

First Things First! (Haggai)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Haggai 1, John 2:19, Ezra 3:1–6, Matt. 1:23, 12:6, Haggai 2, Luke 24:13–27.*

Memory Text: “The silver is mine and the gold is mine, declares the LORD Almighty” (*Haggai 2:8, NIV*).

Key Thought: Haggai's message is simple: What are our priorities, and why is it so important to get them right?

Haggai's book, one of the shortest in the Bible, was written at a critical time in the life of Judah. The exiles had returned from their captivity in Babylon almost twenty years before; yet, they seemed to have forgotten the reason for their return. They let God's temple sit in ruins while they devoted their energy to building their own houses.

Thus, the prophet urged the returned exiles to give careful thought to their situation. His message was simple and logical. The people had worked hard but did not earn much. This happened because they had mistaken their priorities. They needed to put God first in all that they did. As Jesus Himself said, “Seek first his [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (*Matt. 6:33, NIV*).

Today, too, it is so easy to get caught up in the struggle for existence that we forget what our first priority needs to be, which, of course, is always doing the Lord's will.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 8.*

Planting Much, Harvesting Little

Read Haggai 1:1–11. What was happening here and, more important, why was this happening? Even more important, how might this same principle apply to us today? How might we be guilty of doing the same thing?

“For over a year the temple was neglected and well-nigh forsaken. The people dwelt in their homes and strove to attain temporal prosperity, but their situation was deplorable. Work as they might they did not prosper. The very elements of nature seemed to conspire against them. Because they had let the temple lie waste, the Lord sent upon their substance a wasting drought. God had bestowed upon them the fruits of field and garden, the corn and the wine and the oil, as a token of His favor; but because they had used these bountiful gifts so selfishly, the blessings were removed.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 573.

Haggai confronted the people with their current situation. Futility of labor was one of the curses that resulted from the people breaking God’s covenant (*Lev. 26:16, 20*). Until the people turned their attention to this priority, there would be no prosperity for them.

Haggai possessed great zeal for the Lord’s temple and wanted the people to complete its reconstruction right away. His ambition ran contrary to the complacency of those who did not care about the temple as much as they cared about their own comfort. While Haggai’s great concern was for the temple, the people were interested more in their own houses.

The Lord used Haggai to stir the people’s hearts toward God’s concerns. The temple in Jerusalem symbolized the divine presence among fallen humanity. It was a visible reminder to the whole world that the Sovereign Lord is God of heaven and earth. Yet, God could not be honored properly as long as His house sat in ruins. How could the children of Israel witness to the true God when the very symbol of that God (*see John 2:19, Matt. 26:61*) and the entire plan of salvation was in such a state? In many ways, the people’s attitude toward the temple revealed a deeper spiritual problem: their loss of the sense of their divine mission as the remnant people of the Lord.

Do you see any warning here for us?

God’s Greatest Promise

Read Haggai 1:12–14. Notice the sense of unity of purpose here. Why was that unity so important in order for the people of Israel to do that which they were called to do?

This time the message instantly is obeyed by the leaders and the remnant people. They make preparations, gather materials, and resume work on the temple three weeks later. Within another week they erect an altar and restore the sacrificial worship (*Ezra 3:1–6*). In less than five years the temple is completed.

While the kingdom of God cannot be identified with a material building, the book of Haggai is a reminder that God sometimes uses material things, such as buildings, for spiritual ends.

If immediate compliance with the prophetic message is considered to be the measure of a prophet’s success, then Haggai stands out as one of the most successful prophets. His preaching moved the people to action. Within the month, work on the temple resumed, with God’s prophets assuring the people that the Lord would help them.

