

## **Haggai 1:1-11**

### **Put God's House First**

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Haggai is just a little book and easily overlooked. If I were to randomly ask you what the book of Haggai is about, you would likely be grasping for an answer. In Acts 20, the apostle Paul said that he made it his goal to preach the whole counsel or will of God. We need that too. We need to hear from the full range of what the Bible teaches. We also need what the little prophecy of Haggai has to say to us.

To begin with, we have to become familiar with the historical background. Along with Zechariah and Malachi, this is one of the last books to be written in the Old Testament, about 500 years before Christ. We're near the end of the most traumatic event of the Old Testament era: the exile into Babylon. Because of their sins and rebellion, God disciplined his people by sending most of them out of the Promised Land for seventy years. After a decree by Cyrus king of Persia, a return began in about 538 BC. You can read about all that at the end of 2 Chronicles 36. Jews started trickling back to Jerusalem and the land of Israel.

The first ones who returned saw the work that needed to be done, especially the work on the temple. Ezra 3 describes how that work began. The altar was rebuilt and sacrifices began to be offered again. The foundations were laid for the rebuilding of the temple and when that happened there was praise for God. There was also weeping because some remembered the temple of Solomon and its grandeur. It was a day of mixed emotions.

The Jews who returned early on made a good start. But soon afterwards opposition arose from the Samaritans. In the New Testament, we find a hostile relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans which dates from this era. The Samaritans had been transplanted into the Promised Land. They mixed the worship of the true God with paganism. There could be no alliance with God's people and this created animosity. In Ezra 4:2, some leaders of the Samaritans asked to rebuild the temple with the returned exiles. However, Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the other Jewish leaders insisted that they could not

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work together. The reason is not explicitly given, but from elsewhere in Scripture we can surmise that it was due to the syncretism<sup>1</sup> of the Samaritans. Having been rebuffed, the Samaritans began a campaign to sabotage the rebuilding of the temple. The consequence was that the work stopped and lay dormant for fifteen years. The temple was not even half done. In fact, it was not even a quarter done. It was still in shambles and life went on.

That's when the prophet Haggai gets called on the scene by the LORD. God speaks through this prophet to challenge his people to get their priorities straight. In the first eleven verses of chapter one, we see how *God calls his people to put his house first*.

### **God Exposes Their Failures**

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This is one of those rare passages in the Bible where we can pinpoint the exact date, one of the unique qualities of Haggai. Verse 1 says that the word of Yahweh (the LORD) came to Haggai on the first day of the sixth month of the second year of Darius. That puts us on August 29, 520 BC. The first day of the month was a day for special offerings to be made. Furthermore, the sixth month was the time for the harvest of fruit trees. It was three months after the grain harvest. Things were supposed to be happening out in the orchards and fields and in the temple – but nothing was the way that it should be. On that exact day at that exact time, Yahweh gave his revelation to the prophet.

How exactly he did that, we don't know. It could have been an audible voice, or perhaps a dream or vision. There are different possibilities, but the key thing to recognize is that *God* gave this revelation to Haggai. Therefore, what we find in this book are not Haggai's thoughts. He is passing on what was directly revealed to him by Yahweh. The emphasis here is entirely on the fact that this is divine revelation.

Closely connected with that is the fact that we know next to nothing about Haggai himself. The prophecy says nothing about him apart from the fact that he was a prophet. The rest of the Old Testament doesn't help us with that either. He's only mentioned in Ezra and there again we're only told that he's

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. note: from [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com), "syncretism" is the fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices

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a prophet. The focus is not on Haggai, but entirely on the message that he brings from Yahweh. He is God's spokesman.

The prophecy in our text is addressed to Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest. They stand in here as representatives of the Jews living in Jerusalem. Haggai brings the Word of God to them and through them calls the people out on their failures. Their failures have to do with their misplaced priorities. Not only do they have their priorities messed up, but they've also rationalized them. They're trying to excuse themselves for what they've done, thinking that it will all be okay. They think to themselves, "God will understand."

First, God lays out their rationalizations. It's all about the timing. In verse 2, the people say, "The time isn't right for building the temple." The last time they tried to build the temple, they faced opposition from the Samaritans. The Samaritans tried to get the Persian king to put a stop to the temple project. But now all those people are out of the way, meaning that there are no more political obstacles to building the temple. So why is the time wrong *now*? It's all about the economics. It's about the money and their financial situation. Things are not going well economically in Jerusalem. The time isn't right because the people are hurting financially and they think they can't afford to be building the temple. How could they afford to build a temple when they could barely put food on the table for their families? That is just common sense. Or perhaps it is just a rationalization.

