

Building the LORD's House or Your Own?

Haggai 1:1-15

Key Verse: 1:8

“Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified,” says the LORD.

If you are honest, what is your focus or priority right now in your life? For some it is education. If you are a current student, that's an important priority. For some, their focus is social relationships or marriage. Indeed, most people, though not all people, will get married at some point. For those with children, your children are an important priority. Building a career is a standard of life in our society. Physical and mental health are relevant and important. I am now 61 and I have had more doctor appointments in the past 1 month than I had for the past 5 years put together. Physical health is important. In the ranking of all these priorities, where does the LORD fit in? Or how about the LORD's work? Is it in your top 5? Top 3? Maybe even 2nd? Can anyone say it is their #1 priority and focus? Would there be enough evidence in your life to confirm that? In today's Bible passage, Haggai chapter 1, God's people are challenged by God with this priority issue. May God give us a right priority and focus that pleases and glorifies God, that we may participate in his work and be blessed as his people.

Before we consider Haggai's prophecy, let's review briefly, regarding the proclamation of Cyrus.

In 538 B.C. Cyrus king of Persia, who conquered Babylon, issued a proclamation, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. The book of Ezra is very helpful here. Listen to what Cyrus king of Persia said: “The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:2-4).

This was an important proclamation for it gave the Jews both permission and financial support to rebuild the LORD's temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus also gave them the temple articles to take with them, which had been confiscated by Babylon. The Jews were backed by the king of Persia, who was not even Jewish! Ezra mentions that over 42,000 Jews came back at that time and rebuilt the altar for sacrifices and the foundation of the temple. But due to opposition from enemies, the building was stopped for a period of

about 15 years. This is where Haggai comes in. We will consider Haggai chapter 1 with 3 points: (1) Is it time to build or not? (1-4); (2) Consider your ways, how's that going for you? (5-11); (3) The blessing of obedience (12-15).

(1) Is it time to build or not? (1-4)

It was now 520 B.C., the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. The word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the governor of Judah and Joshua the high priest. Judah had no king since they were under Persian rule. But they had a governor, Zerubbabel, who was a descendant of King David. God gave the governor Zerubbabel and Joshua high priest who were both over God's people, the returned exiles, a message.

Look at verses 2-4. ²“Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.” ³ Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, ⁴“Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?”

God's people said it was not a good time to build the LORD's house. Why? There might have been many reasons. For one, they had enemy opposition to rebuilding it. No one enjoys opposition. Life is much easier when everyone agrees with us, and we are all on the same team. But there was strong opposition from some local people to rebuilding the temple of the LORD. Should they just wait until all those enemies died out? What if they don't die out?

The LORD spoke to them through Haggai the prophet that their problem was putting more priority on their own homes rather than on the LORD's house. Why was the temple such a big deal? What did the temple mean to Israel?

Before Solomon's temple was built, there was a tabernacle or Tent of Meeting. This tabernacle was mobile and it represented God's presence with his people. David had it in his heart to build a temple for God. David said, ““See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent.” ³ And Nathan (the prophet) said to the king, “Go, do all that is in your heart, for the LORD is with you” (2Sam 7:2-3). The LORD was pleased with David's desire to build a house for God, but the LORD told him that Solomon was the one to build it.

It was a beautiful temple, and when it was completed the glory of the LORD filled the temple (2Chron 7:1). And the LORD promised King Solomon: ¹⁶For now I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there forever. ¹⁹“But if you turn aside... and serve other gods and worship them, ²⁰then...this house that I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight...” (2Chron 7:16,19,20).

The temple was the place for God's people to come and worship the LORD and to bring sacrifices for the forgiveness of their sins. The temple was God's dwelling place among his people. So to build the temple, was to honor and worship God as God in their lives. It was to make God the focus and priority of their lives, both individually and as a community.

However, Haggai gave them the LORD's rebuke that they were enjoying their own paneled houses, while the house of the LORD remained in ruins. Why did they come back to Jerusalem? To live in their nice comfortable houses at ease, forgetting God? That was missing the point of returning to Jerusalem. That was missing the point of God moving Cyrus king of Persia to issue a proclamation to rebuild the temple.

(2) Consider your ways, how's that going for you? (5-11)

Haggai continued with the word of the LORD: ⁵“Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. ⁶You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes” (5-6).

Life apart from God is not fruitful or successful, even if we work hard. Why is it so? Because there is an emptiness inside us that can only be filled by God, the Holy Spirit. And there is another reason.

Look at verses 9-11. ⁹“You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. ¹⁰Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. ¹¹And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.”

