

First Things First

David H. Roper

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are the final three books of the twelve that we call the "Minor Prophets." They are called minor not in that they are in any way insignificant but in contrast to the major prophets--Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, whose books are much longer. These final three are called "postexilic" prophets, because they wrote after the exile.

The exile was a very dark and tragic period for the nation of Judah. In the opening years of the Sixth Century B.C., Nebuchadnezzar had sacked many of the smaller towns in Judah. Finally he besieged Jerusalem and in 586 B.C. destroyed the city and the temple, leaving only the blackened shell of the temple remaining. Many of the Jews were deported into Babylon and from there were scattered throughout the ancient Near East. Many went to Egypt and other surrounding nations, like Ammon and Moab. Those who remained in the land were barely able to scratch out a living, and many died from disease and starvation. It was truly a grim period for this little nation. They lost their identity as a nation--all of their institutions were ended. And though some worshiped in the shell of the temple, most of the priests had been deported. They were a beaten people. That is why these books have so much meaning for us today--because they were written for a generation of beaten people, people who were defeated, down-and-out, apathetic, who had lost their motivation for living.

About 536 B.C., Cyrus, the Persian emperor, made a decree that allowed the Jews to go back into the land and rebuild the temple. A few returned--about 40,000--but the rest stayed in Babylon because they thought they had things much better there. Archeologists are still finding bits of business memoranda containing the names of Jews who remained in Babylon and Persia because of their possessions. They did quite well there, and were very reluctant to go back to Palestine where there was nothing much awaiting them. But a few returned under Zerubbabel, the politically appointed governor of Judah, and Joshua, the high priest. They came back to rebuild the temple, and were successful in the early months of their endeavors. But then they were opposed by Samaritans and other groups, and they stopped building the temple and became preoccupied with building their own homes and farming the land. It was at this point the Lord raised up the prophet Haggai to minister to the nation.

We do not know much about Haggai. His name means "festival of the Lord" or "my feast," which may suggest that he was born on a feast day. Evidently he was an elderly man--he must have been in his eighties--because there is some indication from the prophecy that he saw the first temple, which now had been in ruins for over sixty years. Nothing is known of him before this time; this is the beginning of his ministry--which ought to give heart to those of you who feel that perhaps you are past your prime. For Haggai, (as well as for Caleb, Joshua's sidekick), life begins at eighty! That is when his ministry started.

Haggai's ministry is one of encouragement. He was sent to stir up the spirit of the people to begin to rebuild, and he was successful. We know that four years after his ministry the temple was rebuilt; it was completed in 516 B.C.

Haggai's book is unique among the prophetic books, because his prophecies are dated so precisely. We know exactly when they were given. The Jews used a lunar calendar, which is a bit different from our own Julian calendar. But we are able to coordinate these dates so that we know precisely the very day and the year in which they were delivered. The first was delivered on August 29, 520 B.C., the second on October 17, 520 B.C., and the third and fourth on December 18 of the same year. So he had a ministry of about fifteen weeks. And, as you notice, his messages grew progressively shorter. But although the final two prophecies are very brief, they are just as potent as his inaugural prophecy in chapter 1.

Now let us look at that prophecy in chapter 1, which was delivered on August 29, 520 B.C. The prophet says the Lord knows that the people are saying it is not yet time to build the temple. For some sixteen years the temple had been lying in an unfinished state. They had started to rebuild, then had let it lapse while they started to build their own houses, to "panel" them, is the word Haggai uses, referring not only to elaborate paneling within the houses but also to their roofs. Haggai is contrasting the fact that God's people have roofs on their homes, but God's house is still a shell.

I am sure there were reasons why the Jews were concerned about their homes. This was August. The early rains began in September and October. And they were concerned about getting roofs over their heads and caring for their own families. But underlying their concern was an apathy about spiritual things. God had commanded them to go back into the land and to give themselves to the rebuilding of the temple. Though they were committed to that action on the surface, underneath was an indifference toward spiritual things. Their problem was one of inverted priorities. They were more concerned with their own affairs than with God's. So Haggai rebukes them, in verses 4 and 5:

"Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled [roofed] houses while this house [the temple] lies desolate?" Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, "Consider your ways!"

