

Main Idea: Through the prophet Haggai in Haggai 1, God says that three things need to happen in our lives if we're living with wrong priorities.

- I. Wrong priorities need to be confronted (1-4).
 - A. Here's what the people said (2).
 1. Take care of yourself first.
 2. Give God what's left.
 - B. Here's what God said (3-4).
 1. The people didn't have time to do what God wanted.
 2. They did have time to do what they wanted.
- II. Wrong priorities need to be corrected (5-11).
 - A. Think about what you've been doing (5-6).
 1. When you neglect God, you never have enough.
 2. When you put God first, you have all you need.
 - B. Think about what God wants you to do (7-8).
 1. Priority #1: Obey God's will.
 2. Priority #2: Live for God's honor.
 - C. Think about what God is doing to get your attention (9-11).
 1. He can make life hard.
 2. He does so for His glory and our good.
- III. Wrong priorities need to be changed (12-15).
 - A. Here's what change involves (12).
 1. It affects our actions.
 2. It affects our hearts.
 - B. Here's what change requires (13-15).
 1. Haggai preached the Word.
 2. The Lord convicted their hearts.

Make It Personal: Two things we all need to do as we enter 2017...

1. Take time to *think*.
 - ⇒Is the Lord first in my life?
 - ⇒Is the Lord's will more important than mine?
2. Take *steps* to change.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

A group of friends went deer hunting and paired off in twos for the day. That night one of the hunters returned alone, staggering under an eight-point buck.

"Where's Harry?" he was asked.

"Harry had a stroke of some kind. He's a couple of miles back up the trail."

"You left Harry laying there, and carried the deer back?"

"Well," said the hunter, "I figured no one was going to steal Harry."²

It's so easy to see when someone else's priorities are out of order. It's not quite so easy to see it in your own life.

Let's be honest with ourselves. We all struggle with the tension of our priorities. Every day we make decisions, and those decisions flow out of what we consider most important.

"Should I work the overtime, or not?" "Should I watch the movie this afternoon, or spend time with my neighbors?" "Should I go to the ball game at school, or to the Bible

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ Adapted from a series preached at WBC in 2001.

² *Bits & Pieces*, March 3, 1994, p. 5.

study with the youth group?” “Should I buy the new set of tools I’ve been wanting, or put the money towards the children’s college fund?”

To complicate matters, add to these daily choices the rapid pace of life. Life is like a fast-moving roller coaster. Sometimes we make foolish choices, not so much intentionally, but because we fail to ponder what’s really important. We get pulled into the tyranny of the urgent.

What can we do to develop and implement the kinds of priorities that please God? We need not wonder, for God tells us in His Word.

Know this. We’re not the first generation to struggle with our priorities. The people living in Jerusalem in 520 B.C. faced—and failed in—the same problem. And God sent them a message they desperately needed. And so do we who live in the 21st century.

The messenger’s name was Haggai. The primary problem he addressed had to do with mixed up priorities. The solution God gave him to proclaim is contained in the book that bears the prophet’s name, which we’ll investigate for the month of January, the Lord willing.

The Prophet Haggai: Haggai, whose name means “festive” or “festival,” was a prophet in the sixth century BC. He ministered some fifteen years after Daniel, and was a contemporary of Zechariah. We know little of his personal life. He doesn’t give us the name of his father, nor the location of his hometown. What he does give is a powerful invitation to do some soul-searching in the area of our priorities.

In fact, he wastes no time in his book getting to the point. The book of Haggai is actually the second shortest book in the Old Testament, only 38 verses. Though short, the book contains four powerful messages that God commissioned Haggai to deliver to the Jews living in Jerusalem in 520 B.C. The first had to do with priorities.

Through the prophet Haggai in Haggai 1, God says that three things need to happen in our lives regarding our wrong priorities.

I. Wrong priorities need to be confronted (1-4).

Haggai begins, “In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest.”

Notice that the book begins with a time indicator. It’s actually the first of several time indicators. Haggai delivered his first message on the first day of the sixth month of King Darius’ second year as king—in our calendar, that’s August 29, 520 B.C.

