

# Haggai 1

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[ 0 : 00 ] And turn to the prophecy of Haggai. It's on page 791.! Right at the end of the Old Testament.

It's on page 791. Imagine you took a road trip across the country with your family. Let's say you've got young children.

And you're going back to the place where you were born. Back to the cottage where you used to spend your summer holidays. You haven't been there in decades.

It's a place that you have such fond memories. You've told the kids about it. You've gone on and on about it. And of course nostalgia makes everything better, doesn't it?

The sun was always shining on your holidays when you were a kid. And so now you're making the journey. For some of you it would be a journey halfway across the world.

[ 1 : 23 ] After a very, very long time you finally arrive. You pull in bone weary after a long day's driving. And your headlights cut through the drizzle.

And what should have been a delightful chalet is now just a charred mess. All that remains is a smoking chimney stack.

The foundation blocks of blackened cinder just provide an uneven blanket of ash. There are puddles of oily water that fill the depressions in the ground.

And you sit there aghast. Your hands are on the wheel. Your mouth is wide open. And your youngest from the back seat says, where is it daddy? Are we there yet?

And that's what it must have been like for the exiles coming back to Jerusalem. We're marching to Zion to beautiful beautiful Zion. The wonderful city of God.

[ 2 : 30 ] Most of them had never been to Jerusalem. Most of them apart from a few old codgers who made the journey with them most of them had been born in Babylon. They'd been told stories by their parents and their grandparents.

And they were seeing Jerusalem the city of God for the first time. But what brought them back of course is a really interesting example of God's providence.

In 538 BC Cyrus, a Persian king issued a decree which allowed the exiles to return and build a temple to their god. You can see one of the stone tablets bearing that decree in the British Museum.

It's called the Cyrus Cylinder. Who's seen it? Look at that. Marta has seen it. Wants us all to know. But not many others. And you can read about it in Ezra chapter 1.

This is what it says. The Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me, that's Cyrus, to build a temple for him in Jerusalem in Judah. Any one of his people among you may go.

[ 3 : 35 ] May God be with him. Let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may be living shall provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.

You can read those exact same words in Ezra chapter 1, but if you don't trust the Bible, go to the British Museum this week and you can read them there. Isn't it a remarkable thing?

It's a remarkable evidence of the providence of God in the history of his people. Right in our city.

That God raised up this pagan king Cyrus to set his people free from exile. And of course the disappointing thing as you know if you're here for the series on Nehemiah is not all of them responded.

Not all of them returned. Few of them comparatively returned. The majority stayed in Babylon. They chose the city of man over the city of God.

Only about 50,000 returned. And now it's 18 years later. It's 530 BC and the work has hardly begun. And so why?

[ 4 : 48 ] Why is this little book in the Bible? What is to be done about this work? And that's why Haggai is in the Bible.

God is calling his people to take him seriously. God is calling his people to renew their commitment to him and to his cause. And of course you and I don't live in Old Testament days and we do have to do the work of translating this into our own time.

I need to say we're not talking here about bricks and mortar are we? The book of Haggai is not a kind of justification for a building project because no church building today, however ornate, however impressive, however elaborate, is the equivalent of God's temple.

And so if we're going to understand the book of Haggai today, we need to interpret the Old Testament through the New Testament. And if we're going to apply it to ourselves tonight, we need to understand that the building that's being spoken about here is the building that Peter speaks of in 1 Peter chapter 2.

That it's not a temple in Jerusalem built by human hands, but living stones. Living stones being built into a holy temple in the Lord.

[ 6 : 08 ] And that is where we are. God meets with us now. Where does God meet with us? Not in a temple made with hands. God meets with us through his person, Jesus Christ.

So do you remember in John's Gospel where Jesus said to the authorities, they misunderstood what he was talking about, and he said to them, if you destroy this temple, in three days I will raise it up again.

And they thought that he's talking about the Jerusalem temple that was on the mount. But there's a little kind of brackets, isn't there, that Jesus was talking about himself.

He's talking about his own death and his own crucifixion. Destroy this temple and I will raise it again. And Jesus is saying, I am the fulfillment of the temple.