The Lord used a drought to get their attention, as he so often does in our own lives. If we will not listen, then he brings a set of circumstances into our lives to get us to turn off the stereo, or turn off our own mouths, or whatever it is that keeps us from hearing the Lord speak. "Because," he goes on, "your labors are fruitless; they are not productive. It is as though you earn wages to put into a bag with holes."

That is certainly contemporary! My mother had a plaque in her kitchen that I saw every time I walked in there. It said, "The hurrier I go, the behinder I get!" That so often is characteristic of our lives. We hurry and we hustle and we work, and yet nothing of any value results. "If some is good, more is better, and too much is just right." So we start working harder, and give ourselves to even greater effort, but we are no more productive than before. This was what was happening in Israel. Drought struck them and, though this was the harvest time, their crops were not productive.

So the Lord said, "Consider your ways!" You see, their problem is our problem--inverted priorities. There are so many urgent things which tend to tyrannize us and keep us preoccupied. They are good things--not wrong things, necessarily--things which ought to be done. But, in the order of priorities, they are not the first things. The first thing is to make room for God in our life. Now, he is not talking about building his house, because God is not building houses today; he is building people. He is not talking about building church buildings. Church buildings are functional only to the extent that they keep the rain off God's house. You are God's house, not the church building.

So when Haggai talks about priorities, we need to apply this in terms of our own priorities. Are we making time in our own lives to cultivate our relationship with the Lord? Are we spending time in the Word? Are we spending time in prayer? Are we getting to know him on a deeper level than we have known him before? I do not know about you, but I know that, in my own life, my tendency is to give myself to everything else but that. Because there are so many good things to do, so many worthwhile things, so many things which seem on the surface to be more productive, time spent in the Scriptures and in prayer tends to go by the board.

But the Lord will always do to me what he did to Judah--he will bring some set of circumstances into my life which will show me how much effort is being wasted in trying to shore things up and make them work, and yet nothing works. "The hurrier I go, the behinder I get." God says, "Consider your ways!" Put first things first. Block out the time--even if it means setting the alarm clock fifteen minutes earlier. But, do it! Take the time to make room for the Lord, and cultivate the house of God, the place where God lives. Get to know him on a deeper level.

Haggai uses a very interesting word-play in this passage. He says, in the Hebrew, that he was the messenger of the Lord, and he spoke the message, and the people did the message. That is, they did what they were commanded

to do. They went up onto the mountain--I suppose the Mount of Olives--and cut down trees, brought back the wood, and began to rebuild. The interior of the temple had been gutted by fire, but the walls were still there. All they had to do was rebuild the wooden portion. So they got lumber and went to work. It took them three weeks to clear away the debris, but they did it. They did the message. And the Lord said, "If you do it, I'll be with you." Notice the order here in verses 12 and 13:

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 people showed reverence for the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke by the commission [the message] of the Lord to the people saying, " 'I am with you,' declares the Lord."

When we obey, then God supplies every resource for following through.

Now, obedience is not a determination to obey; obedience involves action. I have lost track of the number of times I have sat in meetings and heard someone say something from the Word that hit me, and I determined I was going to act on it--but I never followed through. That is not obedience. It is not obedience until you do the message, until you not only determine to make room in your life for God, but you take whatever practical steps are necessary to set that alarm or block out time during the day--or whatever procedure is necessary. And when you obey, God says, "I am with you." He moves in with all of his power, his resources, to enable us to follow through. But we need to act. And when we act, then God begins to bless. He takes care of the other things in our life which seem to be so urgent, which crowd out the essential thing. God will always do that, if we put first things first.

It is an interesting fact that the Old Testament Jews were commanded to appear three times during the year at the temple in Jerusalem. This was a command that was to be obeyed; it was inviolate. Every adult male was to appear before the Lord in Jerusalem on three different feast days. The first was in the middle of the first month, during the Passover. The second was fifty days later at Pentecost. They would just have gotten home when they had to turn around and go back to Jerusalem. And the third was seven months later at the Feast of Booths. Every male had to appear in Jerusalem during those times. Imagine, if you will, the effect that would have had upon the economy of Judah, and upon their ability to withstand invasion. Throughout their entire history they were being attacked, either by some of the lesser nations--Ammon, Moab, and Edom--or by the great empires of the Near East--Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt. They were always under the gun! And imagine--three times a year, for one week each time, every able-bodied male had to lay down his arms or shovel or whatever, go to Jerusalem, and spend a week at a feast. But the Lord said, when he issued that command, that if they would do this, then no one would covet their land.

