

Haggai "What's First for Us?"

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Preacher: Will Spink

[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Open God's Word with me this morning, if you will, to the message from the prophet Haggai. God has been challenging and encouraging me so much in this book.

I can't wait to dive in together this morning. We're doing the whole thing today. As we do, see if you can picture yourself in a scenario similar to one of these that I've found myself in before.

Imagine you're on your couch with your calendar open in front of you. You've felt a desire for yourself or your family to spend more time on relationship with Jesus.

Praying, reading together. Several people have encouraged you to get your middle schooler involved in a small group. But you're staring at your calendar and it's a wall of events and activities already.

[1 : 20] School, work, volunteer at kids' school, ballet, soccer, piano, swimming. Can we get a meal together one night this week? God, I don't know what to... I mean, I need to sleep, right?

Don't I? That's important. Maybe next year we'll have more time for God then. Imagine you're at your kitchen table with your budget open in front of you and you've just gotten another email from the missionary you love asking for some end of year financial assistance.

You've already thrown away the annual giving letter from your church. And there you are with this email and you open up the budget and you're not seeing how you can help.

I mean, it's just the basics, right? Mortgage, car payment, insurance, Netflix, groceries, bath remodel, kids' activities, clothes, new clothes for the wedding, vacations coming up.

I mean, I've got to save for college. That's important. Weddings. I've got three girls. God, even tithing seems nearly impossible. Now this?

[2 : 31] I guess others must have more margin. Maybe next year I'll be able to help out. Or imagine you're in your church pew with your Bible open in front of you.

Imagine. You've been coming here a couple of years and you're kind of involved, but it just doesn't seem very exciting. You really want to see great things happen in your community.

I mean, revival sounded exciting at first, but you've never prayed to God for it. You've complained politely to a couple leaders, but nothing changed immediately.

Honestly, it doesn't feel like anything remarkable would ever happen here. I mean, my heart gets pumping at work when I make a big sale. It gets pumping on Saturday when I'm watching the big game.

It gets pumping about being with some of my friends and hanging out. But, God, what do you want me to do? It doesn't seem worth it to invest my energy here.

[3 : 36] I mean, I'll come sometimes, but for now, other things are just more exciting than gospel community and experiencing grace and kingdom prayer.

I mean, okay, God. You've been somewhere like one of those, haven't you? Some of us in all three. Imagine you're sitting there feeling those things, asking those questions, and God actually speaks and answers you.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, these people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet.

Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins? Father, that's a piercing question about priorities.

[4 : 55] So we bow before you, our creator, our savior, our king. And we confess that we need to hear from you about what's first and what's best and what's most important.

So thank you that we hear here the word of the Lord. The word of the Lord came. The word of the Lord over and over.

Speak, Lord, to us. May your servants listen. Amen. Amen. Let me tell you about Haggai's context just a little bit.

So we see why Haggai speaks so directly to you and me. We've been walking through some minor prophets, right? And we've heard of these guys, Micah and Zephaniah.

They've been calling God's people over many years, warning them about God's discipline coming through exile. And indeed, Babylon comes in 586 B.C. and ransacks Jerusalem, destroys the temple, and carries off most of the Israelites into exile, out of the promised land.

[6 : 22] It's not looking good. And decades later, God raises up a Persian king named Cyrus to defeat Babylon. And Cyrus releases the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

And he sends them with supplies to rebuild the city and the temple. A marvelous provision. They begin the temple rebuilding with zeal. They finish the foundation.

They're going great. And then they get distracted. They run into opposition from other peoples. They leave the temple alone for several years.

Just a foundation. Until Haggai shows up in 520 B.C. and says, Get back to work!

We just heard it, right? Why was that so important? Building the temple. I mean, is the temple just a building? No.

[7 : 29] It means so much more than that. Listen, if you miss this, you'll miss the whole point of Haggai, and you'll think it's about a building program. And it's not. In the Old Testament, the temple is God's house.

It's where he lives, his very presence, right in the midst of his people. And so, rebuilding the temple means reestablishing that relationship.

Temple is about relationship. Okay? Less structural, more personal. It's where they worshiped God. Brought their sacrifices. Heard him speak to them through the priest. It testified to the greatness and glory of Yahweh, their God. It was to be the place from which the nations experienced the reality and the majesty of Yahweh.

So, Haggai says, This temple is of first importance. That you may know your great God and make him known. That's what it's about.

[8 : 35] So, just as God delivered his wandering, idolatrous people back then, and brought them back to himself, and said, I'm putting you here to live for my glory.

God's done the same with us, hasn't he? God has delivered us from our idolatry. Brought us back to himself through his son, Jesus. Praise the Lord.

God has delivered us. God has delivered us. He's done that. And now he calls us to live for his glory in Huntsville and among the nations. To fulfill the purpose for which we were created.