Haggai 1:12–14 reports the response of the leaders and the people to Haggai’s message. All obeyed the Lord because they recognized that He had sent Haggai. They “feared the LORD” (*vs. 12, NIV*), and showed this by worshiping Him and giving Him due attention. So, Haggai now could deliver a new word from the Lord: “ ‘I am with you’ ” (*vs. 13*). As soon as the people decided to obey the Lord, the messages of reproof were replaced by words of encouragement. This assurance of God’s presence gave them the promise of all other blessings. After all, the statement “ ‘I am with you’ ” goes back to the covenantal promises that God made during the time of the patriarchs and Moses (*Gen. 26:3, Exod. 3:12, Num. 14:9*).

Of course, the greatest manifestation of God being “with us” is Jesus (see Isa. 7:14, Matt. 1:23, 28:20). Dwell on the idea that Jesus, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, lived among us. What does that tell us about our importance in a universe that is so big that we easily can see ourselves as insignificant? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Do Not Fear!

Haggai 2:1–5 presents an interesting development in the great revival taking place among God’s people. About a month after the temple work began, God sent an encouraging word through Haggai to the remnant who had determined, without adequate resources, to rebuild God’s house as directed by the prophets. Haggai asked the elders how the temple’s current state compared to its appearance before the exile. Clearly, the present appearance did not match the former glory. People may have been discouraged because they had no chance of duplicating the splendor of Solomon’s temple that once stood in the same place.

The prophet encouraged the people to keep working because God’s Spirit was with them. He called on all members of the remnant community to be strong and to work hard because of the presence of God Almighty in their midst. Haggai’s words to the leaders, “Be strong! Do not fear!” sound like the Lord’s words to Joshua after the death of Moses (*Josh. 1:5–9*). The smaller and weaker were Israel’s own resources, the greater the people’s need for faith in God. The prophet declared that, in the end, the Lord would make the temple’s latter glory greater than its former glory. That became true, however, only because One greater than the temple had come (*see Matt. 12:6*).

The presence of the Spirit confirmed the continuity of God’s kingdom in Israel. The Spirit of God, who had guided Moses and the elders and who had sent forth the prophets with inspired messages, was in the midst of the remnant. The godly response of the leaders and the people also testified to the spiritual reformation that had taken place. The Spirit was present in renewing them and in bringing them closer to their God. The presence of the Spirit also guaranteed an abundance of blessings. The prophet encouraged the community members to work out the divine promises to their fulfillments.

Haggai ministered God’s Word to people who knew the harshness of life and the disappointment of unfulfilled hope. He turned their attention to God, who is faithful and who counts on the new community to be responsible citizens of His kingdom, by persevering in doing good, and thus finding true meaning and purpose in their lives.

A 35-year-old man who had given up on belief in God wrote a 1,900-page suicide note before killing himself. In his note, he wrote: “Every word, every thought, and every emotion comes back to one core problem: life is meaningless.” How does not only our belief in God, but our willingness to obey Him, give our life meaning?

The Desire of All Nations

Read Haggai 2:6–9. What is being promised here, and how are we to understand its fulfillment?

Through Haggai, God announced a great earthshaking of nations on the day of the Lord when the temple will be filled with Divine presence. The prophet called on his contemporaries to look beyond the present adversities and poverty to the future glory of God’s kingdom toward which the temple pointed.

The main reason for the splendor built into the temple of Jerusalem was to make it worthy of God’s presence. Yet, according to this text, the Lord was willing to inhabit the less-than-glorious house and subsequently bring splendor to it. So, the people did not need to be overly concerned with the ways in which they could finance the temple’s rebuilding. All treasures belong to God, who had promised to dwell in this new temple. The Lord Himself was the provider of the temple’s splendor.

“As the people endeavored to do their part, and sought for a renewal of God’s grace in heart and life, message after message was given them through Haggai and Zechariah, with assurances that their faith would be richly rewarded and that the word of God concerning the future glory of the temple whose walls they were rearing would not fail. In this very building would appear, in the fullness of time, the Desire of all nations as the Teacher and Saviour of mankind.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 577.

