

Haggai

M. W. Bassford, 8-22-10

In our study of the minor prophets to this point, we've seen one theme over and over again. The children of Israel are wicked, and God is going to punish them. In the last three books of the minor prophets, though, we're going to see a major shift in content, for one simple reason. The punishment that God had been promising came about. In 586 B.C., the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, blinded Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, and carried the final remnant of his people into captivity. They remained in captivity for 70 years. Only once the people begin to return to the land of Canaan under the rule of the king of Persia do the minor prophets start up again.

The first of these post-exilic prophets is Haggai, as we see in Haggai 1:1. Darius, the most recent king of Persia, had just begun to reign. Only the first of three waves of Jewish settlers had returned to the area of Jerusalem, about 50,000 people in all. They were comparatively few in number, they were poor, and in many ways, they still didn't have a very good connection with God. Although they had laid the foundations for a rebuilt temple when first they arrived, political opposition deterred them from further reconstruction. Even now that the new king Darius had issued a number of decrees friendly to the religions of the peoples of his empire, the Jews were still too dispirited to build.

It's in this environment that Haggai begins to prophesy. He tells the people that their economic woes are the direct result of their failure to rebuild the temple, and that if they do, they will be blessed. In many ways, this is a situation we can identify with. Like the returned exiles, we're comparatively few in number. We're insignificant compared to the massive denominations around us. As a result, it's easy for us to despair and neglect the Lord's work. We too need a call to action, a call to trust in the Lord. Let's find that call this evening in the book of Haggai.

The Problem.

Haggai opens his writing with a discussion of the spiritual problem that the Jews had. He explains in Haggai 1:2-6. Clearly, one of the new hobbies of the post-exilic Jews was excuse-making. They had plenty of time to work on their own property. They had opportunity to carefully panel their houses, while God's temple was still a heap of ruins. And yet, even though they had all of this time, even though the political climate was favorable to rebuilding the temple, they kept putting it off and putting it off. Then, they wondered why nothing else in their lives went right either.

Today, of course, God doesn't dwell in a temple made with hands. There is not some physical worship center that we are called to restore after it had been destroyed by an invader. However, we need to devote ourselves to constructing the temple that is built of living stones. We need to build the church. We need to be dedicated to helping this congregation expand, either by bringing new souls to Christ or by helping those who are already Christians to become still more righteous and still more useful. We do this by actively, constantly working on the Lord's behalf. There are Bible classes that need to be taught, shut-ins who need to be visited, downtrodden Christians who need to be encouraged, and lost people who need to be invited in. In fact, in God's holy temple, there is work that every one of us can do. Are we doing it? Or are we sitting in our paneled houses, wondering why our lives don't seem to be going right?

God explains the Jews' predicament in Haggai 1:7-10. As He describes them here, they had an expectation problem. In their devotion to their own prosperity, they had all kinds of big hopes for how rich and prosperous they were going to be, but when the harvest time came, they were always disappointed. Why? Because God was working against them instead of for them. These weren't idolaters. These weren't people who had rejected the God of their fathers. However, they still failed to live up to God's expectations. Until they set their hands to rebuilding the temple, God was going to destroy everything they did try to build. Through their self-centered focus, they ended up losing, not winning.

The same principle will hold true in our lives. Christianity is never going to be a road to riches, but God does promise us that if we seek His kingdom first, all the other things will be added to us too. On the other hand, if we don't seek His kingdom first, we can expect nothing. Nor does this even take into account the blessings that follow directly from obedience. When we love and bless others as God intends, those experiences teach us how to make our personal relationships prosper too. When I help someone in need, it teaches me wisdom and compassion, and that makes me a better husband, a better father, a better son, a better neighbor, and a better friend. Now, on the other hand, if I'm selfish and only work to benefit myself, isn't that selfishness going to spill over into all of my other relationships too? I can work and work and work, but as long as I'm self-seeking, I'm only going to fill my life with unhappiness and discord. Like the Jews of 2500 years ago, when we refuse to labor in God's house, we short-circuit His entire plan for our happiness.

Building the Temple.

The ancient Jews solved this problem, though, by immediately building the temple. We learn about their work in Haggai 1:12-15. Haggai has to go down as one of the most successful prophets in the Bible, if only because of how

quickly and thoroughly his warning was heeded. From the time he began to prophesy, it was only about three weeks until the entire population began to work on the temple. In this, the governor and the high priest set an example for all the people to follow. To every last one of them, God's message was, "I am with you."

