

Tom Coop
Haggai 1:1-15
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Haggai: If You Build it, He will Come!

Let me share a story with you about some church people. It's about 4 people in the church whose names were *Everybody*, *Somebody*, *Anybody*, and *Nobody*.

The church had some financial responsibilities and *Everybody* was asked to help. *Everybody* was sure that *Somebody* would do it. *Anybody* could have done it.

But you know who did it? *Nobody*. It ended up that *Everybody* blamed *Somebody* when *Nobody* did what *Anybody* could have done.

Then the church grounds needed some work, and *Somebody* was asked to help. But *Somebody* got mad, because *Anybody* could have done it, and after all, it was really *Everybody's* job.

In the end the work was given to *Nobody*, and *Nobody* did a fine job.

On and on it went. Whenever work was to be done, *Nobody* could always be counted on.

Nobody visited the sick, *Nobody* gave his time, *Nobody* shared his faith... In short, *Nobody* was a very faithful member.

It seems that *Nobody* had priorities straight!

Finally, the day came when *Somebody* left the church and took *Anybody* and *Everybody* with him. Guess who was left. *Nobody!*

Isn't that a sad story? It was to the people of Israel when Haggai comes on the scene.

Haggai is the tenth of the twelve minor prophets. Haggai's name means "festive" or "festival."

Some assume it was because he may have been born during one of the church festivals, thus his name. But, we don't know.

In fact, like Habakkuk from last week, and like most of the other minor prophets, we don't know much about Haggai's background at all.

That being said, in order to understand the message of this book, we do need to get a grasp of several important points of biblical history.

First of all, when Solomon was king of Israel (970-930 B.C.E.) he built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem.

It was constructed of such expensive material that people came from throughout the ancient world to gaze upon it.

The Jews rightly regarded it as their greatest national treasure. They revered the temple because it was the place where God dwelled with man. As such, it represented the heart and soul of the Old Testament religion.

Fast forward almost 400 years. In 586 B.C.E., the Babylonian army, under King Nebuchadnezzar—defeated Judah, destroyed the walls of Jerusalem, laid waste to the city, and utterly destroyed Solomon's temple.

Nothing was left when the Babylonians were finished.

It was like Atlanta after Sherman during the Civil War, or Berlin after the allied forces were through in World War II. The entire city was a smoking ruin of rubble.

Meanwhile, the Jews themselves were taken into captivity. Fifty long years pass and then God raises up Cyrus of Persia who permits the Jews to return under the leadership of a man named Zerubbabel.

In 538 B.C. he leads about 50,000 people back to Judah. There they find shocking devastation. Nothing has changed since their defeat some 50 years earlier.

We would not understand Haggai's message properly either if we forgot that the people to whom he was speaking had made the difficult commitment to leave their established way of life in Babylon and make the dangerous journey back to the land of promise.

They had homes and jobs in Babylon. Most of them had been born and raised there. But they knew that God's purpose for His people involved the Promised Land.

So, by faith they respond to the call to return and commit themselves to the hardships of getting re-established in the land that had been devastated by war.

I would imagine, most of them made that commitment because of their commitment to God.

Once there, the returnees set about to rebuild the temple in about 536 B.C.E. They re-lay the foundation amid a great celebration (see Ezra 3 for details).

Then suddenly the Samaritans (who hated the Jews) begin to oppose them. After all, the Samaritans had no reason to want the temple rebuilt or for the Jews to return to prosperity.

Because of their constant opposition, the Jews stop the rebuilding the process and never get started again. After all, there is plenty of other work to do—I mean, they are trying to restart a nation from scratch.

Gradually, they had lost their vision and had drifted into a lifestyle where God's house was no longer the priority. They probably viewed it as nice, but not necessary; extra, but not essential.

As time goes on, slowly but surely, Jerusalem comes to life again. Homes are built, stores opened, commerce established, fields planted, crops harvested, and life begins to resemble normalcy.

Sixteen years pass. We now come to the summer of 520 B.C.E. Enter Haggai.

God raises Haggai up to deliver four brief messages in the space of only four months—from August to December, 520 B.C.

And, when I say brief, I mean really brief. The whole book is only 38 verses long. You can easily read it in less than 10 minutes.

Matter-of-fact, Marylyn just read to you about half of the entire book.

The outward message of this little book is clear: It's time to finish rebuilding the temple.

Haggai's words are blunt, plain-spoken, direct, vivid. He pulls no punches and wastes no words.

But the Israelites that Haggai first address are saying, "We're not so sure that the time has come to rebuild the temple." (1:2).

If you had pressed them why the temple had not been built, they might have responded:

"Don't get me wrong! I'm all for rebuilding the Temple. It's a great cause. But the timing just isn't right." ... OR ...

"We're in an economic downturn right now. Everyone's hard up for money." ... OR ...

"There aren't enough good jobs. It's all I can do to provide for my family. But times will get better, and *then* we'll rebuild the temple!"

This is easy to understand, isn't it? They truly intended to build God's house, but they just hadn't gotten around to it yet.

Maybe, they were frozen by fear, stifled by selfishness, and paralyzed by presumption.

Perhaps they were still afraid of the Samaritans. So, they selfishly built their own homes, and then presumptuously claimed to know better than God when the temple should be rebuilt.

But then, through Haggai, the Lord calls them to task and helps them re-establish their priorities.

Haggai lays it on the line, calling them to account for the way they were living by essentially saying:

“Hey, you guys live in nice, comfortable homes. You spend your time on things that reward you -- eating and drinking, buying nice clothes and blowing your money on frivolous things -- all to the neglect of the house of the Lord.

