

Haggai Part One

Introduction

Haggai takes its name from the prophet the book refers to. We don't really know anything about Haggai – who he was, where he was from, or who his parents were. He is mentioned in Ezra 5v1-2 (which summarises the events of Haggai).

Background

The Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including Solomon's temple, in 586 B.C. Most of the Jews were taken as captives to Babylon. Without the temple and the altar, the Jewish people were unable to practice their religion as the Law commanded. Then in 538 B.C., after Babylon had been conquered by the Persians, King Cyrus allowed the Jewish exiles to return to their land. There were at least three waves of returnees who took advantage of this opportunity. In 537 B.C. a group of almost 50,000 Jews returned under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, and Zerubbabel who replaced him (Ezra 1:2-4). Haggai and Zechariah appear to have been in this group, as was Joshua the high priest (although Haggai's name does not appear in the lists of returnees in the opening chapters of Ezra). During the year that followed, the returnees rebuilt the altar in Jerusalem and were able to resume offering sacrifices on it. They also laid the foundation for the reconstruction of the temple, but opposition to the rebuilding meant that construction was postponed for 16 years. During this long period, apathy towards rebuilding the temple set in. Then in 520 B.C., as a result of changes in the Persian government and the preaching of Haggai, the people resumed rebuilding the temple, and finished it about five years later in 515 B.C. (Ezra 1—6). Haggai first called the people to resume construction, and Zechariah soon joined him.

Date

(The following two background sections are adapted from Dr Thomas L. Constable's notes on Haggai)

Haggai dates the four messages in the book, and he dated all of them in the second year of King Darius I of Persia – the year 520 B.C. This means his ministry spanned less than four months, from the first day of the sixth month (1:1) to the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month (2:20). (29th August to 18th December, 520 B.C). He probably wrote the book between 520 B.C. and 515 B.C. (mainly because if he finished the book after 515 B.C., we would expect him to mention the completion of the temple, which would have made a good ending)! Zechariah was ministering at the same time as Haggai, who began prophesying in the eighth month of that same year (Zech. 1:1).

Why look at Haggai?

At first glance, Haggai seems to little to say to God's people today. We have not recently returned from exile, and we do not need a temple or a high priest. So why read this book? Why is it in the Bible for us to read?

As with any Old Testament book, Haggai forms part of our history as the people of God; understanding God's words and actions in the past will help us in the present. And the book deals with situations which are surprisingly familiar to us; Haggai challenges beliefs and attitudes which we have probably seen, and possibly held ourselves.

Outline

The book of Haggai contains four messages from the prophet:

1v1-11 – Haggai's first message, to Zerubbabel and Joshua.

- 1v12-15 – Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people respond.

2v1-9 – Haggai's second message, to Zerubbabel, Joshua and the remnant.

2v10-19 – Haggai's third message, to the priests.

2v20-23 – Haggai's fourth message, to Zerubbabel.

Our first session together will concentrate on the first message (we will look at the other three next week).

Haggai's First Message

Haggai's first message from God is for Zerubbabel, the governor and a descendent of King David (1 Chron. 3:17-19), and Joshua, the High priest. These would have been the two most important figures among the group of returnees. Note the way God refers to the Jewish returnees: “these people” (v2), rather than “my people.” There is distance between God and His people.

First, God repeats to them what they have been thinking, that the time isn't right to try to rebuild the temple (they've been waiting 16 years). Perhaps they thought the threat of their enemies was still too great? Or perhaps they were waiting to comply with prophecies they had been given (e.g. to make sure the exile lasted 70 years)?

God exposes this statement as ridiculous by asking them if it is, then, the time for them to live in pannelled (i.e., finished and decorated) houses, while the temple is still in ruins.

What does this say about their priorities? What place have they given to God's glory?

The Jews living in Jerusalem had their priorities all wrong, and that is what God is rebuking them for. Their enthusiasm had faded, and they had forgotten their first love.

When the Jews were in exile, they were hindered in their worship, and it was a struggle to keep going (e.g. read about the hard choices Daniel and his friends faced as Babylonian rule was imposed on them). When they arrived home, they lost their passion. Today we see examples of the Christian faith flourishing under persecution, but suffering from apathy (both within and without) in times of comfort and security. It appears the same happened to those who returned from exile.

