

**NOW OR NEVER**

**Haggai 1:1-15**

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It's my life  
And it's now or never  
I ain't gonna live forever  
I just want to live while I'm alive

Lyrics from the chorus of Bon Jovi's raucous hit song "It's My Life"—winner of VH1's Music Award "Video of the Year" for the year 2000. Ignoring for a moment the self-centered, self-sufficient perspective of this song, the words "It's now or never, I ain't gonna live forever" capture the urgency and the fervor of the prophet Haggai. And, as we will see, Haggai has something to say about a self-centered, self-sufficient view of living.

Haggai's ministry, as recorded in the Bible book that bears his name, was carried on entirely during the year 520 B.C., although it is likely that the book provides only a snapshot of a short span of the prophet's life and ministry. As we will see, each section of the Book of Haggai is specifically dated, ranging from August 29 to December 18 of 520 B.C.

Haggai lived and ministered during one of the lowest points in the biblical history of the Hebrew people. Some sixty-six years earlier, in 586 B.C., the city of Jerusalem had been defeated and its temple desecrated by the armies of Babylon. A large portion of Jerusalem's population had been exiled to live in the labor camps of Babylon, while others had escaped and settled in foreign countries far from their homeland. Only a few remained in the promised land. But in 539 B.C., the international situation began to change. The newly powerful Persian Empire, under the leadership of Cyrus, defeated Babylon and thereby became the master of the fate of the exiled Jews. Cyrus made it possible, perhaps as early as 538 B.C., for exiles who lived in his newly acquired territories to return to their homelands. And so some of the Jews, after half a century of residing in Babylon, began to return to the promised land. Since many of these Jews had been born in exile, they had never seen their homeland. Of those who came back, a few

seem to have set about the task of restoring the temple that had been destroyed in 586 B.C. Their efforts, however, were to little avail. Most of them would have been hard pressed just to survive, and though the work had begun on the temple, little progress had been made with the reconstruction project. Haggai was faced with a state of despair and sluggishness. Despite the poor economy and a pessimistic people, Haggai was one of a small handful of men who saw that something had to be done about the temple. Without the temple, there was no symbol of God's presence among His people, there was no sign of national pride, and so there was no hope of the people escaping from the captivity of their circumstances. Let's read chapter 1 of the Book of Haggai.

<sup>1:1</sup>In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month [August 29, 520 B.C.], the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

<sup>2</sup>This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'"

<sup>3</sup>Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: <sup>4</sup>"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

<sup>5</sup>Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. <sup>6</sup>You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

<sup>7</sup>This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. <sup>8</sup>Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. <sup>9</sup>"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. <sup>10</sup>Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. <sup>11</sup>I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands."

<sup>12</sup>Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.

<sup>13</sup>Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD. <sup>14</sup>So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, <sup>15</sup>on the

twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius [September 21, 520 B.C.] (NIV).

Pictured in this passage are people who resemble much of American society. They are a busy people, but they concern themselves only with their own self-interests. “My house lies in ruins,” God tells them through Haggai, “while you busy yourselves each with their own house.” Their focus and their efforts are directed toward taking care of themselves, “looking out for number one,” making sure that they themselves survive.

Yes, the people were undergoing hardships, and it seems so natural that they would scurry about to find some sort of security for themselves. A few apparently prosper and are able to build for themselves comfortable dwellings, with rich cedar paneling. However, most of the Judeans have to scratch out a living. And so, when it is suggested that the people should be concerned about rebuilding the temple, their response is, “Later. This isn’t the time to worry about that.” The bottom line is, whether prosperous or poor, the people’s relationship with God occupies no place in their thoughts and deeds. This is a secular people who have forgotten about God and who are relying entirely on themselves.

