



# IT'S TIME TO GET YOUR PRIORITIES IN ORDER!

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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Book of Haggai

Seventh Message

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I worked for a difficult boss for a number of years. No matter how hard I tried, every day I faced tremendous stress and failure. But this failure drew me closer to God. Through obedience to God and his will for me I learned that:

-My significance did not depend on my boss's approval and what mood he was in. My significance comes from God.

- Praying with my wife each morning, before work, allowed us to communicate our weakness and needs to God and each other. Prayer had the effect of placing upon God the weight I was feeling, taking it off my wife's shoulders.

- Prayer for my boss and co-workers in the midst of the day and during meetings helped me remember that I could not fix every problem. I can only try and be wise to be choose those things I could take on, and give the rest to God.

I wish I could say that during the past five years I have made these lessons a consistent part of my life, but I haven't. Why? I am sad to say this, but life has gotten easier. Don't get me wrong, I still work hard, and probably have more demands on my time today. But my work has produced results, and my goals are within the reach of my capabilities. At times I feel like asking, Where did God go? Or rather, as I make up my "to do" list, how high a priority do I place on my relationship with God?

Hardships often give birth to lessons learned, but with time, these lessons, which seem like common sense, are easily set aside. A recent magazine article on Stephen Covey, the author of the book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," said Covey is packaging common sense as if it were original—and making a fortune doing it. But Covey would say, what seems to be common sense just isn't common practice.

This morning we come to the book of Haggai in our series in the Minor Prophets. Through Haggai the prophet, God calls us back to a relationship with him and the work he intends for each of us. If you feel it's time to evaluate what you are working so hard for in life, the message of this book is, get your priorities in order—just do it!

The history of the nation of Israel is not a record of their faithful progression from a chosen people to the revealing of Christ, their long awaited Messiah. Israel, once chosen and privileged by God, became proud, and turned away from God in rebellion and idolatry. The result was that the nation was divided, and delivered into the hands of its enemies. Jerusalem was captured and its main buildings destroyed. The magnificent temple, built by Solomon, and the city's walls and fortifications were demolished. Israel was placed in captivity and deported to Babylon. In their suffering, the people turned to God to seek his blessing

and their hoped-for return to their homeland to rebuild the temple.

In 538 BC, nearly seventy years after the captivity and destruction of Jerusalem, as recorded in the book of Ezra, King Cyrus allowed a number of Jews, less than fifty thousand strong, to return to Judah with their possessions. This group, made up of farmers and their servants, planned to rebuild the temple and reinstitute worship of God. Humility and hardship had drawn the remnant closer to God, and they made it their first priority to rebuild the temple and institute formal worship. They quickly set about laying the stone foundation of the temple and rebuilding the walls. When the altar was built, sacrifices in the form that God had instructed Moses to follow were once again offered. The remnant, having learned bitter lessons through captivity and exile, wept with joy over their deliverance.

Now we come to the book of Haggai, which was written after the remnant had been back in Jerusalem for eighteen years. Haggai 1:1-4:

**In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, "This people says, "The time has not come, even the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt." "Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet saying, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?" (Hag 1:1-4, NASB)**

This message from the Lord, delivered by Haggai, recorded in the month of August of 520 BC, is addressed to Zerubbabel, a descendant of David and heir to the Davidic throne (as governor of Judah, Zerubbabel held the highest office of civil authority); and to Joshua, a direct descendant of Aaron the Levite, who held the highest office of religious authority.

Right away we see two clues in Haggai's message that there is a problem in the relationship between God and the returned remnant. First, God refers to them as "this people," rather than the more common form of address, "my people." This indicates that the relationship between God and his people had become strained, to say the least. It probably caused them to wonder about their reputation as the "chosen people." Second, notice that their own words are thrown back in their faces: "This people says, "The time has not come, even the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt." Although they had been back in Jerusalem for eighteen years, they did not think the time had arrived to finish the temple. Yet the book of Ezra seems to indicate that the remnant had gotten off to a great start, rebuilding the temple and working on their relationship with God.

What had they been doing all this time?

Verse 4 answers that question. God asks: "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?" They had been working on their own homes. That took priority over completion of the temple. They were living in finished houses, while the temple still lay desolate and ruined. For eighteen years, they had failed to get around to completing the half-built temple. They were focused on pursuing their own priorities rather than God's. They felt it was "not time" because they were distracted. Life was busy. Furthermore, as we know from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, they faced many hardships and difficulties, especially from their surrounding neighbors, the Samaritans. These people were concerned about the Jews establishing themselves, so they harassed them physically and politically.

Verses 5-7 go on to detail the priorities of the remnant during the eighteen years they had been in Jerusalem.

**Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, "Consider your ways! "You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes." Thus says the Lord of hosts, Consider your ways!" (1:5-7)**

"Consider your ways!" (NASB). "Give careful thought to your ways" (NIV)—the course of life you are on. This is a gentle but firm warning and rebuke. Verse 6 sets out the five pursuits of the remnant. Perhaps we ourselves should give careful thought to how these may apply to us.