Something for us to consider...

Do we, as Christians, ever act in similar ways?

How might we act like the Hebrews, and get our priorities wrong?

We often feel like we need to be comfortable in our situation (i.e. financial security, comfortable living/church situation) before we can do God's work. While this might sound logical, that we'll be able to serve God better when we are comfortable, what does it say about our priorities?

It also leaves us exposed to the trap the Jews fell into; we never have enough, and are never settled. We will end up saying that “the time has not yet come.” “Get out of your comfort zone” is a popular saying, but we should listen – our 'comfort zone' is a dangerous place to be!

The next two verses (5&6) explain that this is the consequence of misplacing your priorities. If you concentrate on food, drink, money and clothes, they will never be enough. They will never satisfy you. This was the experience of the people Haggai is addressing. God tells them that it is because they have neglected Him and put other things in His place that they are never satisfied with what they have (and so never get around to finishing His temple).

Can we see the same experiences in our world today?

All around us, people neglect God and turn to other things (money, cars, success, relationships etc), but they are ultimately empty and never satisfy. This has important implications for our mission, as we share the gospel with people who worship other things in place of God. The satisfaction they seek will not be found anywhere but God – their priorities are totally misplaced.

But there is a way out of this situation for them (v7-8). They are to recover their passion for God's glory, and resume work on the temple. That is what is at stake – not just a building, but **God's glory**. And for that reason, God has withheld his blessing. Ironically, their fixation on material things instead of on God's glory has led to the things they are looking for being withheld. And, in particular, items that were important for worship in the temple (items like grain, oil and wine). These things are often used as a sign that the relationship between God and his people is being damaged.

When they hear God's words through Haggai, the people **obeyed** Him, and they feared the Lord. That is, they remembered who God is, and that he is worthy of proper worship. With the simple words “I am with you, declares the Lord,” Zerubbabel and Joshua, along with all the people, were stirred up. And about 3 weeks later, they came and worked on the temple.

How might the words, “I am with you, declares the Lord” have been an encouragement to Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people?

After the exile, and during the previous 16 years, the people may well have doubted whether God was still with them. Yet he echoes the words he spoke to Joshua when the Israelites entered the Promised land: “I am with you.” It's easy to imagine how this must have brought them renewed enthusiasm.

We should ask ourselves the question, “Where does Jesus fit into Haggai?” Every part of the Bible should point us back to Christ and to the cross. How does this chapter fit with Christ and His gospel?

Thanks to Jesus, we have no need for a temple – He is God with us. And if we are Christians, God lives in us – our worship is not tied to a specific time or place. But our attitude towards Jesus will show up the same attitudes as the attitude of the Jews to their temple.

Often we can become apathetic, and too focussed on our own well-being, rather than on God's glory.

We should also note God's part in rebuilding the temple, because it shows us that God is concerned for **His own** glory:

1. God sends Haggai to tell them to rebuild the temple.
2. God has been withholding His blessing from them because they have lost their passion.
3. God stirs up the people to begin work – He doesn't leave them to do it under their own steam.

In verse 8, God instructs them to build the temple so He might be glorified there (meaning his glory can be shown off, not that he can gain more glory – God is already supremely glorious!).

Something to consider...

How should this affect us and our priorities?

First, I think God's actions here should challenge the way we understand Him. We can fall into thinking that God is there for us, to care for us and make us comfortable. But this is not the whole picture. God's utmost concern is for His glory, that He should be worshipped as He deserves. God

does care for us, but in doing so He displays His goodness and His glory, and it illicitly draws praise from His people.

This is especially important when we think about the cross. The life, death and resurrection of Christ was, first and foremost a demonstration of God's glory. He showed the glorious riches of his love and kindness in dying for us. This is a very different idea than what the cross has come to mean in some parts of the Church.

It also brings a new dimension when we think through big questions, such as the problem of suffering or the existence of hell, if we move the centre from our wellbeing to God's glory.

Secondly, if this is God's priority, then it should be ours too. Our highest priority should be to demonstrate the glory of God. For the Jews, this meant rebuilding the temple. This will happen...

- when we praise and worship God, and as we gather together to remind each other of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.
- as we preach the gospel of Christ, the ultimate display of God's glory.
- as people hear the gospel and become Christians, God's glory is displayed to all.