

Haggai 1

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[0:00] You're looking in one of the Pew Bibles. As we prepare for the beginning of a new year, it's a good opportunity to consider as a church, as families, as individuals, where we've been and where we're going.

Roughly twice a year, I take a day for a personal retreat. It's a practice that I was required to do when I was on staff with the campus ministry, and I've continued as a pastor here in this church.

But it's been a beneficial time. What I usually do now is I'll go for a long bike ride and stop a couple places along the way to read some Scripture, to pray, and reflect and write about what's going on in my life. And I keep a folder with my notes from these retreats that I take about every six months. And I'll usually read at least the last, what I wrote the last time.

And often I'm surprised at how much has happened and how much has changed even in just six months. Or a year. Someone said most people overestimate what they can do in a day and underestimate what they can do in a year. And the problem is, I think many of us get so caught up in the day-to-day that we rarely step back to ask, where am I hoping to be in a year?

Or in ten years? And even if we do have clearly defined long-term goals, we can easily get sidetracked along the way. Every so often we need to step back and reconsider our priorities.

[1:28] And priorities is a theme of the book of Haggai. It's a short Old Testament book, two chapters. We're doing chapter one this week, chapter two next week, and that's it. We'll be done.

But I want to look at this theme of priorities as we begin, prepare to begin a new year. So, Haggai chapter one, we're going to read that chapter together. Let's listen to God's word.

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 the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

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? Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. You have sown much but 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 does so to put them in a bag with holes. 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 and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You look for much and behold, it came to little.

[3:04] And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why, declares the Lord of hosts, 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, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors. 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 the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, I am with you, declares the Lord. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, 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, in the second year of Darius the king. There are two key phrases in this chapter, which I want to focus in on today.

The first phrase is found in chapter, verse 5 and verse 7, where Haggai says, consider your ways. The second phrase is found in verse 13, where Haggai says, I am with you. And I'm not choosing these phrases arbitrarily, they both appear as well in Haggai chapter 2, which we'll see next week.

But what we'll see from these two phrases is two things. First, God confronts us about our misplaced priorities. And second, God encourages us when we listen to His Word. So first, God confronts us about our misplaced priorities in verse 1 through 11. Technically, there are two parts to this section, verse 1 through 2. He's speaking specifically to the leaders, to Zerubbabel, who is the governor, and to Joshua, who is the high priest, the leader of the priestly group. And then verse 3 to 11 is spoken to the people as a whole. But really, the message is the same. So it's two messages packed together on the same day, and it's the same point. So verse 2, thus says the Lord of hosts, these people say the time has not yet come, the time to rebuild the house of the Lord.

You might ask, what exactly is the house of the Lord? What time is it? A little historical background, 586 BC, the city of Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians, the temple was destroyed, and the king was taken into exile. Forty-eight years later, in 538 BC, the Persians defeated the Babylonians and the Persian emperor Cyrus sent a first group of Israelites back to Jerusalem, back from the exile. The exile was probably the biggest national tragedy of Israelite history.

And so the return from exile was an exciting time. The group was led by Zerubbabel, who was descended from the kingly line. And the book of Ezra describes how they built an altar, and they laid the foundation for the temple, and they celebrated. And then some of their neighbors didn't like them rebuilding the temple and didn't like them rebuilding the city, and so they began to cause trouble, and they began to send a bad report to the king of Persia. And so they gave up.

[6:55] They stopped. They laid a foundation, they had an altar to offer sacrifices, and they had nothing else. It was sort of like an abandoned construction site with just a foundation and nothing else, downtown in the center of the city, and it was lying there for 18 years. 18 years later, nothing had changed. But Haggai came on the scene in 520 BC, the second year of King Darius.

And you can almost hear Haggai's tone. He's indignant. These people say, the time hasn't yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. It's been 18 years that they haven't been doing anything.

He's annoyed at their perpetual procrastination. And so he begins by appealing to the leaders, saying, look, we have an abandoned construction project sitting here for 15 years.

This is not good PR for our city, but even more than that, this is supposed to be the dwelling place of God himself. This isn't just a monument or a city hall building for our ingenuity or for our reputation. This is God's reputation that's at stake here. And it looks neglected and ignored.

Now, of course, people had all kinds of reasons for not rebuilding the temple. Some of their reasons might have been, we're too poor. Right? They could look back to the glory days when their ancestors were far wealthier. They were a bunch of refugees who had barely resettled a devastated land.

