

God-Centered Priorities & God-empowered Obedience

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Date: 19 November 2016

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[0 : 00] spending power at an all-time low and people were going on strike.

Well, some say that that is what life could be like post-Brexit. But actually that was the situation in the time of the prophet Haggai. Verse 1 gives us all the information we need for the context of the book.

In the second year of King Darius on the first day of the sixth month. It is the 20th of August, 520 BC. That's what verse 1 tells us.

And Haggai is the name of the prophet who is going to address God's people. Now we know virtually nothing about this man Haggai. We couldn't draw up a CV for him.

We don't know where he went to junior school. We don't know if he went to university. We don't know whether he was a full-time prophet or he did it in his spare time. He's mentioned in the book of Ezra.

[1 : 00] But he pops up on the stage of Israel's history here in August 520 BC. And as far as we know he leaves the center of Israel's history in December the same year.

And his prophetic ministry, as far as we know, lasts 17 weeks. He speaks on four dated occasions. You can see chapter 1, verse 1.

He speaks again on chapter 2, verse 1. Chapter 2, verse 10. And chapter 2, verse 20. On four dated occasions Haggai speaks.

But verse 1 gives us all the context that we need to know. Even if we know virtually nothing about the man himself. Now I don't know what your Old Testament history is like.

A bit hazy? Probably. You may remember that Israel became led by kings. The first of whom was Saul. The second of whom was David.

[2 : 00] And the third of whom was Solomon. Solomon broke every rule that God had given for a king to obey. The most famous of which was that he married 700 wives and also had 300 concubines.

If you were living in Solomon's day, wedding dress manufacturing was the business to be in.

Because it would have seemed like every other week Solomon acquired a new wife.

Hello magazine! Well the photographers were busy all the time. As a result of Solomon's disobedience, the nation Israel was split into two.

Israel retained the name of the northern kingdom. And the much smaller southern kingdom was called Judah. All the kings in the north were tow rags.

Every one of them was a scumbag. And in the end God's patience, as he had warned, God's patience ran out with Israel. And they were beaten up by the superpower of the day, the Assyrians.

[3 : 10] And they were carted off into exile. The land was repopulated, never to become populated again by God's people. The southern kingdom of Judah lasted a bit longer.

But in the end they too were beaten up by a man called Nebuchadnezzar. Who was the king of then the new superpower, Babylon. And Nebuchadnezzar came and destroyed Jerusalem.

He completely destroyed the temple that symbolized God dwelling amongst his people. Not one stone left on another. And he carted anyone who could lead a rebellion against him.

He carted them off to his capital Babylon. You may remember some of the stories of men who were taken into exile. People like Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

And they were taken into exile. But Jeremiah the prophet said that exile would only last for 70 years. And true to God's word, after 70 years, King Cyrus, the king of Persia, the then superpower, allowed anyone who wanted to go back to Jerusalem.

[4 : 25] But when they went back, what faced them was a massive building project. It wasn't renovation. It wasn't restoration. It wasn't repair.

It was building again from scratch. And the first thing they had to build was a new temple. Well, the book of Ezra tells us that the people laid the foundation stone and work started.

But by verse 1 of the book of Haggai, work had ground to a halt. Tools were down. People were on strike. And the building of the new temple in Jerusalem, well, it looked a bit like a half-finished Mjorkan hotel.

Read the book of Ezra. And it looks like the reason that people stopped work was discouragement. The people in the neighboring area didn't want a restored Jerusalem, didn't want a restored Judah. And so they hired, Ezra chapter 4 describes it, they hired counselors to go to Jerusalem to discourage the people from building.

[5 : 44] We'd call them spin doctors today. But they went and discouraged the people. And Ezra chapter 4 and verse 20 tells us that the work had ground to a halt.

And that is the context into which Haggai speaks. But actually Haggai unmask that the real issue about building this temple in Jerusalem wasn't discouragement.

But was, as we see in verses 2 through to 11, was the people hadn't got God-centered priorities. And that's ultimately what Haggai chapter 1 is really all about.