First, God says: "You have sown much, but harvest little." Their work was not producing enough. They were not meeting their objectives. Second: "You eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied." Their food did not satisfy them. Third: "You drink, but there is not enough to become drunk." Wine failed to provide them with an escape from life's challenges. Fourth: "You put on clothing, but no one is warm enough." Their clothes did not meet their need for warmth and comfort. Fifth: "And he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes." No matter how much money they made, they never had enough.

The remnant were facing great hardship, and working hard, but not getting anywhere. All their efforts were in vain. They probably reasoned, "Surely God will understand that once the chaos of life's daily grind smooths out, we will again make a high priority of rebuilding the temple."

Here we could ask ourselves a question: What are the things that get in the way of our relationship with God and pursuing his priorities? God's desire is for his people to think carefully, to exercise free will, and choose to obey him. We should think carefully about what we ought to do. C. S. Lewis observes in *The Problem of Pain* that in all moral law, the question that man has to face is, What ought he to do? This is quite different from what we want to do or what we are being forced to do.

The next moral problem man faces is dealing with his inability to do what he feels he ought to do. By their own standards, all men stand condemned. But humble reflection and admission of guilt are a far cry from the "radar

detector" lifestyle of the '90's. We only slow down if we think we are going to be caught; then we search for loopholes to beat the charges. The convicted murderer Richard Alan Davis seems to symbolize our society's indifference and lack of shame. Do we consider our ways? No. We live by our desires; we justify ourselves by appealing to our emotions. We measure success by our titles, our checkbooks, our cars, our appearance.

I think the wisdom of our times was captured in a recent Kudzu cartoon. Character 1 says to Character 2: "If you believe the infomercials, there are lots of people who think their lives will improve if only their buttocks were firmer!" Both characters reflect on this, and then Character 2 says: "Buns of steel, brains of silly putty!"

What are you pursuing in life? For most of us, success in our jobs provides us with significance and determines more of our self worth than we are willing to admit. Weight Watchers, Alcoholic Anonymous and other organizations help people who are seeking satisfaction through food or dulling the pain of life through drugs. Our incomes are always just short of meeting our perceived needs. Things aren't working out. Life is not bringing satisfaction. We work hard, but we seem to be going nowhere. So we work harder. Is this all there is to life? What are you going to do about it? Stop merely responding to life. Be still, and listen!

God is informing the remnant that the connection between the fruits of their work and the satisfaction derived from it should always be viewed in the context of their relationship with and obedience to him. God is both the source of the blessing and the source of withholding of the blessing. This is what Haggai points out in the next verses. Chapter 1, verses 7-11:

**Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Consider your ways!" Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified," says the Lord. You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?" declares the Lord of hosts, "Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house. Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands." (1:7-11)**

Here God is saying that he is the source of their difficulties! He blows away the wheat with the chaff. And it was he who brought a drought on all the land, withering their crops, bringing tension to their relationships with their neighbors, and hardship on their cattle. All their efforts had been in vain! But, as life became harder, the people did what seemed right to them. They looked to their own abilities to solve their problems. They buckled down and worked harder for their goals, which were always just out of reach. God did not bring these things upon the people to punish them, but to draw them to himself. Yet they did not turn to him.

Today, just as in the time of Haggai, man feels he does not need to turn to anyone but himself to work out his problems. The self-help sections of bookstores grow bigger every year. Today, you can even find books for children

who are dealing with the difficulties of life. From the time of Adam, the blessing of both the land and animal life had been directly related to man's relationship with God. God withheld the blessing because the sacrifices of the people were not offered from the heart. What seems odd is that in the book of Ezra, the remnant's first sacrifice upon completion of the altar was born out of their gratefulness to God and their recognition of their need for protection.

Here is how Ezra put it:

**Then Joshua the son of Jehozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening (Ezra 3:2-3).**

I believe that the returning remnant, as new arrivals in the destroyed city of Jerusalem, a place inhabited by hostile Samaritans, and facing the hardship of plowing and planting new land, truly felt weak and inadequate. But it was this feeling of inadequacy that made them aware of just how needy they were. This humbling experience forced them to turn to their God to communicate in worship and express their needs. They realized that the work on the temple was started before the work on the city walls and fortifications. They knew that their protection came from God. Over the next eighteen years, however, each man established his home and lands, harvested his crops and tended his cattle. As each family established themselves, and their needs were met, their first priority shifted from their relationship with God to tending their own affairs and running their households.

Our own hearts are easily drawn away from a relationship with God. How can we worship him when our attention is drawn to our jobs and possessions, to sports, television and hobbies for our significance and satisfaction, rather than looking to God, the Creator and Father? What is distracting you in your relationship with God? What would you find it hard to live without? What takes first place in your life? Where are you looking to for satisfaction? A heartfelt attitude of obedience worships God, and God promises his blessing through a relationship with him. Does God have your attention?

In verse 8, God directs his people to turn their hearts from satisfying their own needs and desires toward a relationship with him, and toward obedience, by finishing the heart of the temple—the very means of worshipping and communicating with him. God directs them to get wood; since the external foundation of stone had been completed, the internal wooden structure and adornment was left undone.

