

How to Rebuild the LORD's House

Haggai 1:1-15 (NIV)

¹ 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 Jozadak, the high priest: ² This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house.' " ³ 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?" ⁵ Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁶ You have planted much, but 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." ⁷ 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 my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. ⁹ "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 your 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 olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands." ¹² 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. ¹³ Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD. ¹⁴ 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, ¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.

I know some of you know this, but I don't think everyone does. The Bible readings for each Sunday are prechosen according to the days of the church year. Every third year on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, the Old Testament reading comes from the book Haggai. Last Sunday, when I started delving into these verses and the historical context of that book, I had to sit back and marvel at God's timing. What his prophet said almost exactly 2536 years ago is a message that I don't think could be more applicable for us today.

In 586 B.C., the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, leveled the Temple, and exiled the Jews to Babylon. We know that the LORD did this because of the Jew's refusal to repent and turn from their sinful ways. Yet, God had promises to keep in Jerusalem. He had already promised to bring the Jews back to that city. In 538 B.C., the first edict came from Cyrus - the king who conquered Babylon - sending the Jews back to Jerusalem to resettle the area and to rebuild the Temple. About 50,000 Jews returned. They immediately went to work clearing the rubble of the old Temple and laid the foundation for a new house of the LORD. Joshua, the high priest, began making the daily sacrifices again. The people worshiped the LORD! But just as quickly as the work started, it stopped.

Enter the prophet Haggai. It had been about 18 years since the new foundation of the Temple had been laid. The word of the LORD came to Haggai: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house.' " (verse 2) Why did the work ever stop? You get the impression from verse 6 that maybe it stopped because the people were poor. God said, "You have planted much, but 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." However, when you read the parallel account from the book of Ezra, you learn that King Cyrus had given money from the royal treasury for this building project. On top of that, families of the returned remnant gave 1,100 pounds of gold in addition to a bunch of silver. Do you know what 1,100 pounds of gold goes for today? It's over \$21,000,000!

Another thing you learn from reading Ezra is that Israel's neighbors came to help with the project. The Bible gives us the insight that these are not just helpful neighbors, but actually enemies of the Jews. The Jews politely turned them down saying that this task was given specifically to them, commanded not only by King Cyrus, but also by the LORD. The enemies of the Jews then showed their true colors and used legal litigation to have King Cyrus's successor order a stop to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and of the Temple.

Now, that sounds like a pretty good excuse for the Jews to stop building - ordered by the government to cease and desist. However, this was the same government who ordered them to go back and build it. The Jews, under their governor Zerubbabel, filed an appeal, the cease and desist order was lifted, and even more funds were given for this project. Yet, here they are, 18 years into the project, and the people are saying, "The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house." (verse 2)

These excuses sound good, but the LORD casts them aside. The word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” (verses 3-4) Instead of rebuilding the LORD’s house, the Jews had taken the money and materials and built up nice houses for themselves while neglecting the rebuilding of the Temple. God calls them out on their mixed up priorities with his rhetorical question and says, “Give careful thought to your ways.” (verse 5)

Here we are 2536 years to the month when Haggai preached this message. Now, our house of the LORD was not damaged by foreign invaders, but by wind. Is it time for us to rebuild the house of the LORD? I don’t think there is a single person here today who would say, “No, leave it in ruins. It looks better this way.” It obviously needs to be done. We want it done now. But as we go about rebuilding the house of the LORD, we too need to give careful thought to our ways. Do we just put it back the way it was? Do we do something different? What else in the LORD’s house needs attention?

Some of you may remember that back in December of 2014, we took a survey to learn about people’s hopes and dreams for our congregation. Already then people were saying that they would like to do something different to the front of the building, to make this house of the LORD look more like a church and less like a former Lindquist Mortuary. Last fall when our Property Improvement Committee was formed, they put it on the project list, but, honestly, it was put low on the priority list because we had no solid idea of what to actually do to the front. Then May 1st happened, and we lost about a half of our front roof overhang. The Property Improvement Committee’s priorities changed. Ideas changed as we went about answering the question, “What should we do?”

Through Haggai, the LORD Almighty said: “Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD. (verses 7-8) Think about what you and I are here to do. God has placed us here right now in 2016 to rebuild the LORD’s house. Our first and overriding thought in this discussion, in all of our planning, in all of our actions, is to ask, “How will the LORD take pleasure in what we do with his house? How will the LORD be honored by what we do with his house? How can I show that the LORD my God is my number one priority in life?” This is an opportunity to show the people of our community what we think of our God, where our priorities are. How will our building help in proclaiming God’s message? What will that even look like? Maybe that means putting the front of the church back to the way it was. Maybe that means designing something new in the front of our church. This is for us to decide as Christians who want to show the LORD that he is our number one priority in life. We as a congregation have yet to decide how to best do that.

For Haggai the prophet, Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the high priest, and the whole remnant who returned to Jerusalem, the answer was clear. They were moved to finally take up the construction project again and rebuild the House of the LORD the best they could. No more excuses, no more delays. God was right. Our priorities were messed up. It was time to rebuild his house. They “came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month” – a mere 24 days after hearing the LORD’s message through Haggai. (verses 14-15)

As we give careful thought to our ways as to how our rebuilding of the LORD’s house will allow him to take pleasure in it and how it will honor him, how we can best proclaim him to our community and show everyone in this valley that the LORD is our number one priority, we have the same promise from the LORD that was given to the Jews as they did the same. “I am with you,” declares the LORD. (verse 13)

“I am with you.” God says this 16 times in the Old Testament, often preceded by the words, “Do not be afraid.” God prophesied through Isaiah that the deliverer born of a virgin would be called Immanuel, which means “God is with us” - a promise passed on to Zerubbabel, the governor at this time. When the LORD says “I am with you,” it’s more than just giving the comfort that you aren’t alone, more than having God as a companion for us through the journey of life. When God says, “I am with you,” he is promising what he has always promised that “I will deliver you. I will save you.”

When it came to us, the LORD said that he would spare no expense to save us. So he gave his one and only Son. He came down to earth. He spent his whole life working for us, not himself. He died on the cross for us, not for himself, not so that he could be glorified. He spent all of that on us so that we would have the glorious riches of his everlasting house in heaven. You and I, we are the LORD’s number one priority. He shows that through that promise of being with us always to the very end of the age, by all that he did to save us.

We are about to rebuild the LORD’s house. As we plan to rebuild and carry out the work, we will give careful thought to our ways, remembering that LORD made us his number one priority by living for us, dying for us, and building for us an eternal home in heaven. And so we ask, “How can the LORD take pleasure in this house as we rebuild it and how can he be honored by it?” God bless our conversations about rebuilding his house, and God guide us in how to do this best. He is with us. Amen.