

Do you ever feel like you work, and you work, and you work –
but you never get anywhere?

You spent years building your career – and where did you get?
You pour your life into people – and what happens?

Nothing ever changes.

The estate of sin and misery continues its reign.

Every style of parenting produces disturbed and miserable adults (Onion).

The prophet Haggai addresses the people of God at a time when they felt very much like that.

They were rebuilding their lives after the exile –

rebuilding their houses – restoring their fields and vineyards –
but it wasn't working.

They had encountered opposition from their neighbors –
and so they had stopped rebuilding the temple.

They were trying to “get along” and “fit in” –
and not make waves among their neighbors...

They were drifting.

Do you ever feel that way?

Like you're just “drifting” along in the Christian life?

D. A. Carson warns us:

“People do not drift toward holiness.

Apart from grace-driven effort,

people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture,
faith, and delight in the Lord.

We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance;

we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom;

we drift toward superstition and call it faith.

We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation;

we slouch toward prayerlessness

and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism;

we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.”

(D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, 2.25).

The only way to holiness is the way of the cross.

Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

Or as Haggai 2:4 puts it: “Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of Hosts.”

Haggai is short.

Only 38 verses.

We’ve got two – maybe three – sermons here.

But that’s because Haggai’s point is very simple – and very clear!

If you focus on building *your house* – your labors will be in vain!

But “I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts” – so get back to work
building *my house*.

And since *all of the Christian life* is about temple building –
building up the body of Christ –

Haggai’s basic point is a point that we need to hear!

And at the heart of Haggai’s point is the importance of hearing the Word of the LORD.

Haggai only has 38 verses.

But in these 38 verses, there are 29 references to divine revelation!

Four times we are told that the Word of the LORD *came* to Haggai.

Five times we hear “thus says the LORD”

Twelve times we hear “declares the LORD”

along with a handful of “voice of the LORD,” “the LORD’s message,” etc.

Likewise, there is not only a focus on divine revelation,
but also divine sovereignty.

In these 38 verses, God is called “the LORD of hosts” 14 times.

He is the one who speaks – who acts – and whose Word controls the fortunes of his people –
and indeed over all nations – and all creation!

1. The Word of the LORD by the Hand of Haggai (v1-2)

a. To Zerubbabel and Joshua (v1)

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 the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

We heard in the book of Ezra that Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the Jews
at the time of the rebuilding of the temple (Ez 5:1, 6:14).

In Ezra we heard that the builders laid the foundation of the temple during the reign of Cyrus.
King Cyrus of Persia had issued his decree,

allowing the return and the rebuilding of the temple in 538.
Zerubbabel and Jeshua had returned and laid the foundation.
but then the enemies of Jerusalem opposed them and the work stopped
until the reign of Darius.

So it was not until the 2nd year of Darius (ca. 520 BC) that the work resumed.
We know from Ezra 6:15 that they *finished* the temple in the 6th year of Darius (515).

The book of Haggai focuses entirely on a five month period from August 29 to December 18, 520.
There are six “time stamps” in the book that take us through these months.

1:1 – 1st day of sixth month (Aug 29, 520)
1:15 – 24th day of sixth month (Sept 21)
2:1 – 21st day of seventh month (Oct 17)
2:10 – 24th day of 9th month (Dec 18)
2:20 – 24th day of 9th month (Dec 18)

Zerubbabel is called “governor of Judah” –
but as we saw in Ezra-Nehemiah, it is not obvious that Judah was a separate province.
The “Province Beyond the River” included the whole region –
and the governor in Samaria certainly seems to have thought that he had charge of the region.
Some argue that Persian governmental structure was very rigid –
but that is largely based on documents produced in Persia and Babylon!
Zerubbabel, Joshua, and Haggai lived in the first two decades of Persian rule –
and they live on the fringe of the Persian empire,
on the border of the Arabian desert – a region that *no* outsider ever controlled!

As Ezra-Nehemiah makes clear –
there are lots of competing players in the game –
and while all would *say* that they are loyal subjects of Persia –
none are particularly interested in enforcing Persian rule
(except insofar as it furthers their own particular interests!).

So Zerubbabel is called “governor” of Judah
at a time when Judah does not seem to be its own province.
Zerubbabel was a grandson of Jehoiachin, the son of Josiah,
and so was the last Davidic ruler of Jerusalem.

Joshua is called the “high priest.”
He was a descendent of Zadok – in the line of Aaron.

So Haggai’s first message is given to the Son of David and the Aaronic high priest.

It comes on the first day of the sixth month.
August 29, 520.

The first day of the month is a New Moon feast.
And since this is the first day of the *sixth* month,
it is also three weeks after the anniversary of the destruction of the first temple.
The temple had been destroyed 66 years ago last month.

And now the word of the LORD came “by the hand of Haggai the prophet.”

b. Against the Claim That It’s Not Time Yet (v2)

² *“Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.”*

The central problem that the book of Haggai addresses is the claim of verse 2.
“These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.”

We laid the foundation 16 years ago.
So we’re committed to rebuilding the temple.
But it’s not time yet.

