

HAGGAI: Some Words to Discouraged Carpenters

by Ray C. Stedman

When you read this book you will notice that the theme of the prophecy of Haggai is “get busy and build the Lord’s house.” Now, although you may be crowded in your church, and have need of more space, the church building is not the house of God. In Haggai’s day it was a picture or shadow of the true house of God. These shadows (as we learned in the New Testament) pointed toward the true house of God which is the believer, and, collectively, all believers – forming the great house of God which is the church, the place where God dwells. That is what God is interested in building.

In Haggai’s day the Lord’s house was the temple, and you may remember that they had some difficulty building the temple after the Babylonian captivity. (This prophecy should be read in connection with the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah which appear much earlier in the Old Testament.) As many of the prophets had prophesied, the Babylonian nation was raised up and came sweeping down across the land of Israel. They captured Jerusalem, the king was taken captive, his eyes were put out, and he was also carried as a captive to Babylon and there, just as the prophecy of Jeremiah had foretold, the people stayed in bondage exactly 70 years. This, by the way, is one of those remarkable prophecies which have already been fulfilled, so you can see how God speaks through the prophets what no man could speak on his own.

After the 70 years were fulfilled, Daniel, who prophesied in Babylon, tells us that God began to move to bring the people back to the land. They came first under Zerubbabel, who is mentioned in the opening verse of this prophecy of Haggai. Zerubbabel, who was descended from kings, was the captain of the remnant that came back from Babylon. When they came to Jerusalem, they

found the city in ruins. The walls were broken down and the temple was utterly destroyed.

They began work first of all on the temple. Although they were still under the domain and rule of the Babylonians, they had permission from the king of Babylon to begin work on this temple. They started working, and they managed to lay the foundations and perhaps just one row of stones – a much smaller temple than the original one that Solomon had built. Then the work began to lag, and after a while it ceased altogether and for 15 years nothing was done on the temple. It is at this point that Haggai the prophet rises up to speak.

Haggai delivers four messages to these people – all within the space of about a year and a half, all concerning the building of the temple. But their deeper message, as I have already suggested, applies to us, the temple or the great house of God that he has been building for 20 centuries now. So we will read this prophecy not only as a message of the prophet to the people of his day about building the temple, but also as a message to the people of God everywhere concerning their responsibility in building the great house of God, the temple that the Holy Spirit has been building out of human hearts.

In this prophecy there are four messages dated by the calendar. Each one reveals an excuse given by the people for not working on the temple – both their excuse and the real reason behind that excuse.

The first message includes all of Chapter 1. We read (Verses 1 and 2):

In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah [governor under the King of Babylon] and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, “Thus

says the Lord of hosts: This people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.” {Hag 1:1-2 RSV}

The prophecy was addressed to the civil governor and to the religious heads, Joshua and Zerubabel, and in this verse the prophet repeats the excuse that the people gave for leaving the temple abandoned for 15 years. They were saying “Why, the time has not yet come. There has been a mistake in figuring the 70 years that Jeremiah prophesied. There’s no use doing anything now because God is not ready yet.” But read the answer God gives to their excuse (Verses 3-5):

Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts Consider how you have fared.” {Hag 1:3-5 RSV}

In other words, God says, “Is the problem really that you think it’s not yet time for me to work? Well, it’s amazing that you think it is time for me to work in helping you to build your house. How about mine?” And he rather ironically suggests that the real reason the work of God has lagged is that they are all wrapped up in their own affairs. They have put God’s work second and their own needs first.

They had forgotten something. The fact that they were there in the land at all proves that God’s time had come. They would not have been back there if those 70 years had not been fulfilled. The real reason, therefore, was that they were not willing to put God first. Their own comforts, and their own convenience and their own desires came first.

