

First Things First

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Preacher: Nigel Anderson

[0 : 00] I know that in the notices I'd originally felt that the first 11 verses were sufficient, but we'll just go through the whole chapter, we'll look at the whole chapter as a whole. Verse 4 and 5 in particular, verse 3 in fact, when the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, and then this is the word given to the returned exiles, those who were thinking of this morning.

Is it a time for you yourselves, the emphasis on the people, you yourselves, to dwell in your panelled houses while this house lies in ruins, and of course this house referring to the temple. Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. Setting priorities. Setting priorities is a daily exercise in any walk of life.

You know, whether you're talking about home management, or work management, or life management. And when it comes to life as a Christian, when it comes to your life and your devotion to God, then of course priorities are essential.

You find that taught again and again in scripture. Go to the very first commandment. What's the first commandment? The first commandment tells us to set our priorities in relation to God.

[1 : 27] Putting God first. Like Exodus 20 verse 3, you shall have no other gods before me. Then think of what Jesus taught, and the importance of putting God first in all things.

What did Jesus teach? Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added unto you. And I suppose in some senses anyway, as a congregation we've begun a new year in ministry.

And you know, when we think of all that tells, and all that suggests as a congregation, it's surely for us at this point to get our priorities right before God.

Because we've got work to do. We've got work to proclaim the good news of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. We've got that work to do here in Livingston and beyond.

We've got work to do in evangelism. We've got, of course, work to do in the refurbishment of this building. We pray a testimony to the work that God has given us to do as a church.

[2 : 31] And so, surely we have to ask ourselves, in all these things, in all our plans, are they putting God first?

Are our priorities God-centered? Are they for his glory? Are our plans priorities for the furtherance of his kingdom? Or are we simply doing things for self-glory rather than God's glory?

Well, in this little Old Testament book that Jim read there, we find just this matter of priorities being highlighted, well, in the life of the returning exiles from Babylon.

Okay, we're talking about two and a half thousand years ago. But the principles, the principles of conduct are exactly the same. There's the same need to put first things first in relation to our God and Saviour.

Why? Well, we've got the same sinful nature as the returned exiles had. Because so often, of course, our sinful nature relegates God to second place when he has to have first place in our lives.

[3 : 40] So, we're going to find, I pray, very important lessons for us in, well, these two chapters. I know we've been going through Mark's Gospel certainly before the holidays.

I said, well, well, let's just take a little break from Mark. Let's just focus on Haggai just for a couple of weeks. And if we're going to be serious about getting our priorities right as individuals and as a congregation, then see as God's Word tells us, informs us, where and how we put these priorities in relation to our God and Saviour.

Well, let's think of the context, of course, to help us in this. Haggai. Haggai is a prophet, as we read there, as we saw there. He's one of three prophets that was sent by God at this particular time as the Jews were returning from their exile in Babylon, as they were returning back to Judea, back to the capital, back to Jerusalem.

And you know the context. King Cyrus, king of Persia. The Persians had conquered the Babylonians and King Cyrus' policy certainly was to look after the minorities in his kingdom when part of that policy was to send back a good number of Jews who'd been exiled in Babylon. So King Cyrus allows these Jews to return back to their homeland. Now, not every Jewish exile returned, of course, back to Jerusalem, back to Judea, but many did.

[5 : 07] And many settled in towns and villages and, of course, in the capital, in Jerusalem itself, and they began to build their homes. They even began rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

The temple, as we said, that 70 years before had been destroyed by the Babylonians, destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar. But we can project 16 years forward, 16 years after the return of the exiles, 16 years forward, and there's no completed temple.

The temple is still in ruins. Yes, there's foundations, but the temple is in ruins. The temple, the temple that symbolized God's presence with his people.

Now, these Jewish returned exiles, they've been busy. What have they been busy at? They've been busy focusing on their own homes, on their own livelihood. They've been focusing on their fields and their businesses.

They've been neglecting the temple. In other words, their priorities were wrong. They'd relegated God to second place. They put themselves first and God next.

[6 : 18] So, in other words, their hearts weren't wholly devoted to God. Now, they could justify, or in their estimation, justify their decision to delay putting God first.

You see that in verse 2, when, you know, they're giving what might appear at the time to be a reasonable excuse. The time's not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.