[8:35] The economy was struggling. They might have thought, you know, that's an ambitious project to rebuild a glorious temple. We won't be able to do it well, so we won't do it at all. Or maybe they thought it's too risky. If we start building again, our neighbors will cause trouble and they'll send bad reports to the Persian king and then we don't want to deal with the king of Persia being mad at us. Or maybe some of them had a sort of religious motivation. They said, well, we should wait for the Messiah to come.

Because until the Messiah comes, nothing's really going to change. We should just wait for God to do what he's going to do, and it won't really do any good to act before then. But Haggai said no.

Haggai said those are not good reasons. Those are fearful, lame excuses. Because God had told the Israelites in his word to build a temple so that he might dwell among them. Exodus 25, 8. He said, let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst. There I will meet with the people of Israel. I will dwell with them and be their God. You see, God had made it very clear, and the people's lack of follow-through on God's explicit command represented their lack of desire for the Lord to dwell among them. The people were disregarding God's command as well as God's promise. And so Haggai confronted them. He said, people, your priorities are completely out of whack. Verse 4, is it a time for you to dwell in paneled houses while the house of God lies in ruins? Now, what exactly were paneled houses? Well, at least that means they were finished and functional. The last stage of construction, was putting the wood paneling over the stone or wooden structural walls, sort of like putting the drywall and paint on, or plaster. But the same word is also used in 1 Kings 6 and 7 to describe

Solomon's palace, which was paneled with cedar. Haggai's saying, look at the contrast. You live infinite, you live in finished, functional, maybe even beautiful homes, and the house of God is a neglected construction site. And he says, look at where your misplaced priorities have taken you.

Consider your ways. In other words, look at how your life is going and take it to heart. Verse 6, he says, you've sown much and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough.

[11:14] You drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm, and he who earns wages does so to put them in a bag with holes. We didn't deliberately leave the heat off as an object lesson. It just happened someday, you know. But they, now notice, they weren't living in abject poverty. Okay, they weren't starving. They weren't totally broke. They didn't harvest nothing. They weren't naked, but they were lacking satisfaction. They were lacking a sense of fulfillment and abundance because they were lacking contentment. Haggai says, you put all this effort into your beautiful homes, into your bountiful harvest, but your priorities are out of whack, and God is frustrating your ungodly ambitions in order to get your attention. Verse 9 through 11, God takes responsibility for what's going on. Verse 9, he says, you look for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, behold, I blew it away. Verse 11, I have called for a drought on the land and the hills.

In other words, God says, your lack of fulfillment, your lack of prosperity is not an accident. It's the result of your lack of obedience and lack of desire for God. Now, let me be very clear here, because this is a challenging issue. There's not a one-to-one connection between obedience to God and material prosperity. It's not true that if you just have enough faith, God will deliver you from all sickness and put thousands of dollars in your bank account. It's not true. Sometimes the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer because we live in a fallen world, and we're waiting, longing for the redemption of our bodies and of all creation. On the other hand, God's still the creator of this world, and God is not distant and detached from our daily circumstances. He made the world, and when our priorities are not aligned with His, we're going against the grain of His creation, the world that

He made and still upholds, and it will not ultimately go well for us. And sometimes God sovereignly brings trials into our lives in order to expose our misplaced priorities. The people were neglecting God, the source of every good thing, and so the good things that they were so actively pursuing were constantly slipping out of their hands. Charles Spurgeon wrote, If people are selfish and keep their wealth to themselves and rob God of His portion, they shall not prosper, or if they do, no blessing shall come with it.

Has God frustrated some of your ambitions and plans, even though you've diligently pursued them? Or are you constantly wanting more, even though you've perhaps advanced materially in some ways?

Is your lack of satisfaction an indication of a lack of desire for God, a lack of obedience to God, a lack of finding contentment in God? Psalm 139 says, Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

[14:52] Twice Haggai says, consider your ways. Consider your priorities. Don't begin another new year without considering your priorities. You might say, what does that look like practically? Well, here are three concrete questions you can ask yourself. First, what are you spending your time on?

As verse 9 says, what are you busying yourself with? Literally, that word can mean running off, sort of constantly running. What are you running around to do? What are you keeping busy with?

