

WILL YOU REBUILD THE LORD'S HOUSE?

Haggai 1-2

Key Verse: 1:9, "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."

God's people Israel were unfaithful to God. So in the year 586 B.C. God gave them into the hands of the world power Babylon, and many of them were exiled to Babylon. About 50 years later, Persia conquered Babylon and became the new world power. God moved the heart of the king of Persia to issue an edict (Ezra 1:2-4): "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.'"

So nearly 50,000 Israelites returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. They were led by Zerubbabel the governor of Judah, and Joshua the high priest. They first rebuilt the altar and offered sacrifices on it. Then they laid the foundation of the temple. This took two years. But there was strong opposition around them. Ezra 4:4-5 says, "So these people started beating down the morale of the people of Judah, harassing them as they built. They even hired propagandists to sap their resolve. They kept this up for about fifteen years, throughout the lifetime of Cyrus king of Persia and on into the reign of Darius king of Persia."

It was at this time that the word of the LORD came to the prophet Haggai in Jerusalem. God gave him four messages. May the LORD challenge, inspire, humble and renew our spirits through the LORD's message to his people through the prophet Haggai.

First, "Will you leave the LORD's house in ruins?" (1:1-15)

Haggai's first message from God was directed to Zerubbabel the governor of Judah and Joshua the high priest. ² This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house.'"

³ Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴ "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Zerubbabel was a direct heir of King David. As the appointed governor of Judah he represented the local government of God's people. Joshua was the high priest, who represented the temple worship. Of course, there was no finished temple but just an altar for Joshua the high priest to minister at.

Humanly, there were many good reasons that they were not building the temple. For one, there was strong opposition by people who did not want to support the rebuilding of the temple. Another reason to be sure was that it would require much time and effort on their part to build the temple. But building the temple would not give them any immediate benefit. On the other hand, if they worked in their fields, they could reasonably hope for the benefit of more food on the table. If they worked on their homes, they could enjoy more comfort and security—perhaps less bugs in their homes, or nicer beds, better lighting or water storage. Of course, first they needed to survive—just to have enough

food, clothes and shelter. Then, if they worked a little harder for themselves they could have more food, and more varieties of food, nicer clothes, and a larger, more comfortable home. Actually, they were simply doing what all people all over the world usually do every day, working to obtain better food, clothes, shelter and possessions. One time Jesus said that unbelievers worry and chase after things such as food and clothes.

Now look at verses 5-7. I'll read these verses in the Message version of the Bible:

And then a little later, GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies spoke out again:

“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.
That's why GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies said:
“Take a good, hard look at your life. Think it over.”

In these verses, the LORD Almighty is giving a message to his people, whom he has set apart for himself. The LORD Almighty is a title repeated frequently in Haggai and the prophet books. Who is God? He is the LORD Almighty. He is God of the Angel Armies. The LORD of hosts. LORD Sabaoth is his name. A mighty fortress is our God. This God created the heavens and the earth. Our lives and all we have belong to him. This God redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt and brought them out by his mighty acts of judgment on their oppressors. This great God redeemed us by the blood of Jesus Christ. He purchased us to be a kingdom and priests to serve him.

To the Israelites just out of exile, to worship God was a risk and a danger and a great inconvenience. How about to us? How easy it is to forget that the LORD is Almighty God! How easy it is to regard worshipping or seeking God as a burden or inconvenience. Brothers and sisters, this should not be! God deserves much more than we give him. God deserves more than two hours on Sunday. God is worthy of more than 10% of our income, yet so many Christians do not give even that. God deserves our best love, our hearts, our lives. Why? Because he is God our Creator and Redeemer, our Savior and our Shepherd. We are the sheep of his pasture. We are his children, and he is our Father in heaven.

Twice the LORD Almighty told his people to take a good, hard look at their lives, to give careful thought to their ways. God was saying to them, “Don't you see what's going on here?” He wanted them to realize that their prosperity and success did not ultimately depend on their hard work or their focus on their homes and fields, that is, on their careers and families and personal possessions. Of course, it's good to work hard. The Bible tells us to do so. And physical training definitely has some value. But God wants us to know that ultimately our health and our wealth does not depend on us alone. In fact, it depends primarily on God, our Shepherd and King. So in that same passage where Jesus said not to worry about food and clothes, Jesus gave us this directive: “But seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

How about God's people in Haggai's time? What did God tell them to do? Verses 8-11, again in the Message version say:

"Here's what I want you to do: Climb into the hills and cut some timber. Bring it down and rebuild the Temple. Do it just for me. Honor me. You've had great ambitions for yourselves, but nothing has come of it. The little you have brought to my Temple I've blown away—there was nothing to it.

