

# Minor Prophets: Haggai

Turn to and obey the LORD!

September 23, 2018

## Introduction (5 mins)

### *Contemporary relevance*

In Matthew 6:33, Jesus tells to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and to trust in His provision for our needs. So instead of thinking first about what we're going to eat, where we're going to live, or how we're going to improve our lives, Jesus tells us to put Him first above ourselves and then to trust Him to take care of us.

This is a familiar command to many of us. It's very clear and direct. But, how many of us today can say that we're truly living this out? Jesus is not saying to close to first place. Or put Him first only if everything else in your life is taken care of and following Him is easy. No, Jesus calls us to seek Him first no matter what our circumstances are and regardless of how we feel. But, it's hard to put God first in our lives. We struggle and need both reminders to obey and encouragement to continue doing so.

This struggle of putting God first is the same struggle the people had in Haggai's time. This is the issue that God uses Haggai to address. Today, we will see 2 lessons in Haggai: God calls us to turn from disobedience and God helps us to continue in obedience.

### *Historical background*

To understand Haggai, we must first go back to about 1,000 years before Jesus was born, to the height of Israel as a nation. Solomon, David's son was king and had built a beautiful temple in Jerusalem that was the center of worship. The people gathered to the temple often to celebrate festivals and bring their sacrifices before God.

However, soon after, everything went downhill because the nation repeatedly disobeyed God. The people ignored many warnings from God's prophets and worshipped other gods, even sacrificing to idols at the temple that Solomon built. Eventually, God used other nations to destroy Israel in two phases and deported a small group far away into Babylon. And the temple of God at Jerusalem was completely burned to the ground.

That would have been the end of the Jewish people, but God did not forget about them. After 70 years in exile, as we see in the beginning of the book of Ezra, God brought back a small group of 50,000 Jews to Jerusalem under the leadership of a man named Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was in the royal line, being a descendent of King David. He is probably one of the most important persons in the Old Testament that you've never heard of. We'll talk more about him later.

After returning to Jerusalem, Zerubbabel and the people started rebuilding the temple of God. However, they were just a small group surrounded by hostile enemies. Those enemies threatened Zerubbabel and the people and they gave in and stopped rebuilding the temple.

This finally brings us to Haggai's time. We are 500 years before Jesus and about 20 years after the small group had returned to Jerusalem. The people are struggling greatly to just survive, and the temple has continued in ruins. God uses Haggai to stir up the people toward

obedience, so they can reorder their priorities and worship God as He deserves to be worshipped.

### *Book overview and structure*

The book of Haggai records the messages that God spoke through the prophet Haggai. It's the second shortest book in the Old Testament, with only 2 chapters and 38 total verses. But remember, as we've been saying throughout this series on the Minor Prophets, even though these books have fewer words, their message is just as important as the other books of the Bible.

These are important words because they come from God Himself. In fact, in Haggai, 25 times we see the phrases: "says the LORD" or "declares the LORD" or "the word of the LORD." There are 14 times where we see God referred to as "the LORD of hosts." "Hosts" means armies and "the LORD of hosts" indicates God's sovereignty and power. Therefore, even though this book is short, know that it contains the very words of God, the omnipotent Creator of the heavens and the earth - so pay close attention!

The book itself has a simple structure: it contains 4 chronological messages from God. Each of the messages starts with the specific date when it was given. We'll look at messages 1 and 3 together, and then messages 2 and 4 together. Messages 1 and 3 are about the call to turn from disobedience. Messages 2 and 4 are about how God helps us to continue in obedience.

## God calls us to turn from disobedience (11 mins)

### *Areas of disobedience*

God calls His people to turn from their disobedience. How were the people disobedient? The people were disobedient because they had wrong priorities and because they were unclean.

In message 1, we see in Haggai 1:2:

"Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD."

