

# OVERVIEW OF HAGGAI

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## Historical Background

I. In 587 B.C. the Babylonians completed their conquest of Judah. They destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and, for the third time in 18 years, exiled many Jews to Babylonia.

II. In 539 B.C., in keeping with the prophecy in Isaiah 44 & 45, the Persian Cyrus entered Babylon and established himself as the king of a new world empire. He promptly authorized the Jews to return to Palestine and to rebuild their Temple. He even returned the sacred vessels that had been seized from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar and agreed to partially finance the reconstruction from the royal treasury.

III. In 538/37 B.C. the first group of Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Joshua. They promptly set up the altar in its former place and resumed the offering of sacrifices amid the Temple ruins. In 536 B.C. they laid the foundation for a new temple, but then opposition from the local residents and neighboring communities, especially the Samaritans, caused the work to grind to a halt.

IV. According to Ezra 4:4-5: "Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia."

V. The Temple was still in ruins sixteen years later (520 B.C.) when the prophet Haggai delivered his oracles.

## Haggai 1:1 – 2:19

I. Call to Work on the Temple and the People's Response (1:1-15)

A. Prophet's call to work on the temple (1:1-11)

1. V. 2 points out that in 520 B.C. the prevailing sentiment among the people of Jerusalem was that the time was not right for rebuilding the Lord's Temple. They did not doubt the necessity of rebuilding it or their obligation to do so; they were simply convinced that their present circumstances justified postponement of the task.

2. The people apparently believed that they could not afford to rebuild the temple. As 1:5-6 make clear, they had not been able to accumulate any wealth. All their efforts to

achieve a "comfortable" lifestyle that would "free them" to undertake the rebuilding had failed. When their ship came in, then it would be time to build the temple.

3. You certainly find this attitude in the church. We have the same tendency to put off the things we know the Lord wants us to do until a more convenient time.

a. When we get a raise or pay off some debts or win the lottery, we'll get around to financially contributing to Christ-glorifying causes.

b. When our hours at work change or when school gets out or when the kids get older, we'll get around to studying the Bible and praying regularly to God.

c. When we get more secure in our job or in our relationship with our friends, we'll get around to speaking to our co-workers or to our friends about Jesus Christ.

d. When other demands on our time and energy subside, we'll get around to faithfully attending the meetings of the church where we worship God and edify and encourage one another.

e. When other demands on our time and energy subside, we'll get around to serving the church, both as a group and as individuals, and to serving people in general.

4. In v. 3-4 the Lord makes clear that what the Jews had convinced themselves was a valid reason for putting off the Lord's work was simply an excuse for unfaithfulness. Despite their difficult economic situation, they had found the time and resources for completing and possibly even decorating or expanding their own homes! It is not a matter of time and money but a matter of priorities. They simply cared more about themselves than about obeying God. If they'd been living in the temple, it would have been built long ago.

5. In fact, they had gotten matters completely backwards. Their lack of material blessings was not a reason for them to put off building the temple; it was a *result* of their having done so! The very hardship they were using to justify their procrastination was God's discipline to bring them to repentance (see, 2:15-17). If you are having a hard time in some area of your life, first ask if God is disciplining you.

6. They needed to reverse their priorities. In the words of Christ, they needed to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things would be given to them as well. Our highest priority must always be to do the will of God. Everything else flows from that.

## B. The people's favorable response (1:12-15)

1. The leaders and all the people obeyed the message of the Lord that had been delivered by the prophet Haggai. They did not resist the word of God but submitted to it. They

didn't argue that God was misunderstanding their situation but acknowledged their sinfulness and condemnation.

2. God used the word of the prophet to "stir up their spirits." His word brought about within them conviction of their sin, repentance, and the commitment to follow through on that repentance. That is why you must expose your heart to the word. You must allow God to assess your life. If you only listen to your own voice, you'll rarely condemn yourself. We are much better at rationalizing and justifying our unfaithfulness.

3. As the people were convicted about how they had sinfully withheld from God the honor due him, they "feared the Lord." They now saw what they had done in the right perspective; they feared what they deserved from the Lord. We must never allow the grace of God to cause us to take sin lightly, to cause us to think that it's not really deserving of judgment.

4. God comforts them in their repentance and lets them know that he is with them. He has not abandoned them in their sin. Rather, he will be active in their obedience. When as a Christian you have neglected the things of God, confess your sin, commit to changing your behavior, and know that God will be with you. He will give you strength to carry out his will, but you must be committed to obey.

## II. Encouragement in the Face of Seeming Insignificance of Their Efforts (2:1-9)

A. In 2:3 God has Haggai voice what was in the hearts of a number of the people. The temple they had been working on for the last month (probably planning and possibly gathering material) seemed to them like nothing. What they were building compared so unfavorably to what had existed in the past, the Solomonic temple, that it threatened to undermine their incentive to persevere. Why struggle and endure hardship to build a merely second-rate temple?