Next, God lays out the real problem. The people are living in panelled houses. The last time we read about a panelled house in the Old Testament was with regard to Solomon. King Solomon lived in a panelled house, a house lined with expensive cedar wood. He lived in luxury. But unlike the people in the time of Haggai, Solomon also spared no expense with respect to the temple. The temple he built was magnificent, a building worthy of an earthly dwelling for Yahweh. Now these people are said to be living in fairly nice houses too. Yes, they're hurting in other ways, but they've still got roofs over their heads and pretty nice roofs at that. And what about the temple? It has a foundation and not much more. It's been neglected and still lies in ruins. For fifteen years it's just been sitting there and no one has worked on it. Meanwhile, the people are busy with their own houses, taking care of their own needs. Priority

number one is *them*. They have not put God and his house first, but themselves. First they'll line their own houses with panels, and then, maybe, when things are going better economically, the time will be right to take care of God's house.

Do you see what God is doing here in our passage? He's exposing the sin of the Jews. He's laying it out for them. He's like a surgeon exposing the tumour that's killing the patient. He's saying, "Something has to be done about this." Not long ago, these people were languishing in exile in Babylon. They were singing psalms like Psalm 137, longing for the city of God and the temple. They were bemoaning their exile and what it did to their relationship with Yahweh. But now they've returned and they quickly fall back into sinful ways. They quickly succumb to sinful ways of thinking and rationalizations. However, God doesn't leave them there. In his grace, he goes after them again and confronts them with their sin.

It is a sin which Christ came to address. In his perfect life, he always put God his Father first. We see him in his Father's house. The temple was nicely built by this time, but it had become a shopping mall. In his zeal, our Lord Jesus cleaned it up. He cared about God and his house. Christ's priorities were straight as an arrow, lined up exactly the way they should be. Not only that, but he went to the cross and paid the penalty for people whose priorities are messed up. All those misplaced priorities were nailed to the cross and crucified with Jesus. In his ministry then, Jesus lived perfectly for all who believe in him and he suffered and died for the forgiveness of their sins too.

A people like the Jews of Haggai's day needed a Saviour like Jesus. The prophecy found here in our text is a cry for a Saviour. The story of the Old Testament is a story of one epic failure after another. There were a few bright spots here and there, but mostly we see sin and failure, and we see it here in Haggai 1 as well. People with messed up priorities who rationalize their sin make it even worse!

Let's not look down at the Jews in our text. After all, are we really any better? Do we always put God first in our lives? What about with regard to his house? That brings us to the question of where we find God's house in the New Testament. Jesus said that he himself was the temple of God (John 2:19). In

passages like 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and 1 Peter 2:5 the apostles build on that and say that the body of Jesus is the temple of God. The church is the body of Christ, and so the church is the temple of God, the house of God. So the question becomes: how are our priorities with regard to the church of God? Such a question is not in the first place about the building (although that can be included somewhere), but about the people. Where do God and his people fit in our lives? Are they important? Is that reflected in how we invest our time, energy, talents, and, yes, also our money (think here of first fruits)? Are we pursuing our own goals and ambitions and making those priorities, while leaving God and his house somewhere further down the list?

As we look into the mirror of God's Word here, we have to be humble and admit that all of us fall short on so many counts. That's why we need a Saviour. We need his perfect righteousness to be credited to our accounts and we need the forgiveness of our sins in his blood. We need the grace of God in Jesus. Once again, as we see our sin, we also have to see our Saviour and continue to trust in everything he has done for us. Moreover, through his grace and Spirit, we are empowered to turn away from our sin and learn to hate it. We want to have priorities that are straight. We want to seek first the kingdom of God, putting him and his house as top priorities in our lives.

### **God Outlines the Consequences**

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If we don't, there will be consequences, just like there were in our text. Yahweh tells the Jews to think carefully about what's happening in their lives. He says it twice, which is God's way of emphasizing how important it is to be thoughtful here.