I am where you come to meet with God. Jesus is where we meet with God. Jesus is how we approach a holy God because he is the sacrifice, he is the altar, he is the priest, he is the temple.

[ 7 : 14 ] It is through his once and for all sacrifice that we come into the presence of God. And we know the presence of God in our lives through him by his spirit.

and so, as we meet as the people of God tonight, we are God's temple where God dwells by his Holy Spirit. And so the question I'm asking from the book of Haggai is how do we get the work of God done now?

How do we do the work of God now? How do we build the house of God in our day and generation? And how does the book of Haggai and his prophecy help us?

At IPC Ealing. Three things, how do we build God's house today? Number one, by refusing to make excuses. Number two, by sorting out our priorities. And number three, by listening to God's word. And so, first of all, how do we get the work of God done today? By refusing to make excuses. God's people are very good and we have always been very good at making excuses.

[ 8 : 24 ] Look with me at the opening verses. 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 of Juzerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadek, the high priest.

Thus says the Lord of hosts. These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. We've heard that before, haven't we?

We're just waiting for the right moment. now is not the time. It's not that we're against building the temple, but now is not the time to do it.

It's an excuse. Somebody has defined an excuse as the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie. And that is what this is. They have their reasons.

Look, at verse six, times were hard, weren't they? You've sown much, 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.

[ 9 : 39 ] Inflation has gone through the roof. It's a day of poor harvest. They've gone back to the land, and the land has been uncultivated for 70 years.

It's a city that's laying in ruins. It's just like London after the Blitz or Beirut or Kiev today. Struggle to survive.

We've got families to look over. We've got to keep, look after. We've got to keep a roof over our head. You've got to keep the wolf from the door. And that was their immediate priority. And on top of that, there was local opposition, wasn't there?

So the Samaritans hated the idea of the temple being built in Jerusalem. They'd made an official complaint to the government, and so the funds from the government had been withdrawn and the work had come to a standstill and they'd been like that for 14 years.

Now I do want to say this. I want to say these are godly people. These are the ones who came back, do you remember? These are the keenies. As we'll see in a moment, they were kind of living for themselves rather than for God, but nevertheless, they were still in the right place, weren't they? [10:59] These people, by coming back, they wanted to do the right thing and they wanted to do it for the right reasons. Unlike the generation that had been carted off into exile, these people took God seriously.

And those who came back, they weren't motivated by commercial business interests or a kind of narrow, nationalistic consideration. It was devotion to God's house that had brought them back. They could have stayed in Babylon. They could have enjoyed a much higher standard of living. That's why most people didn't come back. Because things were pretty good in Babylon for them. They would have been materially better off if they'd stayed in Babylon. But they made the decision to return. They made a choice. To rebuild. And according to Ezra chapter 2 and verse 67, this is incredible, they'd raised from among themselves the equivalent of about 4.5 million pounds to get the project off the ground.

That shows a significant amount of commitment, doesn't it? And so Haggai, it's not written to unbelievers. It's not written to outsiders. It's not written to nominals.

[12:13] These are people who want to do the will of God, but life has moved on. And circumstances have overtaken them. And their zeal has abated.

And that happens, doesn't it? there's the kids' education to think about. There's the mortgage repayments.

Don't you know the scale of rent in London? Don't you know how busy we are? I don't seem to have the time or the energy anymore.

Not like I once did. I seem to get tired more than I used to. Once, it mattered to me more than life itself to do the Lord's work.

But you've let it slip. You've let it slide. No one would say we've abandoned the project. Now is just not the right time. And we're waiting for the right time.

[13:15] And it's just not the right time at the moment. We're right behind you Zerubbabel. He was the project manager. He was the governor. And we're right behind you Joshua.

He was the high priest. We're right behind you Pastor. But they don't say how far behind they are. And when you look over your shoulder they're nowhere to be seen. And so the word of God comes to us this evening as a challenge.

Look at verse 5. And then look at verse 7. Consider your ways.

We are Sunday night people aren't we? And we call ourselves God's people. And we profess to be Christians. We are people who have decided for the Lord Jesus Christ.