According to 2:1 he preached his second message about seven weeks later, on the twenty-first day of the seventh month—that would be October 17, 520 B.C. The third message which begins in 2:10 came on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month—that’s December 18, 520 B.C. Haggai announced his fourth and final message later on the same day as the third, as 2:20 indicates—again, that’s December 18, 520 B.C.

As I take a glance at Haggai’s entire book, it strikes me that all we know of Haggai’s ministry is this four month period in 520 B.C. He gave four sermons in four months, from August 29 to December 18. Yet what he did in only four months—rather, what God did through him—is amazing as we’ll see in the weeks ahead.

On August 29, 520 BC the Lord’s word came to Haggai, the prophet. What did Haggai do with his message? Verse 1 says he delivered it “to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest.”

Notice that Haggai took God's Word to both the political leader and religious leader of his people. He was a minor prophet with a major message. Like the other Old Testament prophets, he was a reformer. He proclaimed God's Word to address the pressing needs of his day.

We're living in an age of tolerance and acceptance. The experts say that preaching is out. "Sharing" is in. The fact is we need Haggai to remind us that not all voices are equal. There is one voice in a class all by itself.

Thus says the Lord.

Here was the message—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.'"

The prophet's job isn't to share his opinions, but to proclaim God's Word. That's what Haggai did. His goal wasn't to be popular, but to please God. And so he confronted the wrong priorities of his people.

A. Here's what the people said (2). "The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built." It's not time, yet. What did they mean by that? To understand, we need to sketch the historical backdrop.

When Israel entered the Promised Land, God told them, "You can live here as long as you worship, obey, and live for Me. But if you turn away from Me, I'll send you into captivity."

And that's what happened. The people turned, and God judged them. He sent them into exile in three waves, the final wave occurring in 586 B.C. at which time the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians.

Yet in His mercy, after seventy years God began to restore the Jews to the Promised Land. As there were three waves of deportation, there were three waves of return: the first led by Sheshbazzar in 538 B.C. (Ezra 1:1), the second wave led by Ezra in 458 B.C. (Ezra 7:7), and the third wave led by Nehemiah in 445 B.C. (Neh 2:1).

The pagan king who allowed the first wave of Jews to return to their homeland was Cyrus, King of Persia. In the first year of his reign, following the fall of Babylon, this ungodly king issued a very unusual edict. Cyrus gave orders for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. And not only did he authorize the building project, he funded the expenses for the rebuilding out of his own treasury.

So it happened, the first wave of 42,360 Jews left captivity and headed home. The year, again, was 538 B.C. Once back in Israel, the Jews' first order of business was to rebuild the temple. They got right to the task, according to the record in Ezra 3. In the first year and seventh month, they rebuilt the altar and started offering sacrifices. In the second year and second month, the work on the temple itself began. The Jews laid the foundation quickly, and even had a celebration service to give thanks to God for the good beginning.

But then, trouble began. The Samaritans opposed the building project (in Ezra 4), and the Jews lost heart for the work. Consequently, the Jews shifted their attention from restoring the temple to rebuilding their own homes and farms. It didn't take long until all work stopped on the temple.

The people weren't opposed to doing God's work. *Just not right now.* "We'll get around to it later," they said.

And so God's unfinished temple just sat there as little more than a foundation. No place to bring offerings to God. No covering for sin. No basis for forgiveness.

For how long? For the next sixteen years! That's when Haggai enters the scene and begins to confront the priorities of his people. To put it bluntly, here's what they were...

1. *Take care of yourself first.* Then...

2. *Give God what's left.* Oh, they didn't deny God. They just put Him in the back seat. "It's not time yet to rebuild the Lord's house," they said.

They were guilty of procrastination. They weren't against serving God. They'd serve God—just not yet. "I'll serve You, God. I'll give you my whole life, just not yet. I need to get some other things in order first."

And before they knew it, they'd wasted sixteen years of precious time.

Oh yes, they had good reasons for their negligence—we can always find plenty of "valid" reasons for not doing what God wants us to do, can't we?

"It's too dangerous. The Samaritans are against us. Besides, we've got to live somewhere. We'll just get our houses fixed up first, and then we'll feel better about fixing up God's house. That makes sense, doesn't it?"

That's what the people said.

B. Here's what God said (3-4). "Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Remember the excuse the people gave? "The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built." In other words...

