

## **The Message of Haggai – projects, priorities & perspectives.**

### ***Haggai 1:1-12***

#### **Introduction**

You know the saying, ‘can’t see the wood for the trees’? Well I think that could well be true for the message of Haggai. Here is a prophet who has a very specific message to bring at a specific time, to a specific group of people, facing a specific task. And if we focus in just on that one thing, the specific tree if you like, then we’re in danger of not being able to see the wood, or in fact the forest that surrounds it.

As a recap, it’s a little over a year ago since we last looked at Haggai. In October 2008 here during a series on money matters, and also at the church weekend away last November if you came to that, you might remember Andy Twilley preaching from Haggai on the use of gifts.

It’s not a very long book. If you’re familiar with the book, or if you’ve followed along in the Bible this morning you’ll realise that there are only two chapters. I wondered whether God had something new to say to us.

The prophet Haggai (one of the shortest books in the OT and probably not one that has had a great deal of your attention) is speaking to a group of Jews in the second half of the sixth century before Christ. (So around 520 BC). These Jews have been in exile in Babylon, away from their home land and religion. Solomon’s temple has been long destroyed, but then Cyrus King of Persia who conquers Babylon allows around 50000 of them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. The foundations are finished after two years amid great rejoicing. This unnerves their neighbours, including the Samaritans, who manage to kick up enough fuss to get the work stopped. And it’s not until King Darius comes to the Persian throne that work starts again. That’s where we meet the story this morning.

Unfortunately the Jews are dragging their feet when it comes to the temple rebuilding, and so the message that Haggai brings to the people in this prophetic oracle is that God is pretty unhappy with their behaviour. Why? Because they’re looking after their own interests rather than thinking about God’s house.

The people are reportedly saying, ‘The time has not yet come for the Lord’s house to be built’ In other words, we’re not going to give God the priority.

God says in response through his prophet ‘Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin? Give careful thought to your ways.’

And so here’s the focus on the specific tree, rather than looking at the wood. It’s temple rebuilding.

To change the analogy for a moment, imagine we're digging down through Haggai's message. Here we are at the surface level, the top level. And so here's the first layer- the surface level. On the surface this is all about rebuilding the Temple – a project.

So for those of you who are project managers. Listen up. You might get some useful tips for work tomorrow!

### Project.

When you take on a project it helps to have specific information.

This is a book of detail. In contrast to much prophetic writing, we hear exactly when the prophecies come, the exact dates. In the second year of the reign of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month.

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month.

The message is 'get on with the temple building.'

That could be a useful message for us here at Wade Street. For those of you who are members or regular attenders you'll know that one of the things we're considering at the moment is refurbishment of the sanctuary – this room where we worship.

Perhaps the message of Haggai for us today is to 'go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I [God] may take pleasure in it and be honoured.

### Priority

But what if we weren't considering some kind of refurbishment project? Would God's word still have something to say?

'Consider the subject matter so that we look not so much at it as at the word of God' – Martin Luther

If we dig down below the surface, then the next level of Haggai's message is one of priorities.

Forget for a minute that this is anything to do with temples or building projects or Jews or prophets or the sixth century BC and listen to this....

"Take a good hard look at your life. Think it over. You have spent a lot of money, but you haven't much to show for it. You keep filling your plates but you never get filled up. You keep drinking and drinking and drinking, but you're always thirsty. You put on layer after layer of clothes, but you can't get warm....

Take a good hard look at your life. Think it over"

That's how Eugene Peterson paraphrases Haggai's prophecy in 'the Message'

What were the people's priorities? What are our priorities?

When we looked at the whole question of money and good stewardship last year there seemed to be a strong message to us to be careful with our priorities. Nothing has happened to change my mind in the last year, to make me think that God has stopped requiring us to be careful with all that he has given us.

If you can remember back to the money matters booklet (perhaps you've still got it gathering dust on a shelf somewhere) there was a quote saying 'money tends to leak, largely as a result of successful marketing, which creates desires we never thought we had and attracts us with products which promise to satisfy those newly created desires.'

It goes on to say that 'Planning your spending is the only way you can make sure that you are controlling your money and exercising choice about how it is used.'

The people God is addressing through Haggai the prophet seem to be a good example of poor or virtually non-existent stewardship. There doesn't seem to have been any planning, and so money was just frittered away and so there was never enough.

Perhaps you've seen the TV programme 'spendaholics'. Where young people who find themselves in debt are challenged to set a budget, stick to it and work their way out of the debt. They are always amazed to find that they've been spending so much money each week, often on things they don't need, simply because they haven't set a budget.

