

### ‘Priority Number One’

A woman’s dishwasher stopped working so she called a repairman. Since she had to go to work the next day, she told the repairman, ‘I’ll leave the key under the mat. Fix the dishwasher, leave the bill on the counter, and I’ll post you a cheque.’ ‘Oh, by the way don’t worry about my bulldog Tyson, he won’t bother you. But, whatever you do, do not, under any circumstances, talk to my parrot!’ ‘I repeat, do not talk to my parrot!’

When the repairman arrived at the woman’s home apartment the following day, he discovered the biggest, meanest looking bulldog he had ever seen. But, just as she had said, the dog just lay there on the carpet watching the repairman go about his work. The parrot, however, drove him nuts the whole time with his never-ending yelling, cursing and name calling. Finally, the repairman couldn’t contain himself any longer and yelled, ‘Shut up, you stupid, ugly bird!’ To which the parrot replied, ‘Get him, Tyson!’

All the way through the Scriptures, we find that God’s people didn’t listen to God and because they refused to listen, God would often have to punish them. There are times when whole nations were wiped out because they refused listen to Him.

I would like to talk to you about ‘the prophet who got results’, and what I mean by that is, for once God’s people listened to Him. You see, at crucial moments, a single voice can influence a mass of people into action and get the masses involved in something that needs to be done. Prime Minister **Winston Churchill’s** inspiring words may have done that in World War 2. American civil rights leader **Martin Luther King’s** words and speeches captured America’s conscience in the 1950’s and 60’s. And in many ways, Haggai’s inspiring words, kicked started the Lord’s people into action.

So, with that in mind, please turn your Bibles to the **Book of Haggai**, You see, Haggai’s words, similarly, rang clear in a time of confusion. I want to take you back to around 520 B.C. and tell you about a man whose name means ‘festival’ or ‘festive’. He was a prophet of God and he had one job to do and that was to tell the people of God to get their priorities right.

You see, the people of Judah had been exiled to Babylon in 586 B.C. and Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. But under the rule of Cyrus, king of Persia, the Jews were allowed to return to Judah and rebuild their temple. So, the people returned to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the temple, but they hadn’t finished. Haggai was a man with one single goal in life and that was to get God’s temple finished. But the temple lay unfinished while the people lived in beautiful homes.

And so, Haggai warns them against putting their possessions and jobs ahead of God. At that’s really the message of the first six verses, it’s all about procrastination. They started off well, but didn’t finish the job. **Haggai 1:2** “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘These people say, ‘the time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built.’ Notice how God addresses His people in **verse 2**, He says ‘These people’. Why? Didn’t God help these people out of captivity?

Why didn’t He say, ‘My people’ like He usually does? God usually calls them, ‘My people’ or ‘people who are called by My name.’ Why did he use the term, ‘these people’? Could it be that God was so dissatisfied with His people and their actions that He wanted to get their attention? You see, we use stern words when our children do something that’s wrong, and I believe that’s what God is doing here. He’s getting their attention, He’s being serious.

Now before we get into the text I’ve been given to speak about today, I want you to notice, that all the way the **Book of Haggia** God is continually trying to get their attention. He’s trying to get them to stop and think about what they are doing. Notice the phrase, ‘Give careful thought’.

**Haggia 1:5** “Give careful thought to your ways.” **Haggia 1:7** “Give careful thought to your ways.” **Haggia 2:15** “Now give careful thought to this from this day on.” **Haggia 2:18** “From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the LORD’s temple was laid. Give careful thought.” God wants them to seriously consider what they’re doing in light of their relationship to God.

**Haggai 1:7+8** “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Give careful thought to your ways. 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.”

God says to them, ‘go and get timber and build My house’. Get busy, get your priorities right, I come first, then you can build your own homes.’ Why? ‘So that God can take pleasure in it and so that He can be honoured.’ Loved ones, God always takes pleasure and is always glorified when His people obey His word. And the reconstruction of the ruined temple was clearly a project which was the will of God.

Remember it was God’s Spirit that stirred up Cyrus to command the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. And it’s God’s Spirit who is using Haggai to speak against those Israelites who couldn’t be bothered to finish building the temple.

Think about it, how could that pile of stone and timber glorify God? If foreign people came along and saw that pile of rotten timber and saw the bricks which were left over from Solomon’s temple just lying around everywhere. Foreigners would be thinking to themselves, what kind of God is this they worship? ‘No-one seems to respect this God because no-one seems to obey Him!’