God-centered priorities. So notice, as Haggai speaks, verse 2, this is what the Lord Almighty says. These people say, the time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built. Maybe they were spiritualizing the opposition that there was.

[6 : 46] Oh, not the right time. We don't want to upset the locals. We don't want to appear bigoted and have a building in Jerusalem that says there's only one God.

No, that would appear very narrow-minded. We can't do that. The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built. Let me say, you can always find a spiritual reason for what you don't want to do.

And that's ultimately what was going on here. And notice the hypocrisy is exposed in verse 3. The word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai. And with a little play on words that the translation gets well for us, is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses while this house remains a ruin?

They're saying it's not time to build the temple, but it is time for us to live in our panelled house.

Now, a panelled house in the ancient world was the height of luxury.

A panelled house in the ancient world would have been a detached house. It would have had a jacuzzi bath. It would have flat screens on all the walls. It would have had decking in the garden.

[7 : 58] A panelled house was a luxurious house. And the people were saying it's not time for us to build the house of God, but it is time for us to be living in our own panelled houses.

The people had got their priorities upside down. Their agenda was not God's agenda. God's agenda was build a house for me.

But they'd been building houses for themselves. They'd put their own comfort above God's command. God's agenda was the first thing when you return to Jerusalem, is build a house for me. But they'd put their own comfort above God's command and had been building their own houses, their own panelled houses. Now, don't mishear me. There was nothing in itself wrong with a panelled house.

There is nothing wrong with living in a detached house and having a jacuzzi bath and a flat screen on every room and decking in the garden. There's nothing wrong with it until it becomes your God.

[9 : 16] Until it becomes your idol. Until it usurps the command of God over you. And it would be worth us, when we come to discussion time, it would be worth us asking, what might our panelled house be?

What might become at the top of our agenda and usurp what God's agenda for us is? What might be at the top of our agenda that actually, in and of itself, is morally neutral, but takes the place of the command of God over us?

It's very interesting. I, last summer, on holiday, read through Luke's Gospel. And I made a list of the things that stopped people following Jesus in Luke's Gospel.

And there are two things, more than any other, that stop people following Jesus. Can you guess what they are? The first is stuff. Money.

Wealth. And the second is family. Now there's nothing wrong with family. Family's good. Family is obviously a creation gift of God.

[10:39] But it's so subtle. It can become at the top of our agenda and take the place of the command of God over us. It can become the idol.

That's what was going on here in Haggai's day. The people had no longer got God-centered priorities. And Haggai is exposing the hypocrisy of saying, it's not time to build God's house. Hello. It's not time to build God's house, but it is time for us to be living in our panelled houses. Well, God had wanted to wake the people up to their wrong priorities.

And that's really what's going on in verses 5 through to 11, which is written in a little sandwich. Haggai likes sandwiches. So in verses 5 to 7, and then again in verses 9 to 11, notice that God had withdrawn blessing from the people.

So in verses 5 to 7, which itself is a little sandwich, where they're told in verse 5 and again in verse 7, put your thinking caps on. But give careful thought to your ways, verse 5.

[11:55] Give careful thought to your ways, verse 7. And what are they to give careful thought to? Well, in the middle there, verse 6, five economic indicators, that were meant to have woken the people up to, there's something wrong here.

Things are not right. Five economic indicators, the last of which may be metaphorical. You earn wages only to put them in a purse with holes in it.

Not literally, they've got a wallet with holes or a purse with holes, but rather, have you ever had the experience, you've been to the cash point on a Monday and you've got 30 quid out of the cash point, and then you look in your purse on Friday and there's nothing there and you think, what have I spent my money on it?

It just seems to have kind of evaporated out. Five economic indicators that say things are not going well in Judah.

Five economic indicators that say things are not good in Jerusalem. And those five economic indicators should have woken the people up. Why? Because those five economic indicators have all been mentioned earlier in the Bible.

[13:24] You can find them all in either the Leviticus 26 or Deuteronomy chapter 28 where God warned the people through Moses that if they disobeyed him then there would be harsh times.