So what's going on? God paints a picture of people just barely scraping by. They spend a lot of time planting, but there's hardly anything to harvest. They have food to eat, but they are never full. There's always that gnawing feeling in the pits of their stomachs. There's some wine to drink, but nobody's ever in danger of getting drunk because there is barely enough to go around. What does go around has to be watered down so that everyone can have some. They've got clothing, but it is thread-bare and people go through the winter shivering. No nice warm wool sweaters for these people. Yes, they make some money, but it's like their wallets and purses have holes in them. The money flows through their fingers like water. Nothing seems to last, they

can't save, and they can't ever have enough. This is a picture of a subsistence lifestyle. They're barely holding on. They're less than a paycheck away from total economic devastation. They had great expectations, says verse 9. But everything ended in failure. If they did manage to bring something home, it was stripped away from them. God blew it away.

Nature is also conspiring against them because of their failures. The skies have not been generous with moisture. The earth has not cooperated in producing harvests. Why? Because God has called nature into action against the people. Yahweh called for drought. Therefore, there's little grain, few grapes, and just a few tiny olives. All the staples for those people in that day were in short supply. In fact, anything agricultural was scarce. Families were unproductive and cattle were not flourishing either. The whole natural order was working against these people because of their failures and consequently there was little to show for any labour.

There are two key things to recognize here. First of all, none of this happened by chance. It wasn't as if these people were dealing with a case of bad luck. There's no such thing as luck or chance in this world. Things were going south for these people because God is in control. These things were all in the hands of our sovereign God. Throughout our text, he is referred to as the LORD Almighty, literally *Yahweh Sabaoth*. In older translations that appears as "the LORD of Hosts." That title is meant to call attention to his power. He commands heavenly armies. The angels do his bidding and so does all of the natural world. He is the omnipotent, all-powerful, sovereign God.

The second and perhaps more important thing has to do with the covenant. These people were not just ordinary folk out there in the Persian Empire. These were God's people. They were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had entered into a covenant relationship with them. In that covenant there were gracious promises and blessings. But there were also sanctions and curses if the people should spurn their God. One of the important passages outlining this is found in Deuteronomy 28. In fact, what we find there lines up by and large with what we find in our text. God warned that if his people would neglect him and not put him first, they would suffer drought, agricultural failure, a life of just barely getting by, and much worse. These were the curses associated with the covenant and they're coming back to haunt the Jews in our text. God warned that his curses would come upon

them and overtake them (Deuteronomy 28:15ff). In the days of Haggai, they do.

But why? What was God's purpose in sending these curses on the people? He wasn't trying to destroy them, but save them. This was all about discipline administered in love. The Bible teaches that God disciplines the people whom he loves (Proverbs 3:11-12, Hebrews 12:5-6, Revelations 3:19). He goes after them and tries to get them to turn from their sin and return to him. That is why he sent these covenant curses. That is why he also sent the prophet Haggai with his Word. In his grace, God isn't giving up on these people, even though they certainly deserve it.

There's more to this. God wants to be close to his people. The temple was not an end in itself. The temple was all about the presence of God with his beloved Israel. God sent this discipline upon the people, because he wanted them to get back on track with his plans for them in this era before the coming of Christ. That involved praises for him in the worship ordained for the temple. That also included the sacrifices and ceremonies associated with the temple ministry. In Ezra 3, we find that some of that was in place in a basic way. But the rebuilding of the temple was necessary for everything to function in the way that it should, to function in a way that also pointed to the coming of Christ. With the covenant curses, God was drawing his people back on track.

Now what about today? If we are out of line with our priorities, can we expect that God will chastise us? Can we expect that he will discipline us like he did the people of our text? Can we expect little fruit from our labour and a subsistence lifestyle if we are living in sin with regard to our priorities? To answer these questions, we need to think about chastisement in the New Testament. I already mentioned that Scripture teaches that God disciplines the one he loves. Where does the Bible teach that? It's true that it is first found in the Old Testament in Proverbs 3:11,12: "Yahweh disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in." But those words are also found in the New Testament. Jesus himself says that he rebukes and disciplines those he loves. He says that in his letter to the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3. In view of that teaching, he calls them to be zealous and repent. Discipline is meant to lead to repentance, a change of mind and heart. But that's not the only place we read about the LORD's chastening. It's also

mentioned in Hebrews 12. The author of Hebrews is quite clear that God will still chastise and discipline the people he loves; the people of the covenant. He does it to bring them back to himself, to put them on the right path, and to call them out of sin.

