

Haggai: Work, for I Am with You

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, hearing, we may also obey your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Background

- Babylon defeated Judah.
- Judah was exiled to Babylon.
- Babylon fell to Persia.
- Persia allowed Judah to go back home.

In 538 BC, the Persian King Cyrus declared that the Jews could go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the ruins of the temple and city. Hope filled the air. The temple foundation was laid ... but then plans got stalled ... and eighteen years later, there was still no temple.

"The time has not yet come," said the people, "for the house of the Lord to be built."

Procrastination. Distraction. Apathy. There are sins of action, and then sins of inaction. You can be busy, and still commit the sin of inaction.

Why did God's people keep kicking the can and not rebuild the temple?

- Maybe Israel was discouraged—There's no way they could build a Second Temple like Solomon's glorious First Temple in the "good old days"—it would take too much money and too little people.
- Why try? They could never measure up to the past.

But there's another possible explanation:

- Life for the newly returned exiles just got too busy for God.
- Israel didn't have any time or energy left reserved for the Lord's work.

Their new homes were decked out, but the house of God was in shambles.

This happens to us too. God can't get an appointment with us—we're booked out months ahead. We forget to keep first things first.

- The first things become the last things.
- And after a while, the first things become the no things.

Our priorities get out of whack—and we suffer for it.

Enter the prophet **Haggai**, whose name is derived from the word “journey” or “pilgrimage.”

Haggai was a short-term prophet—assigned by God to give four messages in four months to the people of God after their return from exile: Rebuild God’s temple that had been destroyed by Babylon 70 years earlier.

The monarchy was over, so Haggai gave God’s message to the new leadership.

- To **Governor Zerubbabel**—whose name means “**Son of Babylon**” because he was born in this pagan city during exile.
- And also to the **high priest Joshua**.

We read that the two leaders, “gave heed to the summons of the Lord and to the word of the prophet Haggai and they revered the Lord.”

The leadership got back on track. And they in turn inspired the remnant of God’s people to refocus and renew their calling and purpose. And so the rest of Haggai is an encouragement for the leadership and the people to finish what needed to be done.

Yes, the church is the people, but the people need a place to gather together.

Whether it be in:

- wilderness tabernacles or revival tents,
- synagogues or temples,
- cathedrals or catacombs,
- living rooms or storefront missions,

the household of God and its spiritual environment needs our careful attention.

Or as Winston Churchill famously said,

“We shape our buildings, thereafter our buildings shape us.”

The people of God needed to do some spiritual housekeeping and get their house in order by getting God’s House in order.

...

Let's hear God's Word to us from:

Scripture: Haggai 2:1-9 (NRSV)

"In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?

Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt.

My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Haggai: Work, for I Am with You

On Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL was bombed. Four African-American girls were killed in the blast. They were making their way to Sunday school class.

Not long after the horrific tragedy, Martin Luther King Jr. was in his kitchen alone. Depressed. Despondent. The senseless church bombing deflated him. The plight of his people seemed hopeless. His own home had already been bombed three times. He'd been imprisoned and was living under a constant threat of death. King wanted to give up. Throw in the towel. Surrender to anger and bitterness.

But then, in King's kitchen, he felt a presence. There were no words, no answers or explanations. Just an awareness that God was there. The past wasn't erased. The pain wasn't gone. But God's presence assured King he could carry on and continue Christ's ministry on behalf of his people.

Or in the words of Haggai, "Work, and I will be with you." Martin believed and Martin worked and he kept dreaming. And he was refreshed and renewed for the task God had given him. He kept doing the Lord's work ... until his time on earth was through.

Haggai has the perfect message for you if you're feeling discouraged, distracted, or delayed in accomplishing what really matters.

- If you want to refocus and reprioritize your life—go to Haggai.
- If you want a little less of yourself, and a lot more of God—heed Haggai's admonition.

First, consider your way of life. Four times we hear this refrain in Haggai.

- Consider your way of life.
- Slow down and reflect on what really matters.
- Listen to your heart.
- Listen to God.

Second, don't do things in your own strength. Rely upon God's Spirit for strength. When we do things in our strength, we live a frustrated existence. We try so hard to make things happen that are just not meant to be.

As Haggai puts it:

- You expected much, but got little.
- Sowed much, but reaped little.
- You eat, but you're always hungry.
- Drink, but ever thirsty.
- You layer on your clothes, but never get warm.
- You save money, only to have it fall through the hole in your wallet.

In other words, stop the madness.

- Stop the futility of running yourself ragged.
- Look to God, not yourself.

Or as Jesus would later say,

"My Father still goes on working, and I am working too."

Rest and let Jesus work through you.

Third, remember that God is the Lord of Hosts. Fourteen times Haggai reminds us of this. Eugene Peterson translates Lord of Hosts as "Lord of the Angel Armies." God and the heavenly hosts are backing you up to overcome obstacles and strengthen you to do what needs to be done.

"Silver is mine," says the Lord of Hosts, "and gold is mine."

Our resources might be meager, but our God owns the cattle on a thousand hills.

This temple will be built and my glory will fill it.

The Lord has the resources, even when we don't.

God not only abides, but God guides. God's presence imparts not only peace, but also power.

And so God likes to shake things up too. Elvis knew about this. God is able to act in a sudden and jarring manner—whether you're a pauper, a president or The King. The God of the earthquake and the God of the still small voice can bring spiritual and literal seismic shifts that shake us to the core.

"In just a little while," says the Lord, "I will shake the heavens and the earth—the sea and the dry land, I will shake the nations."

The Holy Spirit shakes us and rouses us from our slumber. The Spirit awakens us and provokes us to do the work of the Lord. In other words, God gives us the diligence and fervor to TCB—Take Care of Business. And if you don't have a desire for God, ask God to give you the desire to desire God. Shake off the paralysis of analysis.

"Be strong and act for I am with you, says the Lord."

So when we do what's already blessed, we'll find ourselves blessed.

God said through Haggai, "Rebuild the house and I will give you prosperity and favor." The Hebrew word is SHALOM—peace.

What we do matters. Faithfulness to God and his work is crucial—this is how God often works in the world—through us. Plus, there's a deep sense of joy and satisfaction when we make our mark in this life with eternal and good things. This is what we were created for.

God has a message for Zerubbabel at the end of the book of Haggai:

I shall take you Zerubbabel, my servant, and shall wear you as a signet ring, for it is you whom I have chosen.

God was restoring Zerubbabel and the line of King David, who was his ancestor. Jesus the Messiah would come from the line of Zerubbabel.

Signet rings were a sign of the king's power. Often times the king would take his signet ring and seal a document with wax and mark it with the impression of their signet ring. And so too, God makes his mark on us and through us. We're chosen and sealed for his service. In the Spirit of Christ, we're God's living signet rings—signed, sealed, and delivered.

We can be influencers and change-makers for good by the way we worship, work, communicate, and use the authority entrusted to us with those around us. God extends his authority through us to make a loving mark on society and those around us.

So Immanuel, stay soft and moldable—like heated wax. Wax eloquent. Be careful of becoming hardened and impenetrable to God's message. Heed his voice. Remember that you bear the image of Christ, as Paul says,

"I bear the marks of Jesus branded on my body."

Don't be discouraged and weary in well-doing. Work for the good of all, especially for members of the household of God.

And as Peter says, "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Amen.

The New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.