

Lesson 9

Haggai: Rebuild the Temple

Introduction

Some have suggested that Haggai had personally seen the temple of Solomon before its destruction by the Babylonians in 587 B.C, Haggai 2:3. Now some sixty-seven years later in 520 B.C. Haggai exhorts his people to service on rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. We know little about Haggai. He is mentioned only in three places: Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14-16 and in the book that bears his name. Of his home and background, we know nothing. We do know he was part of the remnant that returned to Babylon with Zerubbabel. His name means “festive” or “festival.” Some believe he was born during one of the Jewish feast days.

The historical context

In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar moved his army south toward Egypt sweeping up all the lands in the wake of his army. Judah was one of these nations. A puppet government was hastily set up with Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.). After Babylon’s invasion in 605-604 B.C., Jehoiakim served Babylon for three years. and Nebuchadnezzar responded by harassing Judah with raiding bands of mercenaries for three years, 2 Kings 24:2. In 598 B.C., Jehoiakim died, and his son Jehoiachin took his place, 2 Kings 24:8. He reigned three months and surrendered Jerusalem to the Babylonians who had held the city hostage. He, the royal family, and ten thousand of Jerusalem’s leading citizens were carried into captivity, 2 Kings 24:12-16. *None remained except the poorest people of the land, 2 Kings 24:14.* Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah as king, 2 Kings 24:17. After a few years, Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar moved in, besieged the city for two years, and finally destroyed what was left. Zedekiah was captured and brought before Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians slaughtered his sons in his presence, then put out his eyes, bound him, and took him captive to Babylon. The writer of 2 Kings records the end of the nation of God’s people in this way:

Now on the seventh day of the fifth month, which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the Lord, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire. So all the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Then the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon and the rest of the people, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away into exile. But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen. . . . So Judah was led away into exile from its land.

– 2 Kings 25:8-12, 21

What the prophets had foretold and warned had come to pass. God allowed the nation of Israel to be destroyed. For multiple decades the Jews would be found as a conquered nation, swallowed up by the Babylonian Empire.

The World of Haggai			
JUDAH			
TIME	NATION	KING	PROPHETS
598	JUDAH	ZEDEKIAH (598-587)	
587			
570	BABYLON	NEBECHADNEZZAR (609-562)	70 Years of Captivity (606-536)
560		Three weak leaders (562-556)	
550		NABONIDUS (556-539)	
540			
530	MEDO-PERSIAN	CYRUS (539-530)	Zerubbabel leads 50 K Jews back to Palestine
520		CAMBYSES (530-522)	Haggai (520) Zechariah (520-516)
510		DARIUS (522-486)	

Nebuchadnezzar remained king of Babylon until his death in 562 B.C. After his death, Babylon found itself with weak kings who by 549 B.C. could no longer keep the empire together. During the 540's B.C., Cyrus united the Medes and Persians together. They took Babylon in 539 B.C. One year later Cyrus

issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland. By 536 B.C., Zerubbabel led a group of fifty-thousand Jews back to Jerusalem, Ezra 2. Within seventy years of the first captives heading off to Babylon, a remnant of God's people returned to rebuild, just as had been foretold by Isaiah. See Isaiah 44-45. On the remnant, Smith makes an interesting observation: "Many (Jews) chose to remain in Babylon because during the exile there they had become prosperous merchants. Only the most spiritually committed desired to return to the ruins of Palestine to rebuild their nation and their temple."¹ God never promised to bring back the entire nation. He promised to bring back those who had fully given their hearts to Him, Deuteronomy 30:1-10; Jeremiah 24:7.

Upon their return to their homeland, the people of God found things in disorder. The land had been left barren fifty years earlier. The homes and communities of the past had been leveled. Foreigners inhabited their land. Ezra 3:3 tells us of their first task: rebuilding the altar of the Lord. In the second year, construction of the temple began, Ezra 3:8. After a period, the foundation had been rebuilt. This caused a great emotional response among the people, Ezra 3:11-13. But what joy the people experienced would be short lived. Adversaries came in and *discouraged the people of Judah and frightened them from building*, Ezra 4:4. Ezra 4:24 says, *Then the work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.* This work stoppage lasted sixteen years.

