen up to Haggai. Anyone inclined to think, "I'll be strong for the Lord when I feel stronger, but right now I'm pretty weak," should pay attention to Haggai's spiritual direction.

The prophet Haggai was called by God to respond to all the people's excuses and rationalizations for not building the temple. With three simple down-to-earth messages, Haggai targeted the people's hypocrisy and discouragement with laser-like accuracy. His customary refrain underscored the people's responsibility to act on what they heard. "Give careful thought to your ways" (1:5,7; 2:15,18) is our translation for Haggai's "set your heart upon your ways." His bottom line was an imperative, "It's now or never." Spirituality devoid of action is sin. A piety of words without works is worthless. The prophet Haggai and James the brother of our Lord gave the same message: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." Faith without works is dead (James 1:22; 2:17).

In the year 520 BC "the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai" with the expressed purpose of eliminating the excuses that stood in the way of authentic spiritual renewal. Scholars assume that Haggai was an old man, because he may have seen Solomon's temple (2:3). If this is true that would make him Zechariah's senior and a representative of the older generation that had lived most of their lives in captivity. Haggai's name meant, *my feast*, which was fitting for a prophet who was focused on the worship life of the people. However the one thing that we know about Haggai with certainty, and really the only thing worth knowing about him, is that his life and ministry were defined by the word of the Lord. In the Book of Haggai there are thirty-eight verses and no less than 29 references to the authoritative word of the Lord. The only authority Haggai had was the authority granted to him by the word of the Lord. He had nothing else to say and no other reason to be heard, other than the word of the Lord. His messages were stripped of all peripherals and extras. There were no entertaining anecdotes or informative sidebars to keep his listeners attentive. Everything was distilled down to the definitive declaration of the Lord.

Another distinctive feature of Haggai's ministry was his respect for the political and priestly authorities. In this short book, Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and Joshua, the high priest, are named together five times. Both leaders give every impression of supporting Haggai's prophetic authority and responding to his message. Presumably the leadership was ready and willing to move forward, but progress was being impeded by the excuses of the people. This tension is reminiscent of the confrontation between Israel's leaders in the wilderness, Moses and Aaron, and the people of God who grumbled and complained about leaving Egypt. In Haggai's day, however, prophet, priest and king stand together in a unique way and cause us to anticipate the coming Prophet, Priest, and King, who will represent in himself all three dimensions of

leadership.

### **Get to Work!**

Haggai doesn't waste any time with small talk. He gets right into the message the Lord has given him: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house.'" But God says, "Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" Haggai's point-counter point method recalls Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus said, "You have heard it said. . . .But I say to you. . ." There are always plenty of reasons for not doing what the Lord wants us to do. Excuses are always easy. The delay in reconstructing the temple was no exception. The people had plenty of excuses for not continuing the work they began eighteen years ago in 538 BC. There were economic, political, emotional, personal and religious reasons for not going forward. Rebuilding the temple demanded expensive resources that were not readily available. The temple was a symbolic center for Israel's revival that drew strong opposition from Israel's enemies. Just knowing that the temple would never be as great as Solomon's temple was an emotional hurdle that was easier to avoid than face. Some may even have been arguing that temple reconstruction should wait for the coming of the promised one, the messiah. Haggai brushed aside all these excuses and zeroed in on the people's self-centeredness. They lived in well-built, nicely decorated homes while the house of God remained in ruins. The people had prioritized personal peace and prosperity at the expense of the household of faith. Whether the contrast is between completed (roofed) homes and the uncompleted temple, or luxury (paneled) homes and the demolished temple, the problem is the same: the people were indifferent to what would center and establish the biblical community. They were preoccupied with their own self-centered interests.

The force of Haggai's spiritual direction depends on personal responsibility, reasoned reflection, and a call to action. True persuasion comes from within. This is why Haggai emphasizes, "Give careful thought to your ways." I know of dead churches that devote one month a year to a hard-sell stewardship campaign and I know of vital churches that have no stewardship campaign because people give freely and sacrificially all year long. Institutional religion must extract a tax, but the Body of Christ gives generously with gratitude in their hearts to God. If people don't want to think about their ways, if they don't want to let their head explore the motives of their heart, then there is not much hope for the Word of the Lord to bring about change. Devoted disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ will prioritize the household of faith and the mission of the church.