We’ll get around to it – but we’ve got to make sure that our own houses are in order first!

Remember David?

He wanted to build a house for God –
but God told him no – your son, who comes after you –
he will build the house for my name!
Sure, we laid the foundation – but our children will build the house!

Just like David!

What’s the difference?

David was eager and ready to build the house.
But God told him not to.
Now the people of God aren’t all that eager or ready...
It’s not time – we have too many other things to do!!

Does that sound familiar?

We have too many things to do to build the kingdom of Christ!
I’m not talking about being too busy for “church activities”!
If we’re not careful, then “church activities” are one of the things
that can get in the way of building the kingdom of Christ!

Building the kingdom of Christ is all about building up the people of God –
building that holy temple where God dwells –
“I am with you, declares the LORD.”
The word, sacraments, and prayer are the means that God has chosen for us to use
as we build his holy temple.

2. The Word of the LORD by the Hand of Haggai (v3-11)

a. This House Lies in Ruins (v3-4)

³ Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, ⁴ “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?”

The reason why I use the parallel with David
is because that is the language that the LORD uses in verse 4.

“Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?”
The ruined character of God’s house is where God’s rebuke begins in verse 4
and ends in verse 9.

Why are things not the way they should be?
Because my house is not the way it should be!

You are all focused on your own houses –
when you should be focused on God’s house!

And so at the center of our text are two calls for Israel to “Consider your ways.”
First in verses 5-6 –
and then a second in verses 7-8.
The word translated “consider” will play an important role in chapter 2 (verses 15 and 18 –
“consider from this day onward.”)

b. Consider Your Ways – and the Results (v5-6)

⁵ Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. ⁶ 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.

The word translated “consider” means to set or place something.
Here the LORD says, “place your heart on your ways” –
in other words, take some time to think carefully about your ways.

(In Hebrew, the “heart” is the center of thinking –
while the kidneys are the center of the emotions.

You sometimes hear people say that Hebrew has no word for “mind” –
but that’s not true – “mind” is simply the thinking part of you –
and in Hebrew the thinking part of you is the “heart”!)

So consider your ways – think about the path that you have been on!

And when you hear verse 6, at first, it sounds like Haggai is saying that they are facing poverty.
But listen more carefully:

“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.”

That is not a description of *scarcity*!
That is a description of *avarice*!
Always wanting *more* –
You eat – but never have enough.
There’s food – there’s drink – there is clothing –
but there is no contentment!

No matter how much you have – there is never enough!
Twenty years ago Ginger and I lived comfortably on less than \$20,000 a year.
Now we spend almost that much on food!
Of course, we’re feeding five times as many people –
but there is a tendency for our wages to burn a hole in our pockets!
We earn and we spend – and it’s gone –
and we need more...

And God says to us:
“Consider your ways.”
Set your hearts to think carefully about your path.
That’s why the LORD of hosts says for a second time in verse 7:
consider your ways!

c. Consider Your Ways – and the Purpose, that I May Be Glorified (v7-8)

⁷ “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. ⁸ Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD.

Think about the path that you are on!
Where is it going?
What is the *purpose* of your path?
What is the goal of the road – the way – that you walk?

“Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house,
that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord.”

There are five verbs in verse 8 – just like there were five verbs in verse 6.
You have been interested in your own houses – while my house lies in ruins.
You have been seeking your own pleasure –
you have not sought *my pleasure!*

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will come back to these same themes.
“Do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’
or ‘What shall we wear?’
For the Gentiles seek after all these things,
and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.
But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.” (Matt 6:31-33)

When we are oriented towards our own happiness –
we find ourselves chasing after the wind!

And that is at the heart of verses 9-11:

d. Heaven and Earth Withhold Their Bounty Because My House Lies in Ruins (v9-11)

⁹ *You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.*

Why has all your labor fallen short?
Because God is not at the center of everything you do!!

You are not loving God with all your heart – and all your soul – and all your strength!
The exiles have been thinking that when they get their own houses in order,
then they will be able to get the temple rebuilt.

Have you ever done that?
“When my marriage is in better shape – then I can serve God better!”
“When I’ve got my career in order – then I can focus on God’s kingdom!”

It will never work.
You looked for much, and behold, it came to little.
As long as you are putting *your house* – your economic situation –
ahead of your pursuit of the LORD –

you will fail *again and again and again*.

I know.
I've done it.

No, pastors are not immune!
I can preach Christ and his kingdom –
and yet not seek Christ first!

And notice what God says will happen when the church forgets her calling:

¹⁰ Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. ¹¹ And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors."

If you take this in a strictly literal way –
then you would be forced to say that God's bounteous blessing is upon our land!
We haven't had a serious famine in this land for decades!
Not since the Dust Bowl of the Great Depression in the 1930s
have we had a serious food shortage!

We are well-fed, well-clothed –
the economic downturn of 2008 was a minor inconvenience –
not a devastating famine!

And yet – we eat, but never have enough –
(and our diet creates all sorts of medical problems...)
we drink, but never have our fill –
(as alcohol destroys our livers, and sugary drinks destroy our kidneys...)
And we clothe ourselves, but no one is warm –
no one is content –
we keep building bigger and bigger closets to hold all our clothing –
until our closets are bigger than bedrooms used to be!