1. *The people didn't have time to do what God wanted.* But...

2. *They did have time to do what they wanted.* God challenged the people's pretext with this question, "You say it's not the right time to rebuild My house. What makes it the right time then for you to be living in your fancy houses?"

He refers to them as "paneled" houses. This indicates luxury, usually associated with royal dwellings (such as the palace built by Solomon in 1 Kings 7:3, 7). Haggai doesn't tell us what kind of paneling they used, but it's interesting that Zerubbabel purchased cedar wood from Lebanon to construct the temple (Ezra 3:7). Could it be that this wood was used to decorate the houses of the wealthy rather than build God's house?

There's nothing wrong with fixing up our houses. There is something wrong, however, when we put our own interests above the Lord's, when we pour our time, money, and energy into our agenda and neglect the Lord's agenda.

The founder of McDonald's, Ray Krock, was asked by a reporter what he believed in. "I believe in God, my family and McDonald's," he said. Then he added, "When I get to the office, I reverse the order."

What are the priorities that govern your life? Please realize, it's not what we *say* but what we *do* that reveals our priorities. In Haggai's day, the people didn't seem to have time to do what God wanted, but they made time to do what they wanted.

"I don't have time to be in God's Word every day." Do you have time to eat? If we can find time to feed our bodies, surely we can find time to feed our souls.

"I don't have time to come to the Wednesday evening Prayer Service." Do you have time to watch television, or read Facebook, or go to a ballgame?

You say, "What's wrong with watching TV, checking Facebook, or going to a ballgame?"

Nothing. But if we can carve out time for those kind of activities during the week, surely we can make some time for corporate prayer. Not to merit God's favor, but

because He has given it to us by His grace in Christ. That's why we devote time to His church, and prayer, and Bible study. We want to know and please the One who's been so good to us.

And when our priorities are not expressing that, says the Lord through Haggai, those priorities need to be confronted.

II. Wrong priorities need to be corrected (5-11).

Notice verse 5, "Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways." *Consider your ways*, as the KJV puts it. That's a key phrase for Haggai. It appears four times in his book (1:7; 2:15, 18).

If we're living with wrong priorities, what do we need to do to correct the problem? Here's where we must start. We need to *think*. We need to stop the treadmill, and start thinking about three things.

A. Think about what you've been doing (5-6). The Lord says, "You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

Most of us spend very little time *thinking* about our lives. We bounce from paycheck to paycheck. We try to keep our heads above water and just survive another week.

But according to Haggai, we ought to be asking ourselves, "Why is life so crazy in the first place?!"

Give careful thought to your ways, Haggai said. Think about what you've been doing, he told his people. You've been planting, eating, drinking, earning money, and what do you have to show for it?

Here's what they had. Their crops failed—"you've sown much, but bring in little." The bottom dropped out of their economy—"you eat and drink, but never have enough; you put on clothes, but aren't warm." Inflation spiraled out of sight because of the scarcity of goods—"you earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

It kind of reminds me of the bumper sticker, "My take home pay won't take me home."

And why were the Jews in this predicament? Because God was seeking to get their attention. The Lord is so good. He created us to live for His glory, and He knows we won't be content until we do just that. So He won't let us put Him on the backburner of our lives. Not only is He passionate about His glory, He loves us too much to let us keep coasting.

So He sends us wakeup calls. He sets off the alarm once in awhile. The bills start piling up. Or the income is there, but there's an emptiness in our soul.

1. *When you neglect God, you never have enough.* Have you noticed that? It's impossible to fail to give God His rightful place in our lives without experiencing the painful reality that something's missing.

On the other hand...

2. *When you put God first, you have all you need.* I didn't say all you *want*, for God is not a Genie in a bottle. But He is our Shepherd. As David confessed, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want (Ps 23:1)."

Dear friends, here's the first step for correcting wrong priorities. Think about what you've been doing. Take time for some soul-searching reflection.

One of my God-given tasks as a shepherd is to seek to restore wayward sheep. In part that involves contacting those from our church family who've become lax in their covenant responsibilities. "We've been missing you in church recently," I'll say.

It's not uncommon to hear a response like, "I guess I've just kind of gotten out of the habit. And honestly, I didn't realize it had been so long."