If you do what God tells you to do, He will take care of everything else. Make room in your life for God, and he will take care of your housework or your business, or your children, or your health, or whatever. But we have to start by doing first things first. Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you". We ought to pray as Paul prayed for the Philippians--that we will do those things which really count. There are many things which are important, but there is only one thing which really counts, and that is to make room in our life for God. That is Haggai's first message.

The second message is found in chapter 2, and is a bit briefer. It occurs on October 17, about fifty days after the first message was delivered. Here the problem was one of discouragement. Note verse 3:

"Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison?"

There were many Jews standing there observing this attempt to rebuild the temple who had seen the first temple sixty-seven years before, and they were discouraged. And who would not be? In the first place, they had not been able to put much work in on the structure. The seventh month is a month of feasts-- the first day of the month is the Feast of Trumpets, the tenth day is the Day of Atonement, the fifteenth day is the Feast of Booths. So throughout the whole month they had been able to work only about nine days, and the temple did not look like

much. They had been able to gather some wood and to clear out some of the debris, but it was still in ruins. They looked at that temple, and compared it with the glory of Solomon's temple, and they were terribly discouraged.

If you read the book of 1 Kings you get some understanding of what they were comparing their temple with. Solomon's temple was one of the wonders of the ancient world. The walls were overlaid with gold, all the furniture was overlaid with gold, the floor was paved with gold, even the front steps were gold. Someone has reckoned that there was over 8 million dollars' worth of gold in the front steps alone. It was a magnificent structure. They looked at this burned out, blackened ruin, and compared it with what it had been before--and Ezra says they sat down and wept. It was as nothing in their eyes, and they wanted to give up. But Haggai says,

"But now take courage, Zerubbabel,' declares the Lord, 'take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage', declares the Lord, 'and work; for I am with you,' says the Lord of hosts."

Do you know that those are exactly the same words David addressed to Solomon when he told him to build the temple? "Take courage, and work, and the Lord will be with you." They were to do as Solomon did, to take courage and build, and God would be with them.

And he goes on to promise in verse 9 that the glory of this temple will be greater than the former glory of Solomon's temple. We know that this temple was the one whose basic structure Herod embellished. At the time Jesus ministered, the Jews had been working on this cycle of refurbishment for forty-six years. When Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," the Jews said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" He was talking about his body, but they thought he meant this beautiful complex of buildings they were still working on, enlarging it, and adding many rooms and courtyards. But even this beautiful temple never compared with Solomon's temple. The Jews never tried to relate the fulfillment of this prophecy to this temple.

No, Haggai is talking not about the temple but about the glory of Messiah. Messiah would fill this temple with his glory. The glory, you know, was the Shekinah glory, the cloud that filled the tabernacle while they were in the wilderness, and later dwelt in Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. But it never dwelt in this second temple, the one that was rebuilt by the exiles, the one to which Jesus came. The Shekinah glory was never there. The glory was Jesus. John said, "We beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Haggai does a strange thing in this prophecy. In verse 7 he actually uses poor grammar, and the translators have never understood quite how to handle it. He uses a singular subject with a plural verb, and it is almost untranslatable. That is why the New American Standard Version gives you a couple of options. I believe the one in the margin is the right interpretation:

"...the Desire of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the Lord of hosts.

He uses the same term Daniel uses to refer to the One desired of all women--Messiah. Messiah will come to this temple, and he will fill it with his glory. And it was to this temple that Jesus came. It was here that he ministered and taught. His teachings and his glory filled this temple, and therefore "its latter glory was greater than its former."

Do you know that the Lord is saying the same thing to you this morning? You may be very discouraged about the building process. Perhaps you have had your priorities disordered, but you have begun now to make room in your life for God. And yet, as you compare yourself with other Christians around you, you feel that you have come out on the short end, and you get discouraged. (By the way, we should never compare ourselves with others. Compare yourself with the Lord, if you must compare yourself with someone.) The process does not seem to be advancing very rapidly. We forget that God is the One who controls time.