I mean, the people are making excuses. They're saying, well, it's actually good reason for us not to rebuild the temple. You know, and they can argue politically. Well, they're still under Persian rule. Judea's still under the rule of King Cyrus. Well, in fact, Darius, his co-ruler, king of Persia, controls the land of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem.

You go to the book of Ezra and you read there that the Jews had actually hostile neighbours and they were discouraging the people, discouraging even the building of the temple.

[7 : 19] And so, you know, the people are arguing that, well, we're being discouraged. We can't expend our energy in the temple. And they're saying, well, our businesses have to be looked after.

Our farms have to be looked after. But what do we notice? What do we notice as God tells the people through Haggai? You've planted much but have harvested little.

And then you read in verse 11, you read of the drought and the failure of crop production. The people were being discouraged. Well, yes, because of their political problems, their economic problems, because of the attacks of those who are opposed to God and opposed to God and his people.

The people are feeling, well, despair, hopeless. And then, so they're saying the time hasn't yet come to rebuild the temple of God. Other priorities are ruling their lives.

Now, let's move forward two and a half thousand years. And you know, in many ways, there's still that hesitation. There's still that same hesitation to serve God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind.

[8 : 32] In many ways, we still have the same reasoning as these returning Jewish exiles had and their lack of having their priorities correct. Politically, well, politically, don't we live in difficult and dangerous times?

constant attacks on Christian values and there can be that temptation to give in, to despair and almost, you know, say, wait, let's wait for better times before we embark on mission and evangelism and church refurbishment.

And then financially, well, in many ways, it seems we just about break even. Expenditure on a grand scale for the refurbishment of our building. Well, some might argue it's just a waste given the current financial and economic conditions.

And in the face of so much hostility to the gospel, we can get discouraged. And we can feel like the psalmist in Psalm 73 when he cried out, when he was responding to all the opposition around him. And he said, my heart is grieved, grieved, my spirit embittered. That man felt he was following God in vain. He was in despair. And you know, we can and we do make excuses for our inactivity.

[9 : 51] We base that on our feelings, our feelings of hopeless despair. And we say, the time isn't right to come to build, how we build the kingdom of God.

And we say, well, we're so weak in the land, the church is so weak. The voice of Christ, the Lord Jesus, heard less and less. Yes, it does seem as if at times the church has a purse with holes in it. And then, what happens? Other priorities begin to rule in our lives. God not being put first. We're not seeking first the kingdom of God as we ought. And we can make every excuse under the sun for not persevering in faith and practice just as these Jewish returnees were making their excuses for their inactivity.

But God isn't interested in excuses. He wasn't interested in the excuses of these people back in Jerusalem. In fact, God challenged them as he's challenging us to get your priorities right. Get rid of your half-hearted worship and be whole-hearted followers of our God and Saviour. And God tells them as he instructs us.

[11:07] God tells the people, take a good, long, hard look at yourselves because the people have been more concerned with themselves rather than God. That's where we see the core of the problem.

Verse 4, is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses when this house lies in ruins? The people have been challenged. The people have been challenged to set their hearts in the right direction.

As we notice, the people have been making excuses for not rebuilding the temple. Remember, we noticed the political climate, they said, wasn't right, the economic downturn, the opposition of others.

But then when we look at the details, these same factors didn't stop them from building their own homes. I mean, they were certainly building them to a level of luxury of 25th century BC standards. These are the same people who'd left Babylon with that, well, they certainly had a full intention when they left Babylon to rebuild the temple. They were going to restore true religion in their homeland.

[12:14] Remember, these same people had been exiled because of their idolatry. And they'd replaced the worship, true worship of God with a half-hearted worship that brought in idols. People had been punished in exile.

But 70 years on, the people had returned. Many of them had returned. And they had this initial burst of zeal. As we said, the temple foundations had been laid.

And then there's that pause, the pause in completion. In the beginning, their hearts were right, they were steadfast, they were sure, but then their changed priorities had distracted them from that which was truly needful.

Their own material well-being had come first to such an extent that other things were now controlling their lives, controlling their hearts. Because God was no longer central to their thinking. And you know, bring that to ourselves. Surely that's something we all need to be aware of in our constant need to seek first the kingdom of God.

[13:21] And to do so, keep testing your heart. Keep a watch over your heart. Keep a watch so that secondary things don't become primary things.