God would bring harsh times. So when Israel experienced these harsh times here they should have been thinking what's wrong? Are we disobeying God?

It should have woken them up. But it hadn't woken them up and so Haggai has to spell it out in the second half of the sandwich. So having got them to put their thinking caps on in verses 5 to 7 he then gives them the answer to what they should have thought in verses 9 to 11.

You expected much but see it turned out to be little. What you brought home I blew away. Their economic hardship was the result of God's action.

Why? Declares the Lord Almighty. Here's the answer. Because of my house which remains a ruin. Well each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops.

[14:47] I call 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 labour of your hands.

God has spelt out why has he withdrawn good things from them? Why has he withdrawn his blessing? So that they would wake up and change priorities.

So that they would no longer put their house above God's house. Their comfort above God's command. And so notice the command is issued there in verse 8 in the middle of the sandwich.

Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured says the Lord.

And does that actually give away what the real underlying problem was? Was the reason they got their priorities wrong ultimately because they didn't understand or weren't motivated by honouring and pleasing God?

[16:01] If they'd understood that the command to build the house was so that God would be honoured and pleased might that have kept them at work?

There's the heart of the issue. Building the house was how God would be honoured and pleased. God-centred priorities.

Well, is this just an interesting history lesson? Or do you think it's got any relevance to you and I today? Do you think that given there's no temple in Jerusalem today, do you think we should all book flights on Monday morning and fly to Jerusalem and build a house there next week?

Are we about house building? well, the answer to that is a no but also a yes.

Do you think our chief priority ought to be to honour and please God? Is that still the chief end of mankind? It is.

[17 : 24] what's the first prayer request that Jesus taught us to pray? I used to get so muddled up with that when I was at junior school.

As I explained earlier, I was brought up in a non-Christian home. But at junior school we were still taught to pray the Lord's Prayer. I think it's an inappropriate prayer actually to teach non-Christian children to pray, but that's for another day.

But we were taught to pray the Lord's Prayer, but I was very confused by it. I could never work out how we'd gone our Father who art in heaven and then I could never work out why we prayed for God to be called the same name as my father.

You see, my father was called Harold. And I thought we were praying our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name. And I thought even then the name Harold was slightly outdated and I thought why does God want to be called Harold?

Harold. Well, hooray, I became a Christian in my teens and discovered it's not our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name, but hallowed be thy name. It literally is translating the idea, may your name be treated with the honor or worth that you deserve.

[18 : 40] That's our chief end. That's our top priority. And once we've understood that the driving force for us in our Christian lives is to honor and please God, then our priorities will change and they'll be God-centered rather than my comfort centered.

They'll be God-centered priorities. But do we need to get on a plane and go to Jerusalem and build a physical temple there for God to be honored and for God to take pleasure?

The answer to that is no. Because you may remember that when Jesus died on the cross, Mark tells us in Mark chapter 15 and verse 38 that something happened at exactly the same time.

As Jesus breathed his last, Mark chapter 15 verse 37, when Jesus breathed his last, verse 38, died, the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Without any explanation, Mark just expects you to get it. It means that access into the presence of God, that's what the curtain was about. It was a massive no entry sign.

[20 : 05] You cannot come into the presence of a holy God as a sinful person and expect to live. But that curtain is taken down because the death of Jesus makes it possible for us to be in the presence of God today by faith and one day face to face.

And as a result, that curtain being torn in two is the beginnings of the destruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem, such that there never needs to be a physical temple built again.

And I reckon we all know that, don't we? You know that this is a nice building, but you know that this isn't a building that God lives in any more than he lived in the station down the road.

There are no special places anymore, so we don't need to build temples. We like this building, it's reasonably warm, and I assume the roof will keep us dry if it rains later on.

But that's its purpose, isn't it? And although it's been architected in a slightly odd way, if I may say, so that some people will think that that's the bit of the building where God's really around, you and I know, don't we, that because of the death of Jesus, there are no special buildings anymore.