Now God says that he wants them to see what the results are. Three times he says, “Consider ... consider ... consider.” Notice in Verses 5 and 6:

“Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages earns wages to put them into a bag with holes.” {Hag 1:5-6 RSV}

They had inflation in those days too! He is saying that all this labor and work that they put out did not give them what they expected. “You are

trying to get prosperous,” God says “but prosperity eludes you. You are trying to satisfy yourself, but you never find fulfillment. There is always something missing.” Verses 7-11:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may appear in my glory, says the Lord.” {Hag 1:7-8 RSV}

Why?

“You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while you busy yourselves each with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought upon the land and the hills, upon the grain, the new wine, the oil, upon what the ground brings forth, upon men and cattle, and upon all their labors.” {Hag 1:9-11 RSV}

God says, “I am behind this.” Why did he do this? Why did he short-circuit all their efforts to achieve prosperity? Was it because he was trying to punish them? No, God never punishes in that sense. He was trying to wake them up. He was trying to show them that there was an infallible rule that runs all through Scripture and all through life, that men are constantly trying to reverse, that says, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well,” (Matt 6:33 RSV). The way to have what you need in terms of physical food and material shelter and the necessities of life is to give your major concern and interests not to these, but to advancing God’s work. That is what you are here for. You have a Father in heaven who knows your needs along this line, and he is perfectly able to supply them, and he will as long as your interest is first of all in his work.

That is right up to date, is it not? That is calling us back to this great principle that the New Testament is reminding us of that we are not our own, but we were bought with a price {cf, 1 Cor 6:19b-20a}. We belong to him. We are here to advance his cause, his interests. We are here to build the house of God. That is why God has left us here in this world, so that we might be his in-

struments in this work of erecting a great temple of human beings which will be and is a habitation of God, the dwelling place of God.

Is that first in our interests? Is that what we live for? Or is it that we might get a new color TV set or a better automobile or a more beautiful home or better drapes or a softer rug? Not that all those things are denied to Christians. Let us understand that. God, in his grace and goodness sometimes gives wealth to Christians and they are to use it, as Paul reminds us in his letter to Timothy, in being generous, giving richly and freely.

But God has called us primarily to put the building of the house of God first – not the brick and mortar building, but the church of God. There are people all around us that the Holy Spirit intends to add to the house of God if we are his instruments and channels of his working. And the great question that Haggai confronts us with is: how can we find time to advance our interests so eagerly, so carefully, so thoughtfully – spending so much time thinking about advancing our own material gain and then excuse ourselves from the work of building the house of God by saying, “It isn’t time yet”?

Do you remember that story of William Carry, the father of modern missions, who in 18th century England got concerned about India, far across the sea, and prayed that God would somehow reach those poor, benighted heathen who had never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. He tried to stir up interest in the churches of England, but he met everywhere with adamant resistance to his idea. In one meeting, Carry made an impassioned plea to be sent out as a missionary. Even though he was a simple cobbler and uneducated, he was willing to go. One of the elders of the meeting pointed his finger at Carry and said, “Young man, sit down. When God wants to evangelize the heathen, he’ll do it without your help!” This was the kind of stubborn resistance that Carry met with, but he was a man who could not be defeated. He was used of God to begin the great modern missionary movement that has not stopped yet, because he was one who was concerned about God’s work. There is an excitement that comes into our lives when we really, genuinely put the affairs of God first, and do not even bother to think about the provision of our own needs. This is why God says, “Now is the accepted time, today is the day,” {cf, 2 Cor 6:1-2}.

So we read that they started this work (Verses 12-15):

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people feared before the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord’s message [and what a message], “I am with you, says the Lord” [you can count on that]. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the ... governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month. {Hag 1:12-15 RSV}

How long did the work last? Three weeks. And then it ground to a halt again. Notice the calendar (Chapter 2, Verses 1-3):

In the second year of Darius the king [that is, the same year] in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, [21 days later] the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, “Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?” {Hag 2:1-3 RSV}

Now God was repeating what the people were saying. They had gotten started and the temple had begun to go up. There was a bustle of excitement until an old man came down to watch the work. He had been a child when they were carried captive into Babylon and had seen the temple of Solomon in all its great glory, and as old men sometimes do, he was living in the past. And he said, “Do you call this a temple? This heap of ruins here? I saw Solomon’s temple, and what you are building here is nothing compared to that. All the gold and silver that was in that temple – it was amazing! And you don’t even have any gold or silver. How are you going to decorate this temple?” The people got discouraged and they said, “You know, he’s right. We don’t have any gold or silver. We don’t have

anything to make this temple beautiful. What's the use? Why work?" So they quit.

