Moving Forward Together

Last in the series, Heritage and Hope

# Scripture: Haggai 1

# Key Thought: Haggai’s challenge to Israel also challenges us today.

# Intro idea: three characters of today’s story

Joshua

Joshua was a famous Old Testament name. Most famous man named Joshua was the successor to Moses who led the people of Israel into the Promised Land. This Joshua lived about 900 years later. In Nehemiah, he is called Jeshua. He also helped lead the children of Israel back to their homeland. This Joshua, was not the political leader, he was the priestly leader. He teamed with Zerubbabel, who was the kingly figure.

Haggai

Haggai was a prophet during the time of Zerubbabel and Joshua. He is very important because he is the first prophetic voice to speak to the exiles after they returned back to their homeland. His speaking is a sign of God's continued presence and oversight of Israel.

Haggai’s message comes at least a decade after Zerubbabel and Joshua and the group of exiles have arrived and settled down around Jerusalem.

We know almost nothing about Haggai the man except for the four messages that he brought to Israel over about a four month period.

Zerubbabel

We do not know a great deal about Zerubbabel. We do know he was the next one in the kingly line of Israel. His name means “shoot of Babylon,” referring to his being born in Babylon. He was the grandson of King Jehoiachin who was carried into captivity by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar.

Zerubbabel was the leader of the first group of exiles to return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity subsequent to the 538 BC decree of Cyrus, the Persian monarch, which allowed the Jews to return.

# Israel’s situation

The setting for Haggai’s prophecy is Jerusalem 10 to 15 years after the exiles have returned from captivity. They are lead by Zerubbabel and Joshua working together. They have built houses, and settled down in an agrarian economy. However, according to the prophecy, they were not prosperous. They were just surviving. One of the reconstruction projects they were supposed to have done was rebuilding the Temple. This project had not been started. This situation provides the occasion for God to challenge the people through the prophet, Haggai.

# Haggai’s challenge

God’s challenge to Israel through Haggai was simple. “Give careful thought to your ways!” It is repeated for emphasis in chapter 1 verse five and in chapter 1 verse seven. God is saying think about your situation. What did God want them to think about? Through the prophet, God went on to explain. You are working hard; you are back in the Promised Land; I am the Lord your God who is promised to bless you. Yet in spite of these favorable things, you are not being blessed. Your crops are not prospering, your stored items are not keeping (2:16, 17), your crops are blighting and you are experiencing drought. Something is not right! What is it? Reflect for a moment; stop and think.

Finally, Haggai helps them understand the conclusion that God was leading them toward. They were focusing all their energy on themselves. They had fixed their own homes up well. But they had neglected to honor God by repairing his Temple. The rebuilding of the temple had been an explicit instruction of King Cyrus in his decree allowing the Jews to return.

2 Ch 36:22-23 NIV

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

23 "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you — may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.'"

But they had let the number one priority go undone even though more than a decade had passed by. Certainly this was nothing else but culpable neglect! God knew it and once Haggai said it, to their credit, they recognized it too!

# Israel’s response

Unlike their ancestors who had not listened to the prophets, this generation did listen, and quickly. There is a wonderful and exemplary dialogue that is prompted by the prophet’s challenge.

## The challenge 1:1-11

## The leaders and the people respond positively 1:12

The leaders and the people immediately showed a good heart to listen to God’s word, to agree with God’s word, and to change their ways. This combination of three things together are what Jesus referred to when he often said to the Israelites, “He who has an ear to hear let him hear!” To truly hear means to take into our hearts and respond in action. It means to adjust the direction of our lives according to the Word of God that has come to us. This is the only way to demonstrate that we truly “fear God.” In Haggai 1:12 we read that the leaders and the people did “fear God.” That is evident in their response.