Building on this sense of personal responsibility, Haggai gave the people something to think about. His message was to the point:

"Take a good, hard look at your life.  
Think it over.  
You have spent a lot of money,  
but you haven't much to show for it.  
You keep filling your plates,  
but you never get filled up.

You keep drinking and drinking and drinking,  
but you're always thirsty.  
You put on layer after layer of clothes,  
but you can't get warm.  
And the people who work for you,  
what are they getting out of it?  
Not much—  
a leaky, rusted-out bucket, that's what.”

(Haggai 1:5-6, The Message)

The people who justified the delay in building the temple were their own number one priority, but ironically, the more they focused on themselves the less they had and the more dissatisfied they were. For such people, doing God's work is always inconvenient and untimely. Haggai was asking them to think about it: the more they delayed the reconstruction of the temple, the more miserable they were becoming. By centering on themselves and catering to their own special interests they were losing out on God's blessing. We have heard it said that the surest way of making yourself miserable is by focusing your attention on making yourself happy. Haggai was saying something even more pointed: If you focus on your own material prosperity you will end up poor, economically as well as spiritually. Haggai's message recalls Jesus' parable of the ten talents (Lk 19:11-27). Apparently there were a lot of one-talent-wealthy-types in Haggai's day who refused to step out of their comfort zone and invest in God's kingdom work.

Undoubtedly there were many among these people who were disappointed with God. Life was not working out as they expected. They were working harder than ever and earning less than before. They were planting more and harvesting little. God matched their “tight-fisted stinginess by decreeing a season of drought, drying up fields and hills” (1:10-11; the Message). The question arises, how should we apply Haggai's message today? Do financial setbacks mean that God is judging us? If we lose our job or can't make our mortgage payments is God saying we have the wrong priorities? To answer this we have to keep in mind that Haggai was speaking the word of the Lord in a specific situation to a particular group of people. We cannot equate true spirituality with financial success nor can we attribute financial failure to false spirituality. But Haggai's fundamental thesis remains as true for the biblical community today as it was then. If our number one priority is our own financial success and security we will lack the blessing of the Lord. If we are building our own houses and financial portfolios at the expense of the household of faith we will find ourselves in a spiritual drought. In the context of discussing our material needs, Jesus said to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, “and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt 6:33). Both in Haggai's day and in our own, those who are most inclined to be disappointed with God are those in whom God is disappointed. God has not let them down; they have let God down.

Haggai causes us to see the connection between real-world spirituality and the material requirements for doing ministry. The Spirit-filled body of Christ involves physical property, church facilities, salaries, pensions, sound systems, signs, websites, and a myriad of other practical considerations. All of which are part of God's economy for the household of faith.

“Material—bricks and mortar, boards and nails—keeps us grounded and connected with the ordinary world in which we necessarily live out our extraordinary beliefs. Haggai keeps us in touch with those times in our lives when repairing the building where we worship is an act of obedience every bit as important as praying in that place of worship” (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, 1708).

Haggai’s prophetic rebuke also raised the issue of time and if there is anything in our culture that appears to be in short supply it is time! The people said, “Now is not the time to rebuild the temple” and Haggai said, “It’s now or never!” When it comes to the church, time commitments are often squeezed out of the discretionary time allotted to extracurricular activities like sports, social clubs, and entertainment. In the Christendom era, being an elder or deacon conveyed social status, but in the household of faith today it is often perceived as a time commitment in competition with family time and work obligations. The sign of a healthy church is when church leaders look upon their responsibilities as God-given and their time commitments as important as their work and family time. Those who have no time for this kind of hands on, nitty gritty involvement do not believe in the material God. They are consumers of a religion of convenience that refuses to count the cost of discipleship. A church that has set the right priorities is able to distinguish between waiting upon God and putting God off. There is a great difference between participating in the divine patience and playing church.

