

# Haggai

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## **Consider your ways! (Haggai 1:1–15)**

The year was 520 BC. Peace had returned to the Persian empire after a period of political instability. The newspapers of the day would have celebrated the fact that Darius was now firmly in control. Meanwhile, in a backwater of the empire, Judah, nothing much was happening. Most of the people had long since ceased to expect any dramatic intervention on God's part. Eighteen years had passed since the decree of the Persian emperor Cyrus had allowed them to return to Judah and had given them permission to rebuild their temple. But now they had settled into an uncomfortable status quo, grinding out their meagre daily existence, coming to terms with a difficult and ordinary life. Why struggle to accomplish great things for the Lord when the days in which you lived were self-evidently the days of small things? Was this the way the promises of God would end — not with a bang but with a tremulous whimper? By no means. They had reckoned without the God of the promises.

Into that situation of quiet despair, God called and sent his prophet with a message of new hope for his people.

*1:1. 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 means of<sup>1</sup> Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest...*

The book of Haggai is obsessed by exact dates, with six precise chronological markers, giving day and month as well as year, in the space of two chapters. This precision in chronological matters is unique to Haggai and Zechariah among the biblical prophets,<sup>2</sup> and serves a number of purposes.

In the first place, it locates the events against the backdrop of wider world history. The prophetic call to the people to rebuild the temple took place in ‘the second year of Darius the king’ (1:1) — that is, 520 BC. This was a time when stability was returning to the Persian empire after a period of unrest. In 522 BC, a man named Gaumata led a successful revolt against the Persian emperor Cambyses, who was absent on a campaign in Egypt. Cambyses died while returning from Egypt and though Darius, a military officer of noble birth, was able to assassinate Gaumata and take over the throne, there were still a number of rebellions in different parts of the Persian empire that needed to be crushed.<sup>3</sup> It was not until the early months of 520 BC that Darius had a firm grip on the empire.

More pressingly, though, the date reminds us that from the perspective of the faithful among the Judean returnees, the clock was ticking on the seventy-year period Jeremiah had prophesied for the exile (Jer. 25:11–12).<sup>4</sup> Starting with the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, sixty-seven years had now passed. At least some amongst the

returnees were probably counting down the days, watching for the restoration of Jerusalem.

This proclamation of Haggai took place 'in the sixth month, on the first day of the month' (1:1). The sixth month covered late August and early September, the harvest time for the fruit trees, such as grapes, figs and pomegranates. It is three months on from the harvest of grain and corn, which took place at the end of June and early July, and thus a natural time to assess the success (or otherwise) of the agricultural year. The first day of the month, the 'new moon', was a festival occasion, a day of rest and celebration before the Lord (see Num. 10:10; 28:11–15). Thus crowds may have been expected to gather for the sacrifices at the altar of the temple, which had been rededicated shortly after the edict of Cyrus permitting the exiles to return home (see Ezra 3). In all likelihood, this festival, supervised by the civil and religious leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua, provided the context in which Haggai's proclamation took place.

'Zerubbabel', as the civil governor, was a Persian appointee. Yet, although doubtless chosen because of his loyalty to his Persian masters, at the same time he was also a descendant of David and therefore an almost inevitable focal point for hopes for the future. The similarities between Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar, the prince who led the initial return from exile in Ezra 1:8, has led some authors, both ancient and modern, to identify the two men. However, this is improbable. While it is certainly true that some other biblical figures bear two names, this usually occurs where one name is Hebrew and the other the name given to him by pagans; here, however, both names are clearly Babylonian.<sup>5</sup>

'Joshua ... the high priest' was another returnee from among the exiles. He too may have been appointed by the Persian authorities, who at this time were interested, for their own reasons, in strengthening the central institutions of Judean culture.<sup>6</sup> None

the less, whatever human political reasonings were the superficial cause of these appointments, the Lord's messenger brought word to Zerubbabel and Joshua and to all the people that there was a deeper cause behind the scenes.

1:2. *Thus says the LORD of hosts: "This people says, "The time has not come, the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt."'*

Haggai's proclamation took the form of a prophetic disputation: the citation of a current piece of 'conventional wisdom' which is then challenged by a word from the Lord (cf. Ezek. 11:2–12; 37:11–14 for similar examples of the form). In this case the saying was: 'The time has not come, the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt' (1:2). Nobody was disputing the necessity of rebuilding the temple at some point; they were simply stating what seemed to them to be self-evident — that now was not the time. Their reasons for that conclusion are not stated, but it is not hard to guess what they would have included. In the short term, it was harvest time and everyone was busy. More broadly, these were difficult economic times all round; there was a general lack of funds for such an ambitious project. The Persian army was in the process of making preparations for a massive campaign in Egypt and may well have made extensive demands on the resources of their vassal states along the invasion route. In addition to these specific factors, though, there seems also to have been a general sense of discouragement, and even despair, about the future, born of long experience of difficult times.

