PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST

Haggai 1:1-15

By

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February 16, 2003

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February 16, 2003  
Haggai Lesson 1

**Putting First Things First**  
Haggai 1:1-15

Every day you exchange a day of your life for something. It’s as if at the start of life each of us were issued a certain number of coins. They’re hidden inside a large machine so that we don’t know how many we were issued or how many we have left. Each day, the machine issues us a new coin. It may be the last coin we get, or we may get many more. All we know is that the average person in America gets between 70 and 80 years’ worth, but some get far less; a few may get more.

You take each day’s coin and exchange it for something: a day at work or school, shopping, church, leisure, or whatever. Once spent, you can never get the coins back to spend them differently. The art of living wisely is largely a matter of spending your coins on the things that really matter in light of eternity and not frivolously wasting them. Living wisely is difficult because often the choice is not between the bad and the good, but between the good and the best.

The Book of Haggai, second shortest in the Old Testament, has a potent message. It tells us to put first things first in our lives. It was written to people, like us, who would have told you that God must be first. They believed that; we believe that. But, they had drifted into a way of life where their intellectual belief in the supremacy of God was not reflected in the way they were living. They gave lip service to the priority of God, but in fact they lived with other priorities. God sent this prophet to help His people get their priorities in line with what they knew they should be.

The historical setting is the early chapters of Ezra (see Ezra 5:1). In 536 B.C., a remnant of about 50,000 Jews had returned from Babylon to Judah under the decree of Cyrus, King of Persia. They quickly rebuilt the altar and began offering sacrifices. Two years after returning, they had laid the foundation to rebuild the temple. Their Samaritan neighbors had offered to join in the work, but the Jews refused their offer. The Samaritans, in turn, threatened
the workers and sent men to Persia to lobby against the Jews, bringing the work to a halt.

At least 14 years had passed. The people got caught up in the routine of life—farming, building houses, raising families, and that sort of thing. They got used to life without a temple. Even their leaders, Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest, had gotten used to things as they were. Into that scene, God raised up Haggai and (two months later) Zechariah to proclaim His message to this returned remnant.

The Book of Haggai consists of four precisely dated messages from the Lord. The first (1:1-15) was on the first day of the sixth month in the second year of Darius (1:1, August 29, 520 B.C.). The second (2:1-9) came on the 21st of the seventh month (2:1, October 17th). The third (2:10-19) and fourth (2:20-23) messages came on the same day, the 24th of the ninth month (2:10, 20; December 18th). To sum up the first message:

**God will grant true blessing when we put His house first.**

Charles Feinberg (The Minor Prophets [Moody Press], p. 240) put it, “In short, Haggai is saying, ‘Give God the supreme place in your life.’” Or, as Jesus put it, “Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). We all know this, but …

1. **We all are prone to put our prosperity above God’s house.**

   This is the default mode on all of our fallen “computers”! If we give no thought to how we’re living, we will naturally live for our agendas, not for God’s. All of us who have trusted Christ as Savior know (intellectually) that it is foolish and vain to live for the things of this world. We know that these things never deliver the satisfaction that they promise. We know that we will not find true happiness apart from God. And yet we keep drifting towards loving the world if we don’t fight against it. Note four things about those who put their prosperity above God’s house:

   A. Those who put their prosperity above God’s house are often committed believers.

   We would not understand Haggai’s message properly if we forgot that the people to whom he was speaking had made the dif-
difficult commitment to leave their established way of life in Babylon and make the dangerous journey back to the land of promise. They had homes and jobs in Babylon. Most of them had been born and raised there. But they knew that God’s purpose for His people involved the Promised Land. By faith they had responded to the call to return and had committed themselves to the hardships of getting re-established in the land that had been devastated by war. Probably most of them made that commitment because of their commitment to God.

Shortly after returning, they had made an attempt to rebuild the Temple, but the opposition had stopped the project. Gradually, they had lost their vision and had drifted into a lifestyle where God’s house was no longer the priority. They probably viewed it as nice, but not necessary; extra, but not essential.