We've figured out how to feed everyone – how to clothe everyone!
And yet...
"he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes."

We have lost sight of the *only thing* that truly matters:
loving the LORD our God with all our heart – all our mind – all our strength!

[read]

3. Then the Remnant Obeyed (v12-15)

a. Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the Remnant Obeyed (v12)

¹² Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.

How often has that happened?

You hear a sermon – you have a conversation with a friend –
and suddenly the light goes on!

Oh! I have forgotten my God!!

Zerubbabel and Joshua – with all the remnant of the people –
obeyed the voice of the LORD their God –
and the words of Haggai the prophet...

and the people feared the LORD.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

The remnant had forgotten the LORD.

Oh, they hadn't "forgotten" him (intellectually).

They knew that Yahweh was God!

They just feared their neighbors more than they feared their God!

How do you know when you are fearing your neighbors more than you fear God?

It's simple:

when their words matter more to you than God's word!

When what they think of you is more important to you than what God thinks of you.

We're talking daily life here – not some abstract question!

When God says, "love your neighbor as yourself" –

and your friend says, "your neighbor's a real jerk!"

How do you respond?

How do you love your neighbor?

Do you allow your desire for approval and acceptance

lead you to speak evil of your neighbor?

If we fear God more than we fear our neighbor,
then we will begin to love our neighbors *well*.

But it all starts with fearing God.

It starts with obeying the voice of the LORD and the words of his apostles and prophets.

[read]

b. “I Am with You” – the Presence of God (v13-15)

¹³ Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD's message, “I am with you, declares the LORD.”

Haggai is said to be the “messenger of the LORD” –
this could be translated “angel of the LORD” (indeed, that is the LXX translation!) –
because he speaks to the people with the LORD’s own message.

“I am with you, declares the LORD.”
God is present with his people *when they obey his voice*.

If you feel like God is distant,
sometimes the reason is because you are distant from him!
Consider your ways!
Think about the path that you are on!
Are you obeying his voice?
Do you fear him more than you fear others?

I want to be careful here –
because if we say that if God feels distant, it’s *your fault* –
then both Job and Jesus are in trouble!
But my observation is that in our day,
we have largely rejected the path of holiness,
preferring instead the path of selfishness and pleasure.

And then we wonder why “I can’t get no satisfaction”!

Are we being diligent in our pursuit of *knowing Christ*?
I want you to notice the order of things in chapter 1:
God’s blessing – his declaration “I am with you”
only comes to those who obey the voice of the LORD and fear Him.

And then notice what happens next:

¹⁴ And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people.

It is *possible* that “spirit” (ruach) here refers to the human spirit,
but it is far more likely that it refers to the Holy Spirit.

The LORD stirred up the Spirit in Zerubbabel and in Joshua, and in all the remnant of the people.
This is the way that the apostle Peter speaks in Acts 5:32.
When the high priest questions Peter and the other apostles,

charging them not to teach in Jesus' name,
Peter replies,
"We must obey God rather than men.
The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.
God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior,
to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.
And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit,
whom God has given to those who obey him."

God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey him.
Sometimes, I think Reformed folk refuse to say it that way.
We say God gives the Holy Spirit – and *then* we obey him!

Now, in one sense that's true!
We are dead in our sins.
We need God's grace – God's Spirit – to make us alive!

But that's *not* what Haggai or Peter are talking about!
What is the Spirit *doing* in Haggai?
What is the Spirit *doing* in Acts 5?

In Acts 5:32, the Holy Spirit is *bearing witness* to the resurrection of Jesus –
through the testimony of the Christian church
(those who obey him).

In Haggai 1, the Holy Spirit is stirring people up to work on the house of the LORD of Hosts.
In other words, bearing witness to the resurrection of the Son of God!

But the Holy Spirit only does this work *in those who obey him*.
The question here is *not* "are you truly saved?"
The question here is "are you building up the body of Christ?"
Are you bearing witness to the resurrected Son of God –
seeking first his kingdom and making disciples
as we walk together in the midst of this crooked and perverse generation?

That is the work of the Holy Spirit in those who fear God and obey his voice!

*And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, ¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day
of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king.*

It took them three and a half weeks to respond.
Some have wondered why they were so slow!

Others have marveled that they were able to respond so quickly!

This is, after all, the *sixth month*.
Right in the middle of the harvest!
To mobilize the manpower and the materials to start work on the temple in 3 weeks
(after 15 years of inaction!)
suggests that their response was *prompt* and *energetic!!*

If I called up a skilled builder right now and said,
“I’ve got the biggest project in town for you –
can you start in three weeks?”
I’d be laughed out of South Bend!

Uh, sorry buddy, let’s plan on next spring!

But that is not how the people of God respond to the call to get to work on temple-building!
It sounds like Zerubbabel gave them time to get the harvest in –
while he probably got his architects together to figure out
how they were going to make it all fit together!

“Okay guys, we’ve got three weeks until we’ve got all these work crews showing up...
What’s the plan?!”

If you know anything about building projects, this is called *lightning speed!!*