

Withheld Blessings

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Dated: 03.11.2019

Scripture: Haggai 1: 1-15

In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'This people says, "The time has not come, even the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt." "Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?" Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, "Consider your ways! You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who eams, earns wages to put into a purse with holes."

Thus, says the Lord of hosts, "Consider your ways! Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified," says the Lord. "You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?" declares the Lord of hosts, "Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house. Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew and the earth has withheld its produce. I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands."

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him. And the people showed reverence for the Lord. then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke by the commission of the Lord to the people saying, " 'I am with you,' declares the Lord." So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of Darius the king.

Haggai is one of those Old Testament books that is over by the time you really get into it. Just two chapters! But it is still full of meaning. If we take a moment to try and mine it for what it can give because it is part of the word of God and every word that is here is useful for us to draw us closer to God, to help us understand His word, to follow after Him as His disciple.

So, as we look at this first chapter, there are 4 or 5 themes that come up for our perusal.

1. The remnant must reorder its priorities and complete the temple before it can expect the blessing of God upon their efforts.

The remnant – those who have come back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Now, if you know a little bit of the history around this time, circa 700-500 B.C., you'll know that this was the time when the united kingdom of Israel was separated into two: Israel to the north with ten tribes, and Judah to the south with two tribes. Both Israel and Judah didn't follow the Lord; they worshipped idols, and God was so displeased with them. Time and again, we see how God keeps calling them back to Himself. And they didn't.

They would come briefly and then turn away again. God then allowed the Assyrians to take the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity and they were taken to Samaria. The southern kingdom of Judah also went into captivity about 150 years later. This time it was the Babylonians who took them to Babylon.

Things moved on and then Persia began to rise as a prominent nation around that time. King Darius then told the remnant of the Jews who were still there that they could go back to build their temple. So, they returned to Jerusalem. There they found that it was a little more difficult to do things like building than it was before. Why? The land had been ravaged, the temple had been destroyed, everything was rubble. It was so difficult to even plant things as the soil had been hardened. They put themselves towards building the temple for about 2 years, and then they left it, saying, "This is too difficult. Let's just concentrate on living." So, they began to build their homes, lived in the land, looking out for themselves. And they did very well. How do we know that? Scholars tell us that these paneled homes that is mentioned here in the Bible were only available for those who were wealthy.

So, the remnant has come back to Jerusalem and they have forgotten why they have returned. What was their priority? It was to build the temple. But they had forgotten it and decided to concentrate on themselves.

2. Because of spiritual indifference, the people fail to respond to God's attempts to get their attention.

Any time we de-focus on what God wants us to do and focus on what we want to do, we lose some amount of our spiritual walk with the Lord. Somehow we are getting on a slippery slope on which we will go further and further away from God. And that was what was happening. As they began to concentrate on themselves, they were becoming more and more spiritually empty. In this spiritual state, they were unable to understand that God was actually trying to get their attention. This is because when you disconnect from God, no longer is His will predominant in your life. that's what happened to them.

3. In their despondency, they don't realize that their hardships are divinely-given symptoms of their spiritual disease.

In their spiritually-impooverished state, they are unable to see that, what is happening to them is actually symptoms of their impoverished state. Nor do they realize that it is God's hand, that God is allowing these things because they have gone away from Him. What is God allowing? In vs. 6 He says, "You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes."

Vs. 9: "You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?" declares the Lord of hosts, "Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house." Then He says, "I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands." Everything that is happening to them is a result of where they have gone; they have walked away from the Lord and in this state, they are prone to all of these things that God is allowing, trying to get their attention and focus once again on what He has called them to do.

4. Haggai brings them to an understanding that circumstances become difficult when people put their own selfish interests above God's.

As they turn away from what God was wanting them to do to what they wanted to do and put their own selfish interests above God's, then their situations and circumstances became very difficult.

5. When they put God first, and sought to do His will, He brought back His people with joy and well-being.

We read later on, they did indeed go back to the Lord and God restored to them all the things that were missing.

If those are themes in this small book of Haggai, especially in the first chapter, spilling over into the second as well, then what can we glean from it? Sometimes we leave the Old Testament aside saying that it has nothing to do with us. But it is so full of meaning. I put together some things that we ought to be thinking about ourselves as we look at this particular passage.

Remember that the children of Israel were sent into exile because they had forsaken God. Then because of their cries, God brought them back. Remember that they were sitting in Babylon singing, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" They are filled with remorse; they knew they had done wrong. God brings them back to Jerusalem with this express purpose.

- Here's the question for each one of us: Do we find ourselves in places of exile that we have been led to because of sin in our lives, because we have forsaken God, because we don't do the things that He wants us to do? Are we in that place of exile? Have we been in that place of exile? If we are honest with ourselves, we know that we have. It's quite possible that there are some here who are still in that place.

What happens in those places of exile? We are sad, lonely. One of the worst places to be is to find yourself enveloped in gloom, to realize that you have no joy in your life. You just go through the motions, do what you need to do, but joy has long gone. There's just a sense of prevailing sadness and gloom that has settled.

- Or you could be in a place of bitterness. Something has happened to you – maybe God didn't come through in the way that you thought He would. So, you are in this place of bitterness. Or maybe you are enslaved, or impoverished. And you can be in all of these places when you are not doing the one thing that God has asked you to do. The result of not doing what God has asked you to do is actually saying that the flesh, that my will is more important than God's.