Haggai’s answer to these inexcusable delay tactics was uncomplicated. He basically said, “Get to work!” He delivered the Lord’s directive, “Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored” (1:8). The New Testament equivalent to Haggai’s work order is Jesus’ Great Commission, “Go and make disciples of all nations . . .” (Mt 28:19). The immediate response to Haggai’s message was positive. Zerubbabel, Joshua, “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 has sent him. And the people feared the Lord” (1:12). They heeded the message of Haggai because they believed the Lord had sent him and Haggai responded by giving the Lord’s promise to the people, “‘I am with you,’ declares the Lord.” Twenty-four days later, on September 21, they began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty (1:14-15). Thankfully, when the Lord said, “Now or never,” the people said, “Now!”

### **Be Strong!**

Almost a month later, on the seventh day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Haggai gave a message of encouragement. Having begun the arduous task of rebuilding the temple, with limited resources, political opposition, and emotional misgivings, the people were discouraged and in desperate need of perspective. They were painfully aware of the comparison between the supernatural power of the first exodus and the glory of Solomon’s temple and their depressing situation. They lamented the city and society that they had lost through divine judgment and enemy captivity. Starting over was a daunting and depressing task.

Haggai’s strategy of encouragement was realistic, comforting, and visionary. First, he addressed their discouragement by asking three rhetorical questions: “Who of you is left who saw this

house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?" He put his finger on the problem. He named the pain. He acknowledged the glory of the past and the psychological state of the present. Like a good therapist, Haggai got their depressing feelings out in the open, so they could be dealt with. Haggai said in effect, "This is what we have to deal with if we are going to move forward." Haggai knew that no one was helped by pretending that there was no problem. But diagnosing the problem was only the beginning.

Step two followed immediately. Haggai linked the problem with the solution. "But now be strong, Zerubbabel," declares the Lord. "Be strong," Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land," declares the Lord, "and work." To a cynic this is not encouragement, it's rhetoric. To a victim this is advice easily dismissed as too demanding. But to those who are serious about obeying God this is a necessary word. There is nothing wrong with challenging a weak believer to be strong. There is a difference between the weakness that is prone to sin and yields to temptation and the weakness that submits to God's will and displays the power of God's grace (2 Cor 12:9). There is a weakness that caters to the sinful self that is to be rejected and a weakness in our own self-confidence that ought to be embraced. Haggai's admonition to be strong is consistent with the apostle Paul's perspective, when he said, "I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). The only reason Haggai could challenge the people to be *strong* and *work* was the enduring presence of the Lord. "For I am with you," declares the Lord Almighty. "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear" (2:5). Scholars believe that the language of this verse recalls the promise of the Lord given after the golden calf rebellion in the wilderness (Ex 32-34). God was faithful then and God remains faithful now (Boda, 122).

Step three was designed to give the people of God the big picture. The current crisis and suffering was not worthy to be compared to the glory that was coming. What Haggai promised the exiles parallels what the apostle promised believers (Rom 8:18). "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the Lord Almighty" (2:6-7). The author of Hebrews was drawn to Haggai's prophecy and used it to describe "the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things" and the promise of the unshakable kingdom (Hebrews 12:26-28). Strength for today depended on the promise of the greater glory coming in the future. "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," says the Lord Almighty. "And in this place I will grant peace," declares the Lord Almighty." Step three in Haggai's strategy of encouragement anticipates Advent and the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Haggai prophesied better than he knew. He envisioned the wealth of the nations streaming into the temple, but the greater glory he proclaimed would only be realized when it was materialized in the Incarnate Son of God. Haggai had no idea how far the material God would go to bring his glory to us and us into his glory. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

## **Be Careful!**

Haggai's third and final message came several weeks after Zechariah (1:1) had begun his ministry and coincides with the third month anniversary of the temple rebuilding project (Ezra 3:10-11). Like Moses on Mount Ebal, Haggai laid out the Lord's consequences for obedience and disobedience (Deut 27-28). If the thrust of his first message was "Get to work!" and the heart of his second message was "Be strong!" then the essence of his third message is "Be careful!"