[21 : 40] But is God concerned about a building project? And the answer is yes, he still is.

Because the Apostle Peter describes it in 1 Peter chapter 2 like this, as you come to Jesus, we become living stones.

It's a strange idea, isn't it? A living stone, because every other stone you come across is inanimate. But as you come to Jesus, you become living stones being built into, 1 Peter chapter 2 says, being built into the temple where God will dwell for all eternity.

humanity. The Apostle Paul uses exactly the same metaphor, exactly the same language at the end of Ephesians chapter 2. If you've been coming here on Sunday mornings, I take it, did you do chapter 2, Martin?

So you will have done chapter 2, and at the end of chapter 2, you'll know that we are being built into God's dwelling place. God does not dwell in a physical building anymore, but he dwells amongst us, his people.

And is God honored, therefore, by temple building, which is taking the gospel to people so that they can hear it, respond to it, and become living stones?

[23 : 12] Become being built into the place where God will dwell forever and ever and ever. power. And do you think that that ought to be our passion?

I don't know whether you've heard people call on you to talk to friends about the Lord Jesus before. The thing that will sustain us doing it, the thing that will keep us passionate about temple building now, seeing people become living stones, being built into the place where God will dwell forever and ever, is when we recognize that we do it ultimately so that God is honored and pleased. And that is a motivating force that is sustaining for the rest of your life. God-centered priorities. Can you think of any priority more important than honoring and pleasing God? Can you think of any better way to do it than to make the gospel of Jesus known so that people can become living stones?

And do you think that is more important than yours and my personal comfort? it. So the question to ask would be, what might our panelled house be?

[24 : 47] What would stop us from having God-centered priorities? It's 11 o'clock, Martin.

Can I go on a little in... Can we do the second half? Well, the good news is that in verses 12 through to 15, we see God-impaired obedience.

God-impaired obedience. So then Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, Joshua, son of Jehoshadak, the high priest, I've been practicing those names all week, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai.

Why? Because the Lord their God had sent him and the people feared the Lord. Hooray! The people respond. Now, if I was writing the text, I would go from verse 12 and then I'd go straight to the middle of verse 14.

It's a good Bible study question to ask. What's surprising in the way the text is written? And what's surprising is that, again, we've got another little sandwich.

[25 : 51] You see, I would go verse 12 and then to the middle of verse 14, they came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty their God on the 24th day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius.

The people respond. The people work. Hooray! Three and a half weeks after Haggai has begun preaching, the people are at work. The hard hats are on.

The JCBs are on site. The architects' plans are out on the table. Hooray! And many of us who are preachers, well, we would love it if people responded to our sermons within three and a half weeks of preaching.

people respond. The people are now back at work. But the surprise in the way that the text is written is, again, this little sandwich that you get verse 13 and the first half of verse 14 sandwiched in the middle between the people's response and the people's work.

Look with me at what happens. Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people. I am with you, declares the Lord. So, or therefore, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, son of Shealti, our governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people.

[27 : 08] Sandwiched in the middle between the people's response and the people's work is the Lord being present with the people, I am with you, and the Lord's power, him stirring them up.

It's strikingly written because it means that actually when the people are obedient to God, when the people are at work for God, it's because God's at work in them.

It happens lots in the Bible. When God's at work in us, we're at work for him. And when we're at work for him, it's because he's at work in us.

The two just go together like flip sides of the same coin. And notice the Lord's work is his presence. I am with you, verse 13.

And I take it that when the Lord promises to be with them, it's to enable them. When the Christmas holidays come, we've decided we're going to redecorate our kitchen.

[28 : 22] We've got a kitchen dining area. It's got quite a big room, and the whole thing, it's never been redecorated. It just needs painting. And, well, imagine Andy Gemmell.

He's such a nice man. And imagine Andy says, I'll come and be with you when you do the redecorating. I'll be with you. Well, imagine he comes and says, I'll be with you, but actually all he does is plonk himself down at our kitchen table and drink tea all day.

I am with you is pretty useless if he only does nothing but drink tea. That is not what it means when God says, I am with you.