God promised that the splendor of the present temple would be greater than the glory of the former temple. It would be a different type of glory because this temple would be honored by the presence of Jesus, in the flesh. Indeed, Christ’s presence made the glory of the new temple greater than that of Solomon’s temple.

Read Hebrews 8:1–5. Whatever the glory of the earthly temple, we never must forget that it was only a shadow, a symbol of the plan of salvation. Think about what it means that, right now, Jesus is ministering in our behalf in the “true tabernacle,” the one made by God, not man. How can we learn to better appreciate the importance of the sanctuary message in the plan of salvation?

The Lord's Signet Ring

“ ‘ “On that day,” declares the LORD Almighty, “I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,” declares the LORD, “and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,” declares the LORD Almighty’ ” (*Hag. 2:23, NIV*).

The final message from the Lord to Haggai was given on the same day as the previous one in order to complement it (*see Hag. 2:22, 23*). The Lord warned of a coming destruction of kingdoms and nations during the day of God's judgment. But on that same day, the prophet said, the servant of the Lord will accomplish God's appointed task of salvation. This we can best understand as being fulfilled, ultimately and fully, only at the Second Coming and during all that follows it.

The nation's political leader is associated here with the glorious reign of Israel's King David, from whom he was a descendant. Zerubbabel was a grandson of King Jehoiachin and the legitimate heir to David's throne after the Babylonian exile. He served as governor of Judah under the Persian king Darius the Great, and was a leading force behind the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Joshua was the high priest who also helped to rebuild the temple.

The prophet said that Zerubbabel would be the Lord's signet ring, an object that provides evidence of royal authority and ownership. Like a king sealing legal documents with a ring, the Lord would impress the entire world through the work of His servant. Although Zerubbabel's key role in the rebuilding of the temple never should be underestimated, he did not fulfill all of the promises given to him by God through Haggai. The inspired Gospel writers point to the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, son of both David and Zerubbabel, as the final fulfillment of all the Messianic promises found in the Bible.

Read Luke 24:13–27, focusing especially on Christ's words to the two men. What important message is He giving to them, how do His words show us the importance of understanding Old Testament prophecy, and why is it so relevant for Christians even today?

Further Study: “But even this dark hour was not without hope for those whose trust was in God. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were raised up to meet the crisis. In stirring testimonies these appointed messengers revealed to the people the cause of their troubles. The lack of temporal prosperity was the result of a neglect to put God’s interests first, the prophets declared. Had the Israelites honored God, had they shown Him due respect and courtesy, by making the building of His house their first work, they would have invited His presence and blessing.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 573, 574.

“The second temple was not honored with the cloud of Jehovah’s glory, but with the living presence of One in whom dwelt the fullness of the Godhead Bodily—who was God Himself manifest in the flesh. The ‘Desire of all nations’ had indeed come to His temple when the Man of Nazareth taught and healed in the sacred courts. In the presence of Christ, and in this only, did the second temple exceed the first in glory.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 24.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In class, discuss your answer to Monday’s question regarding the presence of Jesus on earth. Think through the implications of not just His presence but His self-sacrifice for the sins of the world. Think through what these things mean about our value as individuals. Think through, too, just how different a view this presents of humanity in contrast to the atheistic, evolutionary views so common in certain parts of the world.
- ❷ Isaiah talks about the proud king of Babylon who, at the height of his power, made “nations shake and the earth tremble” (*Isa. 14:16, 17*). How different is that shaking from the Lord’s intervention as described by Haggai in chapter 2 of his book?
- ❸ Ancient Israelites often were disobedient to the messages proclaimed by God’s prophets. Prepare to share with your class members some of the ways in which God’s people today are resisting the messages that the Lord is sending to His people.
- ❹ The Bible is very clear: the ancient temple and its sacrificial system lost all value, once and for all, after the death of Jesus. What do Hebrews 8 and 9 tell about the things that Christ has done and is doing for us that the early sanctuary never could?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Haggai 2:8*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that as Creator of all and the Source of all blessings, God stirs people to action and desires to bless them.

