

EXAMINING YOUR PRIORITIES

Haggai 1

Worship Moment Message

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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SCRIPTURE

In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: ²Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD'S house. ³Then the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ⁴Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? ⁵Now therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. 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 you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.

⁷Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. ⁸Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the LORD. ⁹You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses. 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 soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labors.

¹²Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai, as the LORD their God had sent him; and the people feared the LORD. ¹³Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD'S message, saying, I am with you, says the LORD. ¹⁴And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua 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, ^{15a}on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month (Haggai 1 NRSV).

MESSAGE

There are times when we need to examine our priorities.

A young lad came to Sunday School late. His teacher knew that he was usually very prompt and asked him if anything was wrong. The boy replied no. Then he said that he was planning on going fishing but his dad told him that he needed to go to church. The teacher was very impressed and asked the boy if his dad had explained to him why it was more important to go to church than to go fishing. To which the boy replied, "Yes, he did. Dad said he didn't have enough bait for both of us."

Priorities. The prophet Haggai helps us to examine our priorities.

There are twelve books in the Old Testament that are referred to as the Minor Prophets. They are not called "minor" because they are less important. Rather, they are called "minor" because they are much shorter books than the Major Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The Book of Haggai, for instance, is only two chapters long.

The people associated with the minor prophets did not all live at the same time. Some, like Haggai, lived during the end of the sixth century before the birth of Christ. This was the aftermath of the Babylonian Exile. The Babylonian Exile or Captivity refers to a period when many Jews were taken into captivity by the King of Babylon. By this time in history and for all practical purposes, the Tribe of Judah was the only tribe left of the original Twelve Tribes of Israel. (Yes, there were a few left from Benjamin, but Judah was dominant.) The exiles were referred to as Jews. The word "Jew" being drawn from the word "Judah."

After seven decades the Babylonians and their empire fell to the Persians. The Persians then gave a limited amount of freedom to the Jews who had been in exile. Many returned to their homeland including a prophet called Haggai.

Haggai noticed that people were focusing their time and energy on decorating their houses or looking for ways to make more money. Meanwhile, God's house lay in ruins. Haggai urged the people to make God their top priority. One way to demonstrate that would be to rebuild the House of God and faithfully engage in worship.

I must confess I am a little envious of Haggai. He is one of the few preachers in the Bible where people actually heeded what he said, and with dramatic results. Within a short space of time they really turned around and they heeded the Word of God. Jeremiah was not in the same situation as Haggai. Jeremiah had a dismal experience, as you know. He became known as the "weeping prophet."

I'm wondering if Haggai's success had anything to do with his personality. Haggai's name means "party." Now that conveys something, doesn't it? It suggests a more optimistic view of life. You've heard of people who have "party" as a middle name. Well, Haggai had it as a first name. Perhaps Haggai was born during one of the festivals. If this guy had a depressing personality that would have been a contradiction. But I don't sense that. He knew what he had to preach and the people responded.

Let's take a look at some of his words and use them to help us examine our priorities. Verse 7 says, "Consider how you have fared." Literally it means "set your heart upon your ways." Taken literally it seems kind of bizarre, doesn't it? Can you imagine walking down the sidewalk and finding a heart beating there? And it would be even more bizarre if it was your heart beating there.

Set your heart upon your ways.

Well, let's not take this phrase too literally. It is a dramatic phrase. It's a vivid phrase. And it is repeated three times in this short book so it is meant to be an important phrase. What Haggai means is this: Fix your attention on your behavior. Think deeply and seriously about what you are doing and why you are doing it.

So, what were they doing? Perhaps it would be better to ask, what were they not doing? Well, they were not rebuilding the Temple and they were not particularly concerned about worship. They were concerned about paneling their houses and material gain. However they started to notice something. The harder they worked, the less they received. The crops seemed to be failing and they were struggling to have enough.

So the Lord, speaking through Haggai, tells them, in effect, "My house and your lives are in ruins. Fix your attention on your behavior." In response the people do exactly that – they see that they have neglected God. They had pushed God aside. They had the wrong priorities.