God did not bless their labors. These words echo Deuteronomy chapter 28, where God promises blessings for obedience to him, and curses for disobedience. God lets us know that seeking him is rewarded and chasing after the things in the world does not satisfy or bear fruit, both in the short term and in the long run.

Jesus said the same thing. Rather than running after material things like unbelievers who only focus on the material world, Jesus taught, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” (Matthew 6:33).

Once Jesus was speaking to the crowds. A man in the crowd asked help to get some inheritance money from his brother. Jesus said to him, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." ¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' ¹⁸ And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." ²⁰ But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:16-21). So we are challenged by the prophet Haggai and through our Lord Jesus to be rich toward God.

But what does that mean to be rich toward God, or to give God priority in our lives? For the leaders and the people of Haggai's time it meant to build the temple, with no excuses. The LORD commanded them in verse 8: "Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified," says the LORD. They had to go and chop down trees and bring the wood, and build the temple. That sounds like a lot of work. Indeed it was.

Why did God want them to do this? The LORD said: "that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified." What pleases God? It pleases God when we love and thank him. As we learned in our Romans study, God gives eternal life to those who by persistence in doing good, seek glory, honor and immortality. These are good things to seek. These are good things that only God can give. You won't find lasting glory, honor and immortality in this world, which is perishing.

Author and pastor John Piper coined an interesting term: "Christian Hedonism." It is founded on this principle: "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." This seems to be what the LORD is telling his people through the prophet Haggai.

Who is God that he should be glorified? That's a silly question. God is God. There is no other. God is God. I am not. You are not. In this short book of Haggai, the LORD is repeatedly called "the LORD of hosts." Hosts represent powers or angels. The LORD is the LORD of the angel armies of heaven. He is the LORD God Almighty. He created all things, including each of us. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. He is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Martin Luther wrote the hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." In it he uses the phrase "Lord Sabbaoth" which is "the LORD of hosts":

“Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing; Were not the right Man on our side, The Man of God’s own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus—it is He; Lord Sabbaoth His name; From age to age the same; and He must win the battle.”

(3) Obedience and blessing (12-15).

How did they respond to the message of Haggai the prophet? In verse 12, Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the high priest, and all the remnant of the people “obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.” Both the political leader and the spiritual leader, together with all the people, obeyed the LORD’s message through the prophet Haggai. That itself is an amazing work of God. How difficult it is for a group of people to be united in mind and heart and spirit. It is much easier to find disagreement or contention, especially when it involves some kind of challenge or change in one’s life, or in a community. These people woke up from their spiritual slumber, including the leaders, and all the people. There is no record that anyone opposed this direction. Rather, they feared the LORD. Here, the word for fear means deep reverence and worship. They revered and honored God as God.

Then they got a great blessing. Verse 13 says, “Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD’s message, ‘I am with you, declares the LORD.’” There is no greater blessing than to know that God is with us. If God is with us, nothing can stand against us. If God is with us, nothing is impossible. If God is with us, we lack nothing.

See how this passage ends in verses 14-15: “And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, ¹⁵on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king.” All of them, from the leaders to the ordinary people, were of one mind and spirit. God stirred up their spirits to come together and work on the house of the LORD of hosts.

What is the LORD’s work that he wants us to do? We have been praying that God would stir the hearts of 1000 attendees at the World Mission Congress with a vision for the LORD’s work. This is in line with our LORD’s Great Commission, which we recite at the end of every Sunday worship service. Our Lord Jesus commanded us, his church, to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey all that he commanded us. And he promised to be with us. These are our Lord’s marching orders. His people, the church, need to be active in participating in this work. Are you

participating in the LORD's work? How so? Is it evident to others that the LORD's work is the focus and priority of your life?

God still wants to dwell among his people through the Holy Spirit. This became possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus replaced the temple sacrifices through his own sacrifice as the Lamb of God when he shed his holy blood on the cross for our sins. Jesus became our Great High Priest. Those who trust in Jesus are the temple of the living God (2Co 6:16). The LORD our God who gave us life and salvation through Jesus Christ is worthy of our best love and effort.

It's easy for me to say that the LORD is the priority of my life since that is my full time work. But it is not always the priority in my heart. Rather, I naturally pursue an easy, comfortable life. Recently, I finished going through the book, "Visionary Marriage" with another couple in our church. In the last chapter the pastor/author challenges the reader to have a God-sized vision for your family: have many children and raise them as pastors and missionaries. This challenged me to not settle for pettiness and small-mindedness, or just getting by. May God help me and each of us to give the LORD and his work first priority in our lives. May God stir all our leaders and all our church to participate in the LORD's work of making disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord.