

## **“Misplaced Priorities”**

**Haggai 1:1-11**

**August 15, 2010**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

This passage is about the practical topic of misplaced priorities. We've all experienced something of this, haven't we? The suburban homeowner who spends a great deal of time cultivating the perfect lawn, but never gives time to cultivating friendships and ends up sitting by himself enjoying his perfect lawn. Or consider the dad who never seems to have time for his children because of the pressures of his career. Then there's the common situation of the person who makes it a priority just to be comfortable and can never seem to get around to doing the important tasks that are temporarily uncomfortable. Life in a fallen world such as ours is filled with examples of those who elevate the wrong thing to the place of importance.

In the passage before us this morning, the prophet Haggai rebukes Israel for a misplaced priority that is more significant and more damaging than any other. It is the mistake of removing God and his glory from the top priority in life. Specifically, they were placing a higher priority on building and finishing their houses than they placed on the building of God's temple in Jerusalem. Let's look now at several important things we learn from this passage about misplaced priorities.

### **I. The Problem of Misplaced Priorities**

We need to begin by understanding the context of the passage, and the very first verse helps us in this by giving us the precise date of Haggai's words. He says that he wrote in the second year of Darius the king. Darius was the king of Persia, and his reign began in the year 522 B.C. So the second year of his reign makes this the year 520 B.C., just 66 years after the exile of Israel to Babylon. Remember that Israel split into two kingdoms after the death of Solomon. The larger northern kingdom, consisting of ten tribes of Israel, had only evil kings. They were taken into exile by Assyria in 722 B.C., only two-hundred years after the death of Solomon. The southern kingdom, called Judah, lasted another 150 years before being taken into exile by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

The exile must have seemed to most in Israel as the end of their nation. But God had promised that Judah would return from their exile, and the way was opened for them to do so with the decree of Cyrus, an earlier Persian king, in 539 B.C. Cyrus' decree not only allowed Israel's safe return to their homeland, but funded the trip and the rebuilding of Jerusalem with Persian funds. With

such an open door, it might be assumed that there would be a mass exodus back to Israel. But that was not the case. An entire generation had grown up in Babylon and settled there. Only about fifty thousand of the exiles chose to make the return trip. Haggai is one of the post-exilic prophets, ministering to the exiles returning to the land. The last three books of the Old Testament—Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi—are all post-exilic, together with the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The post exilic literature of the Old Testament describes the numerous difficulties faced by the returning exiles. The land had been minimally occupied, with the result that houses were in disrepair and fields overgrown. Also, those who were left in the land during the exile had taken up ownership of ancestral lands and homes as squatters. Property rights had to be sorted out. There was also opposition from surrounding nations to the rebuilding effort in Jerusalem, particularly its walls and temple. They did make a start in rebuilding the temple. Its altar, located in an outside courtyard, had been rebuilt, and a foundation had been laid for the temple itself. But when this foundation was seen by the older people who had also seen Solomon's temple before it was destroyed, they wept at the inferiority of this post-exilic temple in comparison to the grandeur of the previous one.

All of these obstacles led them to abandon the temple building project. The purpose of Haggai's writing is to rebuke them for their misplaced priorities. The significance of this problem is indicated in two ways in the early verses of this chapter. First, the Lord refers to Israel as **"these people,"** not *"my people."* It is easy to hear the pain and disappointment in his voice. Second, verse 4 captures well the inappropriateness of their misplaced priorities. **"Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?"** The words "you yourselves" are an attempt to translate the doubled pronoun *you*. Literally, it reads "Is it a time for you, You! to dwell in your paneled houses?" The idea is that of a shocking inappropriateness of laboring to build their own houses while neglecting the house for the one who was their greatest treasure, Jehovah their covenant God.

There are a couple of things we can learn about misplaced priorities in the Lord's quote of Israel's words in verse 2. **"These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord."** First, there is some dishonesty in their hearts. They were deceiving themselves with a promise to get to the rebuilding later. It would have been closer to the truth for them to say to God, "Our needs are more important than your desires, and we will get to the rebuilding of the temple after our own needs have been fully met." But that doesn't sound so spiritual, so it is far more palatable to say, "I'll do it later," than to say, "I won't do it." This common promise to do something later is often used when we really don't want to do something, but we don't want to admit that we really don't want to do it. So we deceive ourselves with a promise to do it in some later, undefined time. When something has a high priority in our life,

there will be a willingness to be nailed down to a specific time. God was simply not a priority in their lives, but they didn't want to admit it.

Another feature of their misplaced priorities is that they too readily allowed obstacles to sidetrack their efforts at rebuilding. There were real obstacles to the rebuilding efforts. Much work needed to be done in restoring order in the land after 70 years of exile. All able-bodied workers would have been much in demand. Since the temple was a larger structure than their houses, large timbers were needed to span the distance between the walls and to provide a roof for the structure. Such large timbers were not available nearby, as indicated by the command of verse 8, where they are told to **“go up to the hills and bring wood.”** The obstacles were real, but when something is a priority, we press on to accomplish it in spite of the obstacles. Wendy's brother-in-law has been diagnosed with a serious form of cancer. He is facing numerous obstacles in the treatment of his disease, including six to eight months out of work, much pain and suffering in his life, and chemotherapy severe enough to risk the introduction of other problems. But he is willing to persevere through those obstacles, because something that has a high priority to him is at issue—his very life. By contrast, when something has a low priority in our lives, any obstacle will be enough to prevent our completion of it.

