

Haggai

First things first

February 11, 2010

Here is a Bible trivia for you: How many people whose name is Haggai there in the Bible? One. Some of you are thinking, "Ask that to somebody who cares."

But you'd better care about what the message of this short Book tells us. Now we are in the new era of the history of God's people in the OT. So far, we've studied about the prophecies that had been fulfilled before the captivity by Babylon through prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and all the other minor prophets. But next three Books were written by the prophets who lived in the time of the postexilic in Israel.

In 536 B.C., Cyrus, the king of Persia, signed a decree that allowed the Jews to return to their home land. Ezra led about fifty thousand of them back to Jerusalem. He and Zerubbabel began the process of rebuilding the temple. This can be easily confused with Nehemiah's project which was building the wall around Jerusalem. Haggai was involved in the temple building project around 520 B.C.

The temple was completed in 515, B.C.

A. THE AUTHOR

Haggai 1:1-2 In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, 2 "Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: 'This people says, "The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.'"

We don't know much about Haggai either, like the other prophets whom we've been studying. Haggai is the first postexilic prophet. His name means "festal" or "festival."

He was a "Get-It-Done" type of leader, a highly motivated man who attacked indifference as the enemy it was. Haggai, and later Zechariah, were used by the Lord to chastise the comfortable, convincing them that there was no excuse for delaying finishing the temple. Haggai's message is greatly needed in our "Me First" day of self-centeredness and apathy.

B. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

A contagious enthusiasm permeates his writing style. In these two small chapters of his Book, he delivers four messages – initially rebuking, then encouraging. He often repeats key phrases to make sure his points get across: "Thus speaks the Lord of hosts", "Consider your ways!", "I am with you", and "Take courage".

His main theme is, "Rebuild the temple!" But threaded throughout the Book is the strong admonition to place God before all else – and keep Him there. In other words, first things first.

C. HAGGAI'S PROPHETIC MESSAGE

Haggai's four prophecies form four natural divisions in his book: the call to rebuild God's temple in chapter 1; the surpassing glory of the new temple in 2:1-9; the

once-cursed people now blessed in 2:10-19; and, finally, a special promise to Zerubbabel in 2:20-23.

1) The call to rebuild the temple – Chapter 1

Haggai 1:3-11 Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, 4 "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?" 5 Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: "Consider your ways! 6 "You have sown much, and bring in little; You eat, but do not have enough; You drink, but you are not filled with drink; You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; And he who earns wages, Earns wages to put into a bag with holes." 7 Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Consider your ways! 8 Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified," says the Lord. 9 "You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?" says the Lord of hosts. "Because of My house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house. 10 Therefore the heavens above you withhold the dew, and the earth withholds its fruit. 11 For I called for a drought on the land and the mountains, on the grain and the new wine and the oil, on whatever the ground brings forth, on men and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands."

Since prophet Ezekiel and Daniel spoke for the last time, there was no record of any message from the Lord to the Jewish people in the OT until this message by Haggai. The date would be August 29, 520 B.C. according to v2.

The message was to Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua (or a.k.a. Jeshua), the high priest. Zerubbabel was king David's descendant, God's chosen royal line through whom the Messiah would come. Joshua was a descendant of the Aaronic line of priests.

Rather than trusting God to overcome their enemies and work on their behalf for His glory, it looks like the newly-freed Jewish remnants had buckled under their enemies' pressure. Their excuse was, "Maybe it is not God's time to rebuild His temple just yet" So for fifteen years they had concentrated on less objectionable projects, such as their own houses – luxurious "paneled" dwellings.

Obviously the Jewish people at the days of Haggai had their priority mixed up bad. But are God's people today any different from those ancient Jews? No.

When it comes to good sports games on TV or Sunday morning services, guess which one people choose? If you've noticed, more and more sports games are on Sunday morning rather than afternoon like a couple of decades ago? Wonder who is behind this idea? Satan doesn't want people to go to church to hear the truth, so he provides them entertainment and amusement.

Have you ever thought of what the word 'amusement' means? 'Muse' means "to think," and 'a' is "the negative," so 'amuse' means "not to think." The devil finds all sorts of things to amuse the people in order to keep them from thinking and facing the realities of eternity.

People are willing to save money for their special vacation trips, but they don't care to think about giving tithes and offerings to the Lord. People would argue, "Come on, we have not had a decent vacation for a long time." God is not against their rest or vacation, but against their mixed-up priorities. Either people flat out ignore the bibli-

cal principles and instructions or they make excuses why they cannot do it. If they are honest, it is never "can not", rather "will not".

Matthew 6:33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

When we put God first and give Him what's rightfully His, we open the door to spiritual enrichment and the kind of stewardship that honors the Lord. A century after Haggai ministered, the prophet Malachi accused the people of robbing God of tithes and offerings and thereby robbing themselves of blessing. His words need to be heeded today.

Because of their selfish priority, the Jewish people were the ones who suffered financially. It still happens the same way. Many Christians who do not put God as their first priority, suffer spiritually, financially, physically and emotionally. They may not suffer right away, they still have to pay their consequences later.