And God's word comes to us as a challenge. And God says to us consider your ways. take a long hard look at yourself and examine yourself.

[14:19] And ask yourself where does God fit in with my lifestyle and to my scale of priorities? Because surely if God is God and he's not some talisman and not some lucky charm some crest on a printed logo if he is the sovereign God and if he is the living God then he's in charge of the ecology and the economy.

And don't make that an excuse not to serve him. And if he is God then his claim on my life is paramount. First things first.

First things first. That's the message of Haggai. So that's the first thing stop making excuses and the second thing is set the right priorities. Look at verse 4 what it says there. The word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet and he said is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses while this house lies in ruins?

Now therefore consider your ways says the Lord of hosts. You've sown much harvested little. You eat but you never have enough.

You drink but you never fill. You clothe yourself but no one's warm and he who earns wages does sort of put them in a bag with holes. I do think it's a wonderful thing is that in verse 4 God doesn't stop speaking to his people.

[ 15 : 50 ] That's why we come here Sunday by Sunday and we come I hope expecting God to speak to us as his word is opened. And then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai.

When I first looked at this passage earlier this week I thought the problem was lethargy but it's not is it?

It's not lethargy. At first I thought these people they were just tired they were lethargic but it's not is it?

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

Can you see the people in Haggai 1 they are very busy and they are very active and they are collecting resources but they're busy doing what?

[ 17 : 04 ] They're busy feathering their own nests. They're busy making sure that their own lives are comfortable thank you very much God. God doesn't even get a look in.

And that is the problem isn't it? God has been sidelined and God has been pushed to the margins of their lives and so they wonder don't they? They wonder why are we experiencing such emptiness and such dissatisfaction?

They've returned to the promised land but it's not flowing with milk and honey. They thought it was going to be. That's what they've been told haven't they on their mother's knee? You eat Haggai says but you never have enough.

You drink but you never have enough. You fill. You clothe yourself but no one's warm and he owns Weejays does so to put them in a bag with holes.

It's like when you go to Westfield and you get on the wrong escalator and you go on the escalator it's going down but you try to go up and you look like an idiot and you make a fool of yourself.

[ 18 : 12 ] You don't get anywhere. Life is a bit like that isn't it? It's only what God had said in the book of Deuteronomy if you forget me there's a whole list of curses that will come and some of those curses are outlined in Haggai chapter one.

Life will be frustrating. All sorts of things will happen if you forget me but if you remember me I will bless you God says. I wonder what your life is like right now.

Jesus says this seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these other things will be given to you. Put God first.

Back in the 17th century the Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal argued that within each one of us there was what he called a God-shaped vacuum, a God-shaped hole. At the very deepest level of our being there was a God-shaped vacuum.

God says we are made for a personal relationship with our creator. And we're not all that keen in coming to him on his own terms and so we try to fill that gap don't we with all sorts of other things which people today would call stuff.

[ 19 : 35 ] Have you read a lot of stuff in your life? We try to distract ourselves don't we? That's what social media is all about. It's all about distracting yourself.

And so we waste enormous amounts of time just being distracted through entertainment through building for ourselves nice homes nice careers which are not wrong.

But invariably they fail. Because only one shape will fill that spiritual vacuum in your life. and when God ceases to be that nothing else can take his place.

And so the paradox is this isn't it the more we have the more we get the less satisfied we are. It is like going up the escalator the wrong way.

I can't get no satisfaction with Jagger sang in the 60s. Why is it like that? Why is it like that in our city?

[ 20 : 43 ] Because people are looking for satisfaction in the wrong place. And that is what God is saying to his people here. You're looking for satisfaction in the wrong place. In property. In a leisure lifestyle.

In a relationship. Do you remember what our catechism says? What is the chief end of man? What is the main purpose of your existence?

Why do you exist? Why are we here? The chief end of man is to what? It is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

That's what you were made for. And that's what the temple was for. So look at verse 8. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house that I, that's God, I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified.

Can you see the enjoyment of God there? And the glory of God. That's what the temple was for. Why did the temple exist? The chief end of the temple was to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

[ 21 : 49 ] That God would be honored. But you're not willing to do that. you're not living for the pleasure of God and for the honor of God.