Now, secondary things have a very proper place in anyone's life. You know, secondary things, what are we talking about? We're talking about our homes, we're talking about our families, we're talking about work, we're talking about possessions, things that in themselves are perfectly legitimate. God's gifts to you. God's gifts to be received and to be received with joy and to be used for his glory. But when these secondary things become primary things, then the balance of the Christian is so distorted and is it any wonder when that happens that our zeal is diminished and the church suffers?

And you know, you can still linger long in having wrong priorities. You know, the Jews back in Jerusalem, they lingered long in their wrong priorities.

But we praise God and thank God that God intervenes, that God will not allow us to over-linger in our wrong priorities. And God reveals the true nature of our hearts and he sets our hearts in that right direction.

[14:45] God works away from self. You see that in verse 5 because God's question of it in verse 4 as we read there is followed by a command. In fact, verse 5 and verse 7, consider your way.

The words literally, the literal reading is set your hearts on your way. Set your hearts on your way. God's telling the people, you know, think, why?

Think, why things aren't working out for them? Why, as we saw in verse 6, why they planted much but harvested little? Why they never had enough to eat or drink?

Why they never seemed to have enough money? God's telling them in no uncertain terms to sit down and to reflect on all their calamities, all their afflictions because as God is telling them that they were responsible.

They got their priorities wrong. Self had come before God. As God says, continues in verse 9, you look for much, behold, it came to little.

[15:51] When you brought it home, it blew it away. Why? Because of my house that lies in ruins while each of you busies himself with his own house.

Consider your ways. And this is as good a time as any for each one of us, as individuals and ourselves as a congregation, to consider our ways, to consider our priorities, to set our hearts and our ways and to ask ourselves, is God first in my life?

Is God first in my life? As a Christian, if you know the Lord Jesus as Savior, is God first in the life of this congregation? Indeed, if you don't know the Lord Jesus as Savior, well, something else is first in your life.

And if it's not the Savior, well, you ponder that truth. What is it? Who is it? Are we seeking first the kingdom of God?

Because every Christian, every congregation, every church where the gospel of the Lord Jesus is proclaimed has to continually ask that searching question.

[17:03] What am I doing with the resources, with the gifts, with the opportunities that God has given us? I mean, there's God's people returning back to Jerusalem.

They've been given everything to restore their lives, given everything to rebuild the temple. But instead, they were using these resources to glorify themselves rather than God.

I mean, they have the skills, they have the skills of building. But what are they doing? They're using these skills first and foremost for themselves. They've been given time to rebuild God's temple.

But that time was being neglected. They've been blessed with freedom, freedom to return to their homeland. But the one, the Lord, who'd freed them wasn't being honoured in the works of the people.

You know, we're a small congregation. Relatively speaking, we're a small congregation. But you know, God has given us the resources, the gifts, and given us opportunities to serve them, to serve them through these gifts, to serve them through the resources that God has blessed us with.

[18:13] So, isn't this as good a time as any to consider our ways and to act upon that consideration. Consider, yes, contemplate who we are before God, contemplate, set our hearts right in terms of our priorities and act, act upon that consideration because God is calling to us to look at our conduct and indeed to look at our misconduct.

And truly, even now, God is surely stirring us into action to be done with our spiritual lethargy, to be done with our self-centeredness and instead to seek to do His will for His glory, for His kingdom, to get our priorities right, to put first things first, to put Him first.

As we see, certainly from verse 5 to the end of the chapters, the God's stirring hearts into action. You know, think of the people who'd returned to Jerusalem.

Look at them. They were what was wrong with Jerusalem, if you like. It wasn't, first and foremost, the political situation. It wasn't, first and foremost, the economic uncertainty.

It wasn't the forces of opposition. It was ultimately the people themselves who were to blame for their own ills and so therefore it was for the people to rectify that situation.

[19:51] But before action, before action was to happen, God directs the people to look to themselves and look at their predicament. He's sown much, verse 6 and 7, and harvested little.

You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. He who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways.

God is telling the people, look at the obvious. Look at the afflictions. That they're suffering as a result of their neglect of God's eyes. Look at the poor harvests.

Look at their lack of food. Look at their unsatisfied needs. Look at their financial problems. Look at the hardship and distress that God was telling the people to consider so that they might turn to Him and put God first to get their priorities right.

I mean, the people up to that point, they'd seen all that was happening around them, but they failed to connect these hardships with their own irresponsible, disobedient conduct.

