

this week's big idea

After eighteen years of believing themselves, the people finally listened because God made his voice more convincing than their own: he met their fear with his presence and stirred their spirits to begin the work.

getting started

Think of a time someone told you something you didn't want to hear — a doctor, a coach, a parent, a friend — and it took you a long time to actually act on it. What finally made the difference?

in the text

Read Haggai 1:12-15 aloud together

Observation

1. Verse 12 names three groups who responded to Haggai. Who are they? What two things does the verse say the people did — and what reason does it give for why they listened?
2. Read the list of names in verse 12, then read it again in verse 14. What stays the same? What changes about who is doing the action?
3. Count how many times “the LORD” is named in verses 12-14. Then compare the date in verse 15 with the date in 1:1. How long did it take from the first word to the first day of work?

discussion questions

4. Our Bibles say the people “obeyed” (v. 12). The Hebrew word means “hear” or “listen” — the same word that begins “Hear, O Israel” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Read James 1:22-25. What is the difference between hearing God and listening to him? Where is that gap widest for you right now?

5. The people were afraid (v. 12), and God answered with two words: “I am with you” (v. 13). Their purse still had holes; there was no rain, no budget, no blueprint. Nothing around them changed. Why would God’s presence be enough to begin? When has his presence mattered to you more than a change in your circumstances?

6. Read Philippians 2:12–13. Paul puts “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” and “it is God who works in you to will and to act” in the same sentence — verse 12 and verse 14 of Haggai in one breath. Whose voice is most convincing to you right now about your time, your money, your future or your fears? What would it look like to ask God to stir you where your own voice has been winning?

closing

In your group, use a simple “check-in”: go one individual at a time in brief fashion (1–2 minutes per person) to say one thing you are thankful for, and one thing you want prayer for. The person to your left listens to your check-in and then briefly prays for you out loud. Then it’s their turn to “check-in” and receive prayer from the person to their left. Continue the process until everyone has participated. For greater efficiency in large groups, divide in half or consider praying in triads.

notes on the text

1. Who responded, and why. Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the high priest, and “the whole remnant of the people” — everyone at once. They obeyed (listened to) the voice of the LORD and the message of Haggai, and they feared the LORD. The reason: “because the LORD their God had sent him.”
2. Same names, different subject. The list is the same and in the same order. In verse 12 the people are the subject — they obeyed. In verse 14 they are the object — the LORD stirred their spirit. Verse 12 tells us what happened; verse 14 tells us why.
3. Eight times, twenty-three days. “The LORD” is named eight times in three verses — more than anywhere else in Haggai or Zechariah. The narrator is telling the story of a people going back to work, and he cannot stop talking about God. The first word came on the first day of the sixth month (1:1); work began on the twenty-fourth (1:15).

Background

Haggai first spoke on the first day of the sixth month in 520 BC; the work began on the twenty-fourth — about 21 September. Twenty-three days, after eighteen years of “not yet.” Those weeks were not wasted: the grape, fig and pomegranate harvest had to come in and building materials had to be gathered. And this was not the first attempt. Nearly twenty years earlier a group under Sheshbazzar had started on the same site, and it stalled under pressure from the neighbouring provinces (Ezra 4:1–5; 5:16). The people said yes with the same empty hands. The word “stirred” in verse 14 is עור (‘ûr) — to rouse, to wake from sleep. It is the same word Ezra 1:1 uses when God “moved the heart” of Cyrus to send the exiles home. What God stirred is the רוח (rûah), the “spirit” — the impulse that governs a person’s life; their will, their disposition. Nothing around them changed. Everything in them did.