

PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: HAGGAI

Notes For Lesson One: The Call to Rebuild the Temple (Haggai 1:1-11)

The book of Haggai revolves around a simple but important message, the call to rebuild the temple. We have seen these events from a historical perspective in our study of Ezra, and shall now see a prophetic perspective on the temple rebuilding that will help us to see what motivated the people to resume the long-abandoned project.

Introduction (Haggai 1:1)

The message of the minor prophet Haggai, who urged God's people to rebuild the temple after their return from Babylonian exile, is an important one for believers in any age. Haggai's ministry went far beyond the specific task of building the temple, in calling the people to a complete re-appraisal of their perspectives and priorities. Over the next three weeks, we shall study the short book of Haggai's prophecies, taking special note of the implications for our lives and ministries today. We shall begin with a review of the historical background to Haggai.

Not much is known about Haggai as a person, but he proved to be persuasive and effective in delivering the message God had entrusted to him. Note that what we often call the "minor" prophets are not minor in the modern sense of the word. The ancient Christians divided the prophets into 'major' and 'minor' by the length of their books of prophecy, because that is the meaning of those words in Latin - that is, these terms originally had no significance in terms of the importance of these prophets' messages.

Haggai begins by establishing the historical setting, and we also shall review the setting as discussed in our earlier study of Ezra (Haggai 1:1)

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

In 538 BC, after about seventy years of living in exile in Babylon, the Jews were allowed to return home by decree of Cyrus the Great, the Persian who had conquered the Babylonian Empire and taken over its territories. The disciplinary period that God had sent his people, for their persistent idolatry and stubbornness of heart, was now over, and a new era in their history was about to begin. The ruthless Babylonians were a suitable tool of discipline, but their harshness toward conquered peoples meant that they would never willingly allow the Jews to return to their homeland, and so God gave them over to the Persians, who were much more inclined to be generous to smaller nations that posed no military threat to their own Empire. Cyrus' decree came just a year after his conquest of Babylon, and the joyful return home soon began.

As the Jews began the process of rebuilding, it was most natural for them to wish to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, which had for so many years been the center of Jewish life and worship. And indeed, when the first main body of returnees began the process of re-settling in about 536 BC, led by Zerubbabel (the governor) and Joshua (the high priest), one of the first projects they began was the work of rebuilding the temple, which had lain in ruins ever since the Babylonian invasion decades before. But this was a huge job, requiring a major commitment of time, effort,

planning, and material resources. Even worse, it provoked resentment and fear amongst those foreigners who had since settled in the Jews' former homeland, and amongst those Jews who had remained behind when most of the nation had gone into exile. Because of all of these complications, work on the temple was soon abandoned, in 535 BC. The Jews devoted themselves instead to less difficult tasks, and in particular, they soon became more concerned with their own private needs and goals than with lofty projects such as rebuilding the temple.

By 520 BC, it became clear that the people's priorities were not going to change. God thus sent two prophets, Zechariah and Haggai, to convict the people of their need to re-focus themselves on more important priorities, and in particular to resume work on the temple. Zechariah's book of prophecy (which we shall begin after concluding Haggai) emphasizes a long-term perspective, and it reveals many ways that God's plans for the Jews of Zechariah's day were important for the future. Haggai's book, which we shall study first, is more down-to-earth. Haggai appealed to the people's experience and common sense, to convict them of the need for a better perspective, even on simple things in their daily lives.

Study Suggestions:

- 1) How could Israel's experience of returning from exile parallel events in the lives of Christians? Consider both the initial experience of becoming a Christian, and events that might happen later.
- 2) In view of your answers to the first question, consider how the challenges and opportunities that the Jews faced in Haggai's day might be similar to challenges and opportunities in the lives of contemporary Christians. Then consider what we might expect to learn from studying Haggai.

Haggai's Appeal (Haggai 1:2-5)

In the initial joy of returning to Jerusalem, the Jews had begun work on the temple, but the size of the project, and the opposition it had aroused, soon led them to abandon it. They turned to simpler tasks, and became especially concerned with their personal goals and dreams. For 15 years no work on the temple was done, and the partially rebuilt structure lay in ruins, waiting for God's people to return their attention to it. So in 520 BC, God sent Haggai, not only to convict the people of the need to get back to work on the temple, but also to convict them of a far more important general lesson about their priorities.

First, Haggai takes note of the then-current perception about the temple rebuilding (Haggai 1:2):

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built.'"

