

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Haggai

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The Author. Haggai's name means "festival." He is a prophet whose ministry lasted for a mere five months in the year 520 B.C. but who had a lasting impact on so many. Haggai was quite different from his fellow prophets. His complaints against the nation of Judah did not focus on the usual flagrant sins of idolatry, unrighteousness, and injustice; instead, his concerns were over his people's apathy in their worship and service of God. Unfortunately, we know very little about Haggai. We do know that he was a contemporary of the prophet Zechariah and that both were used by God in 520 B.C. to prod the exiles that had returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel to pick up the neglected task of rebuilding the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Immediately upon returning from a seventy-year exile, the people had undertaken this project with a mighty vigor. Sadly, disillusionment, discouragement, and controversy so quenched the hearty spirit of the restorationists that they dropped the project shortly after the foundation for the new footprint of the temple was laid. For the next sixteen years no one touched this project – nor did anyone seem to care.

Background to the Book. Some sixty-six years earlier, in 586 B.C., Jerusalem was decimated by the Babylonian armies. Tragically for Judah, her temple, built in 967 B.C. by King Solomon, was totally destroyed, and God's covenant people did not have a place to worship for the first time since Moses had built the tabernacle, the forerunner of Solomon's temple. Most of Judah's population was forced to go into exile some 1100 miles away in ancient Babylon, now called Iraq. Devoid of leadership and the means or place to worship the Living God, their resolve melted. In 539 B.C. the international picture changed abruptly as the newly-formed power of Media-Persia emerged. Under the masterful leadership of Cyrus, Babylon was captured. Perhaps as early as 538 B.C., Cyrus issued a decree (recorded in Ezra 1:2-4; 6:2-5) that made it possible for the exiles to return to their homeland. Under the governor Zerubbabel and the High Priest Joshua, almost 50,000 Jews (a rather disappointingly small percentage of the exiles living in Babylon) returned to Jerusalem and Judah.

539 B.C.	The fall of Babylon
538	Cyrus's decree to allow the return of the exiles
537	49,897 Jews return home (Nehemiah 7; Ezra 2)
536	Work on the temple stopped (Ezra 4)
530	Cyrus dies
530-522	Cambyses II (Artaxerxes), Cyrus's son, reigns
522-486	Darius I (Civil War)

520	Darius I confirms Cyrus's decree (Ezra 6)
520	Haggai's messages
516	Temple completed and dedicated (Ezra 6:15)

A Call to Renew the Work of God (Haggai 1:1-15)

This chapter issues four ways in which we, like the remnant that returned from exile, can be involved in renewing the work of God.

By Refusing to Offer Our Excuses (1:1-2). It was the first time God's voice had been heard in the land since the days of Jeremiah. The prophets Daniel and Ezekiel had spoken during the seventy years of the exile, but they had spoken from the land of their captivity. In verse 2, it is odd that God should refer to His people using the distant form of "This people." Even during their time in Egypt the people of Israel had been known as "My people." How quick we mortals are to find excuses and to blame God when we have not done His work, though we are at fault. Often our excuses are mere pretexts for our laziness and our selfish reinvestment of time on our own projects.

By Setting Our Priorities (1:3-6).

God's work must come before our work. In verse 4, God's work in rebuilding His house ought to have had priority over the exiles' work on their houses, even as it must take priority over our own work. The religious condition of the people's hearts could be directly gauged by their attitude toward working on God's house. If the times were so adverse, how did it happen that so many of the exiles were able to live in "paneled houses?" The people's position that they were too poor to rebuild the temple due to the bad economy, inflation, and the poor value of the shekel was untenable. Their lavish spending on themselves exposed their hypocrisy and lies. "Consider your ways" (v. 5), the prophet urged.

God's ways must come before our ways. One point made in verse 6 is that there is a real correlation between the productivity of the land and the spiritual growth of the believing remnant. This correlation was first established after the fall in the Garden of Eden. Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, the land was cursed. When our Lord returns again, Romans 8:20-22 announces, the whole created order – including the dirt, or land – will experience release from bondage and enjoy the effects of the redemption of our Lord Jesus Christ.

By Getting Involved in Our Lord's Work (1:7-12). The purpose of obedience was not merely to see a building raised; it was first and last to bring pleasure to God and to glorify Him. As God says in verse 8, He wants the people to be obedient: "that [He] may take pleasure in it and be glorified."

The costs of disobedience. Disobedience is never a profitable shortcut to success; on the contrary, it is ultimately a very costly way to go. Because God's house was in "ruins," *hareb* (v. 4), He had called for a "drought" (*horeb*) on the land, mountains, grain, new wine, and oil (v. 11).

The beauty of obedience. Starting with the leadership and continuing down through the rank and file, the people all "obeyed the voice of the Lord their God." Suddenly, as a result of Haggai's preaching and the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, the people – who had been, in effect, practicing atheists – started to obey the Lord.

By Our Receiving God's Enablement (1:13-15). God promises to be "with" us over 100 times in the Old Testament. A complete change of heart had taken place, and the leadership and people now wanted to do the work of God.

A Call to Reject a Negative Spirit (Haggai 2:1-9)

Whereas Haggai's first message addressed the people's unwarranted contentment with things as they were, his second message addresses the people's unwarranted discontent: the new danger that emerged as the work on the temple progressed. This message is a call to reject despondency, despair, and pessimism.

For Our Present Needs: A Divine Formula (2:1-5). The question in verse 3 has a rhetorical note to it: "In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing?" (v. 3). Here was an invitation to confess that what was being built was thought to be small and worthless by many in the returned community.

Of human responsibility (2:4a). The people were to be strong and to get on with the work because God was at work.

Of divine presence (2:4b). Behind God's call for us to "be strong" is His promise "for I am with you."

Of divine promise (2:5a). The Lord does not do anything on the spur of the moment. It was part of His eternal plan that He was carrying out even in the face of what many would have called a real setback. God had given His word to the patriarchs and Moses that He would be and do something unique for Israel so that, through Israel, all the families of the earth could receive His blessing.

Of the divine Spirit (2:5b). Haggai makes the point that the Holy Spirit is continually abiding in the midst of all of us.

For Our Future Participation: A Divine Finale (2:6-9). The future belonged totally to God; He would reorder all things and establish His kingdom on earth. No shake-up that this world had ever seen would compare to that shake up of the heavens and the earth.

An immovable kingdom (2:6).

An immovable king (2:7).

An immovable glory (2:8-9).

God has planned, and has already inaugurated, a kingdom that will never be destroyed.

A Call to Personal Holiness (Haggai 2:10-19)

Haggai addressed the people's unwarranted contentment in his first message and their unwarranted discontent in his second message. In this third message he rebukes the people's misplaced values. It is all too common to rest on one's laurels after completing a major task.

Holiness is not "contagious" (2:10-12)

Evil is "contagious" (2:13)

Holy works do not make holy persons (2:14)

A holy God gives all good gifts to holy persons (2:15-19). Things were really going to change since the revival and repentance of chapter 1 had taken place. Here was another sign that God would now turn toward His people with blessing. Progress in the spiritual realm was the first indication that success was coming in the agricultural realm as well.

A Call to Participate in God's Triumph (Haggai 2:20-23)

Loosely Hang on to the Perishable Things of Life (2:20-21). This shake-up was to be an eschatological one to occur in connection with the coming of our Lord.

Here is a passage replete with Messianic allusions and predictions. "My servant" is a well known title for the Messiah. A second Messianic allusion is the "signet ring," this God-ordained emblem of the office and authority of the Davidic kingship