

Lessons from Haggai

Haggai's book, one of the shortest in the Bible, was written at a critical time in the life of Judah. The exiles had returned from their captivity in Babylon almost 20 years before; yet, they seemed to have forgotten the reason for their return. They let God's temple sit in ruins while they devoted their energy to building their own houses.

Thus, the prophet urged the returned exiles to give careful thought to their situation. His message was simple and logical. The people had worked hard but did not earn much. This happened because they had mistaken their priorities. They needed to put God first in all that they were doing. As Jesus Himself said, "Seek first his [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33).

Today, too, it is so easy to get caught up in the struggle for existence that we forget what our first priority needs to be, which, of course, is doing always the Lord's will.

Planting Much, Harvesting Little

Read Haggai 1:1-11. What was happening here and, more important, why was this happening? Even more important, how might this same principle be happening to us today? How might we be guilty of doing the same thing?

"For over a year the temple was neglected and well-nigh forsaken. The people dwelt in their homes and strove to attain temporal prosperity, but their situation was deplorable. Work as they might they did not prosper. The very elements of nature seemed to conspire against them. Because they had let the temple lie waste, the Lord sent upon their substance a wasting drought. God had bestowed upon them the fruits of field and garden, the corn and the wine and the oil, as a token of His favor; but because they had used these bountiful gifts so selfishly, the blessings were removed."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 573.

Haggai confronted the people with their current situation. Futility of labor was one of the curses that resulted from the breaking of God's covenant (Lev. 26:16, 20). Until the people turned their attention to this priority, there would be no prosperity for them.

Haggai possessed great zeal for the Lord's temple and wanted the people to complete its reconstruction right away. His ambition ran contrary to the complacency of those who did not care about the temple as much as they cared about their own comfort. While Haggai's great concern was for the temple, the people were interested most in their own houses.

The Lord used Haggai to stir the people's hearts toward God's concerns. God could not be honored properly as long as His house sat in ruins. The temple in Jerusalem symbolized the divine presence among fallen humanity. It was a visible reminder to the whole world that the Sovereign Lord is God of heaven and earth. How could the children of Israel witness to the true God when the very symbol of that God (see John 2:19, Matt. 26:61) and the entire plan of salvation, was in ruins? In many ways, their attitude toward the temple revealed a deeper spiritual problem: their loss of the sense of their divine mission as the remnant people of the Lord.

Do you see any warning here for us?

God's Greatest Promise

Read Haggai 1:12-14. Notice the sense of unity of purpose here. Why was that so important in order for them to do that which they were called to do?

This time the message instantly is obeyed by the leaders and the remnant people. They make preparations, gather materials, and resume work on the temple three weeks later. Within another week they erect an altar and restore the sacrificial worship (Ezra 3:1-6). In less than five years the temple is completed.

While the kingdom of God cannot be identified with a material building, the book of Haggai is a reminder that God sometimes uses material things, such as buildings, for spiritual ends.

If immediate compliance with the prophetic message is considered to be the measure of a prophet's success, then Haggai stands out as one of the most successful prophets. His preaching moved the people to action. Within the month, work on the temple resumed with God's prophets assuring the people that the Lord would help them.

Haggai 1:12-14 reports the response of the leaders and the people to Haggai's message. All obeyed the Lord because they recognized that he had sent Haggai. They "feared the Lord" (vs.12), and showed this by worshiping Him and giving Him due attention. So Haggai now could deliver a new word from the Lord: "I am with you" (vs.13). As soon as the people decided to obey the Lord, the messages of reproof were replaced by words of encouragement. The assurance of God's presence gave them the promise of all other blessings. The statement "I am with you" goes back to the covenantal promises that God made during the time of the patriarchs and Moses (Gen. 26:3, Exod. 3:12, Num. 14:9).

Of course, the greatest manifestation of God being "with us" is Jesus (see Isa. 7:14, Matt. 1:23, 28:20). Dwell on the whole idea that Jesus, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, lived among us. What does that tell us about our importance in a universe that is so big that we easily can see ourselves as insignificant nothings?

Do Not Fear!

Haggai 2:1-5 presents an interesting development in the great revival taking place among God's people. About a month after the temple work began, God sent an encouraging word through Haggai to the remnant who had determined, without adequate resources, to rebuild God's house as directed by the prophets. Haggai asked the elders how the temple's current state compared to its appearance before the exile. Clearly, the present appearance did not match the former glory. People may have been discouraged because they had no chance of duplicating the splendor of Solomon's temple that once stood in the same place.

The prophet encouraged the people to keep working because God's Spirit was with them. He called on all members of the remnant community to be strong and to work hard because of the presence of God Almighty in their midst. Haggai's words to the leaders "Be strong! Do not fear!" sound like the Lord's words to Joshua after the death of Moses (Josh. 1:5-9). The smaller and weaker were Israel's own resources, the greater their need for faith in God. The prophet declared that, in the end, the Lord would make the temple's latter glory greater than its former glory. That became true, however, only because One greater than the temple had come (see Matt. 12:6).