"The house of the LORD" was another name for the temple because the temple was a place of God's presence and where the people worshipped and met with God. Now, God was not out on the street and homeless while the temple was in ruins. God is the Creator of the universe and does not live in a small man-made building. The main point is the people's failure to rebuild the physical building showed how they failed to worship and honor God in their hearts.

Note that the people were not saying that the temple shouldn't be rebuilt at all, but that "the time has not yet come to rebuild." They were saying "yes, yes, the temple is important...but not of first importance. We'll do it after we first take care of own houses." But, delayed obedience is not obedience. Saying, "I will, I will, I will" often turns into "oops, I forgot." Delayed obedience says, "What you're asking me to do is just not important enough to stop what I'm doing now to do it." Just ask my parents of how I was growing up or my wife of how I too often still am and you'll understand that saying "I will" but not doing it is very frustrating and inconsiderate. Having that response to each other is one thing, but when we act that way to the God of the universe who tells us to do what's best and we don't do it? That is far worse.

The people's disobedience of wrong priorities was also linked to God's other complaint of uncleanness. In message 3, God says in Haggai 2:13-14:

“Unclean...so is it with this people, and with this nation before me, declares the LORD, and so with every work of their hands. And what they offer there is unclean.”

Again, the people didn't ignore God completely; they were making sacrifices to God. But the point is that even though they gave sacrifices, because they only gave God the leftovers and their hearts were not in the right place, whatever good they did was tainted and like filthy rags to God.

It's as if I'm changing a particularly dirty and smelly diaper and one of my hands gets dirty. If I take my clean hand and try to wipe my dirty hand on it, then both of my hands are dirty! Then if I go up to you and try to give you something with my defiled hands, you'll probably say, "Thanks, but no thanks! Wash your hands first and then give it to me." That was how it was with the people and any good they tried to do. As a result, because of the people's wrong priorities and overall uncleanness, God had them suffer the consequences of their disobedience.

#### *Consequences of disobedience*

It's God Himself who made the people's lives difficult because they did not put Him first. We see in Haggai 1:9:

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

God purposefully made the lives of His people difficult. We can easily imagine a cycle of stubbornness: the people prioritized planting crops as more important than rebuilding the temple, so when they planted grape vines and expected 20 grapes, God made it so they only received 10. And then the people would try even harder the next time to plant grapes and spend even less time thinking about the temple, and God would afflict them even more. You get the sense that the harder the people tried to put themselves first, the harder God pushed back, until life became unbearable for the people.

You might also be thinking that wait, God doesn't make His people suffer! Or, if He did, it would be wrong of Him. Or maybe that it's unreasonable for God have us to put Him first over making sure we have enough to eat. Well, the Bible is extremely clear that sometimes God puts His people through suffering for not putting Him above everything else. When His people are straying from Him, by having them suffer, He's warning them of the consequences of disobedience and directing them to the place of abundant blessing. It's better for our lives to be temporarily difficult if it wakes us up to putting Him first, because He's able to provide everything we need. God's affliction is an act of love, just like a father disciplining His son to teach him that blessings come from obedience and consequences come with disobedience.

Now, let me be clear that when we suffer, it's not always because we've been disobedient and there's sin in our lives. We might suffer from doing what's right. After all, Jesus never sinned and He suffered the most. But, while not all suffering is because of our sin, turning to God is always the right response to suffering. This is what God was doing in Haggai's time - using these difficult circumstances to call the people to turn towards Him.

#### *Call to turn from disobedience*

In Haggai, we see 5 times the call to "consider," or "consider your ways!" In Hebrew, the word "consider" means to think very carefully and deeply. God called the people to contemplate how their difficult circumstances were connected to their wrong priorities. They

were specifically supposed to think about how the bad harvest was connected to their failure to rebuild the temple and their uncleanness.