Feel: Take comfort in knowing that everything belongs to God and that He provides all.

Do: Respond to God's love and care.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God of Relationship

A Why is it so crucial to know that God is with us?

B What are the signs of God's blessing?

C How can the difficulties of life during which it appears that God is absent, inspire us to have more confidence and trust?

II. Feel: Encouragement and Blessing

A What was the ultimate blessing for God's people in Haggai's time?

B How would you react if God told you that He would be with you and bless you if you would follow His directions?

C Why was it so important for God's people to know that the Desire of all nations would come to the new temple?

III. Do: God of Action

A How important is it to be united in doing God's work?

B In what ways are you personally active in your church? In what ways could you be more active?

C What difference would it make if everyone in your congregation used their talents to enrich others?

► **Summary:** God assures His people of His presence and His desire to bless them. The Desire of Ages will come, and the only proper response is to trust that He will guide and protect, even in times of trouble.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Haggai 1:7, 8*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Because He wants to bless them with prosperity, God encourages His people to reconsider their priorities and work on building up the house of the Lord.

Just for Teachers: In the time of crisis, when the people’s expectations had collapsed, God called the prophet Haggai to stir the people’s minds and admonish them to action to work on God’s temple. This week’s lesson reminds us that we should reconsider our lifestyles and put God first in whatever we do. Encourage the class members to become the Haggais of our day. We need new Haggais who will encourage God’s people to work together in doing God’s work.

Opening Discussion: Why is it so tempting to concentrate on those which we consider to be the most important priorities in life instead of focusing on eternal values? Why do we so often put God in second place? Why is it easier to give money and not our time and personal involvement to things that need to be done in the church?

Questions for Discussion:

- ❶ How can God be honored through our actions?
- ❷ What does it mean that God will take pleasure in His people?

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. First Sermon Delivered on August 29, 520 B.C. (*Review Haggai 1:1–12 with your class.*)

God enters into a dispute with His people and asks them to reconsider their lives, habits, and the results of their work. He twice requests: “Give careful thought to your ways’ ” (*vss. 5, 7, NIV*), meaning that they need to end their unbelief and selfish lifestyles. They work hard but have very little. “You

have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes' ” (*Hag. 1:6, ESV*). Without God’s blessing, life is very difficult.

God is in command and makes an appeal: “ ‘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” (*Hag 1:8, NIV*). The people’s response is unprecedented. All together (leaders, priests, and people) they “obey the voice of the LORD their God” and returned to God, fearing Him (*Hag. 1:12, NIV*).

Consider This: What was the underlying cause of the people’s lack of prosperity? What did God command them to do in order to reverse their situation? What does it mean to “give careful thought” to our ways?

II. Second Sermon Delivered on September 21, 520 B.C. (*Review Haggai 1:13–15 with your class.*)

The second message is the shortest sermon and only consists of seven words (only four words in Hebrew): “ ‘I am with you,’ says the LORD” (*vs. 13, NIV*). This proclamation is all that the people needed to hear. God assured them that He was and would be with them! This is God’s all-inclusive promise. If God is with His people, no one can overcome them. God’s presence will provide everything they need for their spiritual and physical life. If God is for us, who can be against us? No one and nothing can separate us from the love of God (*Rom. 8:35–39*). As a result, after three weeks of deep revival, God’s people began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty (*Hag. 1:14*).

Consider This: When God promised the people, “ ‘I am with you,’ ” what all-inclusive assurances did this proclamation include? What meaning and promises are contained for us today in these words?