The presence of the Spirit confirmed the continuity of God's kingdom in Israel. The Spirit of God, who had guided Moses and the elders and who had sent forth the prophets with inspired messages, was in the midst of the remnant. The godly response of the leaders and the people testified to the spiritual reformation that had taken place. The Spirit was present in renewing them and in bringing them closer to their God. The presence of the Spirit also guaranteed an abundance of blessings. The prophet encouraged the community members to work out the divine promises to their fulfillments.

Haggai ministered God's Word to people who knew the harshness of life and the disappointment of unfulfilled hope. He turned their attention to God, who is faithful and who counts on the new community to be responsible citizens of His kingdom, persevering in doing good, and thus finding true meaning and purpose in their lives.

A 35-year-old man who had given up on belief in God wrote a 1,900 page suicide note before killing himself. In his note, he wrote: "Every word, every thought, and every emotion comes back to one core problem: life is meaningless." How does not only our belief in God, but our willingness to obey Him, give our life meaning?

The Desire of All Nations

Read Haggai 2:6-9. What is being promised here, and how are we to understand its fulfillment?

Through Haggai, God announced a great earthshaking of nations on the day of the Lord when the temple would be filled with Divine presence. The prophet called on his contemporaries to look beyond the present adversities and poverty to the future glory of God's kingdom toward which the temple pointed.

The main reason for the splendor built into the temple of Jerusalem was to make it worthy of God's presence. Yet, according to this text, the Lord was willing to inhabit the less-than-glorious house and subsequently bring splendor to it. The people did not need to be concerned overly with the ways in which they could finance the temple's rebuilding. All treasures belong to God who had promised to dwell in this new temple. The Lord himself was the provider of the temple's splendor.

"As the people endeavored to do their part, and sought for a renewal of God's grace in heart and life, message after message was given them through Haggai and Zechariah, with assurances that their faith would be richly rewarded and that the word of God concerning the future glory of the temple whose walls they were rearing would not fail. In this very building would appear, in the fullness of time, the Desire of all nations as the Teacher and Saviour of mankind."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 577.

God promised that the splendor of the present temple would be greater than the glory of the former temple. It would be a different type of glory because this temple would be honored by the presence of Jesus, in the flesh. Indeed, Christ's presence made the glory of the new temple greater than that of Solomon's temple.

Read Hebrews 8:1-5. Whatever the glory of the earthly temple, we never must forget that it was only a shadow, a symbol of the plan of salvation. Think about what it means, that right now, Jesus is ministering in our behalf in the "true tabernacle," the one made by God, not man. How can we learn to better appreciate the importance of the sanctuary message in the plan of salvation?

The Lord's Signet Ring

““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, for I have chosen you,” declares the Lord Almighty.” (Hag. 2:23).

The final message from the Lord to Haggai was given on the same day as the previous one in order to complement it (see Hag. 2:22-23). The Lord warned of a coming destruction of kingdoms and nations during the day of God's judgment. But on that same day, the prophet said, the servant of the Lord will accomplish God's appointed task of salvation. This we can best understand as being fulfilled, ultimately and fully, only at the Second Coming and during all that follows it.

The nation's political leader is associated here with the glorious reign of Israel's King David, from whom he was a descendant. Zerubbabel was a grandson of King Jehoiachin and the legitimate heir to David's throne after the Babylonian exile. He served as governor of Judah under the Persian king Darius the Great, and was a leading force behind the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Joshua was the high priest who also helped to rebuild the temple.

The prophet said that Zerubbabel would be the Lord's signet ring, an object that provides evidence of royal authority and ownership. Like a king sealing legal documents with a ring, the Lord would impress the entire world through the work of His servant. Although Zerubbabel's key role in the rebuilding of the temple never should be underestimated, he did not fulfill all of the promises given to him by God through Haggai. The inspired Gospel writers point to the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, son of both David and Zerubbabel, as the final fulfillment of all the Messianic promises found in the Bible.

Read Luke 24:13-27, focusing especially on Christ's words to the two men. What important message is He giving to them, and how do His words show us the importance of understanding Old Testament prophecy, and why is it so relevant for Christians even today?

Further Study:

“But even this dark hour was not without hope for those whose trust was in God. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were raised up to meet the crisis. In stirring testimonies these appointed messengers revealed to the people the cause of their troubles. The lack of temporal prosperity was the result of a neglect to put God's interests first, the prophets declared. Had the Israelites honored God, had they shown Him due respect and courtesy, by making the building of His house their first work, they would have invited His presence and blessing.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 573, 574.

“The second temple was not honored with the cloud of Jehovah's glory, but with the living presence of One in whom dwelt the fullness of the Godhead Bodily—who was God Himself manifest in the flesh. The ‘Desire of all nations’ had indeed come to His temple when the Man of Nazareth taught and healed in the sacred courts. In the presence of Christ, and in this only, did the second temple exceed the first in glory.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 24.