

GIVE CAREFUL THOUGHT TO YOUR WAYS

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Haggai 1:1-11 (Matthew 6:25-34)

Who has time for God these days? We're really so busy with just getting by! Our society demands so much of us! Who has time for church services? Okay, maybe some of us don't put it so harshly. Nevertheless, we occupy ourselves with 'essential' matters; addressing things we see as more pressing, and put off going to church, reading our Bible, or growing more in our discipleship. But, God understands, right? When family members are sick and dying, when I'm struggling with my addiction, when my marriage is falling apart, when my job's in jeopardy, I need to take care of these things first. Then, then I'll go to church. Then I'll serve Jesus. Then I'll give my attention to God. Let me just take care of these important life matters first, then I can have time for God. God understands this, right? He understands I need my rest? He understands I have to put food on my table? He understands I need to care for my physical well-being, do my community service, and add to my 401K, right? Actually, while this may be our intuition, I do not think it is God's perspective. I think God has different priorities for us that put Him at the very top, and putting Him at the top is actually, and ultimately, for our good. And, today, I think God would like us to seriously consider our ways with such things.

In our study of Obadiah, we looked at the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587/6 BC. At that time, many Jews were captured and transported back to Babylon where they remained exiled from the land. This would have been the second deportation of Jews to Babylon. The first would have occurred earlier in 597 BC and included King Jeconiah, his officials, prominent citizens, and the prophet Ezekiel who was of priestly lineage. In 537 BC, a community of exiled Jews (*50 K under Zerubbabel*), allowed to return to the land, began to rebuild the

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temple that had been destroyed. However, the rebuilding of the temple was met with fierce political opposition. Ezra describes this experience (**READ *Ezra 4:1-5, 24***).

So, the returned remnant of God's People abandoned their efforts to rebuild the temple for 16 years. Can you imagine the difficulty and hardship of the Jews during this time? Then, in 520 BC, Haggai begins his public prophetic ministry, and the first thing he does is rebuke God's People for not rebuilding His temple. Seems kind of heartless, doesn't it? After all, this returned remnant of Jewish exiles were struggling to reestablish themselves in a destroyed land inhabited by foreigners and surrounded by enemies. These Jews willingly left the comfort of their established lives in Babylon to recolonize Judah and Jerusalem, certainly God understands their difficult if not desperate situation and their need to focus on things that would sustain their very lives and physical well-being? While this may seem logical according to our worldly wisdom, this does not reflect God's thinking; because, it does not reflect God's good priorities for His People.

1. The Prophet Haggai (READ Verse 1)

- a. In light of Ezra's meticulously recorded genealogies of returning Exiles (e.g., *Ezra 2*), it is interesting that Haggai's ancestral father is not mentioned. Ezra himself recorded Haggai's prophecy (*Ezra 5:1-2*), and he later led another group of returning exiles to Jerusalem in 458 BC. Therefore, it appears that Ezra would have known such information about Haggai had it been available. This is even more striking when the fathers of both Zerubbabel, the Governor, and Joshua, the High Priest, are mentioned in the same verse in which Haggai is introduced.
 - i. It reminds me of the mysterious Melchizedek in some ways.

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- b. Haggai was also a prophetic contemporary of Zechariah whose public prophetic ministry began about two months after Haggai's (**READ Zechariah 1:1**).
- 2. **The Word of the LORD (Verses 2-11 which is the first of four messages from God through Haggai)**
 - a. **The LORD Hears what His People Say READ Verse 2**
 - i. God knows the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. He knows our deepest desires and darkest secrets.
 - 1. God also knows our greatest needs, even if we fail to realize them.
 - a. While the temple remains unbuilt, God is still with His People in their lowliness and knows their hearts.
 - ii. God understands that His People are weary and worn out over these past 16 years. He knows that the nature of their circumstances appears bleak, and that, humanly speaking, they cannot imagine giving their energy to building God's temple. They're barely managing as is.
 - 1. But God will not leave His People in such despair and helplessness. God, through His prophet Haggai, challenges their narrow assessment of their apparent situation.
 - b. **The LORD Challenges His People's Preoccupations READ verses 3-4**
 - i. What a challenge? What a revealing question? God is asking: Is this the time for you to be nicely decorating your houses with ornate paneling like that used in Solomon's magnificent temple? You think you are struggling but look at how you are really just building up your own estate, living in relative luxury, seeking security and comfort. Meanwhile, the temple of the LORD, the One Who brought you back to the inheritance He promised, remains neglected, forgotten.

