

Whose House?

Hiding away in the 'minor prophets' at the end of the Old Testament, the book of Haggai has only a couple of chapters. If we have read it at all, we may have only scanned it, just seeing that it is a fragment of the history of the Jews after the exile in Babylon.

But here is a piece of dynamite, a message that reverberates through to parts of the New Testament and to our present situation. We will do well to respond to the prophet's call: "Consider your ways – give careful thought to them!"

About 18 years earlier, when Cyrus had defeated the Babylonian empire, God stirred up his spirit to not just allow, but command that Jews go back to Jerusalem (after 70 years away!) to rebuild the temple there. The whole story is there in ***Ezra 1:1–5:24***. To sum it up:–

1) The purpose of returning to Jerusalem was to rebuild the house of God. (***Ezra 1:1–4***)

2) God himself had stirred up the spirit of those who returned to rebuild his house (***Ezra 1:5***) – as well as Cyrus's own spirit (***Ezra 1:1***).

3) The enemies of God's people didn't like it one bit, and tried various tactics:–

a) First they tried to join in (***Ezra 4:1–3***), as they claimed to be fellow-worshippers of the LORD, or, as they called him, 'your God'. Their true identity is parallel to those in ***2 Kings 17:24-41***. They had been 'ethnically cleansed' from all sorts of backgrounds, may have tried to 'serve' the LORD, but were certainly not his people!

b) When this approach was rejected, they discouraged those who were building (***Ezra 4:4–5***). They frightened them so that they did not build and hired counsellors at the court of the king of Persia to frustrate their plans.

c) Not content with this, they then made accusations against the Jews, saying that Jerusalem would become rebellious and turn against the Persian empire (***Ezra 4:8–24***).

The result of all these efforts was that work on the house of God stopped . . .

. . . Until the LORD spoke to Haggai! If you want to follow up the story, go on reading in ***Ezra 5***, and you will see that Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua (Joshua) the high priest challenged the ruling and not only stopped the opposition and discouragement, but even got a royal decree to supply

them with all that they might need and pay all their bills out of the local tax revenue! But back to Haggai . . .

The years of discouragement had deadened the people's desire to rebuild the temple. Zerubbabel and Joshua the same. They had a new excuse now: "No, the timing's not right. Yes, we know that the temple needs to be rebuilt, but we have got to wait for the right time, you know!"

"Rubbish," says the LORD, "it's down to your priorities. You have got very nicely settled in to doing what you want, while my house lies in ruins. Take a good look at your life!"

"Look at everything you do. Lots of big ideas, big plans, but it all comes to nothing, or at best, not to very much!"

"Take a good look at your life and get on with rebuilding my house!"

"When you look for big results, you only get a little. Why? Because I blow it away. And why do I do that? Because of my house, lying in ruins while each of you gets on with your own thing. It's because of you that harvests fail and all your livestock are unproductive. Even your own physical work is blighted."

OK, so that's a very free paraphrase of *Haggai 1:1–11*, but the point is clear. Can you see the parallels with our situation today?

Perhaps the key verse is **v. 6**. How do you think the Church is? The Jews seemed quite content, everything was going OK in Jerusalem, they had what they wanted. It took the word of the LORD to show them what was really going on.

Survival, but not abundance. Enough to get by, but certainly no feast. How about us? – and I mean the Church locally as well as generally . . .

Sown much, harvested little. From time to time, we tend to have an emphasis on evangelism. Sometimes there are some encouraging results, but not very many; not as much as we hoped and prayed for.

Lots of eating, not much real satisfaction. Teaching, teaching, teaching! Christians seem to want feeding all the time, yet how many of us have found real solid satisfaction from all that 'food'?

Drinking, but not to get drunk. (Yes, that's what it says in the Hebrew!) In the Old Testament, there is a definite link between wine and rejoicing (see *Psalms 104:15*), so maybe this speaks of joy, but not overflowing joy – sounds familiar? There's often plenty of show of joy in worship and praise, but how real is it?

Clothed, but still shivering. There's lots of Christian talk about security, about being able to cope in a tough, harsh world. Many Christians are really suffering from exposure, naked to the elements of present-day life, without really having found the grace of God working out for them in daily, practical life.

Earning without saving. Lots of work, by gifted men and women, to see others benefit – but how much to actually show for it? What spiritual 'savings' in our lives, or are we living entirely from hand to mouth, perhaps even depending on weekly 'handouts'?

In our own defence, we can probably remember times when at least some of these things were really 'working'. So could the Jews in Jerusalem. Just look back to **Ezra 3** to see the overflow of blessings, physical and spiritual, as they had dedicated themselves to the task of rebuilding the house of the LORD.

The difference comes in **verse 12**. All the people obeyed the word of the LORD. (Haggai is one of a very small number of prophets whose words were heeded!) Leaders and people obeyed and 'feared before the LORD'. What does that mean? Simply that they were now concerned to avoid missing his priorities, afraid to let him down.

Then the LORD did two great things:– 1) He gave them a word that he really was with them, and 2) he stirred up the spirits of the leaders and all the people. Result? ' . . . they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God' (**v. 14**). Please read on to see how they worked, forgetting their own priorities, and how the LORD made provision for their needs. Great promises, too, that are picked up in **Hebrews 12** !

It would be the easiest thing to just 'fudge' this word away, but let's determine not to do that. This is not just a 'nice message' – far from it, it is a call to repentance and action. If it means anything, it means that we need to return to the Lord's priorities to see his church built.

The temple, the house of the Lord, is the church. (See **1 Peter 2:4–10**, for just one example) Not an organisational thing, not something that can be joined by signing a piece of paper or making a promise. It is the building together of those who have had their lives joined to the Lord Jesus Christ. ALL those and ONLY those who share this new life (by new birth) are in the church of God. In God's scheme of things, there is nothing else worth building!

This may be the toughest commitment for us. As Paul says in **1 Corinthians 3:11**, 'no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.' He had made sure that the church in

Corinth (for all its failures) was based solidly on the personal new birth of every member. They had all received the grace of God. We must start from here – there is nowhere else!

My purpose is not to criticise any group or organisation, but so often Christians are confused into equating the group they are in with the church of God. Usually, the real church is actually wider than their group and narrower than it at the same time. Wider, in that there are other local believers who are not part of the same organisation. Narrower, in that there are often people in the organisation who are not in Christ, even by their own admission.

It may be the Lord's purpose for us to work within the structure of a group, organisation or denomination, but let us not lose sight of the fact that it is only his real church that will survive. The work that will stand the Lord's test of fire needs to be built on the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ, and then built with real God-given materials on that foundation. See **1 Corinthians 3:10–15**.

This is not, as many have suggested, about the quality of an individual's life, but about the quality of the work they may do in seeing the church built. Paul quoted Apollos and himself as examples, and he was not writing about their own standing with God being tested by fire, but rather about their work. If it came through unscathed, there would be a reward for the worker. If it was consumed in the flames, then the worker would be saved, but would 'suffer loss', as all his work would have been worthless.

So, what are we going to do?

1) Pass this off as 'just another Bible study with no real application to me.' Dangerous.

2) Say 'It can't be done, or if it can, certainly not now in our situation.' Sounds very like what the Jews were saying in **Haggai 1:2**! Why not? Is it because it might upset our own comfortable set of priorities?

3) Say, 'OK, Lord, I recognise that I need to fit in with your priorities in seeing your own church built. I can see some of what I need to do. Please lead me on.' The results of this may not be easy, but should be a whole lot easier if there are several of you with the same response. In Jerusalem, there were real results from the LORD's word through Haggai, because the leaders and all the people responded in obedience and action.

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