We need to see ourselves in this picture. If you know Christ, there was a time when you made a personal commitment to Him. You decided to follow Jesus, as the chorus goes. At first, you were zealous for spiritual things. You read your Bible every day. You got involved with groups like Campus Crusade or Inter-Varsity during college. You got involved serving in a local church. But perhaps your efforts met with difficulties. You had a personality clash with another Christian, or you were disillusioned with the disappointing results, or you encountered personal trials that God didn’t remove, even after much prayer.

Meanwhile, life moved on. You started a career and a family. You had bills to pay and other demands on your time. Church and the Lord’s work drifted into the background. You still attend church as often as you can, but it has become a slice of life, not the center. You tell yourself that you just don’t have time to serve as you used to. Someone else who doesn’t have the responsibilities that you have will have to get involved. Without deliberately rebelling against God, you have drifted into putting your house above God’s house. When your conscience nags, you have reasons to explain why things are this way:

B. Those who put their prosperity above God’s house have “reasons” (excuses) for their lifestyles.
They were saying, “The time has not come, even the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt” (1:2). If you had asked them why the temple had not been built, they would have responded, “Don’t get me wrong! I’m all for rebuilding the Temple. It’s a great cause. But the timing just isn’t right. We’re in an economic downturn right now. Everyone’s pinched for money. There aren’t enough good jobs. It’s all I can do to provide for my family. But times will get better, and then we’ll rebuild the temple!”

Again, we must see ourselves here! We’re all prone to make up excuses for why we are not obedient to put God first with the time and money He entrusts to us. Sometimes we even use the Bible to support our excuses. “The Bible says that if a man doesn’t provide for his own family, he’s worse than an unbeliever and has denied the faith! I’m just trying to obey that verse by providing for my family. But someday I’ll have all the kids through college and the bills paid, and then we’ll give more to the Lord’s work.” Or, “This is a hectic time in our family life. The kids demand so much attention. Every day is taken up with meeting their needs. But someday we’ll be through this phase, and then we’ll get involved in the church.”

C. Those who put their prosperity above God’s house are blind to God’s chastening hand.

The people in Haggai’s day were having problems. They sowed plenty of seed, but there was a drought and the crops didn’t yield as much as they had hoped. That meant that they had less to sow the following year, even though they needed to make up for the previous bad year. No matter how hard they tried, they just seemed to be spinning their wheels. Inflation seemed to gobble up the little bit that they earned. It was like putting money into a bag with holes (1:6). By the end of the month, there was nothing left. Of course the hard times meant that they didn’t have any extra to give toward the temple building fund. But surely God understood their difficult circumstances!

What they didn’t see was that God not only understood their circumstances, He had caused them! They were working harder but going behind faster, but they hadn’t stopped to consider that God was trying to tell them something. Haggai came along and said, “Hey, folks, it’s God who controls the rain and the harvest. He is withholding His blessing because your priorities are not right! Put
His house first and He will bless you. Seek first His kingdom and all these things will be added unto you.”

People who slip into putting their prosperity above God’s kingdom have lost the spiritual perspective they need to get out of the quicksand they’ve fallen into. They’re working for the food that perishes, but not for the food that endures to eternal life (John 6:27). They’re forgetting that if their ways are pleasing to the Lord, He will give them all that they really need. They need to stop and consider that they are working against God, who merely blows on their take-home pay and scatters it (1:9). He does that to get them to reconsider their mixed up priorities.

D. Those who put their prosperity above God’s house never get what they’re after.

Some of these people had a measure of material success. They lived in fine, paneled houses (1:4). But the point of verses 6 & 9-11 is, even if you get what you’re working for, it never satisfies. Solomon, who tried money, fame, knowledge, sensual pleasure, and everything a man could dream of, ended up cynically saying, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” (Eccl. 1:2). In the words of the Rolling Stones, “I can’t get no satisfaction”!