Enter Haggai

In 520 B.C., Haggai along with Zechariah stirred up the people to get to work on building the temple, Ezra 5:1-3. The people were in a state of discouragement. Optimistic after leaving Babylon, upon their return their lives had been met with constant opposition and setback. The efforts of Haggai went far in helping to complete the tremendous task of rebuilding the temple. Ezra 6:14 says, *And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo.* Even after stirring up the people and getting the reconstruction effort going, there were problems and opposition. Letters were sent to the king. He had his subordinates conduct a search through the archives. The decree of Cyrus was found, and it was clearly seen that he had charged them with rebuilding their temple. With the blessing of the Persian government, momentum built, and the project was completed.

Haggai's book contains one central message: *build the temple!* At thirty-eight verses, this book is the second shortest book in the Bible. Within these verses are four prophetic oracles that were to move the people to action after a long hiatus, stimulate courage, and generate hope.

A call to action

Haggai opens with a call to action. This first oracle is directed to Zerubbabel and Joshua. Zerubbabel had been appointed as the governor of Judea. He was the grandson of deported King Jehoiachin. Joshua was the high priest of the Jews. His grandfather was slain by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:18) and his father was carried away into Babylon. These two men played a key role in leading the Jews in their homeland. It was time for them to get to work. For sixteen years, a great project had been left unfinished. The Lord speaks through Haggai and asks if it was fair for them to dwell in comfortable homes while the house of the Lord remained *desolate*, 1:4. During the sixteen-year layoff, the people had concentrated on making things comfortable for themselves and allowed the opposition to rebuilding the temple to "put off" the project. God tells the people to *consider (their) ways*, 1:5. The people were called to self-examination. They needed to consider that God was withholding blessings because of their apathy and indifference, 1:6. It was time for the people to conduct a serious spiritual heart exam. They are called upon again in verse seven to *consider (their) ways*.

What was the remedy to their lack of blessings? God says through Haggai, *rebuild the temple that I may be pleased with it and be glorified*, 1:8. The mountains that are mentioned in the text are most likely in Lebanon where cedar was plentiful. They were to bring that wood to the building site and begin construction. Their labor and the temple itself would bring glory to God. Rebuilding the temple was important. The temple served as the religious hub for the Jewish religion. Sacrifices and worship were conducted there. The temple would be a source of national pride for the Jewish people. If the people continued to neglect their responsibility, God would continue to withhold physical blessings from them. For fifteen years this project sat around uncompleted. There had been no demonstration of faith, no bold initiatives, only fear, uncertainty, and a desire to take care of their physical possessions first.

How did Zerubbabel and Joshua respond to Haggai's message? See verse twelve. They along with all the remnant of the people *obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai the prophet*, 1:12. Verse twelve concludes by saying the people *showed reverence for the Lord*. Contrast this to the attitude of the people before the years of captivity. God sent many prophets exhorting the people to action and to turn away from sin. They were continually rebuffed. Not so with this small remnant of Jews. The words of Haggai were exactly what were needed to galvanize the people to unity of purpose and the willingness to complete a project that had begun a decade and a half earlier. When the people started their work, 1:13 says that God spoke through Haggai saying *I am with you*. Within three and a half weeks, work began. Haggai had been very effective in getting his message across.

More encouragement

With the specific dating in Haggai, commentators have been able to place specific dates on Haggai's ministry. Haggai's ministry began on August 29, 520 B.C. Within three weeks of the delivery of his message, work had begun on the temple site. Haggai 2 opens around four weeks later on the twenty-first

day of the seventh month, or October 17, 520 B.C. Work had paused for celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. This oracle is directed to Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant of people. They were called to remember the temple in its former glory. Though it had been pillaged and stripped of many precious items before it was destroyed, it was a sight to behold. Some have taken this verse to mean that Haggai was one of those who had seen the temple before its destruction. And yet at this time, the temple was in ruins. It was a place of desolation. Despite this God says to *take courage... and work; for I am with you*, 2:4. God goes further in verse five and says, *My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!* God was going to stand with them, protect them, and encourage them in their work. What tremendous encouragement for this people!