“The moment has come for you to refocus your time, resources and energy on building for God instead of yourselves. The Lord calls you to build.”

Miraculously -- and unlike practically every other group who was admonished by a prophet in the Old Testament -- these people both listened and acted upon the word of the Lord.

They started building! Even the governor and the high priest pitch in.

Seldom has any sermon had such an immediate practical impact. Haggai preached one message and 24 days later, the people were busy rebuilding the temple.

Would that any of my sermons had the same kind of united, enthusiastic response!

I don't know about you, but I find tremendous encouragement in this story. After all, it's hard to get started after 16 years.

I'm sure the Jews never meant to let the temple lie in ruins that long. But after a few months the weeds began to overgrow the site and at that point, it was easier just to let it go.

Maybe they felt guilty, and I'm sure that over the years they established several Temple Completion Task Forces to study the problem and make recommendations. But despite their good or not-so-good intentions, nothing ever happened.

I know that some of you feel stuck today. You need to get started again, you need a new direction in your spiritual life. You want to begin again, but maybe you don't know how and you don't know where and you don't know what to do.

Haggai is telling us to *put first things first* in our lives. And his book was written to people, like us, who would have told you that God should be first.

They believed that; we believe that. But, they had drifted into a way of life where their intellectual belief in the supremacy of God was not reflected in the way they were living.

They gave lip service to the priority of God, but in fact they lived with other priorities. So, God sent Haggai to help His people get their priorities in line with what they knew they should be.

Speaking of priorities ... you heard about the group of friends went deer hunting and paired off in twos for the day.

That night one of the hunters returned alone, staggering under the weight of an eight-point buck.

"Where's Harry?" he was asked.

“Harry had a stroke of some kind. He’s a couple of miles back up the trail.”

“You left Harry laying there, and carried the deer back?”

“Well,” said the hunter, “I figured no one was going to steal Harry.”

Many people today have their priorities upside down and they don’t see the danger.

You see, it is easy to drift away from God's agenda to our own. It is easy to pursue selfish desires while ignoring God's. In fact, it is the default mode of our lives.

If we give no thought to how we are living, we will naturally live for ourselves. The bent of our hearts and is always toward selfishness.

This is what happened to the Jews Haggai addressed.

Twice Haggai instructs the people, "Consider your ways" (1:5, 7.)

It was time for the people to do some serious self-examination before the Lord. Haggai wanted the people to stop long enough in their busy schedules to evaluate their life. He wanted them to measure the consequences of their actions.

And, evaluation is a good thing. That is why teachers give tests and employers hold job reviews. Socrates wrote: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Each day we need to evaluate how we spend our time and our money, and how we use our talents.

We should examine who we choose as friends, what we set as goals, and where we are going. And, if God is not first, guess who removed him from his rightful place?

When the people obeyed, God sent word, "I am with you" (1:13).

If we have God with us, we have everything. If God is with us and for us, who can be against us ([Rom. 8:31](#))?

If God seems distant in your life, perhaps your priorities have gotten mixed up. When you truly put God in first place, I promise you that you will experience a new awareness of His presence.

At Duke Divinity's *Convocation and Pastors' School*, well-known pastor Rob Bell talked about the Eucharistic calling.

He said the sacrifice of Jesus, symbolized by the bread and wine, are God's good gift to us. When we receive this gift, we are to go into this world and share this gift.

How are we going to be broken and poured out? What is it that we see in this world and ask, "Who's going to do something about that?"

To which the answer is most likely, "No one but you"?

What is your Eucharistic calling? What is God calling you to build?

Habitat for Humanity founder Millard Fuller, in his book "The Theology of the Hammer," stated:

"Our Christian faith ... mandates that we do more than just talk about faith and sing about love. We must put faith and love into action to make them real, to make them come alive for people.

“Faith must be incarnated; it must become more than a verbal proclamation or an intellectual assent.”

In Haggai’s time, the rebuilding of the temple was a visible sign of the Israelites’ determination to put God first in their lives.

We are living in a Haggai era. At the end of the day, the ministry and the realm of God on earth is not about budgets and buildings and memberships and endowments.

It was and is and always will be about creating a community (both locally and globally) in which people feel the presence of God in their midst, lifting, enabling, empowering, and redeeming their lives and the lives of others.

If we can do that, then God’s “House” will be rebuilt and revived and revised, and it will be a beacon to outsiders and will beckon to others.

I’d like to close by sharing a story I’ve told before about the time management expert who was speaking to a group of business students.

He pulled out a large, wide-mouth jar and filled it with fist-sized rocks. When he couldn’t put any more in, he asked, “Is this jar full?”

The class responded, “Yes.”

He said, “Really?” Then he pulled out a bucket of gravel and poured it in, shaking it down through the cracks. Then he asked, “Is the jar full?”

The students were onto him, so they said, “No.”

“Good,” he replied. He dumped in a bucket of sand. Once more he asked, “Is the jar full?”

“No,” they shouted.

Again, he said, “Good.” He poured in a pitcher of water until the jar was full to the brim.

Then he asked, “What is the point of the illustration?”

One student ventured, “No matter how full your schedule, if you try hard, you can always fit more in.”

“No,” the speaker replied, “that is not the point.

“The point is, if you don’t put the big rocks in first, you’ll never get them in at all.”

What are your “big rocks”?

If God is not your biggest rock. If his will for your life isn’t one of the first rocks that go into your jar. If God is not first, probably nothing else will matter.

I want God rocks, how about you?

Amen!