There is something else about the ancient Judeans that is similar to American society. If this passage is read superficially, as is too often the case with Scripture in our society, it can seem to suggest that if the Judeans honor God by rebuilding the temple, then God will reward them with prosperity. A sort of tit-for-tat religion: if you are nice to me, I will be nice to you. Compare this with the health and wealth gospel preached today. If you go to church, God will bless you for your faithfulness. If you help the poor, God will give you abundance. If you follow all the religious rules, God will reward for your obedience. If you pray the prayer of Jabez, God will enlarge your borders with blessings. And on and on goes the tit-for-tat religion. Haggai will have none of this. Notice in verses 12-15 that it is the Lord’s Spirit that stirs up Zerubbabel and Joshua and the remnant of the people to get to work. God always takes the initiative. The Spirit of God works through His prophet to stir up the people and to spark the people to return to their God.

The first and foremost priority in our lives should be God, not ourselves. Secularism ignores God and is self-seeking. Spirituality, as is all too often seen in our society, can

also be self-seeking: we claim God for ourselves because we believe we will profit from such a profession. Whether secular or supposedly spiritual, we are preoccupied with our own selves and with “what’s in it for me” so that the concerns of God are seldom considered.

Last Sunday morning, May 18, presented to this congregation of God’s people was a vision and a plan for a major renovation of this church building—a plea and a proposal for restoring this house of God to its original efficiency and effectiveness. Our motto is: “Building from the Heart.” From verses 12-15 of Haggai chapter 1, there are three principles that I hope will inspire us and energize us for the work that lies ahead.

(1) *The spirit of voluntarism.* The sheer size of Haggai’s proposal is set in perspective when we recall the nature of the original temple constructed in the time of Solomon. It had taken seven years to build and had been supported by heavy taxation and forced labor. In contrast, in Haggai’s proposal, the temple was to be rebuilt by what amounted to voluntary labor. Notice in verse 12 that the people volunteered in a spirit of obedience to God and that they acted out of reverence for God. We have a tough task that lies before us, and it will take all of us working together in unity and in love to accomplish this task. Be prayerful. Be positive. Be prepared to help.

(2) *The inspiration of leadership.* No doubt in ancient Israel there were numerous committee meetings between the end of August and the third week of September in 520 B.C. The Lord “stirred up the spirit” of Zerubbabel and of Joshua, and through them the spirit of all the people. There was a complete change of heart in the Judean community. But no progress is ever made without first overcoming the resistance of the nay-sayers. The fact that construction was started at all was a reflection on the civic and religious leadership in Jerusalem. Unless Zerubbabel and Joshua had given the project their support, it would probably never have got off the ground. Against all odds, work began on the temple on September 21, 520 B.C. In the task that lies before us, I believe that the Spirit of God will stir up leaders who will, in turn, stir up all of us to glorify God in our efforts to restore and renew His house of worship. These leaders will come from among our elders, deacons, ministers, and members—they will come from among the men and women of this church.

(3) *The divine blessing.* In the midst of the proposing and planning, Haggai declares

a divine oracle: “I am with you, says the Lord” (v. 13). When we get our priorities straight, which means God is first and we are not, then the Lord will be with us in our efforts and endeavors. I do not pray that God will bless what we are doing; I pray that we will do what God is blessing. What God is doing, not what we are doing, must be the focus of our actions. What God has done, is doing, and will do through us should be the basis of our thankfulness for the past, our assurance for the present, and our hope for the future. We do not undertake the task that lies before us so that God will bless us; we undertake the task that lies before us so that God will make us a blessing to others.

“Building from the Heart.” As it was in the days of Haggai so it is in the days of the 21st century, any building that is done to the glory of God begins with our heart. Only when our hearts are renewed and revitalized will God’s house be remembered and restored. When we allow God to build our hearts, we will be enabled and empowered to build great things for His glory.

Church buildings are only tools. In fact, we can—as many Christians do—serve God without any building. But . . . but . . . once a building is built it becomes something more than just a building—it becomes a reflection, for better or worse, upon those maintain it. Haggai’s message is a scary one: the condition of the Lord’s house reflects the condition of the hearts of God’s people. Look at this building. Look at your heart. What do you see? Maybe it’s time for renovation and rejuvenation—*for both!* Maybe it’s time that God built each of our hearts into a house in which He may dwell.