The promises that God had made through the prophets concerning the rebuilding of the temple hadn’t been completed. And because it wasn’t completed, not only was it a bad reflection on the Israelites, it was a bad reflection of the God they worshipped. It was a bad reflection of who He was and what He’s done for them in the past. Loved ones, it’s all about priorities, these people had plenty of time for themselves, but they didn’t have time for God.

And that attitude, sadly, hasn’t changed much today, has it? I’ve lost count of the number of non-Christians who have said to me, ‘yeah, I’ll study the Bible with you, but I just don’t have the time at the moment!’ I’ve lost count of the number of Christians who have said to me, ‘yeah, I would love to come to the Bible study, but I’m just too busy just now!’

Why is it that some people find a forty-minute sermon too long, but they’ll quite happily go to the cinema and watch a three-hour film? Why is it that some Christians will read someone’s autobiography over a few nights but won’t read the Book of Isaiah because it’s too long? Why is it that some people will listen to people singing on the X-factor for two hours, but complain when we sing too many songs in worship?

Why is it that some Christians will travel miles to visit some old friends, but coming to a prayer meeting or a Bible study through the week is just too far? Why is it that some people will mark in their diaries when Liverpool are playing Everton, but they never mark any church events in those same diaries?

I remember a few weeks ago having a discussion on WhatsApp about the church meeting together throughout the week. And one brother wrote, ‘but we’re not commanded to meet any other day of the week.’ To which I replied, ‘oh really, what about Hebrews 10:24-25?’ Hebrews 10:24-25 “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

You see, the Day mentioned here is the Lord’s Day, Sunday, but the phrase, ‘as you see the Day approaching’, implies that we’ve got to meet together throughout the week. It’s impossible to ‘spur one another on toward love and good deeds’, it’s impossible to ‘encourage one another’. It’s impossible to do any of these things, ‘as you see the Day approaching’ if that Day has already arrived.

This is all about preparation for the Lord’s Day worship and when you think about it, there are over 30 New Testament commands that you cannot do on your own as a Christian. And please don’t tell me you can obey all of those commands, during worship or during a coffee break before a study! Just as a side note, after the discussion on WhatsApp, the guy admitted that he was simply too busy to meet with the church throughout the week. Why didn’t he just say that at the beginning, instead of looking for a get out clause! Don’t you find it sad that some Christians will only meet with other Christians throughout the week if they are commanded too?

Loved ones, God has blessed us with the gift of time, but we must always put God and His priorities first. And so, because God’s people had neglected the rebuilding of God’s temple, the Lord goes on to say.

Haggai 1:9-11 “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. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. 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 labour of your hands.’”

The Lord says, ‘they looked for much, but they received little’ and what they ‘did bring home, God blew away’. They had a ‘no rain’ for a long time, even their cattle, fields and crops were all cursed by God. But why? Isn’t this a little severe God? And the Lord says, ‘it’s because of my house, which remains in ruin’.

Now let me say a few words about the temple. If you’ve ever studied the **Book of Hebrews** you will notice that one word, a word which you would think would be mentioned in the letter, isn’t mentioned at all. Do you know what that one word is? It’s the word temple. Why is that? Well it’s not mentioned because God never asked for a temple to be built in the first place.

1 Chronicles 17:1-6 “After David was settled in his palace, he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of the covenant of the LORD is under a tent.” Nathan replied to David, “Whatever you have in mind, do it, for God is with you.” But that night the word of God came to Nathan, saying: “Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: You are not the one to build me a house to dwell in. I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought Israel up out of Egypt to this day. I have moved from one tent site to another, from one dwelling place to another. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their leaders whom I commanded to shepherd my people, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?””

The building of the temple was David’s idea, not God’s. God says, when have I ever asked for a house to be built? Loved ones, God gave Moses up on the mountain instructions pertaining to the construction of the tabernacle and its contents. But you won’t find anywhere in the Bible where God gave instructions about the construction of the temple.

So why is God emphasising the importance of the temple being built here? After all its going to be destroyed in AD70! What made the temple so important at this point in time? After all, the proper sacrifices and rituals could be carried out on a makeshift altar.

Could it be that this was more about obedience to the will of God? Could it be that God’s reputation was at stake? Could it be that God couldn’t be properly honoured so long as the house He called home lay in ruins? Could it be that the temple symbolised God’s presence, and Israel’s priorities? Could it be that, God is so upset and then punished them, to get their attention?