You notice that in this passage he says, "In a little while...I will fill this house with glory." Do you know how long

that was? Almost 550 years! You haven't been at it that long; therefore you can't give up! I believe that Haggai is saying what Paul says to us in Philippians: "He who has begun a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ." We may not always see it, but he is building, and we must not get discouraged. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3 that we are being changed from glory to glory, i.e., from one attribute to the next. God is doing that in our lives. That is his promise, and we can cling to it. So do not give up. "Take courage." The Hebrew word addressed to Zerubbabel means "to lay hold of"-to lay hold of God and keep moving. And the latter glory of that house-your life, my life-will be greater than the former.

Then there is a third prophecy delivered two months later, on December 18. This prophecy is based upon a symbolic action that Haggai takes. He goes to the priests, who were custodians of the law, who rendered decisions on the law. If you had a question about how a law should be interpreted, you would go to the Levites and they would render the decision. So he goes to the priests and asks for a ruling:

If a man carries holy meat [meat that had been offered in sacrifice] in the fold of his garment [most likely referring to the way the priests would carry it], and touches bread with this fold, or cooked food, wine, oil, or any other food, will it [the common food] become holy?

And the answer is, "No, you cannot transmit holiness from one object to the next." Then he asks, "If I'm out in a field and I touch a dead body, and then I touch any of those common foods (the oil, the wine), does the food become defiled?" "Yes, you can communicate defilement, but you cannot communicate holiness." Haggai does not state specifically what this principle is, but we can infer that he is referring back to Judah's former disobedience. When they were disobedient, when they were preoccupied with their own homes, they were defiled, and therefore they were defiling everything they touched. That was why the drought had come. Environmental problems are always the result of man's sin and thus they defiled their land. But now they are holy, now they are doing God's word. They had been at work on the temple for at least two and a half months. But the drought continued. So, beginning in verse 15, Haggai says, "Look, reason backward...." Here again the marginal reading of the ASV is to be preferred:

But now, do consider from this day backward: before one stone was placed on another in the temple of the Lord, from that time when one came to a grain heap of twenty measures, there would be only ten; and when one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there would be only twenty. I smote you and every work of your hands with blasting wind, mildew, and hail; yet you did not come back to me, declares the Lord.

Do you see what had happened? Now that they were obeying God, the drought was unabated; there still was no rain. And they were getting resentful and bitter. "We can understand why God would discipline us when we are disobedient. But we've been obedient for two and half months, and there's still no rain!" And oh, were they bitter! Have you ever been there? I have! Do you know what we are saying? "God, you owe something to me. You're in debt to me. I can understand why you'd discipline me if I'd been disobedient, but I've been obedient, and things still aren't going right! You're not treating me right, God. You're not fair. You owe me all these good things." Do you realize that God does not owe us anything? He does owe us hell, frankly. But he does not owe us health, or a happy family, or a good job. He does not owe us anything. But he will give these because he is gracious and because he is faithful to his word.

Now Haggai says an interesting thing: "Do consider from this day..." (and we know precisely what day that was: December 18, 520 B.C.) "From this day on I will bless you." That is, there was something significant about this date. There is only one other date in the Old Testament which is pinned down with that much precision. It occurs three times -- in the books of Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and 1 Kings. It is the date when the siege of Jerusalem began--on the tenth day of the tenth month of the ninth year of the captivity of Ezekiel. We know exactly when that was-- January 15, 589 B.C. And from January 15, 589 B.C., to December 18, 520 B.C., is exactly 25,200 days. And based upon the Jews' 360-day lunar calendar, that is precisely 70 years, right to the day. Jeremiah had promised that there would be 70 years of captivity for this people, 70 years of desolation. This can be computed a number of different ways. From 606 B.C., the date of the first deportation, to 536 B.C., when they returned, is one 70-year span. From the time the temple was destroyed in 587 B.C. until it was rebuilt in 516 B.C. is another 70-year span.

But there is a third 70-year span—from the time when Jerusalem was besieged until this day, December 18, 520 B.C. And God said, "From now on I'll bless you". Why? Because you deserve it? No; because it is based on my word. I promised.

Oh, if we could ever get that through our heads, it would save us so much bitterness! We really do not deserve a thing, except eternal judgment. But grace has set us free from that—not because we deserve it, but because Christ died for us. We do not deserve health and happiness, but God gives them because it is based on his word, based on his faithfulness. Paul says, "He who has called you is faithful, and he will do it". So God says to Judah, "You have endured drought for two and a half months, ever since you started to build the temple, but from this day on I will bless you."