This is the same call we have today, to consider our ways. But what is it that we need to consider? First and foremost, consider whether you have been cleansed from your sins. If you have not, then know that you are responsible to pay for them. Either Jesus pays the punishment for your sins, or you do. You can be cleansed today if you agree that yes, you are a sinner who deserves punishment, but believe that God gave you one way to be saved through His Son Jesus Christ. If you believe that when Jesus died on the cross, even though He was perfectly good, had no sins, and deserved no punishment, that God punished Jesus for every single one of your sins, then you can be saved and washed clean of not some, but all your sins. Trust that Jesus took your place and be cleansed.

For those of us who have already been washed clean, we still must also consider our ways. If we're going through tough times, instead of only asking God to get us out of our circumstances, to just make it easier, or to give us what we really, really want, we should be also asking God to show us what He's trying to teach us through the difficulty we're going through. We must ask God to show us how we've been disobedient to Him and for Him to change our hearts, so we can turn and obey.

Are we putting God first? Are we seeking first His Kingdom? Sharing the good news of salvation from sins to our lost friends and family? Putting Sunday worship and weekly prayer as high priority? Or are we busy devoting so much time to activities that won't last and are just for ourselves?

Consider your ways! If your priorities aren't right, God may be afflicting you to wake you up. Or if life is good, turn now before He does start afflicting you.

#### *Turning from disobedience*

In Haggai's time, God called the people to obey by going up to the mountains, bringing wood and rebuilding the temple to glorify God. And amazingly, we read in Haggai 1:12,14 that God stirred up their hearts and

“all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God...And the people feared the LORD...And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God.”

Let's follow their example and heed the warning by putting God first in our lives today.

Now that might feel complete, to consider our ways and then respond by turning to God in obedience. But, this sermon is not over yet - we've only gone halfway. And hopefully, by the end of this second part you'll be thankful and not grumbling that we didn't just stop here.

## God helps us to continue in obedience (11 mins)

### *Why we need help to obey*

One of the reasons I really appreciate this book is because Haggai is very realistic about the Christian life - that it's hard! We'll always be tempted to put other things before God. Obedience isn't a one-time act, but it's a lifelong process for Christians. But the comforting part is that God doesn't just leave us to get tired and weary as we struggle through life. He gives superabundant resources to help us. Messages 2 and 4 in Haggai are about how God helps His people to continue in obedience.

We see one of the challenges to staying obedient in Haggai 2:3-4:

3 'Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?

After the people obeyed and started rebuilding the temple, their situation didn't change overnight. The obstacles that made it easy to deprioritize the temple were still there. They were still surrounded by enemies who opposed the rebuilding project. The crops did not suddenly sprout abundantly overnight. And maybe worst of all, even after the people began rebuilding the temple, as we see in the passage above, the results were discouraging.

The previous temple that Solomon built was a masterpiece. In 1 Kings 6, we read that Solomon used only the finest cedar wood and had detailed carvings of flowers, palm trees, and angels on the walls. And then he covered everything with pure gold. It must have been beautiful. But, it was completely burned down and in Haggai's time, the people didn't have anything like the fine gold and nice wood that Solomon had. Can you imagine how pathetic their temple was looking? They probably just felt like giving up.

Today, aren't we also tempted to just give up? Wouldn't it just be easier to put God second or third and instead focus on something else that we're better at, that comes easier, or where we can see more results? Or just give in and spend our days being entertained and living for pleasure? I've definitely gone through this throughout my Christian life.

Isn't it so frustrating after spending just 15 minutes trying to read your Bible but falling asleep for 10 of those minutes and ending up not remembering anything you've read - and this happening day after day! Or trying to pray to God but your mind constantly wandering onto other things. It just feels like you're wasting your time.

Or with our relationships, trying to love your family, husband, wife, or child and they're not appreciative or worse, even resentful. Or serving at church and seeing brothers and sisters never seeming to care, change, or grow.

Or knowing that you should try to bring up the gospel with that person but being too scared to and again feeling guilty afterwards. There are so many ways we get discouraged when we try to seek first God's kingdom.

Thankfully, God has not left us to keep struggling by ourselves, but He gives us real and effective help in so many ways. Haggai describes three of these ways for how God helps us to continue in obedience: by His presence, His provision, and His plans.