I think this is another picture of how we relate to God at times. We go through the motions, but fail to spend the time to adorn our love relationship with him. We avoid intimacy, even when we talk to our Maker. The Jews had been routinely worshipping God, going through the motions, with no heart, no passion. The temple was not a special place to them. In fact, as it says in verse 4, "this house lies desolate." It was hardly a place that exemplified God's thriving house of worship.

Why was the temple so special that God desired to be pleased with it and glorified through it? To answer this question we need to look at the structure and symbology of the temple. The elements of the temple provided God's people with the necessary aspects of worship that demonstrated their humility and obedience. The elements were physical reminders of the Messiah to come. They were the Christ-centered symbols that God had required as part of worship.

Let's briefly look at these elements. Lavers were used for cleansing before people entered into worship. Christians today confess their sins to cleanse their hearts, knowing that Christ paid for our sins with his blood. The temple altar was the place where blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins. Christians have no need for an altar. In the cross of Christ, the sacrifice has been paid. The altar of incense is a picture of prayer, as the aroma moves from the area of worship past the great veil into the Holy of Holies. The veil, which came between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, was torn in two at the death of Christ. His death forms the basis on which we can approach God and enter his presence. The Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was seated, symbolized the presence of God. This was where the blood of the lamb was placed on the Day of Atonement.

Today, however, the temple is the Body of Christ, built of human hearts that have been moved by the Spirit. Listen to these words of Paul, from Ephesians chapter 2:

**But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. ...For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph 2:13, 18-22).**

And these words from 1 Peter 2:4-6:

**As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." (1 Pet 2:4-6)**

There are people around you today whom the Holy Spirit intends to add to the Body of Christ. At home, at work and at play, are you strengthening the body of Christ or are you a stumbling block? What is stopping you from adding living stones to the body of Christ? You may be thinking, "I don't know anybody." If you attend church but are not in Christian fellowship, you are not functioning in the body. Listening to teaching from the pulpit but not seeking Christian relationships is like listening to lectures on how to play the piano but never playing a note. There are many midweek opportunities to meet other Christians: in home fellowships, men's and women's Bible studies, singles, college fellowships, etc. There are even

more opportunities beyond PBC. And if you don't like any of those, start your own group!

Perhaps you are thinking, "I don't think I can get involved in ministry." But if you are in Christian fellowship, you are in ministry. Ministry isn't all teaching and evangelism. Only a small part of ministry is done by full time pastors and paid staff. Serve with the gifts and talents that God has given you, right where you are. Be obedient to God where you are planted, at home and at work. He will use you to accomplish something that will have eternal effects.

Some of you may be thinking, "I'm not ready to teach others. I need more teaching and discipling." Has someone poured their life into you? If so, it may be your time to nurture others. Our children would love to hear simple stories of what you have learned about God or what he has done in your life. How long will you soak up good teaching and yet not share what God has taught you? Junior High, High School, College, Singles, and the Juvenile Hall Ministry all provide opportunities for us to share life, to serve and build the body of Christ. If you need information, the church office, the information kiosk and upcoming ministry fair can get you connected. Again, if you don't feel drawn to any of these, start your own!

Are you saying, "I'm too busy"? I don't know anyone who isn't. Maybe you are going through a busy season. Ask yourself, is this a season or a lifestyle? Is this an excuse to have relationships on your own terms, not God's? You should evaluate your priorities in light of your relationship with God. Do your priorities, your work and sacrifices, have eternal value? When we began our home fellowship, I thought about how hard it would be to give up our Wednesday evenings. But, after five years of meeting together, I would not trade that evening for anything.

Are you thinking, "I'm waiting until the right ministry opportunity comes along"? Are you a perfectionist, worried about the quality of your work? My advice is, just do it! Remember that the temple that Haggai encouraged the

remnant to build was probably a crude structure, having been built by farmers. In fact, some of the older members of the remnant remembered the glory and splendor of Solomon's temple and they were highly critical of the work in progress.

In the verses that follow, God encourages his people to obedience by saying:

**'But now take courage, Zerubbabel,' declares the Lord, 'take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage,' declares the Lord, 'and work; for I am with you,' says the Lord of hosts (2:4).**

Is the work hard? Be strong! God is with you!

God also promises, in 2:9:

**'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former' (2:9a)**

If you are frustrated and ready to quit because the work doesn't seem to measure up to some previous standard, be careful. God is in control—and he loves a new creation. This very temple constructed in Haggai's day was the very house of worship that Jesus, the long awaited

Messiah, would enter to worship and fill with his glory five hundred years later.

Will you choose to put aside your excuses? What will be your first priority . . .

- Material gain or eternal treasure?
- Sports channel or relationships?
- Prime time wisdom or knowledge of God?
- Self help or submission and obedience to God?

Do you allow yourself to be bounced around on a sea of emotion, chasing the winds of convenience and comfort? In the book of Haggai, God calls us back to a heart to heart relationship with him, one that is demonstrated through obedience, which glorifies him and brings him pleasure.

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