We should not come down too hard on these people. There were plenty of outward signs to suggest that it was not an ideal time to build the temple. They had aroused plenty of opposition with what they had built so far, and knew that each step would not come easily. Further, during the period when the temple work was abandoned, there had been some tumultuous events in Persia, making Persian officials wary of any new projects that might threaten their power or strength. All honest Christians can recall times in our lives when we have seen circumstances unfavorable to spiritual growth, and have concluded that 'the time has not yet come' for us to make a long-awaited change. This is simply human nature - we should condemn neither ourselves nor Haggai's contemporaries, but rather should learn from what the prophet now has to say.

Haggai's call then centers on a theme to which he will return again and again (Haggai 1:3-5)

Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways."

Starting an important project or ministry is exciting, and it is easy to develop zeal for such things. But as the realities of time, effort, and sacrifice become clearer, the initial enthusiasm wanes. We start to turn our attentions towards things that have less spiritual importance, solely because they are more achievable. We might resolve better to understand some of the more difficult portions of Scripture, but later we decide it would be more fun to take up a new hobby instead. We may have a goal of reaching a lost soul with the gospel, but soon we find that it would be easier to settle for becoming more popular with the neighbors. This loss of motivation usually does not come from a bad heart, or from overt selfishness, or as a result of any conscious decision at all. Rather, we have been pushed down an easier path by the sheer weight of the commitment involved in carrying out a worthwhile ministry. Our response should be neither to condemn ourselves or others, nor to resign ourselves to spiritual ineffectiveness and mediocrity. Instead, we ought simply to heed Haggai's appeal to "give careful thought to your ways". No fewer than five times in his short book (1:5, 1:7, 2:15, and twice in 2:18) does the prophet urge us to do so. This will be his theme, and it should be what we keep foremost as we study Haggai and apply it to the rebuilding God calls us to do in our own lives.

Study Suggestions:

- 1) What activities or responsibilities in the lives of Christians would be similar to the job of building the temple that Israel faced in Haggai's day? Make sure to consider spiritual parallels, not just outward tasks. Consider also possible parallels on a congregational level.
- 2) What reasons might the Jews have had for initially abandoning work on the temple? How are these similar to factors that hinder Christians and congregations of Christians in their ministries? What lessons about our own motivation can we learn from them?

Expectations & Reality (Haggai 1:6-11)

Haggai's call is for God's people to "give careful thought to their ways". The goals and dreams that humans pursue so often lead not to happiness or security, as they desperately expect, but to disappointment and frustration. Unfortunately, we often place the blame for this on God, instead of our own flawed perspective. The reason why most persons act in a selfish and ungodly fashion is because they mistakenly think that such behavior is the road to happiness. But Haggai tells us that the selfish lifestyle does not lead to any good at all, and that there is another way to fulfillment.

Haggai thus appeals to them to change their perspective (Haggai 1:6-11)

"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." This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the Lord. "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the Lord Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the

mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands."

God appeals to his people's experience and common sense. Most of them have devoted the best of their time and energy to serving themselves, showing limited concern for serving God or his people, giving only when it proved convenient and painless. They expected that by so doing they would become prosperous and happy. From a worldly perspective, the logic seems clear: If I spend time on myself, pursuing goals important to me, then I will be happier than if I were spending time and energy doing things for God or others, things that cannot benefit me. Despite the obvious selfishness of such a perspective, even many believers can still feel in their hearts that they would be happier if they kept more for themselves, and can even end up envying those who are more selfish, falsely believing that they are happier. Note that God is not saying that the selfish will always have things go wrong for them, but that they will never feel fulfilled. And he is not saying that the godly will always experience success and prosperity, but that they will always have what they need and will be able to be content with what they have. For a comparison study to these verses, see Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28, and Ecclesiastes 1.

God calls us to set aside superficial worldly logic and think about what really happens. While the selfish appear satisfied on the outside, their restless striving means that they can never be contented, no matter how much they have, while those with a godly perspective can be far happier with much less. Strong-willed persons who threaten and intimidate others may seem to be getting their way all of the time, but such behavior is by no means a sign of strength; rather it reveals a desperate insecurity and emptiness inside these persons. Their frantic and ugly ways of manipulating and exploiting others are a hopeless attempt to make themselves feel better. On the other hand, only those who give up their own self-will to pursue the will of God know the deep peace that comes from finding a joy that does not depend on temporary, short-term conditions or behavior of others, because they know that God is in control and that his ways eventually will prevail.