And so Haggai says to you, consider your ways, take stock. You say the time is not right. It reminds us, doesn't it, to the famous African theologian Augustine.

Augustine was brought up by a godly mum, Monica. and she prayed for her son Augustine. He was a pretty wayward character. He was a young man in his twenties enjoying wine, women, and song. And he becomes convicted of his sin of womanizing. And he says this, I prayed to God, O Lord, give me chastity, but not yet. Not yet.

He says, I was afraid that God might answer my prayer too soon. I think that's often how young people feel in church life.

[ 22 : 56 ] They know the demands of the gospel. They know the need to live all out for the Lord Jesus, but not yet. Not yet. Let me enjoy myself. Maybe that's where you are tonight.

You want God to work in your life, don't you? You want God to know God as a living presence in your life, but just not yet. There are other irons in the fire right now.

There are other things you're interested in. There are other things that you've got to do. The time is not yet right. But the apostle Paul says it is. He says now is the day.

He says now is the time. So let me say to you, be careful that the not yet doesn't become not ever. Be careful that the not yet doesn't become not ever.

First things first. God has been speaking to them for 20 years. Some of you have sat in this church for 20 years. Under the word of God.

[ 24 : 04 ] And maybe you've never done anything about it. They did nothing about it. God comes another time doesn't he? And he challenges them.

And he says there's a ruined temple in your life. And your treasure is in the wrong place and your priorities are all stuffed up.

And you're living in your panelled houses while God's house remains a ruin. And as long as that is so, as long as you neglect your relationship with the Lord, you'll never be satisfied.

Do you realise that? Whatever tonight you put in his place will leave you empty and it will leave you frustrated. They were saying, weren't they, think about this with me, they were saying, we cannot afford to build the temple.

And God is saying to them, you cannot not afford to do it. you can't afford not to. They were saying, we can't afford to build the temple, and God says to them, you can't afford not to, to build the temple.

[ 25 : 21 ] And so what is the stuff you've got in your life now instead of God? Why is that so important to you? Let me put it this way.

Do you know what the besetting sin of these people was? The sin that they really struggled with? The besetting sin for these people, they were house proud.

They were house proud. That doesn't sound very serious, does it? You might think, well, that isn't going to damn you to hell, is it?

But it's idolatry, isn't it? I think we've seen this a number of times in different parts of the Bible over the last few months. Martin Luther pointed that out to us, didn't he? That behind every sin is an idol. And so whether it's the home furnishings department, or whether it's sport, whatever it is that takes the place of God in your life, maybe it's your reputation, maybe it's how you're viewed, whatever it is that takes the place of God in your life, that is an idol.

[ 26 : 28 ] That is idolatry. And they were living in paneled houses, while God's house was a ruin. And God says, think about it.

Take a long, hard look at yourself. You've spent a lot of money, but you've not got much to show for it. Look at what you're doing. You're building your dream house, you're building your dream life, while God's house lies in ruins.

Can that possibly be right? Putting first things first, so stop making excuses, get your priorities sorted, and thirdly, listen to the voice of God in his word. And I'm choosing my language really carefully.

Listen to the voice of God in his word. And the reason why I kind of stress that is a number of times over the last few weeks, people have said to me, the Lord has told me to do this, or the Lord, I think the Lord is saying this, and the Lord gets blamed for an awful lot of rubbish, I can tell you.

So you listen to the voice of God in his word. Are you familiar with the story of Helen Keller? It's an amazing woman, she was a woman who was born blind and deaf, imagine that.

[ 27 : 41 ] A story, was it the Miracle Maker with the film, I think it won a couple of Oscars. How do you communicate if somebody is blind and deaf? How do you communicate, it was somebody who was born blind and deaf?

What happened was this, it's a lovely story, one day Helen's teacher began to spell out the words, the letters on Helen's hand, tracing the letters with her fingers.

And Helen, she learned to imitate the movement which spelt out the words, but she failed to understand what the movements were. They were just movements on her hand, meaningless movements.

And then one day the teacher had a brainwave, the teacher spelt out the word water. Spelled out the word water into one of Helen's hands.