2) The surpassing glory of the new temple – 2:1-9

Haggai 2:3-5 'Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing? 4 Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel,' says the Lord; 'and be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land,' says the Lord, 'and work; for I am with you,' says the Lord of hosts. 5 'According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear!'

About a month later, discouragement seeped into the community once more. Perhaps the daunting task to clear away the debris and comparing the inferiority of this temple to the splendor of Solomon's weighed everyone down. So God sent Haggai with another message.

Our God is such a God of encouragement. I don't know about you, sometimes, I get so discouraged from several things, one after another. My spirits get to be so down and out, you have to use a putty knife to peel it off from the floor.

See what the Lord said to Zerubbabel through Haggai:

Haggai 2:9 The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former,' says the Lord of hosts. 'And in this place I will give peace,' says the Lord of hosts."

Though the second temple they were building may look inferior to Solomon's temple, it points ahead to the crucial role of God's redemptive plan through Jesus Christ. Herod's temple was far better than Solomon's if you only look at it from the view point of architecture.

But it was only a building until Christ came to Jerusalem to die on the cross. The moment Jesus died on the cross for our sins, the veil in the temple that separated the holy of holies from the holy place was torn in two from top to bottom. It signified God's permission for us to enter into His presence without any delay and without anyone mediation other than Jesus.

1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus

3) The blessing of the once-cursed people – 2:10-19

Haggai 2:10-14 On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, 11 "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Now, ask the priests concerning the law, saying, 12 If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?'" Then the priests answered and said, "No." 13 And Haggai said, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" So the priests answered and said, "It shall be unclean." 14 Then Haggai answered and said, " 'So is this people, and so is this nation before Me,' says the Lord, 'and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean.

Two more months passed by before the Lord gave Haggai another message to deliver. The two questions he asked to the priest are, in my opinion, two of the most profound questions ever asked any person who thinks himself or herself religious, yet not received Jesus into his or her hearts as the Savior and Lord.

Let's look at the first question together again:

v12 If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?

The priest answered correctly. Even though it is the sanctified meat and sanctified garment for the Lord, they cannot transmit holiness to other things in such a simple manner.

The second question drives God's point to our hearts:

v13 And Haggai said, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" So the priests answered and said, "It shall be unclean."

What if something gets to have a contact with an unclean thing, would it be contaminated by the unclean thing? Again, the priest answered correctly.

Haggai had made his point: The people working on the temple couldn't impart any holiness to it, but they could defile it by their sins. We can transmit defilement from one thing or person to another, but we cannot transmit holiness in the same manner. Holiness only comes from the Lord to us while we respond to His command with our obedience.

Haggai 2:18-19 'Consider now from this day forward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, from the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid--consider it: 19 Is the seed still in the barn? As yet the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have not yielded fruit. But from this day I will bless you.'"

It was the sins of the people that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of the nation, and their sins could hinder the rebuilding of the temple and the renewing of the Jewish nation in their own land. Sin hinders the work of God and robs us of the blessings of God.

When God speaks to us by His Word, there's only one acceptable response. That's obedience. We don't weigh the options, we don't examine the alternatives, and we don't negotiate the terms. We simply do what God tells us to do and leave the rest with Him. Faith is believing in spite of evidence, it's obeying in spite of consequence.

A simple obedience always brings further truth from the Lord. Why should our Lord give us any more revelations or more insights when we are not even willing to do what He tells us in the first place? He tells us to follow His instructions through the Word of God one step at a time.

4) A promise to Zerubbabel – 2:20-23

Haggai 2:20-23 And again the word of the Lord came to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month, saying, 21 "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying: 'I will shake heaven and earth. 22 I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I will destroy the strength of the Gentile kingdoms. I will overthrow the chariots And those who ride in them; The horses and their riders shall come down, Every one by the sword of his brother. 23 'In that day,' says the Lord of hosts, 'I will take you, Zerubbabel My servant, the son of Shealtiel,' says the Lord, 'and will make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you,' says the Lord of hosts."

Later that same day, a mere four months since he began his prophetic ministry, Haggai received his last word from the Lord. The recipient this time was Zerubbabel alone.

Today Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed that Iran has produced its first batch of uranium enriched to a higher level, saying his country will not be bullied by the West into curtailing its nuclear program a day after the U.S. imposed new sanctions. If what he says is true, it is like a sociopath murderer running around with a nuclear bomb. Come to think of it, he already is a serious sociopath.

However, God will protect Israel from anyone's threat, because He made a covenant with Abraham and He never fails to keep His promises. Zerubbabel must have been encouraged to hear this message from the Lord through Haggai.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) The work of God is begun, sustained and encouraged by the Word of God.

We can be a part of God's wonderful work by submitting ourselves to His will or left out from blessings because of our disobedience. Our choice.

2) When the outlook is bleak, try the uplook.

Apart from God's promises, we have no hope. Faith sees the invisible, chooses the imperishable, and does the impossible.

3) Putting God first is the guarantee of God's best blessing. First things first.

4) Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, our labors are in vain.