Study Suggestions:

1) Haggai says that when we put ourselves first, and give the best of our time and efforts to meeting our own needs, the results will be disappointing. Think of examples of how you have seen this to be true - in your life, in the lives of others, and also on a larger scale.

2) Haggai calls the Jews to "give careful thought to your ways". In what respects might he make the same appeal to Christians today?

Sources & References

Haggai is a book with a solid historical setting and a mostly straightforward message. This makes it one of the easier prophetic books to study, and despite its brevity there are a fair number of useful commentaries written about it. Of these, the following are those that I would most particularly recommend for those who want to study Haggai on their own as a parallel to our class studies (each is part of a series, as indicated in parentheses):

Joyce Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Tyndale)

Michael Bentley, *Building For God's Glory - Haggai & Zechariah Simply Explained* (Welwyn)

Pieter A. Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT)

Bentley's book is ideal for a first-time study without a lot of technical details. It gives a full explanation of the historical background and relates it to the spiritual message. It has plenty of

good spiritual insights, and also would be useful for studying Zechariah. The other two are for more advanced study, and cover the spiritual themes but also have a more involved look at the details. Baldwin's book is the handiest, because it is a relatively inexpensive paperback and also covers all three books that we shall study this autumn. Verhoef's book is well-done and very thorough, but it is only available as an expensive hardback (and it does not cover Zechariah).

As always, see me if you want help locating any of these, or if you want more information on other possible study materials.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2001

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PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: HAGGAI

Notes For Lesson Two: Rebuilding a Spiritual Perspective (Haggai 1:12-2:9)

Having heard Haggai's appeal, the people respond and at last resume the work on the temple. As they proceed, God encourages them by helping them to develop a godly perspective on what they are doing, a perspective that will overcome their inertia and occasional discouragement.

Blessings From Seeking God's Will (Haggai 1:12-15)

Although Haggai's appeal for the people to re-focus their priorities and energies was a challenge, they knew immediately that God was speaking through the prophet. Most responded quickly with a readiness to do as God asked, and to work together on the temple rebuilding and other projects of spiritual importance. When they made this decision in their hearts, several significant things happened. Most fundamentally, they received the immediate assurance that God would be with them in all that they did (Haggai 1:12-13):

Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: "I am with you," declares the Lord.

Their willingness to heed God's appeal through Haggai made it easier for him to assure them that he was with them. When we are walking in the light, it is much easier for us to see the ways that God is with us, and it is much easier for God to re-assure us whenever we need it. But if we are wandering in the darkness, pursuing our own agendas, as the people had been doing before Haggai's call, then it is much harder to see God's caring hand at work in our lives.

The people also quickly developed a spirit of unity, beginning with their leaders (Haggai 1:14-15):

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, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius.

As the people began to work on the temple, God strengthened the hearts of their leaders, Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest. Soon, the people as a whole were unified and strengthened in a way that could not have happened when they were seeking their own agendas. The picture is one of complete unity: the people with each other, the people with their leaders, and all of them with God. All of us long in our hearts to experience a genuine unity and fellowship with other humans and with God. Unbelievers do a great many things (some ridiculous and even sinful) in a desperate attempt to find acceptance and camaraderie from others. The craving for acceptance overrides all questions of right and wrong, of truth and falsehood. And all the while, the blessings they seek are available freely, and without limit, only by seeking God and his will. But rather than bash pagans, we must examine our own hearts. Haggai's message, after all, was directed at God's own people.

Genuine unity can only be achieved among those who have sacrificed their worldly goals and agendas so that they can unite in accordance with God's will. Any other basis for unity or acceptance is fragile and deceptive, and can at best produce only a temporary alliance among those who find each other useful for pursuing some short-term objective. If we desire to know genuine unity in the body, we must be ready to give up not only any self-centered focus we may have on worldly things, but also any human agendas or goals for the church. God's designs hold much more wisdom and go much deeper and farther than any of our own. It is only those of us who are willing to discard not only our fleshly and worldly goals, but also our own preconceptions about the church itself, who can know a real and lasting unity that will be based on a complete humility in the face of God's wisdom, and on a genuine readiness to pursue his will whole-heartedly.

Questions For Discussion or Study:

1) Consider the lessons we can learn from Haggai on the following questions: Do we really understand what unity is when we strive to obtain it? Where does unity come from? Based on this, how does it fit in with other priorities such as love, hope, and truth?

2) What general lessons have we seen so far in Haggai about working together and doing God's will?