1:3–4. *The word of the LORD came by means of Haggai: 'Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your wood-panelled houses, while this house is desolate?'*

The Lord's response to their 'conventional wisdom' was to show their inconsistency in following through their own presuppositions and to reveal the lack of true, biblical wisdom in their thinking. If now was such a bad time to build God's house, why was it time for them 'to dwell in [their] wood-panelled houses'? (1:4). There has been debate as to whether *s<sup>e</sup>pûnîm* means buildings that are panelled or roofed with wood; both interpretations are possible. More important to note, however, is the connection with Solomon's Temple: in three of the four other uses of this verb in the Old Testament to describe a building it has reference to Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6:9; 7:3,7). The point is that they have been quite happy to put precisely the kind of time and resources into building their own houses that they have been claiming are not there to restore God's house.

*1:5-6. Now thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Give thought to your ways. You have sown abundantly, bringing in little. There is eating, but no fulness; drinking, but not to satisfaction; being clothed, but not enough to bring warmth. The hired labourer hires himself out for a purse with holes.'*

For all their busyness in pursuit of their own ends, they have not been achieving the goals they had hoped for. Though they had sown abundantly, they had not reaped accordingly. Instead, 'There is eating, but no fulness; drinking, but not to satisfaction; being clothed, but not enough to bring warmth' (1:6). It was as though they were earning wages, and then putting those wages in a bag with holes in it (1:6), so that what they got out of life was not what they had put into it. They were not experiencing the fulness of God's blessing, but rather an inadequate, unfulfilling life in which every pleasure proved disappointingly incomplete.

Why was life this way? The problem was certainly not with God's lack of power to bless. Their God was 'the LORD of hosts',

a title that focuses on his power.<sup>7</sup> The problem lay rather in their own actions, which is why the Lord tells them repeatedly to ‘Give thought to your ways’ (1:5,7). They were not acting in faithfulness to their covenant obligations as God’s people, which is why he addresses them as ‘this people’, not ‘my people’ (1:2). They have put their own interests before God’s interest and have reaped the consequences of that set of priorities — a life of futility. Futility curses were a standard part of many ancient Near-Eastern covenants;<sup>8</sup> here, those curses had become a reality in the lives of the Israelites because of their unfaithfulness.

1:7–11. Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Give thought to your ways. Go up to the hill country, fetch wood and build my house, so that I may delight in it and be glorified,’ says the LORD. ‘You sought abundance, but look, poverty! You brought it home and I blew it away. For what reason? This is a declaration of the LORD of hosts: it is because of my house, which is desolate while you are each running about on behalf of your own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth has withheld its produce. I have summoned drought upon the land and upon the mountains, upon the grain, upon the new wine, the oil and upon that which the soil brings forth, upon mankind and domesticated animals and upon all the labour of your hands.’

The solution was straightforward: to abandon their excuses and reorder their priorities. In place of the wood they had eagerly gathered to panel their own houses, now they should go out to the hill country and gather wood for God’s house (1:8). The prophet underlines his point with a pun: in place of running about (*rā’im*) on behalf of their own houses (1:9), they should instead turn God’s house from a useless and desolate ruin into a place in which God

may delight (*rāā*, 1:8) and may be glorified. Their present distress was, in fact, the logical consequence of their own priorities: because God's house was 'desolate' (*ārēb*, 1:9), therefore he had summoned 'drought' (*ōreb*, 1:11) upon the fruits of the soil and the efforts of their hands. Until their priorities were reordered, they could hardly expect to see greater fruitfulness in their land.

*1:12. Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all the remnant of the people listened to the voice of the LORD their God and to the words of Haggai the prophet as [one] whom the LORD their God had sent. The people were afraid before the LORD.*

The result of Haggai's preaching was immediate. Zerubbabel, Joshua and all the remnant of the people recognized the voice of the Lord as it came to them through Haggai, his prophet (1:12). Calling them 'the remnant of the people' focuses attention on the judgement for unfaithfulness that God's people have already experienced, but at the same time also on God's promises that his judgements upon their sin would not completely obliterate them (e.g. Isa. 10:21). Now those who had returned were convicted anew of their sin of unfaithfulness to the Lord with respect to the temple, and in consequence they became 'afraid before the LORD' (1:12). This attitude is not merely one of reverence before the Lord (so NASB); rather, it is the appropriate holy dread that falls on those who recognize God's commandments and the ways in which they have fallen short of meeting their demands.<sup>9</sup> They recognized God's justice in judging them.

*1:13–15. Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke the LORD's message to the people: 'I am with you, declares the LORD.'*

Then the LORD roused the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people, and they went in and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God. *It was the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius.*<sup>10</sup>

As they turned their hearts towards the Lord, they found the Lord turning towards them, announcing through Haggai the comforting good news: ‘I am with you’ (1:13). After repentance and restoration came prompt action: ‘the LORD roused the spirit of Zerubbabel ... of Joshua ... and ... of all the remnant of the people, and they went in and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts’ (1:14). Godly sorrow is never an end in itself; it always issues in an appropriate response of renewed obedience. It was now ‘the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius’. A mere twenty-three days had passed since the first word of the Lord to his people through Haggai.