What good does it do to work hard all your life so that you can retire and enjoy the good things in life, if a month after your retirement, you have a heart attack and die? You have just put your wages into a purse with holes! What good does it do to build bigger barns to hold your increased wealth if God says, “You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?” (Luke 12:20)?

History is strewn with people that devoted themselves to climbing the ladder of worldly success, only to find out too late that it was leaning against the wrong wall! Sadly, some of those people have been God’s people who just drifted downstream with the world. The truth is, only God can satisfy your soul. As Jesus promised, when we put God and His kingdom first, He gives us all the material things we need. But we have to fight constantly the drift toward wrong priorities.

2. We must deliberately and continually put God’s house above our prosperity.
Let me clarify what I mean by “God’s house.” In our text, of course, it refers to the temple in Jerusalem, which was the center for worshiping God. Although God is everywhere, the temple was the place on earth where God dwelled in a special sense. He revealed His glory there. The sacrifices offered there pointed ahead to the coming of God’s Messiah, Jesus, who would offer Himself as God’s final and complete sacrifice for our sins. To allow the Temple to lay in ruins was to neglect the worship of God. It was to have inverted priorities, and as James Boice puts it, “in the final analysis all inverted priorities are idolatry. They put the creation before the Creator” (The Minor Prophets [Baker], 2:469).

In the church age, God’s temple is not a physical building, but rather, His people, both individually and corporately (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). God dwells in individual human hearts, and together we are being built into the temple or house of God (Eph. 2:21; 1 Pet. 2:5). To make God’s house the priority in life means that your number one aim is to make your body a fit dwelling for the Holy Spirit and to devote yourself to building others in Christ so that their lives are a proper dwelling for God. It means that your main goal is to know Christ at home in your heart by faith and to do all that you can to help others do the same. Note two things:

A. To put God’s house above material prosperity requires deliberate and continual effort.

As I said, our default mode is to put material prosperity above spiritual prosperity. That is the strong pull of the world. If we want to go God’s way, we have to fight every inch of the way.

It is striking that in contrast to many of the prophets, like Jeremiah, who preached all their lives to stubborn and disobedient people, Haggai preached and the people obeyed! It started with the leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua (1:12). That took humility on their part. It would have been easy for them as the political and spiritual leaders to resist Haggai’s message in order to preserve their esteem in the eyes of the community. “Who does this upstart prophet think that he is? We’ve never heard of him before. He has no credentials. He just comes along and says, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts’ and we’re supposed to believe him?” Yes, they were, and thankfully they did!
It’s interesting that proportionately, Haggai claims to speak the word of the Lord more than any other prophet in Scripture (25 times in 38 verses) and he refers to God as “the Lord of hosts” 14 times. He is saying, “God is the Lord over all the armies of heaven and earth, and I am bringing you His message, so you’d better listen!” In this case, the people did listen and obey.

The application is that we must accept the Bible as the authoritative word of the Lord of hosts and submit to it. When it confronts the way we live, we can either resist it by making up more excuses, or we can obey it. But one-time obedience is not enough. We must deliberately and continually obey if we want to keep our priorities in order. How do we do that?

B. To put God’s house above material prosperity requires constant self-evaluation in the fear of God.

Twice the Lord tells the people, “Consider your ways” (1:5, 7). That means to stop long enough in your busy schedule to evaluate your life in the light of God’s Word and fearing Him (1:12).

(1) How are you spending your time? These people had plenty of time for themselves, but they didn’t have time for God. Rearrange your schedule!

(2) How are you spending your money, which is really God’s money? These folks claimed that they had to get their own houses built first, and then they could build God’s house. That was backwards. God says that we are to give Him the first fruits, off the top. We are to give Him the best. We are managers of all that He has given us, to invest it profitably for His kingdom.

(3) What are your goals? What is it that you’re aiming at in life? If you live to an old age, what do you want to look back on as far as accomplishments?