Correction starts here. By *thinking*. Think about what you've been doing.

B. Think about what God wants you to do (7-8). "This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁸ 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."

What did God want His people to do? The answer? Build His House!

"Why?" you ask. "Why was it so important for the temple to be rebuilt?"

On the one hand, the temple was just a building, and you can't contain the Omnipresent God in a man-made structure, as Stephen clarified years later in Acts 7.

But the temple was not *just* a building. It was the place God established for *sacrifice* and *prayer*. Without blood sacrifice, we can't be right with our holy Creator. We are under His just wrath until we utilize the means He has provided to cover our sins.

In the sixth century BC, that gracious provision was the temple. That's where you would go with your animal that would be slain and whose blood would provide a covering for your sins.

So do we need a temple today to experience God's gracious atonement? Praise God, the answer is, we don't need a building for our temple is a person. His name is Jesus Christ, and He said in John 2:19, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again." The temple of which Jesus spoke is His body, according to John 2:21.

Jesus is the full expression of God's glory. He is the fulfillment of the sacrificial system. He established a new covenant as Hebrews 9:28 says, "So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people."

So we go to the Living Temple, Christ Himself, and put our faith in Him and the sacrifice He made, and He covers our sins forever.

But the temple wasn't just a place of sacrifice. It was the place where God demonstrated His *glory*. In verse 8 Haggai speaks for God and says, "Build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored ["glorified" in the KJV]."

That's what was at stake in Haggai's day. *God's honor*. When God's house is neglected, people think poorly of Him.³ When the Jews were in captivity, the surrounding people could understand why the Lord's temple was in shambles. But sixteen years after returning home and settling into their paneled houses? Is that what your God means to you? Doesn't look like He's very important.

The people's mixed up priorities were costing God the honor due to Him.

So what priorities does God want us to have? We see two right here that should top the list...

1. *Priority #1: Obey God's will.* For Haggai's people that meant, go get lumber and start building. That was God's will. They knew it, but weren't doing it.

2. *Priority #2: Live for God's honor.* "Build my house...so I will be honored."

³ In the Old Testament, there was a close relationship between the glory of God and the temple of God, as in 1 Samuel 4:21, "And she named the child Ichabod, saying, 'The glory is departed from Israel, because the ark of God was taken.'"

Obedying God. And living for His honor. There's nothing more important.

So take inventory? Are you obeying Him and living for His honor? Is there anything God has made clear He wants you to do that you're not doing?

When our priorities are right, it will be our delight to obey God's will. And it will be our passion to live for God's honor.

Eg--

C. Think about what God is doing to get your attention (9-11). In the sixth century BC, here's what He did: "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."¹⁰ Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops.¹¹ 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 labor of your hands."

God can do—and does—some powerful things to get our attention. Simply put...

1. *He can make life hard.* He can send a famine, as He did in Haggai's day. He can also send a pink slip. Or a physical ailment. Or a relationship fallout.

You say, "Are you suggesting that if I'm having problems in my life, it's because my priorities are out of whack?"

No, I'm not. Jesus Himself suffered, and certainly His priorities were rightly ordered.

I am saying that if our priorities aren't what they should be, God can do lots of things to get our attention. And that includes hardship. So if that's what He is doing in our lives, we need to listen.

In Israel's case, He held back rain, and gave them poor crops and vineyards. Simply put, He made life hard for them.

Why? Because He's unkind? Can the One who gave His only Son be unkind? Never. When God makes life hard...

2. *He does so for His glory and our good.* God doesn't inflict needless pain on His children. But neither will He let us coast along and ignore Him, not if we're His. That wouldn't be in our best interest.

No good parent sees his child heading for disaster, and stands idly by. He takes action. And so does God. He always does what He does for His honor and our good.

Wrong priorities need to be confronted, then corrected.

III. Wrong priorities need to be changed (12-15).

And that's what began to happen in verse 12, "Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, 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."

A. Here's what change involves (12). It affects two things.

1. *It affects our actions.* We don't change merely by making vague, emotional commitments. We change by taking concrete, grace-enabled *action*. Like the Jews did. They "obeyed" the Lord. All of them did. From the governor to the high priest to the common people, they *obeyed* and started building.