Created truly to know him in intimate relationship. And continually to make him known to those around us. That his kingdom would be great.

See how we're in such a similar circumstance to them? Having experienced God's amazing grace. And being called to delight in him.

[9 : 40] First and foremost. Just as Haggai calls God's people to then. But that great purpose wasn't their first priority, was it?

Verse 2. These people say that time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. Verse 4. Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins?

Verse 9. My house lies in ruins while each of you busies himself with his own house. They're busy. They're busy. Something else has become first for God's people, hasn't it? Their own little kingdoms.

Paneled houses. That's luxurious upgrades. The comforts of life. Much easier than fighting opposition to work on God's house.

[10 : 47] We'll get back to that when we're not so busy with our own. The call of the prophet Haggai is clear, isn't it?

Relationship with God must be our first priority. You know, that's why God delivered you. To be with him.

Not to make sure you have a comfy home in life. It's not what it's about. Nothing else is right unless this is right. As I learned from my dad quite often, the main thing is what?

To keep the main thing the main thing. There you go. That's your puzzle on your bulletin. It sounds simple, but we really struggle with that, don't we?

That's hard for us. It's why we confessed earlier in the service as Ron was leading us through Matthew 6. We worry about what we eat, what we drink, what we wear, how our lives will go.

[11:54] That's what we're consumed with. And God says, what? Seek ye first. Seek ye first the kingdom of God, the main thing.

And I'll take care of all those other things for you. But don't lose track of priority number one, the main thing. There are a lot of things wrong with the world in Haggai's day.

Bad people out there doing bad things. Corrupt leaders. Warring nations. Who's God going to call out for all of this?

His rebuke is for whom? For his people. He says, look inside. What's at the root of what's wrong with this world is that I've designed things to start with you.

And to flow out to others. For you to know me. And to make me known. And what's wrong is you're focused on your own little kingdom.

[13:09] Friends, we need to hear this in our day every bit as much as they did. What seemed normal to God's people then. What seems normal to us now.

It's just the way things work. It's the way life goes, right? It's not the way it's supposed to be. We were made for so much more than we pursue, weren't we?

We were created to know God. We were redeemed. Delivered from our slavery that we might worship God. We're indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

That we might restore God's kingdom in this world. We are to be committed to our relationship with God first. First. But we say, yeah, sure, I'll prioritize God.

When... Kids, it's easy to think that God will be there once your life gets settled. For you to get to know Him then.

[14:23] You know, once that special relationship comes along. Once your career is really well established.

You've got the job and the money that you need. Kids, listen. That's not what's most important. Forgive us for teaching you that those things matter more than getting to know God.

Get to know God first. First. Now. Now. You can know Him now. Because what happens is you grow up and you're a young person, young adult.

You're starting to look at your beginning salary and say, you know, I'll tithe once I get a promotion. After we get the house decorated. Y'all, I'm not old, but I'm older than I was yesterday.

There's always something else. Isn't there? There will always be another reason, another something that's more important.

[15:27] God is reminding you to put Him first now. Families. Are your kids' activities what comes first and drives everything else?

What do our Sundays tell our kids about what's most important? Is God always the one getting sacrificed? Or does anything else ever get sacrificed to know Him more?

Those of you a bit older. What's first in retirement? Finally, yourself, right?

Your home. Your trips. Right? Or do you start with how you'll give your time away?

How you'll invest it for God's kingdom. Is that first? What's first for us? Actually, practically. Not what we say when we sit in here.

[16:29] I mean, we say things. I long to see great things from God. His kingdom advance. Revival come. Not sharing the gospel with my friends.

I mean, I'd love to see more adult baptisms, but not doing anything about it. I wish there were more materially poor people in our church family. But I'm not befriending them in my own life.

What's first for me, practically, is my own house. My own comfort or family or plans.

You know what's remarkable about this, too? Our priorities don't actually work, do they? We're not actually getting what we want, if we're honest. Surveys tell us this throughout our country, throughout churches.

But I'd rather you just be honest about your own heart this morning. Don't you find that even when you rush all over the place all the time, you don't actually find peace and rest?

[17:42] Don't you find that even when you prioritize work and money, you still don't have enough? Don't you find that even when you get all the stuff that you thought you wanted, you still aren't fulfilled?

Don't you feel that? Why does it work that way? Why does life with those things first never fulfill? You know why it is? Because God made it that way.

God designed it that way so he could call you back to himself. He's been doing it for generations with his people. Notice what Haggai tells them.

Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. Think about your life. You've sown much and harvested little.

You eat but never have enough. You drink but never have your fill. You clothe yourselves but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. It doesn't fulfill.

[18 : 41] Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house that I may take pleasure in it, that I may be glorified, says the Lord.

You looked for much. Behold, it came to little. When you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? Why did God make it like that? The Lord of hosts says, Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.

Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew. The earth has withheld its produce. And I've called for a drought on the land and the hills, the grain, the new wine, the oil, what the ground brings forth on man and beast and on all their labors.

God has done all of this, so you'll see the emptiness and come back to him. Consider your ways, he says. Aren't you longing for more? Don't you find this world empty?

Doesn't there have to be something better? God says, yes. Yes. See, he's committed to the priority of this relationship, isn't he?

[19 : 48] Look at all the things that he would do to have us come back to him. He says, repent. Come back to me. Trust that I know what you were made to be fulfilled by.

Live for me first. I've committed to you living for my glory first. Build my temple. Know me.

Pursue my kingdom. Do you hear him calling to you today? It's what repentance is, right?

We've said it nearly every week. Repentance is about relationship. Repentance is about returning from all of these things. We've unwisely prioritized these relationships and turning back to our primary relationship and saying, it's primary.

Wow. It actually happens in Haggai's day. Verse 12. Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, did what?

[21 : 03] Obeyed the voice of the Lord their God. The words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord. They heard.

They returned. They obeyed. Back to God. Back to building his temple just three weeks after Haggai's first sermon. Wouldn't that be glorious?

Whether you're sitting in front of your calendar or your budget or right here this morning? Hearing God speak. What would he say?

How would he direct me? And actually turning back to him, living by his priorities, it's not complicated, is it? It's not hard to figure out what would God say.

He speaks. But it's also not easy for our selfish hearts.

[22 : 04] This repentant, obedient response is almost unheard of in the prophets. Right? We don't usually get sentences like that. It never happens.

Our hearts are so selfish. Oh God, help us this morning. Send your spirit in this generation to this community. That's what we need.

I want you to hear me this morning heaping one more to-do onto your already overwhelmed list. That would be easy to hear. Just add it on there.

Do more spiritual stuff. Go to church things more. Right? I just got one more thing. I'll write it at the top of the list. I'm actually calling us to something a bit more radical than that.

How about wipe the list clean? Could we start that way? Just clean it off. And say, what comes first? What's most important?

[23 : 12] What's really first? Really, truly? It's all about knowing God and making Him known. It's all about experiencing and expressing His grace in relationships that will impact eternity.

Your relationship with God first and foremost. Then with each other, practicing His presence in your life in gospel community. and then with your neighbors that everyone might feel and know the glory of God's presence with them.

Right? That's why the temple had to be rebuilt. It wasn't just for these few people. It was for everybody to know that God was here and that His glory was greatest. See, this is actually

permission to say no to all the other things besides those relationships.

In fact, it is God through Haggai directing us to say no to all other things to have Him first.

Just one thing on the list so far. Because that's what we're created for. He knows it. See, seeking first His kingdom is not the doing of some great deeds.

[24 : 35] It begins with trusting the King. Now sometimes we start doing that.

We start living for God and for His kingdom and things still don't seem easy, do they? Well, the rest of Haggai's very short prophecy is a couple more sermons that he delivers to God's people over the next couple of months as they start obeying and rebuilding the temple.

Remember, they've started before and they've allowed something else to distract them and become more important and more of a priority for them than the work they were called to. So like a good pastor, he walks alongside them and keeps pointing them back to the worthiness of God and of His kingdom work.

Don't lose your focus. Remember, He's worth it. First, he says, prioritizing God is worth it because God's presence with us ensures future glory and true peace.

Have you ever gotten weary pursuing God first? Maybe because others don't really care or they even oppose you when you try to do that?

[25 : 59] Because it doesn't really seem to make a difference anyway, spitting on a fire? Haggai 2 verse 3, God's people feel this. Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory?

He's talking to the 70 plus crowd. They've seen the temple. How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?

They're discouraged, aren't they? This temple will never match the one Solomon built on. Not worth the effort? Yet 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. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts.

According to the covenant I made with you when you came out of Egypt, my spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. Don't fear.

[27 : 04] I'm with you. And as a result of that, verse 6, yet once more in a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land.

I will shake all nations so the treasures of all nations shall come in and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts.

And in this place, I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts. He's pretty clear on that from him, isn't he?

Y'all, it's already begun here with King Cyrus sending treasures from pagan nations to build Yahweh's temple. That's crazy. But it will take generations and the coming of the Messiah to shake the nations and bring all their treasures in for the glory of Israel's God.

But it's all his, all of it. He is bringing the true peace you're working for. It's in him. He is making his people together a glorious temple full of his presence.

[28 : 16] That's what he's doing right here. Did you know that? So keep putting him first. It will be worth it. He guarantees it.

Next, Haggai encourages them with another remarkable promise of God. Let me try to explain briefly what he says about the Old Testament ceremonial law.

It's a bit confusing for us. He says that one clean thing doesn't make all the unclean things it touches clean all of the sudden.