[20 : 59] But notice, and we praise God that He does this time and time again. God in His mercy was bringing the people to see for themselves that God's afflicting them was for their good.

And God, through Haggai the prophet, God's given the people this opportunity to repent, to repent of their ways. God's given the people an opportunity to change their ways and to live wholeheartedly for Him to get their priorities right.

And you know, there are times when, yes, when God causes His people to bear affliction, but for a purpose to bring them to bring us back to Himself.

I mentioned Psalm 119, verse 67, this morning. Let's read it again. Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep Your words.

In fact, that Psalm in just a few verse portions brings out this truth. Verse 71, it's good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes. And then verse 75, I know, Lord, that Your rules are righteous and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me.

[22 : 16] There are even Christians here tonight who can testify to the truth of God's dealings with Him or with her. Yes, through affliction. But affliction that has actually turned a believer back to God in faith and obedience.

And such affliction does occur, whether it's in individuals or congregations or denominations, even in the land as a whole. Then we have to ask ourselves, what is God saying to us through these afflictions?

Isn't He telling us, isn't He telling me, you, to repent, to return to Him, to consider our ways, to be wholehearted in our devotion to Him, to be wholly obedient to His Word, to have that zeal for His Word, for the Gospel, to have done with lesser things, to focus on the primaries, on the one true thing, to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

That's chief purpose, glorify God, first things first, and enjoy Him forever. And you see in verse 8, in verse 8 following, really, the affliction and the recognition of affliction as part of God's providence, part of God's providential signs that the people have been half-hearted and they're following Him. What do we notice as a result? As a result of God intervening, we see the people respond. We see the people respond in faith and obedience. God is stirring the people into action.

[23 : 49] You see there in verse 8, go up to the hills, bring wood and build the house that I may take pleasure in it, that that may be glorified, says the Lord. And we read on in the chapter, what do we notice?

Notice the people obey. See that in verse 12? The people obey because they fear the Lord. The people, well, they've been told to consider their ways.

Consider their ways in light of the afflictions around them. And they can see the building in ruins. They can see that, yes, their livelihoods were being endangered.

And so they had considered their ways. And they knew that they'd been found wanting. As we see in the passage, once the people had considered their ways, once they had given careful thought to everything, once they had returned in their hearts to God, once God had encouraged them with these great and wonderful and abiding and eternal words, verse 13, I am with you, then the people are stirred into action.

You see that in verse 14? And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehozadek, the high priest, and the spirit of all the raiment of the people.

[25 : 06] And they came and worked in the house of the Lord of hosts, their God. The people had been stirred into action. They'd been shaken into action.

It's the same word, you know, when you shake someone who's asleep, to shake them up and to wake them up. That's exactly what happened there. The people had been shaken out of their slumber. They'd been shaken out of their spiritual lethargy.

And notice who's been stirred up. It's all the people from the top, from the leaders, the governor, the high priest, to every single member of the community.

They were all shaken into action. No one was exempt from being involved in the rebuilding of the temple. The whole community involved, united, performing the task that God has given them to do.

We pray that God would shake us here. You know, each one of us, me, me, we all are guilty of spiritual lethargy, laziness.

[26 : 10] Let's be stirred into action. Let's be stirred, each and every one of us, united and working together for the furtherance of his kingdom. Each one of his people here are involved in that work.

None of us can go absent without leave. Because if you wish, if you want to see the kingdom of God advance, you have a part to play in that work under God's sovereign purpose.

Each and every one of us. Whatever work God has given us to do as a church, and we can go into so many details, so it's not just those who are in leadership that have worked to do in our congregation, it's everyone, everyone.

I'm sure we could give a list of 101 things that are being done and have to be done in this church and your life itself. But surely it's for us to seek first the kingdom of God, to get our priorities right in serving him for his glory, for his praise.

And be prepared to be shaken. Be prepared to be stirred into action. You know, so often the easiest thing sometimes is just to sit back and do nothing and let someone else do the work.

[27 : 23] No. If we're serious about the work of God, the work of the kingdom, be those who have that desire to do God's will even in the work that God has given us to do.

Are we working together? Are we using the gifts that God has given us within the body of Christ? Is your heart, is my heart in the work?

Am I, are you, half-hearted or whole-hearted for the Lord? Because you see, if we're anything less than whole-hearted, if we prefer half-hearted complacency, we're just going to be like these exiles in the first 16 years of the return back from Babylon.