III. Third Sermon Delivered on October 17, 520 B.C. (*Review Haggai 2:1–9 with your class.*)

God strengthened the leaders and the people not to look at the difficulties and not to compare this temple with the glorious Solomonic temple. The present sanctuary may not have looked like much, but they were not to despair. God encouraged: “ ‘Be strong. . . I am with you. . . I covenanted with you. . . My Spirit remains among you’ ” (*Hag. 2:4, 5, NKJV*). This work would be accomplished by the Spirit of God (*see also Zech. 4:6*); and “ ‘the glory of this present house will be greater’ ” (*Hag. 2:9, NIV*) than that

of Solomon's temple, because the Messiah, Jesus Christ, would come into it.

This third sermon contains one of the most beautiful Messianic prophecies: “ ‘ “I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,” says the LORD of hosts’ ” (*Hag. 2:7, NKJV*). “The Desire of All Nations,” a phrase that appears only once in the entire Bible, is none other than Jesus Christ.

Consider This: The title of the book *The Desire of Ages* by Ellen G. White, on the life of Jesus Christ, was inspired by this verse. What does the word *desire* mean? What is it in Christ that “All Nations” would desire?

IV. Fourth Sermon Delivered on December 18, 520 B.C. (*Review Haggai 2:10–19 with your class.*)

Haggai asked the priests two questions. The first was: will consecrated meat bring holiness to the things it touches? (*vs. 12*). The answer to this first question was, No. The second question was: will an unclean person having contact with a dead corpse defile things around himself? (*vs. 13*). The answer was Yes. What do these inquiries mean? Sin automatically spreads around us; therefore, if we want something good to happen around us, it must be cultivated carefully! A weed grows in a garden by itself, but in order to have vegetables, one needs to cultivate the vegetables. Only God can produce holiness in a person's life, because He is the only Source of holiness. People, things, and time can become holy only as they are in relationship with God.

This is the last message to all people. God encourages: “ ‘ “Give careful thought” ’ ” (*repeated three times, vs. 15, 18, NIV*), leading people to think and carefully notice, and then He promises: “ ‘ “From this day on I will bless you” ’ ” (*vs. 19, NIV*).

Consider This: Why is it often the case that when you try to do good, you suddenly face many obstacles and difficulties? What does that say about the existence of evil?

V. Fifth Sermon Delivered on December 18, 520 B.C. (*Review Haggai 2:20–23 with your class.*)

The last message is a personal message specifically for Zerubbabel, the governor of Jerusalem. God said that He would intervene, and His purposes would be accomplished. The governor would be His signet ring if he would cooperate with God by being His living example, a model of what God is like as revealed through a human instrument. Zerubbabel would be God's guarantee and signature. Zerubbabel did not need to worry about anything. God would work for, and through, him (*see the contrast with King Jehoiachin [Coniah] in*

Jer. 22:24). Zerubbabel is later mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (*Matt. 1:12, 13*).

Consider This: Zerubbabel was “chosen” by God. For what purpose? What does it mean to be a model or human instrument of God? What is a signet ring, and what is it used for? What dimensions do the words *through* and *for* imply in terms of the kind of work that God intends to accomplish by using us?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: God wants to bless His people, but first they need to respond to His call through His Word and Spirit. Note how in the Bible God’s Word and Spirit go together in order to produce life (*Gen. 1:1–3, Ps. 33:6, Ezek. 37:3–14*).

Application Questions:

- 1 Ask class members to define in their own words the difference between working alone in God’s work or together in close cooperation.
- 2 How can you encourage others in your congregation to be a part of God’s work? How can you build up your church in a physical and a spiritual sense?

►STEP 4—Create

Activities:

- 1 Compose a monologue as though you were Haggai or Zerubbabel and narrate his experience as it is told in the book of Haggai. Have class members read or perform their monologues for the class.
- 2 Write an imaginative dialogue between the prophets Haggai and Zechariah about the time when they wanted to help the people to build the temple in Jerusalem.
- 3 Have members of the class pick from among the sermons of Haggai the ones that speak the most to them at this point in their lives. In what ways are the lessons from the sermons applicable to our lives today? Have the students share their thoughts in class.