"And why?" (This is a Message from GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, remember.) "Because while you've run around, caught up with taking care of your own houses, my Home is in ruins. That's why. Because of your stinginess. And so I've given you a dry summer and a skimpy crop. I've matched your tight-fisted stinginess by decreeing a season of drought, drying up fields and hills, withering gardens and orchards, stunting vegetables and fruit. Nothing—not man or woman, not animal or crop—is going to thrive."

Of course, they didn't have a Home Depot to go and buy the lumber. They didn't have power tools to work easily. They had to chop trees down and carve it into usable boards. It was not easy work. Yet God told them that is what would honor him. That would give him the rightful place in their lives and community.

How about us? What would give God rightful place in your life? In your home? In our church? Personally, it should involve sincere times of prayer and Bible reading, study, meditation and application. How about as a church? What has our Lord commanded us? He left his church with several two clear commands: "Love one another," and, "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations." Jesus wants us to love our fellow Christians as our brothers and sisters, as family. We must not compare or compete or condemn or judge. We must love one another, sincerely and deeply from our hearts. And we must preach the gospel to all people and make disciples of all nations. That is not easy. That is not comfortable. That will create opposition, persecution, hatred. Are we more concerned about securing our own comfort and well-being or in honoring, glorifying and pleasing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Lord, help us! Lord, have mercy on us!

How did Haggai's audience respond? Verse 12 says, "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."

They accepted Haggai the prophet's message as God's message. They obeyed the voice of the LORD their God. The Bible says they "feared" the LORD. This word "fear" is one of the words for worship, along with the words "bow down" and "serve." They humbled themselves before God's message. God was pleased with their response.

Look at verses 13-15. ¹³ Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD. ¹⁴ 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, ¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.

“The LORD is with us” is the most encouraging and inspiring message. It moves us to action. The Bible says “the LORD stirred up the spirit” of the governor, the high priest and the whole remnant of the people. They were united in one heart and spirit by God’s word to them, and they began the work of rebuilding the temple, the house of the LORD Almighty, their God.

Second, greater glory and blessing is coming (2:1-23).

One month later, God’s second message came to Haggai: ²“Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, ³‘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?’ ⁴But 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. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ⁵‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’”

This temple that they were building looked very unimpressive compared to Solomon’s temple which was plated in gold, silver and bronze. When some older Jews who had seen Solomon’s temple saw Zerubbabel’s temple, they wept. Perhaps it looked like a bungalow house compared to a mansion.

God understood their discouragement and their fear. So God encouraged them saying, “Be strong...be strong...be strong...and work. For I am with you...This is what I covenanted with you...And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.”

God had more encouraging words about this temple:

⁶“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. ⁷I 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. ⁸‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ⁹‘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.”

Many Bible scholars understand these words as a promise that all nations would come to the temple with gifts of gold and silver for the LORD and his temple. There is a similar vision in Isaiah 2:2, written 200 years before Haggai’s time: “In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.”

There is yet another sound biblical interpretation. The ultimate desire of nations is the Messiah, our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The greater glory is when Jesus entered the temple and preached the good news of the kingdom of God. Jesus stood in an upgraded temple and said, “Destroy this temple and I will raise it in three days.” But the temple he had spoken of was not the building, but his own body. Jesus was despised and rejected by people. He was beaten and flogged, slapped and spat upon. Finally, he was nailed to the cross. Isaiah wrote, “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6). Apostle John wrote: “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” (John 1:14).

In God's third message to Haggai, God wanted them to return to him and be consecrated. He wanted them to know that his blessing came upon them from the day that he decreed it. In his fourth message God promised to shatter foreign oppressors and to make Zerubbabel, the heir to David's throne, like his signet ring, a symbol of authority.

Today, we heard the LORD's message to his people through the prophet Haggai. Be strong and work. Honor me. Build my house. I am with you. May we take this exhortation to heart and, by his grace and Spirit, do what the LORD wants us to do, personally, in our homes, and in our church. Amen.