Encouragement Through Godly Perspective (Haggai 2:1-5)

The temple rebuilding had been discontinued once before, because the discouragements, sacrifices, and obstacles involved soon overwhelmed the people. Here, the prophet addresses one particular discouraging factor: their tendency, natural in God's people in any era, to compare their work with the seemingly greater things that God had done in the past. He is aware of what many of them are thinking (Haggai 2:1-3):

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: "Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?'

A very few of the Jews had seen the original temple, and the rest had all heard about it. That was the legendary and glorious structure built in Solomon's reign, for centuries the center of religious life in Judah, celebrated not only throughout Israel, but among the surrounding nations as well. By comparison, the new temple was shaping up to be a humble structure, not worthy of comparison with the old, in the eyes of many. When Solomon had built the original temple, over four centuries earlier, he was a powerful king, whom the surrounding nations were eager to please. He had access to all of Israel's own wealth, and received valuable materials and labor from neighboring kings wishing to earn his friendship. But in the days of Haggai, the Jews were refugees, with no wealth and no political or military strength. They thus had to make do with limited materials and manpower, even after Zechariah and Haggai motivated them to continue rebuilding.

The new structure was thus far less impressive, on the outside, than the original temple. We saw in our summer study (Ezra 3:12-13) that even in the early days of rebuilding the temple, before any obstacles arose, there were those who were bitterly disappointed that the temple would never be as glorious as it once had been. Now, after 15 years of obstacles and inactivity, this feeling is an even larger obstacle. Misguided perspectives like this can be very effective in preventing Christians from building or re-building in their lives and ministries.

Haggai must thus appeal to them to reject this negative perspective (Haggai 2:4-5):

But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,' declares the Lord. 'Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the Lord, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the Lord Almighty. 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'

Humans all have a tendency to focus on the external, to focus on things that can be counted or assigned a price tag. But God is more concerned with spiritual values. It made no difference to God whether they built his house out of gold and silver or out of stone and wood, as long as he knew the people were giving him the best of their time and effort. God would be present regardless of the materials and decorations that were used. Christians also must always remember this principle. The success of our ministries is not measured in terms of buildings or dollars or numbers of any kind. Worldly-minded believers who evaluate Christian ministry in such terms are doomed to be filled with either frustration or pride. It is not us but God who can "once more shake the heavens and the earth" (see below), and if we remember in our hearts that it depends on him, not on us, we can then pursue the ministries to which he has called us, in confidence and joy.

Questions For Discussion or Study:

1) Some of the Jews in Haggai's day had seen the original temple, now destroyed, and many of the younger Jews had heard about it from the older generation. How did their knowledge of the original temple affect their feelings about the new one? In what ways did their memories hinder them? Could these memories have been at all helpful?

2) Apply your answers to the first question to Christian ministry - that is, based on the example of Haggai's generation, consider how memories of the past can both help and hinder our ministry in the present.

God Has the Power & the Glory (Haggai 2:6-9)

God always values the spiritual more than things that can be measured or counted, but he knows how hard it is for humans to make this same adjustment in their own thinking. He therefore wants to assure us that, while the things we do in our ministries may be unimpressive and humble by earthly standards, he has the power to turn them into something quite glorious, by his standards. When the people became discouraged, and thought that their efforts could not produce anything as glorious as the first temple, they had forgotten the real meaning of glory.

Haggai thus reminds them of just how much power and glory God has (Haggai 2:6-9):

"This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land.'" I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the Lord Almighty. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the Lord Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the Lord Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the Lord Almighty."

Humans never have any real power, and likewise they never do anything that merits any real glory. When we forget this, even for a short time, it creates insecurity, frustration, envy, depression, and many other negative results. When we expect instead that it is God who will do great and glorious things, that it is God who should receive the glory, that it is God who can fulfill our needs and dreams, then we find a secure ground for hope and confidence. Ministries

and responsibilities that once seemed oppressive or impossible become pleasant and fulfilling. For the small price in humility that we must pay, in order to accept in our hearts that God is the focal point of all power and glory, this realization yields many rewards and blessings.

It is God who can "shake the nations", and it is God who can fill his house with glory. Hebrews 12:26-28 reminds us that this promise - and the challenge it implies - is for Christians, too. It is a privilege for us to participate in the fulfillment of his plans, and it is a responsibility of believers to be ready for God to use them, but it does not depend on us in any way. And when we can accept this, we shall find that the glorious things God can do will far outshine the fleshly acts that we can accomplish on our own strength. Let us stop looking at ourselves and seeing our own fleshly strengths and limitations. Let us also avoid making comparisons with what God has done through others, and even with what God has done in the past through us. Instead, let us look to God and remember that he is an inexhaustible source of power, energy, and love.