Now, maybe you're considering actually literally buying a house, or doing a renovation project, or an interior design project. Ask yourself this question. Am I doing this as an expression of wise stewardship of the resources God has given me in order to serve my family and extend generous hospitality? Or is this an expensive and time-consuming distraction, driven by a desire for more and better things that will never be filled? Or maybe you're spending a lot of time at work. Work is a good thing. It's part of what God made us for, and what made us to, what He made us to do. But is your work, but many times work can be constantly demanding more. Is your work hindering you from biblical rhythms of work and rest? Is it making it, is it preventing you from caring for your family, or investing in other people in the church? Consider your ways, Haggai says. Is it worth it to invest your time this way for the next year, or for the next 10 years? Now, maybe the answer is yes, for a time. Perhaps you must endure an ungodly work environment, or an ungodly schedule for a time. But are there changes you can make or request in order to invest faithfully in your work and in your co-workers and in your boss, while also investing fruitfully in the other areas of life that God has entrusted to you? Haggai says, consider your ways. How are you using your time? Second, what are you consuming in order to be full?

In order to be filled up. Verse 6 says, you eat, but you never have enough. You drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. Now, food and drink and clothing are all generous gifts from our Heavenly Father. The passage we heard earlier says, if God clothes the lilies of the field, how much more will He clothe you? Oh, you of little faith. They're gifts from God that we can joyfully and gratefully receive. You know, God gives us food not only for our bare sustenance, but also for our enjoyment. He even commanded the Israelites once a year to go and feast and eat whatever they want for a whole week. We all just did that, so we fulfilled that command without intending to, right? But it's easy to allow food and drink and clothing to become our masters instead of our servants. And instead of receiving them gratefully as God's gifts, we fantasize about them or grab them or hide them or consume them in a compulsive and greedy and later guilty way, and we are never satisfied. What are you consuming in order to be filled up? Third, what are you spending your money on or saving your money for? Verse 6 says, he who earns wages does so to put them in a bag with holes. I had this sense that they would earn their money and it would slip out of their hands.

Inflation was probably very high in that context. But Jesus said, don't store up treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy, where thieves break in and steal, but store up treasures in heaven and where your treasure is there your heart will be also. Have you taken a hard look at your budget?

[19:04] What are you spending? What are you saving? What are you giving? Do you even know what you're spending? Many people don't. You can't effectively make a budget if you don't even know where your money is actually going. Sometimes all you know that it is that it's gone. What needs to change so that your budget increasingly reflects godly priorities? Generous giving, responsible saving, wise spending.

Now maybe you can't immediately change your budget because you're paying off long-term obligations, school loans, or other kinds of debt. But take a long-term view. Think about not just the next year, but the next 10 years. How can you make decisions now that in 5 or 10 years will give you increasing freedom to give generously? That will give you increasing freedom to invest your resources in the things that matter?

Some time ago, an older man said to me, don't get into the rat race of buying a home that you can't really afford, buying a car that you can't really afford because you can't afford it, being pressured to work more, and then you have neither time nor money to spare. And once you get in, it's even harder to get out. Haggai says, consider your ways and begin turning to the Lord now. Verse 7, he says, consider your ways, go up to the hills, bring wood and build the house that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. Haggai says, make it your priority to build the house of the Lord. Now you might say, where is this guy going with this? He's talking about money, he's talking about building a house. He must be announcing a church building project. I'm not.

The only time I've heard Haggai preached was when we needed to buy this building, nine years ago. It's a somewhat legitimate secondary or third-level application. It's not the primary meaning of this text. What does this mean for us, right? We're not Jews returning from the exile to Jerusalem. We're followers of Jesus, who is our ultimate prophet, priest, and king.

We're not following Zerubbabel the governor or Joshua the high priest or Haggai the prophet. Ultimately, we're following Jesus, who is the fulfillment of all of them. What does that look like? Well, in the New Testament, God hasn't commanded us to build a physical temple in the earthly city of Jerusalem or any other earthly city in particular. He hasn't promised his presence in that way.

[21:52] Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, the time is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. The time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. We see in the New Testament that in Jesus Christ, God is building a new temple, not of stones, but of people. Ephesians 2 says Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone, and the whole structure being joined together in him grows into a holy temple in the Lord. You are being built together into a dwelling place for God by his Spirit. First Peter 2 says, you yourselves, you yourselves, like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house. So what does it mean to make it your priority to build the house of God? It means to prioritize the people of God. What would this look like? It might mean spending time with someone who's exploring Christianity and has a lot of questions in order to seek to lead them to see and put their faith in Jesus the Savior and become one of his people. It might mean discipling a newer

Christian, spending time with them one-on-one and reading the Bible and praying together. It might mean writing a note, dropping it in the mail, sending an email to encourage a fellow believer who's going through a hard time, saying, I'm praying for you. Here's how I'm praying for you.