God used pain in their lives to get them back on the right track. Proverbs 20:30 “Blows and wounds cleanse away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being”. You see, God will let us go through all kinds of pain to get our full attention back on Him. If you’re struggling spiritually, or life is throwing all sorts of trails and difficulties at you, let me say this. ‘Give careful thought’ to your ways, think about the life your living, is it possible your priorities all wrong?

God told them that they are working hard all day and night for nothing, why? Because they had neglected building God’s temple and were too busy looking after their own interests. And so, God brought about a drought throughout the land, in order to stir His people into action. In other words, God won’t bless anyone, who’s determined not to do His will. And loved ones, if we want to continue to enjoy the blessings of God, we must continue to obey His will.

I love the nursery rhyme about Humpty Dumpty. We all know that he sat on the wall and had a great fall and that all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put humpty together again. And so the question needs to be asked, who could? Who could put humpty together again?

The only person who could put Humpty together again was the king, but nobody thought about asking him. If your life is in peices or your priorities are all wrong, ask the King to help you, because He will help. God says, He’ll take care of you, He will put your life together again, but for Him to be able to do that, we must make God priority number one in our lives.

Matthew 6:33 “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.”

Haggai 1:12-15 “Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak, 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. Then Haggai, the LORD’s messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: “I am with you,” declares the LORD. So, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jozadak, 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, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.”

Haggai tell us that those captives who came as a remnant from Babylon were encouraged to build because they trusted the word of the Lord that came through Haggai and Zechariah. And because they feared the Lord, they set their hands to the work. You can always tell the Christians who don’t truly fear the Lord. They are the ones who have become unresponsive to the things of God, they will waste their lives away in things that relate to this world.

They’re the Christians who have always got some excuse for not getting involved in ‘church’ life. They are the Christians who are slow to respond when they hear of an opportunity to minister and serve in the church. They hear the announcement, ‘we’re having a fellowship day with a visiting speaker’. And they sit there, and they know in their heart that they have absolutely no intentions of going.

Now you might be thinking, here he goes again, [is he speaking about me?](#) Well, let me put you out of your misery, yes, I’m speaking to you, I’m speaking to all of us, I’m speaking to myself. God’s work should always be priority number one in all of our lives. God should always be above your husband or wife. He should always be above our children, He should be above our work and our hobbies and interests.

And you can always tell the Christians who truly fear the Lord, and [how can you tell?](#) You can tell by their work ethic, they are always first to respond to a serving opportunity. You can tell by the way they live their lives for God, you can tell by the priorities in their lives. When Christians fear the Lord, they will work. But they don’t just work out of fear for the Lord, they work because they know that God is with them.

God said to the faithful remnant, ‘I am with you’. In fact, later in [Haggia 2:4](#) God says, “Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty.” And in [Haggia 2:5](#) He says, “And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.”

Now those three words are some of the most comforting words we find within the Scriptures. Jacob found them comforting when God spoke to Him in a vision and said in [Genesis 28:15](#) “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.” Moses found them comforting when God, from a burning bush and said to him in [Exodus 3:12](#) “I will be with you.” And when I was putting this lesson together, I thought to myself, [where have I read those words before?](#)

And then I remembered our theme from last year, [Matthew 28:19-20](#) “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

To put this text, in it’s context, we have to remember that the disciples have been with Jesus for three years. And they’re about to be persecuted, hunted down and slaughtered by the authorities. I can imagine them being very scared about what was going to happen to them but Jesus comforts them by saying, ‘surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’ These words would have greatly comforted them, just like those words did with Jacob and Moses.

But notice that the promise of being with us always is in relation to obedience in keeping His commands. When we obey the Lord, we will work because we know He is with us. Let me finish by saying this, it’s easy to make other things more important than doing God’s work.

But God wants us to follow through and build up His kingdom, He doesn't want us to stop and make excuses. He wants us to set our hearts on what is right and then do it, He wants us to get our priorities right. Haggai encouraged the people as they worked to finish God's temple. Near the end of **Haggai 2**, He assured them of the divine presence of the Holy Spirit and of final victory, and He gave them the hope that the Messiah would reign.

And so, if God gives you a task to do loved ones, don't be afraid to get started because His resources are infinite. God will help you complete the work He has for you to do, by giving you encouragement from other believers along the way. And if that's not enough encouragement for you, then remember Jesus' promise to you, **"Surely I am with you always."**