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1. How often do we get lost in the mundane routines of maintaining a household or engaging in our daily work without even considering God's presence and promises in our lives? How do we think the tasks which occupy most of our time are essential when they're really luxurious fluff?
- ii. While we forget God, He hasn't forgotten us, and He speaks a word to us, so that we may stop for a moment and consider how our priorities run, or ruin, our lives.
- c. The LORD Reveals His Providential Means of Interfering with His People's Priorities **READ verses 5-11**
 - i. CS Lewis calls God the "Transcendental Interferer". God messes up our plans. Thwarts our hard work. Gives us less than we expected. Why? To smash our idols revealed in our misplaced priorities.
 - ii. God simply wants what's best for us. He does not want us to become focused on and content with lesser temporal things of this world that will pass away. He wants to direct our gaze to our eternal inheritance promised to Abraham, which we receive by faith in Christ our Risen King.

In summary, the first "word of the Lord" through the prophet Haggai to His People is a call for them to build His temple. This Word for God's People comes; because, they have improper and misplaced priorities in their lives, and this is seen in their preoccupation with their own houses and in their indifference to God's house. This Word of God reveals that God, Himself, is the One behind the drought and the subsequent hardships the people have experienced, despite their hard work to sustain their lives. They trusted in their labor; not in their Lord.

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And here is another great reversal, and this reversal is counter-intuitive to the fallen person guided by worldly wisdom. We cannot get our lives together and rightly organized BEFORE coming to God. No. We come to God, first and foremost, so that God may THEN organize and rightly order our lives. God graciously makes, and leaves us in, messes, so that we may realize our helplessness and turn to Him to deliver us. God impedes the pursuit of misplaced priorities in our lives, so that we may rightly prioritize Him and His will for us.

For example, the returned Exiles put their own comfort and stability above serving God in building His temple, but God brought poverty to them despite their best efforts because of their improper priorities. God's temple signified God's presence among His People. It is God's presence and provision that is first needed, so that we may then properly use our resources according to God's priorities in service of others for His glory. This is our reasonable and proper worship, and Jesus alone offered Himself to the fullest in this way upon the Cross to grant us the gracious provision of His Holy Spirit Who enables us to hear and received God's abiding Word for our own faithful service. Because of Christ's abiding presence in us by His Spirit, we can now seek first His Kingdom, trusting that all other things needed will be added unto us.

This passage has significant implications for everyone. Notice the repeating exhortation of God's Word to "Give careful thought to your ways." This is precisely what we must do in relation to God's Word as we consider our current circumstances.

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For the unbelieving, non-Christian, perhaps you've been struggling for some time now. Perhaps your life is a mess and you need some direction. Could God be thwarting your ways and frustrating your endeavors so that you would turn to Him and trust in Him to do what's best for you? **READ *Matthew 11:28-30***.

For the believing Christian, listen to God's Word and discern what His priorities are for you as one of His People. As God's Word, through Haggai, commanded His People to rebuild the temple, so too does God's Word incarnate in the Person of Jesus command us to build His new eternal temple, which is the Body of Christ; with He in us and we in Him. By His indwelling Spirit, ourselves living stones of His Temple, Christ sustains us for this temple building project for which He has commissioned us in ***Matthew 28:18-20***.

As we all give careful thought to our ways and consider the priorities of our lives, let us pray for a proper response to God's Word, which reveals that His almighty providential hand could very well be directly involved in certain hardships we encounter because of our misplaced priorities.

How will you respond?