## **II. The Diagnosis of Misplaced Priorities**

Because we deceive ourselves with this promise to get around to something later, it is difficult to diagnose the presence of misplaced priorities in our lives. God seeks to help Israel diagnose their misplaced priorities by asking them twice to do something. The phrase **“consider your ways”** occurs in verse 5 and then again in verse 7. They were being invited to reflect some on their lives, asking themselves the question of whether or not things were working out as they pursued their own priorities. Specifically, God asked them to ponder whether or not their approach to the rebuilding of their nation was working. **“You have sown much, and 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 into a bag with holes”** (v. 6). God was saying to them that their approach to life was not working. Their problem was not a lack of hard work. Note that he admits that they have sown much. Farming is hard work, and they have not lacked for effort regarding this. Verse 9 also indicates their willingness to work hard, saying that **“each of you has busied himself with his own house.”** Their strategy for making life work seemed to be one that assumed that hard work would always yield the desirable and intended outcome. But it wasn't working, and God was helping them realize that the reason it wasn't working was that their priorities were wrong.

There's a well-known illustration of the importance of priorities and planning in the area of time management. A lumberjack is chopping wood with an ax, and he notices as time passes that more effort is required to chop the same amount of wood. Of course, his ax has become duller. When that happens, our tendency is simply to work harder. But it is a doomed strategy. What is needed is to do what feels less productive and take time out from chopping wood in order to sharpen the ax. What God tells Israel here is similar. At one level, he seems to be adding to their burdens. In effect he is saying to them, "You have been working hard trying to make life work in this challenging environment. But you are failing. You are withering on the vine. What you need to do is to resume work on my house, on the temple." God is adding something else to an over-busy people. Someone might object, "But the math of that doesn't work. If they are working hard to rebuild the nation and get in their crops, and they have to take time out from those jobs to build a temple, how is that going to help them?" Because what God is asking them to do is akin to the woodsman stopping work in order to sharpen his ax.

God is telling us here that when we live life with anything as the top priority other than God, it won't work, no matter how hard we work. If you were to do what God is asking Israel here to do, to consider your ways, what would you conclude? Is there joy in your heart? Are you content? Do you love God and love others? If not, God is saying that you need to make him the priority. How can we do that? That brings us to our next point.

### **III. The Solution to Misplaced Priorities**

The solution for Israel was to repent of their misplaced priorities and resume work on the temple. Let me point out a couple of important things about this. Notice first that actions, not words, are the currency of true repentance. Israel had the words before. They were saying that the temple was important to them, it just needed to be done at a later time. God says to them that true repentance will result in actions. The actions he demands would have required a significant reordering of their lives. They were to **"go up to the hills and bring wood."** Bringing wood from a faraway place would require more than good intentions. As a pastor, I have been around many people who have claimed to have repentant hearts. One of the things I have learned is not to believe any words of repentance. It is not that people are deliberately attempting to deceive me. In most cases, I think they have very sincere intentions. But if they are truly repentant, it will be seen in their actions. Words are not the currency of repentance—actions are. It would be very easy for you to listen to this sermon, be convicted that you have not put God first in your life, and then determine to do so. But if there is no follow-up, if it is a repentance in intention only, then it is not true repentance.

If that's true, then what kinds of actions do we need to see in our lives if we make God our top priority? In Israel's case, it was easy to see what those actions would be. They would resume work on the temple. But the actions will be different for us, won't they? Yes, and no. There is not a literal temple God is calling us to build. But there is a sense in which we are called to prioritize the building of the temple. Let me draw out two aspects of this. First, the temple was the place of prayer, and God calls us to make prayer a priority in our lives. Do you remember what Jesus said about the temple when he chased out all the merchants? He said, **"It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you made it a den of robbers"** (Matt. 21:13). The temple is a meeting place with God, and the place where we meet with God today is in prayer. Is prayer a priority in your life? I have experienced this week the normal post-vacation busy-ness, and it is an easy thing to think that I am just too busy for prayer. But prayer is like going to the hills for wood for the temple. It will take time.

There is another well-known illustration of time management that describes a teacher who brings out a large glass jar and fills it to the top with rocks. He then asks the class if the jar is full, and everyone agrees that it is. He then takes some small gravel and pours it into the jar. It fills all the holes left by the larger rocks. After filling it with small pebbles, he again asks if the jar is full. The class is beginning to get the picture now, and only a few think it is full. He then takes a bag of sand, and pours it into the jar. It fills all the small places left in the voids created by the pebbles. Again he asks if it is full, and no hands go up this time. He then takes some water and is able to add more to the jar. He asks the class what the time management lesson is that is contained in this demonstration. Someone says, "No matter how busy you are, you can always pack in more." "No," responds the teacher. "The lesson is that you must put the big rocks in first." Prayer is a big rock.

The second application I want to make of this comes from verse 9 of the next chapter. Speaking of this post-exilic temple, Haggai says, **"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."** When we turn to the New Testament, it becomes clear that Jesus is this glorious new temple. He is the one who brings peace to our hearts. The application is to make it your top priority to receive the grace of Jesus to fill your heart with his peace and joy.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let me invite you now to repent of misplaced priorities and to make Jesus, God's glorious temple, your top priority in life. We are called to do this not so that life will work better for us, though it will. Rather, we are called to make Jesus our priority because of what God says in verse 8. Come to Jesus as your temple **"that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified."**