So, yes, our God could indeed discipline us today. There are two things to note in connection with that. First of all, perhaps he is disciplining you right now. Maybe your priorities have been messed up and you just haven't cared. You've been living in that sin and just saying, "Whatever." Maybe he has been trying to get your attention and now, he's added his Word to the discipline you've received, just like he did with the Jews of Haggai's day. How should you respond? With humility, with confession, and with repentance. By turning to Christ and seeking forgiveness through what he has done. In his loving grace, God has been pursuing you and now you have the vision to see it and to find more grace through our Saviour Jesus. Through Christ you can and will be forgiven. Through Christ things will be different.

The second thing to note here is a word of caution. It's easy to take this teaching about covenant curses and start applying it to people around you. "Ah, yes, now we know why brother so-and-so's business is failing. His priorities are wrong and God is disciplining him. I've got to go and tell him!" No, you don't. This isn't about you looking around and finding all the other people who are being disciplined by God so you can educate them. Job's friends tried that with Job and it didn't work out for them. They had no clue. The disciples asked Jesus about the blind man in John 9:2, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The disciples had it wrong. No one's particular sin was responsible for the man's blindness. You ought never to presume to know why something bad is happening to someone else. You might gently and tactfully raise it as a possibility with someone who really knows you love them. However, to dogmatically go around making judgments about covenant curses and God's discipline is a dangerous and foolish thing to do. It is not your place.

### **God Prescribes the Remedy**

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Verse 7 speaks of the remedy prescribed: "Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house..." In other words, get your priorities straight and start building the temple. Don't hesitate for another minute.

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Delayed obedience is disobedience. Head up to the forests and get the saws going and the axes swinging. Load up the wagons with lumber and make Mount Zion resound with the sounds of men at work. In this instance, this is what true repentance will look like.

What will be the result? The temple will get built. It will again be a place of worship, a place where the means of grace are administered for God's people. Yahweh will be pleased with it and he will be honoured in it. In other words, when the people repent and do what they're commanded to do, God's glory is magnified. When their priorities are reordered and he's put first, he will be made much of.

Again, we can think of our Lord Jesus and the way in which he had all his priorities straight. With him, there was no need for repentance, no need for a prescribed remedy. This is because he was always on track and consequently, he was always pleasing and honouring God.

That Saviour is ours. We are grafted into him and united to him. As we look to him in faith, God sees people who always please and honour him. But looking to Christ also means that our lives are being changed and transformed. As we're challenged by his Word, we seek to put all the remaining sin to death in our lives. We hate our failures and we want to live out of Christ. We, too, want to please and honour God, though we know that we only stumble towards that here in this age. We want to please and honour him in the church, which is the temple of God in the New Testament. We must also do this with our bodies, which are also described in the New Testament as the temple of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). With everything in our being and everything in our lives, we aim to put God first. All because we are in Christ by God's grace.

In conclusion, what does our text reveal to us about our God? We've seen that he is sovereign and omnipotent. He's revealed here as the God who cares about his covenant people. He cares so much that he disciplines them and goes after them with his prophets. God wants to be worshipped by us. He reveals himself here as the one who wants us to have him first in our lives in everything. Second best is not good enough when it comes to God. But, above all, because of all he is speaking and revealing, we see his grace. These people

deserved to be left in their sins, left to wallow in the slime pit of their self-centredness. Yet God chases after them, just like he did with Adam in the garden. “My people, where are you and what are you doing? Think carefully.” To the one who is hiding, it may not sound gracious at the time, but it is. God cares and that’s why he speaks. That’s why he calls his people to put him and his house first. He cared for them and he cares for you.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

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1. One of the features of Haggai is the use of rhetorical questions – questions are asked to which the answer may or should be obvious. We see an example of this in verse 4 of chapter 1. What purpose might these rhetorical questions serve?
2. The temple of God is mentioned in several different ways in the New Testament. One of them is the new heavens and new earth. Revelation 21:3 says that God will make his dwelling with men. The entire new creation becomes the temple of God. How does Haggai 1:1-11 relate to this truth?
3. Reflect on or discuss what this passage reveals directly or indirectly about each person of the Holy Trinity.
4. Besides the examples mentioned above in the exposition, identify more places in the New Testament where we read of God’s chastisement. Why are so many people reluctant to take this teaching seriously today?
5. What are some of the rationalizations that you use to deprioritize the building of God’s temple? What does repentance look like for you here?

Wes Bredenhof

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