What does it mean to fear God? It means to respect him and reverence him and honor him and change our lives to do what he says. Does it mean that we cower in abject fright? Not exactly; but neither does it mean that proper fear of consequences from a holy God is completely absent from our mindset. These Israelites had learned through the bitter experience of exile that God’s holiness would indeed discipline them for idol worship, injustice to the poor, and violence against the oppressed. Their nation had been decimated by conquerors and the remnant had spent 70 years as slaves in Babylon as a result of not listening to the warnings of the earlier prophets. So their fear of God included a healthy respect for God’s wrath upon disobedience and stubbornness. Paul wrote that even today, lack of repentance can store up against us wrath from God too (Romans 2:5).

Thank God Zerubbabel and Joshua and the people responded in obedience.

## God assures them of his continuing presence 1:13

God responds to Israel’s obedience with a wonderful assurance. ““I am with you,” declares the Lord.” (1:13) God’s promise meant more than he was present. God was saying, “I am going to aid you in this project.” This becomes increasingly evident in chapter 2 as God speaks again through Haggai to assure the people that as soon as they begin to build the temple, God will bring a new prosperity to their temporal circumstances as well. In other words, he was going to reward their faithfulness in a material way.

God always rewards faithfulness. His reward is not always immediate and material as it was going to be here in Israel’s case. But he always rewards faithfulness. It is one of the principles of the divine economy.

1 Sa 26:23 “The Lord rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness.” NIV 2011

I hesitate to say the next part, because it has been so misused by charlatan preachers; preachers who might say something like, “Send me seven dollars and God will send you $70.” That is ridiculous nonsense, a misinterpretation and a presumption upon the word of God.

However, as with most errors of that kind, there is a proper version of that truth. The Scriptures do teach about God’s rewards for our financial faithfulness. For example, the prophet Malachi, also in the years after the exile, dealt with a very similar situation to the prophet Haggai. The people were neglecting their gifts to God. Malachi challenged them even more bluntly than Haggai; but he also included a more specific promise.

Mal 3:8-12 NIV

"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'

"In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse — the whole nation of you — because you are robbing me. 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. 11 I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the Lord Almighty. 12 "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the Lord Almighty.

But you say, these are Old Testament passages. Is this truth still applicable in the New Testament times that we live in? That is an excellent question. Yes it is still applicable. The principle that God rewards faithfulness is truer than ever. And, it still applies in the area of financial faithfulness as well. Here’s a passage that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church when he was collecting offerings for the poor in Jerusalem. You will note that it has in it the same ideas.

2 Co 9:6-11 NIV

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written:

"He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

## The people work hard on the project God has instructed them to carry out. 1:14, 15

In response to God’s assurance, the people went to work immediately. What a great way for the dialogue to continue. They did not just talk about obedience; they did not just make confessions about obedience during worship liturgy; they went out from the prophet’s presence and got building materials and went to the temple site and began to build.

Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount that putting truth into action like this was the definition of wise persons (Matthew 7). He had many people who listened to him by the hour but never did anything with what they heard. Jesus called this foolish. He compared it to a builder who built his house on sand with no foundation. But in contrast the one who listens and puts Jesus words into practice, Jesus compared to a wise builder who made a strong foundation upon a rock and then began to build.

# Application to today

Today we here at Copper Hill church have an opportunity to hear the challenge of Haggai for ourselves. In 21st century America, it is easier than ever to be completely caught up in our own projects, our own homes, our own to-do lists, and our own families. There is nothing wrong with any of these in themselves. But the problem can be the same problem that befell Haggai’s listeners. We, as they, can easily neglect to put priority upon God’s house.

Some of you, the Holy Spirit is assuring you that you do prioritize God’s house. You need to be encouraged by the prophet Haggai’s message. God is with you. He is strengthening your hand! He will build his church. Not one cup of cold water given in his name will fail to lose its reward, He says. He will reward your faithfulness. Do not lose heart!

Others of you, the Holy Spirit is speaking to you in words very similar to those he spoke to Israel. I do not know which of you is receiving which message. But you do. To those of you who God is urging to put new priority upon the house of God, I encourage you to listen. It’s not easy, but God’s work needs you right now. God has great plans for Copper Hill. That is evident in the things that have come together over the last year to advance it. God wants you to be a part of the action. One way or another, He will reward you for your faithfulness.