*God helps us through His presence.*

In Haggai 2:4-6, we see:

Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts.

God declares to His people 3 times in the book of Haggai that He is with them. He is saying emphatically that they can take courage, be strengthened, and work! This is the same promise that Christians have today, that God is with us. When we feel tired, weary, and want to give up, we can remember what Paul says in Philippians 2:12-13:

...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

We can also say with David in Psalm 23:4:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

God is not distant, far off, and uncaring. We don't have to call God up to let Him know we've had a tough day; He was there the whole time with us. We don't have to feel lonely or afraid; we're never alone. He knows what we're going through and cares deeply. Since God is with us, we should even more cast our cares upon Him and rely on His strength.

*God helps us through His provision.*

We also see that God helps us through His provision. In Haggai 2:7-9, God declares:

And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.”

When we follow God, we're following the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the One who owns all things. It didn't matter that the people in Haggai's day had few resources and their temple looked pathetic. Silver and gold are God's and He can shake the nations so that money falls out whenever He wants. And that's exactly what He did. We don't have time to read through Ezra 6, but over there, you can see how God took enemy plans to stop the temple rebuilding and completely turned it around so that those enemies had to actually help build the temple and even pay all the money and resources needed!

For us today, we must remember that God doesn't tell us we have to achieve certain results. He doesn't say that we must convert 100 people this year otherwise we fail. Instead, His command is for us to faithfully walk by faith and trust Him for the results. We plant seeds and water them, but God provides the growth. This should be incredibly freeing for us because we're not on the hook for building His kingdom - God is. We just do our part and watch God provide the results.

*God helps us through His promises.*

Finally, in message 4, Haggai ends with a personal promise from God to Zerubbabel, the leader of the Israelites. In Haggai 2:21-23 we see:

“Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms... On that day, declares the LORD of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, declares the LORD, and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the LORD of hosts.”

This is a specific message to Zerubbabel and not to us, but it still provides a lot of encouragement to us. Firstly, notice how God knows Zerubbabel specifically by name and has a specific plan for him. In the same way, God knows every single one of us. He chose you and has perfect plan for you. But while it's encouraging to know that God personally knows us, we can be encouraged even more through God's specific promise to Zerubbabel.

God tells Zerubbabel that He will destroy the wicked forces in this world and will triumph over them. And God promises to make Zerubbabel like a signet ring, which is a symbol of authority and power. That promise was fulfilled partially in Zerubbabel himself, but it was

fulfilled in a far greater way in Zerubbabel's descendent, our Lord Jesus Christ. Through fulfilling His promise to Zerubbabel, God gives all mankind a Savior who died for sins and will absolutely overcome all the wickedness and brokenness in the world. We see in the familiar passage of Matthew 28:18-20:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Since Jesus is in control over all things and since He will always be with us, we can take courage and act. These are the many promises that God gives to His people. But often, we forget about them and live as though we must do everything on our own. Don't forget the spiritual blessings that are already yours! Continue to cry out to God and cling to Him. Meditate on these promises and see how He might strengthen you to accomplish great things for Him.

## Conclusion (2 mins)

We've covered a lot of ground today in these 2 chapters of Haggai. We've seen how God calls us to turn from disobedience, specifically when we aren't seeking first His kingdom and prioritizing worshipping Him. We've seen that the first step in obedience is to believe in Jesus' death on the cross to cleanse us from all our sins. And we've seen that God helps us continue to obey Him by His presence with us, His provision, and His plans.

Consider the foolishness of putting anything else above God. In Psalm 127:1-2 we read:

Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.

But maybe you're just not convinced and there's a nagging thought that if you submit your life to God, that He's not going to take care of you or your life will be miserable. If so, consider Romans 8:32:

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

What more can God do to show that He loves you and has good in store for you, if you would just submit to Him and put Him first? He gave up even His own Son! Now therefore, consider your ways! Turn from disobedience and with His help, take courage and obey Him today!