There is a fourth prophecy, beginning with verse 20, which was given on the same day as the third prophecy. Verses 21 and 22:

"Speak to Zerubbabel governor of Judah saying, 'I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. And I will overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the power of the kingdoms of the nations; and I will overthrow the chariots and their riders, and the horses and their riders will go down, every one by the sword of another.'"

This passage is very significant because of the historical situation at the time. Darius is now king of Persia, having come to the throne just two years before, in 522 B.C. His predecessor was a Persian king named Cambyses, who went insane and killed himself. When he killed himself, the nation erupted in rebellion. From one end of the Persian empire to the other, revolts broke out. Darius spent the first two years of his reign literally fighting for his life. Perhaps you have seen the great monument he had carved on the face of Behistun Mountain, called Behistun Rock. It depicts Darius worshipping the Zoroastrian deity. Underneath is a line of slaves roped together, and one is on his knees. He is Gaumata, a Babylonian king who rebelled against Darius. Darius is shown with his foot on this king's neck, holding him down. Behistun Rock was inscribed in three different languages in commemoration of Darius' victory over all these rebels. For two years Darius had fought, and now by 520 B.C. his kingdom is at peace. Everything is back under his control, Persia is strong and solid, and no one can hope to rebel. During the time this rebellion was taking place, the Jews were thinking, "This is the shaking that is going to destroy the might of these enemies, and then Messiah will come and will give us back our land." But now, suddenly, things are back as they were, and the enemy seems just as powerful, just as formidable as before, and they wonder what has happened, who is in control.

But God says, "Listen, I'm going to shake the nations." And he did. He shook Persia, and Greece, and Rome, and he has shaken every nation since then. "But I will make you, Zerubbabel, like a signet ring. You're going to be my servant, not Persia's." Zerubbabel was the political leader, the governor of Judah. He was the grandson of the last legitimate king of Judah, Jehoiachin. He was in the line of succession that led from David down through all the kings of Judah, right on through to Messiah, if you read the genealogies in the New Testament. In terms of the blood line, he had the right to the throne.

But you may recall that Jeremiah had said to Jehoiachin "I will strip you like a signet ring [the same term] from my finger, and none of your descendants will ever sit on the throne," because of Jehoiachin's wickedness. But God says to Zerubbabel, who was a descendant of Jehoiachin, and who knew that he never would have power to rule, that though he would not reign over Judah (And that was true; he went 'back to Babylon and perished.), he would have power and authority to rule within his own life, and within the sphere of the responsibility given to him. The Jews knew that ultimately this prophecy was to be fulfilled in Messiah. All the Jewish commentaries looked to Zerubbabel as a type of the One who was to come, the king of Israel, who would reign to the end of time, whose kingdom would never be shaken, who would always have authority. He would be like a signet ring on the Lord's hand. A signet ring is a symbol of authority; kings never took it off. And Haggai says, "Zerubbabel, that's what you'll be. You'll be secure, you'll be strong. Everything else will be shaken, but your kingdom won't be shaken."

And Scripture says so clearly that the same is true of our lives. We are like kings, intended to reign in life over our

environment. And just as the Lord himself reigns secure in his kingdom, because he indwells us we will reign secure in our kingdom. Nothing will shake us. Nations may shake around us, and enemies may appear to be very formidable, but God says, "Though I'm going to shake your enemies, you will be secure." In I Peter 5, Peter says, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered for a little, will himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you." And in I Corinthians 15, Paul says that because of the fact of the resurrection life that we have in Christ, we can be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.

Now that is a word to a ruined generation, to a beaten folk. First, get your priorities in order. Do the first things first. Then, keep moving. Take hold of the Lord and all of his strength. Count on him to accomplish the good work that he has begun in you. And know that he is going to be faithful to his promises-faithful, not because we deserve it, but because his word is sure, and steadfast, and certain. He will give us authority, he will establish us. And the latter glory of our house will be greater than the former.

Father, teach us, as Paul prayed for the Philippians, to do the things that really count, to keep first things first, to take whatever steps are necessary to cultivate our relationship with you. And grant to us that certainty, that hope, that what you have begun you are going to complete. We thank you, Father, for the stability and the strength that provides. And we thank you for this encouraging word from Haggai, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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