Recognizing where they had gone wrong, they came together and rebuilt the Temple. Now the question may be asked, was it necessary to build this Temple? I mean, did God actually need this building? The answer is, "No, of course not." God doesn't need a building. The building is actually beside the point. It's what's behind the Temple that matters. The building which was the Temple is a visible representation of an invisible commitment to God – a commitment they had previously lacked. But with the rebuilding of the Temple they renewed their commitment to God. God became their top priority.

God says, “Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it” (1:7). Notice he doesn't say go up and get the stones, as well, because there would have been stones all around in the ruins of the temple. But the wood would have perished and so they had to get more from the hills.

And if they were to put God first by rebuilding the Temple, God says that he will take pleasure in it. It's an interesting phrase this phrase, “taking pleasure.” It has a couple of different meanings. It can mean that God delights in us – that if we put God first we will bask in goodness. We will receive unexpected gifts. We will be the beneficiaries of such wonders and such delights that couldn't have even been imagined. That's part of the meaning.

But this word also can refer to acceptableness. If this is the case here then the message is: If people make God their first priority, demonstrated by rebuilding the Temple, then God will act in such a way as to pass over their sins and make them acceptable once again.

Recall if you will, from your Sunday School lessons about Solomon when he dedicated the Temple. Part of his prayer included the idea that if people would come sincerely and confess their sins, God would hear them and forgive them. And that's a similar kind of wording here. God will act in such a way as to make them acceptable. They couldn't do it on their own. God had to do it. It was an act of grace.

We have seen this come true in Christ. Remember when Jesus was baptized and then later when he was transfigured? What were the words that were spoken? “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased!” (Matt 3:17). This is the nature of the pleasure. An acceptableness. Through Jesus Christ, God passes over our sins. We are made acceptable once again to God. That's the nature of this pleasure, of this delight. We become acceptable to God.

If we know that we have been made acceptable to God, we can anticipate something. We can anticipate that someday God's glory shall be fully revealed. Now we know something of God's glory. We certainly know something of God's glory in Jesus Christ. And we experience something of God's glory in worship and in baptism and the Lord's supper and those special moments of prayer with a friend, and a great many other situations. But the day is coming when the whole day will be filled with that. Our whole lives will be filled with an awareness of God's glory and power and his delight in us.

When Jesus was being cross-examined by Caiaphas, the High Priest, he said that the time was coming when the Son of Man would come in clouds of glory. We anticipate that. We long for it. We hope for the coming of that day. But it won't mean much to us. It

certainly won't mean anything positive to us, unless we rebuild the Temple. I don't mean that literally, of course. By rebuilding the Temple I mean, making God the first priority in our lives.

Not long ago I came across a piece in a news magazine that struck me as odd. Perhaps it will strike you as odd as well. Apparently it was a hot day in San Antonio, Texas. It was 99 degrees. A 10-month old baby girl was accidently locked inside a parked car by her aunt. Frantically the mother and her aunt are running around not knowing what to do and becoming more hysterical by the minute. A neighbor comes by and tries to unlock the car with a clothes hanger, but that doesn't work. Soon the infant starts to change color. She's turning purple. Foam begins to appear around her mouth. Finally, a tow truck driver happened to be going by – a man named Fred Ariola. He grabs a hammer out of his truck, smashes the back of the window and sets the girl free. But was he heralded a hero? No. The mother was furious that he broke the window of her car. She wants to know who is going to pay for it? Priorities. Which is more important, the baby or the window?

You and I can think of a number of examples of misplaced priorities. Perhaps the examples are from our own experiences. It is important that we examine our priorities.

We will not know the joy of God's delight; there will not be a sense of being right with God and having been accepted by God; and there will not be a sense of security for the future unless and until we rebuild the Temple from within and make God our first priority. This was the Word of God in the time of Haggai.. It is still the Word of God today.