Brethren, every last one of us falls into one of two groups. Either we are actively, constantly working for the Lord, or we are not. If we're in the second group, God knows it, and He is not pleased with our negligence. There's only one way to solve the problem, and it's to mend our lazy ways right now. It's not hard to find things to do in the church. If anybody here doesn't know what to do, all they have to do is talk to the elders or to me after services. We'd be delighted to clue you in. There are all kinds of jobs that need doing. The only question is whether we are willing to do them. Once we start working, we get rid of the guilt of being useless, and we can be sure that God is with us.

After about a month, the Jews had gotten a good start in their work of rebuilding, but that only created another problem. God addresses this difficulty in Haggai 2:3-5. Even at this early stage of the reconstruction project, it had become obvious that this temple wasn't going to be anywhere near as grand as the temple of Solomon that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed. For many of the workers, it was doubtless discouraging for them to invest all of this labor in a product that they thought was going to be inferior. Nonetheless, God continues to encourage them. He tells them not to be afraid about what the results are going to be like. They just have to keep working because He's with them.

Sometimes, our work in the church can be equally discouraging. We can spend months and months trying to teach a friend or neighbor, only to have him reject the gospel. We can invest a lot of time and thought in reaching out to a Christian on the fringe who's in spiritual danger, only to see that brother withdrawn from a few weeks later. I've been there, and it is discouraging, especially when we compare our church to the denominational churches around us, where sometimes thousands of people assemble at a time to listen to a pack of lies. That's the sort of thing that can cause us to despair, to wonder why we're bothering anyway. In moments like those, God's answer is the same to us as to those temple-builders of long ago. We need to be strong, be fearless, and keep working, for God is with us too.

God explains the blessing that the Jews would see if they kept working in Haggai 2:6-9. Undeniably, out of their own pathetic little resources, they could only build a pathetic little temple. However, God owned all the gold and silver in the world, and He would literally shake the nations down to make sure that His house was fittingly furnished. According to Ezra 6, this prophecy was fulfilled to the letter when Darius the king decreed that the entire construction of the temple would be paid for out of the Persian treasury. Even more than that, though, God would make the temple glorious by filling it with the glory of His presence. With His help, His house would become a place of peace.

Likewise, friends, the answer to our discouragement with the work of this church is the help of God. Maybe the church that we could build on our own would be a pathetic little thing too, but we aren't building this church on our own. God is building it with us. As long as we keep working, He will keep working too. He will give us everything we need to make this congregation fittingly grand in the eyes of everyone, a holy temple that will bring honor to His name. What's more, He will see to it that His presence with us becomes obvious to all. He will fill our church with peace and glory. We can have all of that here if only we all devote ourselves to doing His work in the way He has commanded.

Blessing.

In another couple of months, though, the Jews came up with another question. They wanted to know where the personal blessing was that God had promised. God begins His answer in Haggai 2:10-14. The answer is based on a couple of rulings that Haggai asks the priests to make. On the one hand, it wasn't possible under the law of Moses to make food holy just by touching it with holy food. However, the opposite wasn't true. It was possible to make food unclean by touching it with something that was unclean. The point was that the people themselves were contaminated.

God's point here, and it's a relevant point for us, is that it's much easier to tear down than to build up. If we don't have goals for our personal relationships, and we interact with our families aimlessly and impulsively, we're just giving ourselves over to the devil's agenda, and without any work at all, pretty soon we're going to have a dysfunctional family. However, once we start trying to straighten our lives out by obeying God and working in His kingdom, that's not going to be easy and that's not going to be immediate. We're going to have to work for a while to see good results.

God outlines the logical consequences of this for the Jews in Haggai 2:15-16, 18-19. Before they began work on the temple, they saw nothing but disaster over and over again. Their apathy toward God tainted absolutely everything they tried to do. Now that they were working, God wasn't going to magically repair all of the damage that had been done before, but He did make them the promise that from that time forth, He was going to be with them.

The same thing is true in our lives. When we turn away from the Lord and from His will, we're going to see consequences from that pretty quickly. Sin always bears fruit, and the fruit is never anything we like. When we mend our ways, God doesn't banish all of those evil consequences. What He does do, though, is bless us and work with us so that we can get out from under all the disaster we've brought on ourselves. Obedience to His will and labor in His kingdom is not a recipe for immediate happiness. However, in the long term and the eternal term, it will work out for our good.