Maybe your parent will do that to your children now, isn't it? And they'll spell out the word water on your child's hands. And on the other hand, the teacher poured water onto Helen's hands.

[ 28 : 48 ] water. And suddenly the mystery of language was unlocked. And Helen understood what water was. This is what she wrote in her diary.

She said, I knew then that water meant the wonderful, cool something that was flowing over my hand. What a moment that must have been. And then she said something that is truly biblical.

The living word awakened my soul and gave it light. Hope, joy, set me free. Well, that's what the living word does, isn't it?

That's what the spirit does with us when he takes God's word and he applies it in our lives. And that's what's happening here in this book. Look at verse 12.

Verse 12. The word of God came to the people and all the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God.

[ 29 : 49 ] And the words of Haggai the prophet as the Lord their God had sent them. You see, the word of God came to them, not in word only, but in the demonstration and power of the Holy Spirit.

Do you see that? Just look at the stress again on the word of the Lord and on the Lord their God.

Then Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, the son of Jehodech, 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 people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, and with you declares the Lord.

And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehodech, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people, and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God.

It's an amazing episode, isn't it? An amazing thing. Don't you wish there were more episodes like that in history? Don't you wish there were more episodes like that in your life, in my life? When everyone, when everyone who comes here on a Sunday, elders, deacons, rank and file, everyone who hears the word of God, believes it, acts on it immediately, that's what happens.

[ 31 : 11 ] That's what's happening here, it doesn't usually happen. Usually the best I get is, well, thank you for that this morning. You see, normally a prophet speaks and the people ignore him, that's the pattern in the Old Testament.

You don't expect to find, had I won 12 to 15, it's a big surprise. It doesn't usually happen in the Old Testament.

It's like the shock you get when you ask your child to do their piano practice, and they say, yeah, sure thing, love to. You're not expecting that, are you?

People don't usually put the word of God into practice immediately, but they do hear, because God is speaking to them, not just through a book, not only through a word, but through a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Do you see verse 14? The Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealti, the governor of Judah, the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehoshaphat, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people, and they came and they worked on the house of the Lord of hosts their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king. [ 32 : 34 ] And they accomplished more in a few weeks than they had in twenty years. And that's what happens when the word of God comes in power, in the power of the spirit.

They're stirred up to do God's work. And so you can be shaken under preaching, but not stirred. You can be challenged and feel the heat of God's word, but actually never do anything about it. But when the spirit works through the word, well, remember what happened in Macedonia. Remember what Paul says to the Thessalonians.

I can find it. What does he say there? He says, we give thanks for you because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction. he thanks God for them, that his word had worked in the Thessalonians. And so is the word of God at work in SIPC, or are we just sermon tasters?

[ 33 : 45 ] Why are you here? Thank God, Paul says, that when you heard the word of God from me, you accepted not as the word of man, but the very word of God. God, what was it that turned Europe upside down 500 years ago?

You think of the state of the Western Church at the start of the Reformation, it was more bleak, it was more dismal than today. The temple of the Lord was in ruins in Europe, the gospel was all but obscured, the establishment was corrupt, the ordinary people were ignorant, lethargic, apathetic, and what changed all of that?

Was it just correct doctrine that was taught? Luther said, I simply taught and preached God's word, otherwise I did nothing. But while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with Philip and Amstorff, the word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor inflicted such losses upon it.

I did nothing, says Luther, the word did everything. And that's how God builds his temple, that's how God does his work in the world. It is by the proclamation of his word in the power of the spirit.

And look what he says there in verse 13, he says, I am with you, declares the Lord. That's what the temple was all about, what it symbolized. It was the presence of God in the midst of his people.

[ 35 : 11 ] You can't ask for anything more than that. That's why Jesus at the end of his ministry in Matthew 28, he promises us in the great commission that all authority has been given to you, given to me, and so you go and make a great work to be done.

And God says to us, you live in panel housing, and there's a great work to be done. And the house of God, the people of God, is to be built. Go into all the world and make disciples of the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you, and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. And it's interesting, isn't it, then, that it is as we go with Jesus' message that we know his presence. Let's pray together.