## Application

It is not hard to preach a guilt-inducing sermon from Haggai 1. You simply give your message the title, ‘God loves a cheerful builder’, and harangue your congregation for living with all modern comforts while the current building campaign is still far short of its target. If you are inclined towards the health-and-wealth gospel, the passage is even more attractive, with its implication that the reason why you are not experiencing prosperity (interpreted as a new car and a home beside the golf course) is because you are not giving enough to God’s work. The problem with such an approach to this passage is that we end up preaching not Christ, but a more effective materialism.



We treat seeking God as a means to building our own kingdom, whether the form of that kingdom for us is a bigger local church or personal prosperity and fulfilling relationships.

To be sure, Haggai tells the people that they may expect God's blessing from now on, a blessing that under the Mosaic covenant was demonstrated in physical prosperity (2:19; cf. Lev. 26:3–12). But material blessing was not God's primary response to their obedience. Rather, it was an assurance of God's presence with them in their current circumstances (1:13; 2:4) and of his future activity on their behalf, shaking the heavens and the earth and bringing the long-desired Messiah (2:6–7, 21–23).

We too need to repent of the ways in which we have focused on building our own houses, not the Lord's. The result of this wrong focus in our lives has also been frustration. This is the fundamental problem of materialism: it is an unreliable and inevitably unfulfilling master. The pleasures it promises often prove elusive, and even those it brings to us turn out in the end to be temporary and unsubstantial. Haggai declares to the people of his day a different vision for which to live. Repent and humble yourself before God and pour your energies into building God's house, the visible symbol of his enduring presence in the midst of his people. In the language of Jesus, 'Seek first God's kingdom, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Matt. 6:33).

The visible symbol of God's presence in the midst of his people is no longer the temple, though, as it was in Haggai's time. Nor is it the church building. Rather, according to the New Testament, it is Jesus Christ himself. Thus, in John 2, when Jesus had ejected the moneychangers from the temple, he said, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again' (John 2:19). He did not have in mind redoing Haggai's task in

three days. Rather, he meant that his body would be raised up on the third day. As Immanuel ('God with us'), he physically represented God's presence in the midst of his people. Now that Jesus has ascended to heaven and poured out his Spirit upon the church, God's presence is represented in the world by us, his people. As the body of Christ, the church is the new temple, made up of Jews and Gentiles being built together as a holy dwelling place for God (Eph. 2:16–22; see also 2 Cor. 6:16–7:1).

If this is what building God's house means, it is a task far beyond our capabilities. It is not simply a matter of collecting wood and stone, but of collecting and shaping living stones. Thankfully, building God's house is not ultimately our task but Christ's. He is the one who bore the cost of building it. It was relatively easy for Jesus to come in judgement and make a whip to drive the sinners out of God's physical house in Jerusalem. It was a far more painful task for him to come as a Saviour and make sinners fit to live in God's house. To do that would require God the Father to turn the whip upon his own Son, so that he might take upon himself the punishment that our sins deserved. Both aspects of Christ's ministry are crucially important. On the one hand, he has taken upon himself the punishment that we deserved for our self-centred failure to seek God's kingdom and to build his house. On the other, in cleansing the temple he has himself shown the zeal for God's house and kingdom that we lacked. That righteousness of his has now been credited to us, as if it were our own, just as our sin of being perpetually interested only in our own houses has been placed to his account.

God's work of building his new temple, the church, by means of his Spirit is the foundation and encouragement for our work. It was because God roused their spirits that Haggai's hearers

set to work with enthusiasm (1:14). It is because God is at work in our earthly bodies by his Spirit that we are called and empowered to glorify God with our bodies (1 Cor. 6:19–20). It is because God is committed to establishing his kingdom in and through us that we are called to seek that kingdom first, above all other things.

The result of seeking first God's kingdom will not necessarily be earthly prosperity, or even large, 'successful' churches. Jesus' earthly ministry was characterized by neither of those things. But God does promise his repentant people his presence with us now, and the fulfilment of his own kingdom goals in the longer term. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 1:3). What else do we need or desire? In place of our preoccupation with food that does not fill, with drink that does not satisfy and with clothing that cannot warm our souls, God promises us the bread of life, a fountain of living water and clothing to cover our spiritual nakedness.

## **The best is yet to come (Haggai 2:1–9)**

We live in an 'instant' world. We have grown used to instant communication, instant coffee and instant credit. We don't even have to wait for the television to warm up any more. As a result, we are very impatient with processes that take time. We want ourselves and our churches to be instantly sanctified, and we quickly grow discouraged when there seems to be little perceptible progress. Yet God's ways are not our ways. To reverse the poetic line, though