Let's put this into perspective. When Solomon built the first temple four and a half centuries earlier, it took him seven years to do it—and he used heavy taxation and forced

labor to accomplish it. Haggai's proposal, in essence, was to rebuild the temple with what amounted to voluntary labor. And the people accepted the challenge.

So a priority change will affect our actions. We'll start doing things differently with our time and money. Instead of doing *this*, we'll do *that*.

Instead of my smart phone, I'll reach for my Bible first thing in the morning.

Instead of two hours with the video game, it's going to be one hour reading a Christ-honoring book, or doing something to serve my family, *then* playing the video game for an hour.

When our priorities change, so do our actions. If our actions remain the same, so too have our priorities.

But not *just* our actions...

2. *It affects our hearts.* The Jews not only *obeyed*, but they *feared*, says verse 12. The people feared the Lord. They revered Him. They respected Him. They recognized Him as the great and gracious God that He is.

So what brought about this change of priorities for the Jews, anyway? How does it happen in our lives? We find the answer in the final three verses of chapter one.

B. Here's what change requires (13-15). Two things...

1. *Haggai preached the Word.* Verse 13—"Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: 'I am with you,' declares the LORD."

So Haggai preached. That's what initiated the change. The Word of God is living and active, says Hebrews 4:12. If you want to help your kids adopt godly priorities, get them in the Word of God. And do the same for yourself.

It's time to get a Bible reading schedule, if you don't have one. If you've never read through the New Testament, then make that your priority in 2017. If it's the Old Testament, then that's your priority. In order for change to come, the Word must be received.

Haggai preached the Word. Then...

2. *The Lord convicted their hearts.* Verses 14-15—"So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, 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, ¹⁵on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius."

What produced the change? The ministry of God's Word and the conviction of God's Spirit. We preach the Word, but only God can stir the heart. And by His grace that's exactly what He has chosen to do when His Word is preached.

"So is my word that goes out from my mouth; it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isa 55:11)."

Now answer this. How long did it take for Haggai's people to get their priorities back in order? According to verse 1, Haggai first confronted them about their priorities on "the first day of the sixth month." Then verse 15 says they started building on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month. The change took place in just 23 days.

Just think. The people had been coasting along with mixed up priorities for a long time—about sixteen years. But it took only 23 days to get things straightened out once God's Word pricked their hearts.

This was not self-reformation. This was God-produced transformation.

Keep that in mind, parents, for we can't change our children's hearts. Husbands and wives, we can't change our spouse's hearts. But we can give them the Word, and pray, and know that the Lord alone can transform a heart. And when change is real, that's what will happen.

Maybe it's happening in your heart right now.

Make It Personal: Two things we all need to do as we enter 2017...

1. *Take time to think.* "Give careful thought to your ways," says the Lord to us this morning through Haggai His prophet.

In a Berlin art gallery there's a painting by German painter Adolf Menzel (1815-1905). It's only partially finished. Apparently, Menzel intended to show Fredrick the Great speaking with some of his generals, and so he painted the generals and the background and left king until last. Then he sketched the outline of Fredrick in charcoal. And then he died. He died prior to finishing the painting, leaving behind a picture full of other things, yet with a partially sketched king.

Sadly, that's what a lot of people do. They come to end of life without ever having put the King, Jesus Christ, into his proper place.⁴

So ask yourself a couple of questions.

⇒ Is the Lord first in my life? Is Jesus Christ truly my Savior and Lord? Am I trusting in Him, following Him, and living for His honor and glory? Am I sure?

Give careful thought, says Haggai.

⇒ Is the Lord's will more important than mine? Again, give careful thought. Think. Is the Lord's will truly more important than my own? Was it apparent in the decisions I made at work this past week? When I was with my friends? Have I been doing what the Lord wants me to do with my time, money, and energy?

If not, confess it to the Lord.

So as we begin 2017, take time to think. Then...

2. *Take steps to change.* Don't wait. In just three weeks, the Jews reordered their priorities. Granted, it would take them the next three and one-half years to finish the task of rebuilding the temple—which they dedicated on March 12, 516 B.C. But it all started the day they got their priorities back in line. It all started when they took concrete steps to change.

We must do the same.

⁴ Karl Laney, *Marching Orders*, p. 45.