It might mean taking time to listen to someone who's been hurt and burned by the church and is hesitant to come in and get involved again. It might mean faithfully preparing to teach the Word of God in your small group or in your Sunday school class, or making time to pray together regularly with your family or with your roommates, or giving generously to the local church and to those who proclaim the gospel around the world and care for the poor in the name of Christ. All of those are aspects of what it means to prioritize building the house of God, investing in the people of God.

Haggai says, make it your priority to build the house of the Lord. So God confronts us about our misplaced priorities, but he also encourages us when we take his Word to heart. This is the second phrase in verse 13, where Haggai says, I am with you, says the Lord.

In verse 12 through 15, we see a three-part sequence. We see obedience, encouragement, energy. We see obedience first in verse 12. You know, one of the most encouraging things about the book of Haggai is the people actually listened to his message. They actually listened and obeyed.

[24:51] Most of the prophets in the Old Testament were ignored or persecuted. People actually heard what Haggai said, and they put it into practice for once.

Verse 12 tells us the people obeyed because they feared the Lord. And that doesn't mean that they were threatened into unwilling compliance. It doesn't mean they were terrorized by the Lord, but it means they were filled with reverential awe.

They recognized who they were dealing with. The holy God who had promised to dwell among them. And so when they heard God's Word, they knew where it was coming from, and they were motivated to listen and obey. And then when they responded with reverence and obedience, God immediately sent encouragement.

I am with you, declares the Lord. You know, God didn't stand back and wait for them. He didn't say, hmm, well, they seem to be listening and wanting to obey. Let me see if they actually follow through.

And then if they actually follow through, then I'll pour out my blessing on them. No. When God calls us to obedience, He doesn't leave us alone and step back and fold His arms and say, let me see if they do it. He comes alongside us and He says, I am with you. He encourages us with His promises.

[26:26] You see, they were undertaking a difficult task. They were poor in some ways. It was risky. The Messiah hadn't yet come, but God said to them, I'm with you.

Brothers and sisters, God calls us to some difficult tasks. Maybe it seems like too much. Maybe you can, maybe you feel like the call to obey, to listen and obey God's Word, it's just, you're never going to achieve it because it's too hard.

Maybe you think, I'm too poor. I don't know enough of God's Word. I'm not where I should be in my walk with God. I'm not worthy. Maybe you think it's too risky, being up here in the godless Northeast.

Right? There's always potential opposition out there. Sometimes we can imagine it when it's not even there. Or maybe you think we should wait for the Messiah to come.

When Jesus comes back, He'll fix everything. And until then, nothing's going to change. So why work? But Haggai has a simple and powerful word of encouragement that outweighs every one of those objections and difficulties and excuses.

[27 : 48] I am with you, declares the Lord. Not I will be with you in the future only, but I am with you in the present now.

Now, one commentator said, without making specific promises, these words promise everything. Isn't it true?

And it's no accident that the Gospel of Matthew concludes with Jesus' great commission, but also His great promise. I am with you always.

God gives encouragement to us through His Word. And not only does He give encouragement, He provides energy by His Spirit.

Verse 14, the Lord stirred up the spirit of the leaders and the people. And they came and worked together on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the 24th day of the month.

[28 : 55] Just 23 days after Haggai's initial message challenging them about their 18-year history of neglect, they were on the construction site working.

Because God, the Lord, had stirred up their hearts. The Lord had roused them from their spiritual apathy and sleepiness and energized them by His life-giving Spirit.

Do you need the encouragement of God's Word? Do you need the energy of His Holy Spirit in this coming year?

God confronts us with our misplaced priorities. Consider your ways. But God also encourages us when we take His Word to heart. I am with you, declares the Lord.

Let's pray. Our God, we thank You that You are a faithful God.

[30 : 07] Lord, we thank You for sustaining Your people so long ago who thought they had lost everything in the exile and had blown it forever.

But You brought them home. And You promise once again Your presence, Your merciful presence among them. Lord, thank You for the hope that You give us as we look into the future.

Lord, thank You for... We pray that You would help us to take to heart this challenge, this rebuke, to consider our ways. We pray that we would consider our priorities and that our priorities would increasingly be drawn into line with Yours.

That You would give us a reverential awe of who You are. A holy fear of You. That would lead us to respond in obedience.

And Lord, we pray that we would know that encouragement from Your Word and that energizing power of Your Spirit. Lord, may that be true in our individual lives.

[31 : 26] May that be true in our families. May that be true among us as a church. As we go forward into this next year. Would You be glorified among us, we pray.

In Christ's name. Amen. We're going to close with a great hymn. The music team can come forward. Come thou fount of every blessing.

Tune...