And the work is not going to happen. We've all got our part to play. We've all got to be stirred up for the gospel sake. So let's be, have that willingness, that desire to honour God and glorify Him.

There's no time like the present. God has given us this time to be used for His glory. And yes, of course, there will be these excuses.

[28 : 40] Oh, we've got far too much else to do. Oh, we don't have enough time in the day. We don't have enough money. Sometimes we feel we're not good enough. We've got our own problems to deal with.

We think, oh, maybe this isn't the right time. No, whenever we bring these excuses, we're actually showing that we're not wholehearted for the work that God has given us to do. Because there can't be excuses when it comes to serving God.

If someone's written this, there is never a right time for engaging in the Lord's work if we're waiting for a time without problems. There always are problems in our lives, whether it's individuals or as a church.

And you know, what have you? And I have at times said, not yet, Lord, when he's called you to do a particular work. And he can bring us, we said, all the excuses under the sun.

But God's call is imminent. God doesn't call us, doesn't call you and expect you to do nothing for him. Well, as we see, and again, we give glory to God, the returnees from Babylon, they did.

[29 : 50] They were stirred to action. They did show wholehearted devotion to rebuilding the temple. And as we see there in verse 14 and 15, they came, they worked in the house of the Lord of hosts.

We're told even the very details of the time on the 24th day of the month and the 6th month in the second year of Darius the king. He could work out the sums. It took just over three weeks between the time of Haggai's first words.

You can work it out from the start of chapter 1 to the end of chapter 1. It took just over three weeks between the time of Haggai's first words to the people and the people beginning to work.

Now, I mean, three weeks, there was obviously time for preparation, practical preparation and so on. But no, the point is that the people did respond with obedience. God had shaken them and the people were committed to the work.

And you go, for example, to the book of Ezra again, you see that under Haggai's ministry and then under his successor, Zechariah, the people prosper.

[30 : 58] The temple is completed. There's great joy. You know, there's no greater joy, no greater satisfaction in the Christian life to be serving God, to be serving the Lord.

when your heart, when your soul, when your strength and your mind are devoted wholly to him.

Because, you know, think again, focus on the Lord Jesus.

He's given all for you. And you surely must give your all for him. I read, in fact, someone wrote to me these words.

He said, amidst the heartaches and disappointments of this world, I find myself happiest when I am with the Saviour on the battlefield, serving under his command.

That person had put his priorities right. He put God first in his life. And in this particular time in the life of this congregation, there's so much in the horizon, we might say, in terms of service for the Lord.

[32 : 06] the work in many ways is continuing. And yes, there may well be heartaches and disappointments along the way, but we still look forward with that hope that God is with us.

And if God is with us, he's with us to bless us. As God was with the people and blessed the people there in Jerusalem as the people rebuilt the temple. And so we put our trust in him.

We put our trust in God with us and God's blessing upon us. And I pray that in this time in the life of this congregation, just as there in Jerusalem, that we will know that prosperity, that we'll know the prosperity of God's blessing, God pouring his blessings upon us.

And that each one of us will be God's fellow workers building God's kingdom on earth, doing that whether it be here or wherever God sends you, and that you put him first in that work.

So give careful thought to your ways. Consider your ways. Set your heart on your ways. Get your priorities right. Seek first the kingdom of God.

[33 : 23] Honor him above all. What does this word say? Those who honor him, he will honor.

Amen. Let us pray. Lord, forgive us, we pray, for the many times when we have put self first, when we have sought our own glory, our own praise.

Forgive us, Lord, for these many times of weakness. We thank you, Lord, that you do stir us, you shake us, you point us in that one way that is the true way, in that way of the cross, in that way of service.

Help us, Lord, to have that strength of heart, to be obedient to you, to your word. May you bless this church, this congregation in these days that lie ahead. Help us in our plans to put you first.

Help us in our plans that they be for your glory and praise. So, Lord, teach us your way that we might delight in it. Go before us now, Lord, we pray.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's close in Psalm 62 on page 80.

[34 : 40] Sing Psalm, Psalm 62, page 80. We'll sing from verse 5 to the end. Find rest, my soul, in God alone, in Him my hope is ever sure, my safety fortress, sheltering rock, in Him alone I am secure.

5 to 12, to God's praise. in Him, shall we ander? Odee Hai. Do you have a coach? everybody. Go outside.■■■quown & hoon.

In Him's breath.

Take care,