But the Lord said (Verse 4):

"... 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;" {Hag 2:4b RSV}

On what basis, Lord?

"Work, for I am with you," {Hag 2:4c RSV}

That is always God's answer. "Work, for I am with you. Don't worry about the fact that things don't look as good as they ought to." Verses 5 and 6:

"according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit abides among you; fear not. 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 nations," {Hag 2:5-7a RSV}

When God says he will shake the heavens and the people and the earth, he is not speaking literally, but figuratively. He means that he is going to rearrange the whole historical picture (Verses 7 and 8):

"... so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine." {Hag 2:7b-8a RSV}

"You don't need to worry about that. I've got all we need of that. And if I wanted this house decorated with gold and silver, I could stack it up in piles here on your back step. But that isn't the kind of glory I have in mind. I am going to fill this house, so that (Verse 9):

"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." {Hag 2:9 RSV}

God is like that. He says, "Look, you are discouraged because you think what you are doing

won't amount to anything. But don't stop the work because of that. I have a different plan in mind. This house, little as it is, unpretentious as it is, without gold or silver, is actually going to have greater glory than the glory of the previous temple."

Now those words were fulfilled. Do you know how? Into that house one day came one who found it filled with money changers, and overthrowing the tables, he drove them out and said, "You make it [my Father's house] a den of robbers," (Matt 21:13b RSV). And he cleansed it and made it a place of prayer. And he filled it with the glory of his teaching, standing in the midst of it and saying things such as people had never heard before. And he utterly changed the whole life of that nation and every nation in the world by what he said. And from out of that house, changed and altered a little by Herod, but the same house, there went forth a glory that has never ceased, a different kind of glory.

Do not stop the work because it does not compare with something that was there in the past. This is one of the problems of God's people. We are always looking back to the past. We say, "Oh, for the days of D. L. Moody. Oh, for the days of the church where we came from. Oh, what we did then." And we are wistful and long to have it just that way.

But the great lesson that God wants to impress upon us is that God always does a new and different work. The thing that is coming in the future is always better for our present situation than the past. We do not need to hang on to these things of tradition. God is saying, "Keep on working, I am with you. And when I am in your midst you don't need to worry about how it is going to turn out. It may be different but it will always be better."

Well, that took effect for awhile, and then what? Well, they quit again. In Verses 10-12 we read:

On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month [that is, two months later] in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Ask the priests to decide this question, 'If one carries holy flesh in the skirt of his garment, and touches with his skirt bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any kind of food, does it become holy?'" {Hag 2:10-12a RSV}

This was in accordance with the Law of Moses. If you get into a situation, Moses said, where you do not know what to do, go ask the priest to declare the appropriate principle and then make an application from that. It is the same thing we are told to do. When you get into a situation that you do not know how to handle, go to the word of God and get the principle that covers that situation.

And this was the question they were to ask the priest. "If you have something clean (holy) about you and you touch something else – a bit of bread or wine or oil – does that become holy because you've got holy flesh on you? Does the unclean thing become holy?" And the priests answered correctly, "No." Well, then he put another question (Verse 13):

Then said Haggai, "If one who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?" {Hag 2:13a RSV}

The priests answered, "Yes, it does." What is this all about? What is the problem here? Well, as we read on we will see (Verses 14-18):

Then Haggai said, "So is it with this people, and with this nation before me, says the Lord; and so with every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean. Pray now, consider what will come to pass from this day onward. Before a stone was placed upon a stone in the temple of the Lord, how did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten; when one came to the winevat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. I smote you and all the products of your toil with blight and mildew and hail; yet you did not return to me, says the Lord. Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider." {Hag 2:14-18 RSV}

What does he mean? If you read between the lines, you can see again what the people were saying. They were saying, "Look, we've been working on the temple for two months. You said that the reason we were having such a hard time materially

and physically was that we weren't working on the temple. We have been working on the temple now for two months, 21 days, and we are still having a hard time. What is the matter? Why work? Nothing is happening. It doesn't work." They were the same kind of people we are. They wanted instant results: "I straightened everything out yesterday. Today everything ought to go great."