So, I want to throw this out to you, church! Are you fulfilling that thing that God has placed on your heart? That purpose, that plan, that He has said very specifically: "This is what I want you to do." Is His will pre-eminent in your life today? Or are you following after something that is yours, that is fleshly, that hasn't come from the Lord.

Then the question that will arise if we are in that position is: What will happen? If we look at Scripture – the blessings of God disappear. When was the last time you told somebody: "I'm just enjoying the blessings of God in my life."? Yesterday, last week, last month, last year? Has it been a few years? Are you looking at your life and wondering what happened to the blessing? Because if you have tasted of the Lord, you know how beautiful it is. So, when it is not there also, you recognize that you are in a dry and arid place. So, in this place where we have gone after our own flesh, God's blessing disappears.

- How do you recognize, very specifically, that you're in this place? The answer is: you work hard, you do everything that is necessary, but it's to no avail. Like the Bible says: *You earn wages to put into a purse that has holes in it.* So descriptive! You work hard, you get paid for it. But at the end of the month, it's not there. It's like it's been siphoned out. That could be the same for, not just monetarily, but whatever it is that you're doing. You're working hard at the different things that you are doing. The question that you need to ask yourself is: Am I putting my effort in the right place, in the thing that God has placed upon my heart? Is this what I need to be doing? Has God placed upon you some plan/vision that He says, "Only you can do it!"? Is that plan/purpose/vision lying broken all around you while you are pursuing something that is not from God.

What is the antidote for this situation? How do I come out of this situation?

At the end of this chapter, we see that they began to reverence God again, to worship Him again. It says in vs.14: *As they worshipped Him and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God. God came and stirred them up as they began to worship Him.*

Worship always is the connect to God. 'Worship' comes from the old English word worth ship – to ascribe worth to somebody. When we ascribe worth to God, then we are placing Him on the highest place in our lives. When we do that and God is honored, then He comes and stirs up within us a desire to get back into those things that He has placed upon our hearts to pursue. And in this particular instance, it inspired them to start building the temple again.

This leads me to two final thoughts:

1. Look at your life, the place that you're in, and ask the question: Why has God placed me right there, where you are geographically, where you are in a company or an institute, or a school/college? Why are you there? What is God's plan for you in that particular place?

Remember the book of Esther. The Jews were about to be annihilated. Mordechai goes up to Esther and says to her: "Who knows that you haven't attained royalty for such a time as this?" Who knows that you haven't attained the places that you are in, beloved, for such a time as this?

In the first service I read from Philippians, where Paul says: God wants us to be shining lights amongst an evil and perverse generation. He wants us to shine like lights. In the place that you're in, what has God placed upon your heart, that maybe you are not pursuing? You're doing all that you need to do, but you're not really doing what God wants you to do.

So, what of the Lord's work is left undone? Maybe, like the children of Israel who gave the excuse for pursuing their own things – vs.2: They said, "The time has not come, even the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt." That's how they justified going after their own interests.

Are you giving an excuse yourself? Are the things of the Lord lying around you as rubble? Has it been a while since God has very clearly said, "This is what you need to be doing"?

2. Do you need to come back to the heart of worship? Because it is in the context of worship that stirs us and gives us the imagination, the passion to do and fulfill His work.

Church, let me ask you a question. I understand that worship constitutes connection with God, ascribing worth to Him, praying and so on, especially in the songs that we sing. But, for how many of us, is worship restricted to half an hour on Sunday? How many of us worship during the week – sing to Him, give Him worth, use the psalms and say, Lord Almighty, You are wonderful, You are the Creator of heaven? Do you ascribe that worth to Him? Or is worship restricted to Sunday?

If it is, beloved, we ought to do something. It cannot be that we worship Him once a week and then use Him as a genie when we say, “Lord I need this desperately.” There are many ways we can do it. Maybe we say, “If I start singing, God may turn away.” God won’t. the joyful noise that He talks about includes you. That’s how He sees each of us as we raise our praises. Even if you can’t, put on music and sing along. There is so much of music out there on the internet. Get worship songs and worship along. It is in the context of worship when we give Him awe and reverence, that His will becomes so dear, and there’s a yearning within us. He inspires us to accomplish those things He has placed upon our hearts.

My prayer is that it will not be said of us that we left the work half done, that we pursued our own dreams. We wanted things for ourselves and we forgot things of God. Let’s examine our hearts and our lives this morning and ask the question: what is that plan and purpose? Maybe you haven’t even thought of that. Lord, reveal it to me. Maybe He has revealed it to you and it’s a long time since you thought about it. So, say, “Lord, would You once again restore to me that dream/plan/vision?” Then if there is some impediment, something that is stopping you, then take it to the Lord and say, “Lord, would You break that wall that is preventing me from following after you

Again, I love it when we come to this place and the next thing we do is to partake of the Lord’s supper, to be reminding that God is proactive with us. At the end of this, in vs.13, God says, “I am with you.” So, as we come to the table, as we pause for a few minutes, ask God’s Spirit to come into our hearts in a fresh way and speak to us. Let’s listen and say, “Lord, I’m open to You. Lord, You show me. My will, in terms of obedience, is aligned with You. Now, show me specifically, what is my path as I leave this place this morning.”