Questions For Discussion or Study:

1) If we can accept that all glory and power belong to God, how will this change our perspective on our lives, our identities, and our ministries? How will it change the ways that we look at other persons?

2) Haggai said that God would "shake all nations". What did he mean by this? What lesson was he trying to teach about God? What similar indications does God give to us in order to remind us that power and glory are his alone?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2001

(Originally taught as week two of a class on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)

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Notes For Lesson Three: Important Spiritual Applications (Haggai 2:10-23)

The people responded with commendable eagerness to Haggai's call, and as they resumed the work on the temple, God continued to adjust their perspective and to teach them to have the right priorities. In the last portion of the book, God uses the prophet to teach them some additional lessons about important spiritual principles that they would need to learn and remember.

After 15 years of inactivity, work on the temple has now resumed. The people realized that the time had come to build the temple, in spite of the outward appearances that made it seem an unfavorable time. For further details on the actual work on the temple, and on the obstacles that had to be dealt with, refer back to the book of Ezra, chapters 5 and 6, which we studied this past summer.

Avoiding Spiritual Defilement (Haggai 2:10-17)

It can be very easy to become discouraged or frustrated in our attempts to serve and worship God. When this happens, we must "give careful thought to our ways". There is a common, but unfortunate, tendency to overlook the fact that the most common cause of spiritual disappointment or discouragement is our own spiritual defilement. That is, that we have allowed something to happen to our hearts, minds, or souls that makes it difficult or impossible for God to use us.

This is what Haggai now addresses, reminding them first of some basic Levitical principles of holiness and cleanness (Haggai 2:10-13):

On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Haggai: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?'" The priests answered, "No." Then Haggai said, "If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?" "Yes," the priests replied, "it becomes defiled."

Haggai reminds them that, according to Levitical law, it was very easy for something to become unclean (defiled) but very difficult to become holy (consecrated). In the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament, these principles were impressed visibly on the Israelites through the system of sacrifice and ritual. They were constantly reminded - as Haggai does in this passage - of the many ways that they could defile themselves, that is, make themselves unclean and impure. It did not necessarily take an overt, deliberate sin to make a Jew unclean. Many of the defilements were mere acts of thoughtlessness or inattention. God wanted the people to be convicted of their identity as a chosen, holy nation, and wanted them to understand how important it was to remain focused on this identity, because it is so easy to become distracted, discouraged, and ultimately defiled by the pagan world. To fulfill their promise and purpose as a holy people, they first had to be clean and pure.

Their spiritual defilement is at the root of many of their difficulties (Haggai 2:14-17):

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. " Now give careful thought to this from this day on - consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the Lord's temple. When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty. I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not turn to me," declares the Lord.

Likewise, it is easy for Christians to become spiritually defiled, and to do things inappropriate for a holy people. And, as in the Levitical system, we do not have to commit a deliberate sin to make ourselves impure or unclean. Simply absorbing the values and perspectives of the unbelieving world, blurring the distinction between the holy church of Jesus Christ and the lost world around it, not only makes it difficult for God to speak and act through us, it is also a very demoralizing way to live. Trying to have it both ways is frustrating to both our spirit and our flesh. This is the situation that Haggai describes to the people in this passage. God hopes that we can avoid this pitfall, and allow him to pour out real blessings upon us, as he describes in the verses that follow.

Questions For Discussion or Study:

- 1) In what ways might Christians "defile themselves"? Why do we fall into such temptations? Can we avoid all possible types of spiritual defilement? How can we 'cleanse' ourselves from spiritual defilement?
- 2) How did God attempt to teach the Jews of Haggai's generation that they had defiled themselves? What ways might God use to communicate similar lessons to us about our lives? Give personal examples if at all possible.

Receiving Spiritual Blessings (Haggai 2:18-19)

In several key passages in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and other Old Testament books, God describes in detail two paths on which his people can travel: the path of rebellion and selfishness, which leads to frustration and desolation, and the path of faithfulness and righteousness, which leads to contentment, joy and security. Here in Haggai, he does the same, for a new generation and a new era in the history of his people. Having reminded them of the fruitlessness of living for themselves (see previous verses), he now assures them that, from this point onward, he can resume blessing them, if only they will take advantage of this opportunity for a fresh start. The resumption of work on the temple can mean much more than the physical rebuilding itself - if they wish, it can be the start of a renewed and re-invigorated relationship with God.