God continued to encourage them in verses six through nine by getting them to envision the future glory of this place. This instilled in them a greater sense of purpose. The exact application of these verses is difficult and disputed among commentators. What is meant by shaking in 2:6? It was to occur *once more*. Some have taken this to mean that the religious order would be shaken one final time with the coming of Jesus Christ. (There was also physical shaking at the death of Jesus, Matthew 27:50-53.) Some feel the shaking in verse seven refers to the constant upheaval of the nations over the next few centuries. There was constant political turmoil among the world powers. God said that the temple would once again be filled with glory. What could this mean? We know that before the destruction of Solomon's temple, it was filled with the glory of the Lord and was seen by the people in the form of a cloud, 2 Chronicles 7:1. But in the second temple, the temple was never filled with this cloud indicating the presence of God. Some have taken the glory in 2:7 to refer to Jesus Christ when He would teach in its courts some five centuries later. In verses eight and nine, the encouragement continues. The people may have been discouraged by what little silver and gold they had to decorate the temple, but they needed to remember that these things already belonged to God, 2:8. The physical temple they were constructing could be viewed as a foreshadowing to the church, the spiritual body of believers, 2:9. The body of Christ is filled with peace.

The third oracle

On December 18, 520 B.C., Haggai received his third revelation from God. Work had now been going on for three months. Even though work had been going on in the temple for a period, the people were not yet experiencing the promised physical blessings. This oracle was given encouraging them to patience. The priests are asked a question by the prophet, 2:12. The portions of sin offerings left for the priests were carried in their robes. If the garment holding holy meat touched some other food, would that cause the other food to become holy? The answer by the priests was "No." "According to Leviticus 6:27, the garment itself would be holy, but holiness would not be passed on from the garment to anything it might touch."² The second question dealt with the positive side of the problem. If a person touched a dead body, everything he touched would become unclean, Numbers 19:22. What is the application? The people had been a holy people, but the nation had become defiled. Everything they touched became unclean. Everything they offered had been unclean. Of this Hailey writes, "they were looking for Jehovah's blessings prematurely; they must first cleanse themselves of their defilement, and then they could expect His presence among them and His blessings upon them."³

Haggai asks the people to consider their situation before the temple construction began. Their harvests failed to produce the expected measures. God brought *blasting wind, mildew, and hail* to get them to repent, 2:17. In the fifteen years since their return from Babylon, the people had become apathetic. God used these methods to try to wake them up. Even after work on the temple had restarted, their harvests had not improved. But Haggai calls on the people to mark this day (December 18, 520 B.C.). From this day forward, their harvests would be blessed. The physical blessings they had waited so patiently for were about to be realized. God says, *from this day on I will bless you*, 2:19.

The fourth oracle of Haggai

On the same day, God spoke through Haggai issuing a promise of hope. This oracle looks to the upcoming spiritual blessings that would come through Jesus Christ. Once again God speaks of shaking the heavens and the earth. Mighty kingdoms and their armies would fall. A study of world history in the five centuries leading up to Jesus bears this out. World powers came and went.

This oracle deals specifically with Zerubbabel. He had been *chosen* by the Lord, 2:23. He was God's leader among the people. This is interesting, especially when contrasting this with the words God spoke to his grandfather, Jehoiachin. In Jeremiah 22:24, God rejected Jehoiachin, but here Zerubbabel is used to reestablish the promise made to David. The Messiah would come through the seed of David and Zerubbabel is part of this heritage. On this Smith writes, "Promises are often made in scripture to individuals which are accomplished only in their descendants. Apparently, the grand promises made to David are here passed on to Zerubbabel and to his line. From him would spring the Messiah in who alone these wide predictions would find their fulfillment."⁴

And with that, Haggai concludes. Thirty-eight verses with a powerful message. A message that motivated an entire nation to unite behind a single purpose and complete a project that needed to be finished. The people had been challenged and they responded accordingly. What a powerful message to Christians today!

For Discussion

1. Haggai's name means:
2. In what year does Haggai prophesy?
3. What is the main theme of this short book?

4. Describe the political scene of Haggai's day. Who is the world power?

5. Can you get a sense of the conditions of the people when Haggai begins? Describe your impression of their quality of life.

6. In what condition was the temple when Haggai begins to prophesy?

7. Did the people have legitimate excuses to postpone work on the temple?

8. On what had the people focused in the fifteen years of inactivity with the temple construction? How did God feel? Can you make any modern day applications?

9. Why were the people being deprived of physical blessings?

10. God told the people not to fear because He was with them. How much of a motivator would that have been? How much of a motivator is it to us?

11. In what way would the temple once again be filled with the glory of God?

12. Explain the lesson of 2:12-14.

13. How was Zerubbabel to be blessed?

(Endnotes)

- 1 Smith, James E. *The Minor Prophets*. p. 475
- 2 Baldwin, Joyce G. *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*. p. 50
- 3 Hailey, Homer, E. *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Religious Supply, 1993), p. 313
- 4 Smith, James E. *The Minor Prophets*. p. 513?