Haggai's third message drew on the Old Testament regulations for ritual purity (Lev 10:10-11). He interviewed the priests on a question of ceremonial defilement in order to make his case that disobedience is far more contagious than obedience. Sacrifices that have been consecrated to the Lord do not make other things holy just by coming in contact with them. But if a person has become defiled by touching a dead body under Levitical law everything that person touches is defiled. We might illustrate Haggai's point today by asking an operating room nurse if a sterile instrument were to come in contact with an unsterilized instrument would it disinfect it. The nurse would answer, "No, of course not. In fact, the sterile instrument would now be contaminated because it had touched an unsterile instrument." Haggai's point: "Be careful! We know from the past that disobedience is highly contagious."

Haggai's description of the moral and spiritual defilement of the people is all-encompassing: "Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled" (2:14). This sweeping judgment parallels the apostle Paul's conclusion, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). In ourselves there is no hope for salvation, nevertheless our saving hope is found in God—and in God alone. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23). Haggai's theology of salvation is thoroughly New Testament. The temple and Zerubbabel's descendant symbolize God's means of saving grace.

Three times, Haggai exhorted the people, "Give careful thought to this from this day forward" (2:15, 18). Haggai wanted the experience of laying the foundation of the temple to be a turning point in the life of the people of God *forever*. In effect he was saying, "Mark this day and never forget it for as long as you live! In the past you were disobedient, and you suffered the consequences of your actions, but from now on your obedience will be blessed by God." Haggai repeats the phrase, "from this day on," three times in order to drive his point home. This day was meant to be a defining moment for the people of God. Let the historical record show that this day was a day of transformation. The old way of doing things, burdened with disobedience and God's disapproval, has given way to a new day of faithfulness and obedience blessed by God.

The final thrust of Haggai's message, communicated later that same day, reaffirmed the future hope of the Day of the Lord. Like the temple, Zerubbabel was a sign of things to come. In words foreshadowing Mary's prayer of triumph (Lk 1:46-55), Haggai repeats that the Lord will shake the heavens and the earth, overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms" (2:21). In just a few sentences, Haggai sketches out a future that has to be received by faith. Under the circumstances there was nothing that would lead the people to believe that the wealth of the nations would one day stream into the temple and that Zerubbabel would be God's prince.

Like Obadiah, who contrasted days of trouble with the Day of the Lord, Haggai brackets time with the day the foundation of the temple was laid and the future day of the Lord. ““On that day,’ declares the Lord Almighty, ‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”” Like the temple itself, Zerubbabel becomes a symbol of God’s future blessing. But apart from faith, he was an unlikely symbol. His name meant “seed of Babel,” which probably indicates he was born in Babylon and as far as world rulers go, he was powerless. Nevertheless, Zerubbabel is the grandson of Shealtiel, son of Pedaiah (1 Chron 3:17) and a direct descendant of King David. He represents the royal line and his name will be included in Matthew and Luke’s list of Jesus’ lineage (Mt 1:12; Lk 3:27). This is the critical and converging point that Haggai saw only dimly but we see today in the light of Jesus Christ: a true descendant of David who will fulfill all the redemptive promises represented in the temple.

Haggai was part of God’s “cradle building,” working to rebuild the biblical community in preparation for the coming of the promised Savior of the nations—the Messiah. Because of Haggai’s Spirit-led work, we take special notice of Jesus’ words, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (Jn 2:19). The crucified and risen Christ Jesus is the chief cornerstone of the new temple. “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him [we] too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:20-22). The material God did not stop with the called out people, the promised land, the Jerusalem temple, the sacrificial system and the law. All these down-to-earth revelations anticipate the coming of the Incarnate One.

In ever-increasing humility, God moved the promises of the past forward to completion in the incarnation of the Son of God. “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:1-3). My father worked hard in the dead of winter to build a church sign; our heavenly Father continues to work hard through the course of history to build up the people of God. First Israel, and now the church humbly bear witness to Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One, the ultimate revelation of the material God.