He thus makes this promise (Haggai 2:18-19):

From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid. Give careful thought: Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit. From this day on I will bless you.

When we read these kinds of promises, it is important to bear in mind their real significance. The Scriptures do not guarantee us that there will always be a direct, immediate correlation between our behavior - that is, whether we are "good" or "bad" - and the amount of worldly goodies we receive in return. While there are often natural connections between the two, and while God also does give good gifts to his people to show his love for them, it must be remembered that it is never God's highest priority to see us succeed in earthly terms. The most important blessings are spiritual, and this is true not only in heaven, but also in this life. The person who accumulates material goods, power, and other earthly treasure through sinful and

selfish living will pay the price inside, in fear, guilt, loneliness, and a cold, hard heart. No matter what kind of phony facade such persons show to the world, they are suffering inside, because their souls are missing their God. Conversely, the person who sacrifices many things of worldly value can have in their place far more important commodities, such as faith, hope, security, purity, and the love of God. No matter how lacking the life of a faithful believer may appear to be by fleshly standards, the believer has spiritual treasure that cannot be measured on any worldly scale.

Haggai told the Jews that God was ready and willing to forget about their years of selfish and irrational living, if they were ready to seize the opportunity he offered them, through the temple rebuilding. So too, regardless of how long you or I have been struggling with selfish living, or with caving in to fleshly sin, all we need do to experience healing is to take the opportunity that has always been there, to repent, to allow the blood of Jesus to cover our sin completely, and to move forward, putting our best time and effort into the things God has called us to do.

Questions For Discussion or Study:

- 1) What blessings did God want to give the Jews in Haggai's day? How are these intended blessings similar to those he offers to contemporary Christians?
- 2) What did these Jews need to do in order to make it possible for God to give them the blessings he had planned for them? What lessons can we learn from this, for our own lives and ministries?

Spiritual Leadership & Initiative (Haggai 2:20-23)

After challenging and encouraging all of the people of Israel, the book of Haggai closes with some special words to Zerubbabel, their leader. Though all the people would bear the responsibility for responding to the challenge God had issued, Zerubbabel had a special responsibility. It was particularly important for him to see clearly what God was doing, and it was also especially vital for him to embrace the role to which God called him, without doubt or hesitation. In the pagan world, leadership means authority, privilege, and rewards. But among God's people, leadership means responsibility, example, and devotion to God and his people.

The prophet thus addressed this concluding message to Zerubbabel personally (Haggai 2:20-23):

The word of the Lord came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: "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, for I have chosen you,' declares the Lord Almighty." (Haggai 2:20-23)

It was very important for Zerubbabel both to understand and to embrace what God was doing. The prophet thus gave the governor some extra encouragement, so that he could demonstrate the spiritual leadership and initiative God called for. In the body of believers, it is more important for leaders to set an example, through their faithfulness and devotion to the work of God, than it is for them to impress the rest of God's people with their talent and brilliance. Further, any abilities or skills that leaders have will only be put to a truly godly use if the leaders' hearts are devoted to God. Leaders should show that they are willing to sacrifice at least as much, and work at least as hard, as they call others to do.

Note the particular things with which God encourages Zerubbabel. He first impresses upon him the magnitude of God's power, and the massive dimensions of the plans he has made for his people. He wants the governor to be fully convinced that the fulfillment of these plans and dreams depends on God's wisdom and might, not on human goodness. Then, he wants Zerubbabel to know that he has been chosen for a special purpose. He uses the image of a ruler's signet ring, a sign of authority, to let Zerubbabel know that as long as he faithfully acts as God calls him to, he shall have God's full power and authority behind him at all times. As we Christians work to fulfill the plans and ministries that God has prepared for us, we shall do well to remember these same points. We do not have enough power or knowledge to accomplish anything ourselves of eternal importance, but God has enough of both to use our humble lives to fulfill his own amazing and glorious plans. And he has graciously chosen us to be part of this process. When we allow his will and his wisdom to reign in our lives, we can be sure that his full authority and power are with us.

Questions For Discussion or Study:

- 1) What particular responsibilities did Zerubbabel have? Why did God direct this last part of Haggai's message to Zerubbabel personally? What kinds of encouragement and exhortation do leaders in today's church need?
- 2) What things did God use to encourage Zerubbabel? How would these have given him strength and courage? In what similar ways does God encourage us? How can we be more aware of and moved by God's encouragement?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2001

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