1. Can you understand how this would take the wind out of their sails? They began to see their effort as insignificant, as ultimately wasted. They knew that they could not pay skilled craftsmen, as Solomon had done, and that they could not embellish the temple with gold. What they could see resulting from their labor was a temple that just didn't seem worth building.

2. Have you ever felt that kind of discouragement in your service to God? Have you ever felt that the result of your labor for Christ was going to be so insignificant or inferior that you wondered if it was worth all the effort?

a. Have you ever looked at great Christians of the past, whether in the Scriptures or church history or your own past, and felt like your efforts to grow spiritually will never amount to a hill of beans? Has that feeling ever tempted you to just give up on trying to grow? Have you ever thought to yourself, "I'll never be like those people, so why struggle with growing? If the best I'm going to be is mediocre, then why not be so without breaking a sweat?" Have you been tempted to give up on spiritual activities that will help you grow, such as meditating on God's

word, faithfully praying, faithfully joining in our times of worship, and giving yourself to the fellowship of the saints?

b. Have you ever looked back to the glory of some church you used to be a part of and then gotten discouraged when you felt that the church you are now a part of, the church you are called to build up, will never be as good? Have you been tempted to throw in the towel, to quit doing your part to help the church grow and be strengthened? Have you been discouraged to the point that you no longer think the church is worth the effort to build?

c. Have you ever thought of some godly families you have known and admired and then had a creeping feeling that your family relationships will never be like theirs? Have you been tempted to give up, to quit struggling to build Christ-glorifying relationships with your spouse and children? Have you been discouraged to the point that you no longer think your marriage or your relationship with your children is worth the effort to build?

B. Haggai had a word of encouragement for these Jews struggling with the apparent insignificance of their labor.

1. Rather than sympathize with them over their disheartening diagnosis of the situation, God commands them to have the courage to carry on with the work. When their view of the future threatens to completely deflate their enthusiasm for the task, they must be strong. They cannot allow the specter of insignificance or mediocrity to defeat them.

2. If you perceive any aspect of your labor in the Lord to be insignificant or not worth the effort and that perception is tempting you to quit working, the Lord's message to you today is "be strong and work." Don't stop working to grow spiritually, don't stop working to build the church, and don't stop working to build a godly marriage.

3. God reminds them that, despite appearances, he has not abandoned them. When things look bleak and the working of God is not obvious, do not think that he is not present. And that promise is repeated even more boldly by our Lord in Mat. 28:20b: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

C. In vv. 6-9 God tells the people that he will turn their meager efforts into much more than they can imagine. In his absolute sovereignty, he will use their seemingly insignificant efforts to his ultimate glorification.

1. This promise was partially fulfilled in history, but its ultimate theological fulfillment awaits the consummation.

a. Historically, after King Darius found the earlier decree of King Cyrus in the archives, he ordered opponents of the building project to pay the cost of the temple from the royal revenue in their own taxation districts (Ezra 6:1-12). In 458 B.C., when Ezra came to Jerusalem from Babylon, King Artaxerxes and his counselors contributed silver and gold for the

temple and permitted contributions from the inhabitants of Babylon (Ezra 7:15). The temple was expanded in the days of King Herod, an Idumean, that in Mk. 13:1 its buildings are called "magnificent." This temple was not only attended by more proselytes than was true of Solomon's temple but was graced by the Lord of Glory himself.

b. But there's more in this promise. The notion of the nations offering their wealth to God is a prevalent end-time motif. The description of the surpassing glory of the temple and the reference to "peace," a term that sums up the blessings of the Messianic age, also point to the end time. The theological essence of the promise is God's unique dwelling with worshipping people of all nations. This same picture is painted, in somewhat different imagery, in Revelation 21. He is promising that their modest work somehow will be used in bringing about that glorious state.

2. If God can do such incredible things with the apparently insignificant labor of the Jews, we need to stop judging the value of our efforts in terms of what we can see. Keep serving God faithfully and do not grow weary of doing good. Know that he can take the most discouraging of results and use them to his glory in ways we cannot imagine.

### III. Blessing in Rededication (2:10-19)

A. In 2:10-13 Haggai has the priests acknowledge the principle that ritual purity cannot be passed on by physical contact whereas ritual defilement can. In 2:14 he applies this to the people of Jerusalem and the sacrifices they had been offering amid the ruins of the temple.

1. Because of their sinful attitude toward God, reflected in their willful neglect of his temple, the sacrifices they offered were worthless in the eyes of God. Rather than being purified through the sacrifices, the sacrifices themselves were defiled by their uncleanness.

2. Nothing that a rebel offers to God is acceptable to him. This same point was made centuries before in Amos 5:21-24. If you are living in sin, you do not please God by coming to church or giving money or taking communion or praying or studying the Bible. All acts of devotion offered by a rebel are a mockery of God.

B. In 2:15-19 God reminds them of the hardships they faced because of their rebellion, and then promises them a new day in light of their repentance. Having committed themselves to the rebuilding of the temple, as evidenced by their re-laying of the foundation, God promises them his future blessings.