One time when a couple came to see me for marital counseling, the man said, "We just can't live together. She is always blowing up and exploding and bawling me out about everything." I examined the situation and found out that the major problem was that here was a man who paid no attention to his wife; he utterly neglected her and she would take it just so long and then she would blow up. So I told him this and he said, "I think you are right." So he went home to do something about it. The next morning he called me up and said, "Well, I took her out to dinner last night and we had a great time. She enjoyed it so much I was sure you were right. But this morning she blew up again. The thing doesn't work." I had to say to him what Haggai said to these people. Do you think the deep pollution of sin that has been going on for years is going to be cured overnight when you start doing the right thing? Do you think that all these habits of wrong thinking that have been deeply ingrained in your mind are suddenly going to be eliminated simply because you begin to operate on the right basis? No, we need time and patience. "Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart," (Gal 6:9 RSV).

Now notice this word of encouragement (Verse 19):

"Is the seed yet in the barn? [You plant your seed and you do not expect instant results, do you? You expect to wait until the harvest. It takes time for the seed to grow.] Do the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree still yield nothing. From this day on I will bless you." {Hag 2:19 RSV}

Do not worry. Keep on. Do not stop work just because you do not see instant results. If you are doing the right thing, keep on doing it and the results will come.

Once again, on the very same day, they needed a little encouragement and so another message came, the last one (Verses 20-24):

The word of the Lord came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month, "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders; and the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his fellow. On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring [the sign of authority]; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts." {Hag 2:20-24 RSV}

Now here was a special word of encouragement to the leader while the people were yet under the authority of Babylon, although they were back in the land and building the temple again, they were still beset by many problems. Everywhere they looked there was the sign of the authority of the foreign power. They saw chariots everywhere and soldiers marching through the streets and all the signs of bondage, and their hearts grew fearful and they said, "When will it ever be: Are we ever going to be free?" God says, "Don't worry. I have a program going that will reverse the whole order of things. I will destroy the power of this kingdom. I will bring their chariots to naught. I will break you loose from the bondage of this people and I am going to take Zerubbabel, the man who stands as the leader of the people and make him a signet ring." Now Zerubbabel was of the royal line, the line of David, and, though these words were not literally fulfilled in Zerubbabel, they were spoken of his descendent who was Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, God fulfilled all these words. He took the son of

David and made him a signet ring by which all the nations shall ultimately be ruled.

Now in what way is all this a word to us?

It is a word of encouragement in a day of darkness, a word of rising up and acting now:

- Build now. Do not wait. The work of God needs to be done now.
- Not next year.
- Not ten years from now.
- Now!
- Are your homes open?
- Are your lives ready?

A great harvest field is before us here and around the world. Opportunities abound as they never have before. Is this first in your prayers? Is it first in your interests that this great harvest may be reaped? Are your homes open to the students that throng our campuses that they might come to Christ? And to your neighbors so that they can come in and find a friendly heart and a ready smile and a ready ear to listen?

How much are we ready to build the house of the Lord?

This is always the key, is it not?

This is the work of the Spirit.

When all that man has done around us crumbles into nothing and all the vast civilizations and great secrets of nature are forgotten, the one thing that will last is the work of the Lord, the house of God that he is building now.

Are we investing in eternal things? That is Haggai's word.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that we may listen with keen ears to these words and hear them anew in our own lives, making application to our own hearts as the Spirit of God prompts us in this moment. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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