(4) What do you think about the most? What secretly occupies your thought life? Do you dream of getting rich, of achieving fame, of some hobby or leisure pursuit, or do you think about the Lord and how He wants you to spend your life?

(5) Who are your heroes or models? Whom do you most admire? Whom would you like to be like? Why?
(6) Who are your friends? Whom do you like to spend time with? Why do you like to be with them?

(7) How do you spend your leisure time? When you have time off, how do you spend it? Do you watch TV? Do you live for sports? Do you hang out with friends? How does your leisure time reflect and affect your devotion to Jesus Christ?

It’s helpful to write down your goals and re-evaluate every so often to see where you’re at. Otherwise, you drift off course.

Undergirding all of these questions should be the fear of God (1:12). Some think that the fear of God is an Old Testament concept, and that we are to focus on His love. But the New Testament has plenty of references to fearing God (Matt. 10:28; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:21; Col. 3:22; 1 Pet. 2:17; Rev. 14:7; 15:4; 19:5). While we do not need to fear His final judgment if we are in Christ, Peter tells us, “If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth” (1 Pet. 1:17).

What is the result when we reverently obey God by putting His house above our material prosperity?

3. When we put God’s house above our prosperity, He is pleased and glorified, His work gets done, and He truly blesses us.

A. When we put God’s house above our prosperity, He is pleased and glorified (1:8).

God is looking for pleasure and glory from His people. The main problem when we fail to put His house first is that we are indifferent to His glory. I commend to you John Piper’s deep, but worth wrestling with, God’s Passion for His Glory [Crossway Books], which includes the full text of Jonathan Edwards’ The End for Which God Created the World. God created and called a people for Himself for His glory (Isa. 43:7). Our aim should be God’s glory.

B. When we put God’s house above our prosperity, His work gets done.

The Lord stirred up the hearts of the leaders and the people (1:14), “and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God.” While we are responsible to get our priorities in
order; when we do it, it is because God has moved in our hearts. As I said recently, whatever you do to pay bills, the chief business of every Christian is to extend the kingdom of God.

C. When we put God’s house above our prosperity, He truly blesses us.

When the people obeyed, God sent word, “I am with you” (1:13). If we have God with us, we have everything. If God is with us and for us, who can be against us (Rom. 8:31)? If God seems distant in your life, perhaps your priorities have gotten mixed up. When you put God truly in first place, you experience a new awareness of His presence. That is true blessing!

**Conclusion**

I’ve shared before the story of the time management expert who was speaking to a group of business students. He pulled out a large, wide-mouth jar and filled it with fist-sized rocks. When he couldn’t put any more in, he asked, “Is this jar full?”

The class responded, “Yes.” He said, “Really?” Then he pulled out a bucket of gravel and poured it in, shaking it down through the cracks. Then he asked, “Is the jar full?”

The students were onto him, so they said, “No.” “Good,” he replied. He dumped in a bucket of sand. Once more he asked, “Is the jar full?” “No,” they shouted. Again he said, “Good.” He poured in a pitcher of water until the jar was full to the brim.

Then he asked, “What is the point of the illustration?” One student ventured, “No matter how full your schedule, if you try hard, you can always fit more in.”

“No,” the speaker replied, “that is not the point. The point is, if you don’t put the big rocks in first, you’ll never get them in at all.” (First Things First, by Stephen Covey, Roger & Rebecca Merrill [Simon & Schuster], pp. 88-89.)

What should your “big rocks” be? God and His house! Put them into your life first!
Discussion Questions

1. Should every Christian put God and His house first, or is this just for “full-time” Christian workers? Defend biblically.

2. How can a Christian succeed in a career if he puts God’s house first? Does God want Christians to excel in their careers?

3. Is it okay for a Christian to have and enjoy nice things? Where do we draw the line? Is “luxury” sin?

4. To what extent (if any) is the notion of retirement biblical? How should Christians view their “retirement” years?

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