

Priorities

We seldom study our Bible. Oh, we read it, of course, but not with reflection or meditation on what the text says, about God, for example, or about His will, or about us. We need to read the Word of God slowly and thoughtfully, and think deeply about each verse or phrase. Sometimes, we need to stop and think about even a particular word that the writer used. And probably there are entire books of the Bible that we've not studied. Today's lesson is on one of the minor writing prophets, Haggai. It's very likely most church-goers haven't thought much about Haggai's prophecy. The message of the book is highly instructive and applicable to us today. It's a short book, only 2 chapters, and we can capture the essence of it with the following extracts:

"This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'These people say, The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built...Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house [the Temple] remains a ruin?...Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it...Give careful thought to your ways'" (1:2-7).

Haggai continues in chapter One: **"Build the house so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored (v. 8)...because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops" (v. 10).**

Further, in Chapter 2, Haggai writes, **"If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things [bread, wine, oil or other food], does it become defiled? 'Yes,' the priests replied, 'it becomes defiled.' Then Haggai said, 'So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,' declares the Lord. 'Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled...'" (vv. 13-14). And this: **"I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not turn to me,' declares the Lord" (v.17).****

What's going on? It's 520 BC. A remnant of Judah had returned to the Land from exile in Babylon, but they occupied themselves with building their own homes. They should have busied themselves with carrying out God's will, viz, building the Temple at Jerusalem. They had the wrong priority. Their priority was themselves, not the Lord's work. The first prophecy therefore is a scathing rebuke of the people. Haggai points out that their circumstances there in Judah was dire, they weren't experiencing blessing, because of their wrong priorities.

"And the people feared the Lord...They came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God..." (vv. 12, 15). And continuing this prophecy in chapter 2: **"Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord, and work. For I am with you, declares the Lord Almighty" (v. 4).**

To the people's credit, they responded to Haggai. They "feared the Lord." **"So 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 the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God" (v.14).** They went to work, and they rebuilt the Temple. And as a result, the Lord blessed the people.

Israel's disobedience to God's revealed word results in hardship, in bitterness of life. Israel's obedience to God's word, in contrast, results in God's favor and blessing. This was what God had said would be the arrangement between them and their God back in Deuteronomy chapter 28. Disobedience results in severe hardships, but obedience results in blessing.

What was so important about the rebuilding of the Temple? Why did God desire it so deeply? Although God didn't occupy the Second Temple as He did Solomon's Temple, that Temple at Jerusalem was emblematic of God's presence with His people and His rule. And because God had great plans for that Temple in the future.

Let's observe that the people of Israel had things reversed. Totally backwards. They were putting off what was known to be a priority for God so as to deal with their personal situations, yet their personal situations only kept getting worse and worse resulting in their needing to double down on their own personal work even further. They didn't realize that the troubles they were having was entirely God's doing because of disobedience. Haggai's message was, if they would put God's priority first, if they'd do what God wanted them to do first, He would change their circumstances. Prosperity and peace were a consequence of obedience to God's will.

What was the turning point? What is that is key to the story? "The people feared the Lord." It was this fear of God that resulted in obedience, and as a consequence, they experienced blessing.

OK, the Church is not Israel. And America is not Israel. Nevertheless, this book is in the Bible for a reason. It's here not just to document what happened to a group of people 2500 years ago, but for our instruction. We can and should apply to our situation today the lesson of Haggai. We're living in a time of great turmoil. There's turbulence in America's politics, indeed, our whole society is shot thru with disorder. The church seems to be asleep, or effete, or in the process of disappearing. The root problem is as plain as day: there's no fear of God in our land. Not in the church or outside the church. Our theology texts don't discuss the fear of God. Pulpits are hushed about the fear of God. No one takes the message that God is to be feared into the streets anymore. The fear of God has vanished from America.

What else? The church in America hasn't got its priorities right. What's God's will for the Church? To proclaim the Gospel so that unbelievers become believers and grow in discipleship and sanctification. But evangelism is rarely done today. We're more concerned about other issues, or about personal problems. Or with trivial and banal pursuits. The church today isn't different from the Israelites back in the days of Haggai. Obedience to God's Word is just as necessary for us as it was for them.

This is not to argue that if we obey God, blessing will come to our land. That's not necessarily so. As we said, the church is not Israel and America isn't Israel. Yet . . . God is sovereign. Who knows what He might do in response to an obedient church? Regardless whether God blesses us in this life, we will have to face God some future day and give an account of our lives. He's a demanding God. He expects us to bear fruit for Him. And He rewards those who are faithful. If we were to obey God, and material blessings don't come to our nation in return, we will still experience them in some other way in the future. Our concern however shouldn't be the expected blessing, but the absolute need for obedience in the fear of God. God's stance toward us is love, great, deep, abiding love. But He also expects great things of us. Let's not presume upon God's love. It's too easy to take God for granted. (Probably that's exactly what the Israelites were doing back in the days of the Old Testament.)

But there's a major difference between us today and Israel back then. It's this: We've been given the gift of the Spirit to empower us and to produce the fruit that God seeks. This means we're far more accountable to God for how we live our lives, what priorities we set, whether we obey His will or not. And something else: Although it's not in the text (and I shouldn't bring something to the text but I will anyway), I'm certain the people who responded to Haggai experienced ineffable joy in seeing that Temple built. Yes, the text says some, the older ones who recalled Solomon's Temple, were disappointed with this Second Temple (2:3), so God made great promises to them regarding the future to encourage them (2:7-9). But I suspect all rejoiced that they obeyed their great God, that by carrying out His will they had pleased the sovereign God who controls the future, who rules all history.

God's priority back then was the Temple. Today, it's growing the Church by proclaiming the Gospel. Of course churches preach the Gospel on Sunday mornings – but that happens only inside the walls of buildings that no unbeliever wants to enter. The early church grew in the Book of Acts because believers were so thrilled with Jesus and filled with the love of God that they wanted to share Him with others regardless the cost. They didn't hide the Gospel. May the same exhilaration over our salvation impel us to go outside the church building to share Christ with others. So that we too may experience the joy of serving our great, sovereign, creator God. Paul, sitting in a dungeon, was filled with joy because he knew he was serving Christ. That was his only priority in life. And he wanted the Philippian church – and us today – also to experience that same joy by knowing and serving the risen, exalted Christ.

Haggai's message to the church today is something like this: "Get with it! Put an end to the apathy, the lethargy, the self-interests, and the zombie-like religion you practice. Serve God with your whole being according to His holy will. God's in control of America, its politics, its culture, its economy, even its enemies. Your priority is obeying God's Word."

Then Haggai finished his prophesying with this, **"Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother. 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 [a seal of authority], for I have chosen you, declares the Lord Almighty'"** (vv. 20-23).

The hope for the future, even for us today, is in a Zerubbabel-like figure, and that is Jesus the Jewish King/Messiah, the ultimate son of David. The Bible warns that a "Day of the Lord" is coming, a time of both judgment and blessing for both the Gentile nations and for Israel. The people of God back then needed to hope and work and wait for that day to come, and so do we in the church.