Now, sitting down and budgeting, going through all your finances, filling in a spread sheet, listing all your incomings and out goings is not most people's idea of a fun night in.

Many of us are reluctant to commit our finances to such scrutiny. We prefer to get by. We think it's going to be too difficult a task, or too boring, or we're too afraid of revealing the true picture of our finances.

Perhaps we see budgeting and financial planning as something we do only when money is in short supply and actually we think we've made it when we don't need to keep a tight rein on it anymore.

But if it helps you get a grip of your finances which in turn helps you to stop wasting money, which in turn helps you to be an active steward of God's provision then it hasn't been a wasted night. In fact it will have been a most productive night.

Most of that, if not all of it, sounds pretty spot on for the lifestyle the majority of us experience in twenty-first century Britain. We have all this 'stuff' but somehow we're never satisfied.

Verse six sums it up beautifully – you earn wages only to put them in a purse with holes in it. Picture the money just running straight out.

Give careful thought to your ways – says 4 times in 2 chapters. Repetition – way of drawing our attention to it. If you hear something enough times it usually sinks in. What are our priorities. Are they in line with God's?

### Perspective

I believe we can dig down a third time and find another layer of Haggai's message. And this time it's one of perspective. Project, priority, perspective. Such a relief when they all start with the same letter!!

It can't all be about temple building and stewardship, can it? Because there are other parts of the Bible, indeed there are other prophets who make it quite clear that God doesn't just want his house to be beautiful. If that's all it's about then Haggai doesn't sit very comfortably within the canon of scripture.

Imagine you're just back from exile. One of the advance party allowed back to start work on the temple. Imagine the euphoria of returning to the homeland. Imagine the devastation of seeing the temple ruins. Imagine the excitement of the work starting. Imagine the disappointment of it grinding to a halt. Imagine the hope as this Haggai chap comes along and it starts up again. Up, down, up, down. Good times and bad times. Isn't that how life is for all of us? Sometimes we're on a high and everything's going great. Other times life is rubbish, and it's just one thing after another.

Haggai's message is one of seeking perspective.

I remember as a child being fascinated with the idea of the horizon. I think it came from growing up by the sea, and seeing ships appear on the horizon, or even more fascinatingly disappear over the horizon. It didn't matter how many times people tried to explain to me that it was all to do with the curvature of the earth, I wanted to know how far away the horizon was. I wasn't even convinced when I was taken up a hill to be shown that you could see further out to sea the higher up you were. I was a stubborn child!!

Of course now I know that the horizon isn't a fixed point, but something that is dependent on my perspective.

If we live as those returned exiles our perspective is limited.

If we live as God's people standing on a hill, looking out then we can see past the ups and downs. We can see .

The desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord Almighty.

From this day on I will bless you.

When Haggai 'the messenger of the Lord' (1:13), calls for temple rebuilding, it is therefore an announcement that the Lord of Hosts yearns to give himself again. This is what the book of Haggai is about – God's yearning to enter into covenant fellowship with his Chosen People once more. Their years of abandonment under God's judgement are over. They should prepare themselves for the Lord's return: 'Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may appear in my glory. (1:8)

**Housegroup Notes**  
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Introduction

The prophet Haggai is speaking to a group of Jews in the second half of the sixth century before Christ. These Jews have been in exile in Babylon, away from their home land and religion. Solomon's temple has been long destroyed, but then Cyrus King of Persia who conquers Babylon allows around 50000 of them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. The foundations are finished after two years amid great rejoicing. This unnerves their neighbours, including the Samaritans, who manage to kick up enough fuss to get the work stopped. And it's not until King Darius comes to the Persian throne that work starts again.

We can look at the message of Haggai on three different levels:

Project

Through Haggai, God speaks a specific message about rebuilding his temple at a certain time in the history of his people.

Priorities

Haggai reminds the people that God requires them to 'give careful thought to your ways'

Perspective

The returning exiles have a localised perspective. God provides an eternal one.

**For Discussion.**

1. Do you think God is speaking to us about a specific project through the prophet Haggai? Why/why not?

If yes, what might He be saying? If no, what is God's message for us?

2. How do you 'give careful thought to your ways'?
3. Does exercising 'active stewardship' mean that we will always have sufficient money? What about Christians who live in poverty?
4. There is no mention in Haggai of social action. What should the balance be with regard to spending on places of worship and social action projects?

As a church are we achieving that balance? What needs to change?

5. Can you think of times when God's perspective, rather than your own immediate one has helped you?

What would you say to those who are enduring difficult circumstances at present?