Perhaps, although a little bit different, think of it like a disease. Someone who's sick has a disease. If a clean person touches them, that doesn't clean them, does it?

The disease doesn't go away. They're still sick. But it does work the other way. Doesn't it? The unclean things, when they touch the clean things, think of the contagious disease now, right?

[29 : 20] Moving the other way, it does make everything unclean, everybody sick. Verse 14, so it is with this people and with this nation before me, declares the Lord.

And so with every work of their hands, and what they offer there is unclean. Even what happens in the temple is unclean because of what's unclean in here.

When your heart is dead and turned after other priorities, coming into the temple of God, generally a good thing does no good. It doesn't make your heart holy to walk in and touch the temple.

And we are that sinful, that unclean, aren't we? Reasonable personal concerns like providing for my family become unreasonable priorities in my idolatrous heart.

We build our own houses rather than God's. Our sinfulness messes up everything. Like Adam and Eve, we turn from the God who made us to walk with Him and trust Him and obey Him, and so we earn His curse.

[30 : 41] And we've been living under the curse that we deserve. But God says, verse 15, from this day onward, something's changing, verse 18, from this day onward, verse 19, from this day onward, I will bless you.

Watch how I wash you clean. From this day on, I will bless you. Did you need to hear those words today from your father?

No matter how much of a failure you feel, no matter how you fail again in the future, those who trust in God can count on His gracious provision.

He takes the unclean and says, you're clean, in a way that it never works apart from Him. That's His grace to us. One final encouragement from Haggai.

If it can get any better than that, this is the best. See, God had promised Israel that its glorious hope, that the future and everything He had promised them was going to come through a king, through an anointed one in the line of David, a Messiah who would come and rule righteously and justly over them forever.

[32 : 14] That's their hope. But those hopes were dashed. The last guy in the line of David, Jehoiakim, because of his idolatry, God sent him into exile from the promised land and God pronounced that that promise, that ring of authority given to the king was taken away.

God took it back and sent the king himself into exile. Promise apparently failed. But God has a plan. The word of the Lord again. Speak to Zerubbabel. I'm going to shake the heavens and the earth, overthrow the kingdoms, destroy the strength of the nations and on that day, verse 23, declares the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, declares the Lord, and make you like a signet ring for I have chosen you, declares the Lord of hosts.

Zerubbabel, besides being one of the great names to say in the entire Bible and the last word on your sermon words for today, kids, that means we're close to the end, right?

That you pronounce that Zerubbabel in American English. Guess what else he is? An heir of David.

[33 : 48] They haven't had one. So this is huge news to Israel that God's signet ring, his stamp of authority, his kingly promises are back with his people in Zerubbabel who, as you might suspect when you get to lineage in the New Testament, is in the line of Jesus.

What is God saying? Why do they need to hear this now? If you're beginning to find the numbing routine of life make you apathetic to the things of God, nothing exciting will ever happen here, then wake up, he says.

God is finishing what he started when he created us to fill the earth with his glory. He's sending his people who've returned to him a true king who will himself be the temple, God's presence among us and fulfill all of God's glorious promises beyond our wildest imagination.

He's gonna do it and he has done it. He'll come. He's gonna be one with his priorities straight. He'll love just to be with his father and then to do his father's will delights him.

And though he's a king, he's gonna have no place to lay his head because he's a king of a kingdom marked by a cross where he'll ultimately sacrifice his own comfort for his people and in doing so, redeem his people and rescue them forever.

[35 : 36] That's what he comes to do. That's what happens when someone sees relationship with God as first priority and his kingdom work as worth any sacrifice.

Jesus is the king we need, isn't he? Amen. He has accomplished what is required of us. He is our king.

So keep working because God has sent this king and therefore all of his promises are sure. It's worth it to give your first and your all to him because he will take care of you.

So keep fighting to know God and to make him known, to live in the kingdom of the cross rather than the kingdom of comfort because that's what the kingdom of the true king looks like.

And guess what happens? As we live together, what's the true king doing? He's building us into that temple where he lives with us and where through us as he remakes us into his image with those priorities, his glory shines through us to the nations so that everybody sees how great we are.

[36 : 51] No. How great the king is. So keep seeking him first. Seeking that relationship above all else because his presence is our peace.

His grace is our hope. His son is our king. Amen. Father, what grace that you would send the one who could finally seek you first.

We thank you for him. We thank you for what he has done, for his presence even now by his spirit with us shaping us to that Father, we need to change.

This is not something we can hear and walk away from the same. We need your spirit to change our hearts and make our lives different. That trusting in a father who's got everything else covered, we would have one thing.

Seeking you, knowing you, glorifying you in everything. Work in our hearts to that end for Jesus' sake.

[38 : 21] Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org. Thank you. Thank you.