It is, I am with you to enable you to do the work that I've called you to do. And so notice the little link there is between verse 13 and verse 14. So, the Lord's presence and the Lord's stirring or the Lord's power go together.

And it's very intriguing, isn't it? Because that little phrase, I am with you. Well, if you know the great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus says, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me, therefore go and temple build.

[29 : 49] Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

And then, do you know that last little line? And, I am with you, even to the end of the age.

In other words, the promise of the presence of Jesus comes in the context of us going temple building. Go.

Make disciples of all nations. I am with you. Or in the kind of Luke equivalent in Acts chapter one, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Do you think that the promise of the presence of Jesus and the assurance of the empowering of the Spirit actually might be the same reality in the New Testament?

[30 : 55] I reckon. But the way Jesus is present with us is by his Spirit to enable us to do the work of temple building.

Temple building is not natural to us. It's not what most of us actually want to do by nature. Even if we're motivated by the desire to honour God and to please him.

But the good news is that in the context here of the people working for God in temple building, God says, I'm with you.

And he stirs them to do it. He empowers them to do it. And isn't it good news that when we're called to temple build, not a physical building now, but the New Testament temple building of God's people through the gospel, I am with you.

You will receive power. You will receive power. Isn't that kind of God? To enable us to do what he wants us to do. I need it.

[32 : 05] Because temple building for me, by nature, I am pants at. Now, a billion years ago, Andy and I actually, we used to work in the same church together.

It was about a billion years ago, wasn't it? In the days of the dinosaurs, we worked together in the same church. And I remember one Wednesday afternoon, I went off to get my hair cut.

And this girl, she must have been about your age, in her 20s, and she was clipping away at my hair. And you know how, when you're having your hair done, the hairdresser engages you in conversation.

They're one step better than dentists, in my experience, because I've found that dentists engage you in conversation while they've got both their hands in your mouth and you can't respond.

Anyway, she was clipping away at, I had hair in those days, and she was clipping away and she said, are you not working today?

I said, oh, I work flexi-time. Well, it's sort of true, isn't it? She said, where do you work?

[33 : 15] I said, I work in a little office in a little road just off the A10. It was true. I could have told her what I did, but I didn't. She said, what do you do?

Great opportunity. I said, oh, I teach people mostly. Sort of true. She said, who do you teach?

Fourth opportunity, who do you teach?

I said, oh, mostly students and young professionals. Fifth question, what do you teach them? At this moment, I realize that this is an evangelistic opportunity.

I'm very slow on the uptake. And so I pray an SUS prayer. Have you prayed SUS prayers? That's a send up a Swifty. And so I prayed the SUS prayer. And I said, Lord, will you help me to take this opportunity and talk to this woman?

So I said to her, I said, look, let me come clean. The Church of England pays people like me to explain to people like you why you should become a Christian. She said, are you any good at it?

[34 : 20] I said, why don't I give it a go and let's see? And so I explained the gospel to her and I left. I left a little booklet with her as I left.

I've no idea what happened. Of myself, I actually will not talk to people about Jesus. But God has given us what we need to do it.

I am with you. You will receive power. The presence of Jesus and the power of the Spirit is what ultimately makes it possible for us to respond and to do the work of God.

God-centered priorities. That's what Haggai 1 is all about. It would be good to pray we have those, wouldn't it?

That we're passionate about honoring Jesus. And that we'll do it by temple building. Making the gospel known.

[35 : 31] And we'll do so confidently. Because when we do it, when we're at work for God, he's at work in us.

Shall I pray? Let's pray. Loving Heavenly Father, we come before you and acknowledge that often in our lives we've not wanted to honor and please you.

We're much happier honoring and pleasing ourselves. But we acknowledge that you are worthy of honor and praise.

And so help us to do it by being passionate about temple building. By getting the good news to people we know. People who are lost and blind and dead.

And thank you for the assurance of your help to enable us to do it. And so make us confident.

[36 : 36] Even in the weeks ahead we pray. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.