



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Haggai 1:1-14

“Haggai – Consider Your Ways”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] We thank Thee for the privilege, Lord, of the study of Thy Word again, and we pray that as we consider again one of the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament that Thou will give us understanding. Enable us, Lord, to not only understand that which the prophet writes, but also enable us to make the application that should be made to our own day, and our own experiences. We thank Thee for the faithful men through whom Thou hast given us Thy Word. And we thank Thee for the living quality of it, and the fact that though many hundreds of years have passed, those words still speak with mighty power from the spirit to us today. So Lord give, us understanding and may Thy blessing be upon us throughout this hour, and in the hour that follows in the institute. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] Tonight we are beginning a series of four studies in the book of Haggai. And so I am asking you if you will to turn to that small prophecy from the Old Testament. The subject for tonight is “Consider Your Ways, or Procrastination and Priorities.” The world usually sits up and takes notice when a man comes along, who is able to challenge a nation to break with the bad habits of the past, and to get up and build a great temple for the worship of God, especially if he is an old man, and Haggai evidently was an old

man, if we may judge from chapter 2 in verse 3. And he was a man, who was about to stir Israel so that they made pecuniary sacrifices, and postponed private interests and put the public interests first in their lives.

The man and his times are described in Ezra chapter 5, verse 1 thorough chapter 6, and verse 14. So if you have some time, I suggest hat you read these chapters in the book of Ezra, in order to gain the knowledge of the historical background that will enable you to understand this prophecy better. It was in 586 B.C. that Jerusalem was captured by Nebankanezer, and the city and the temple were destroyed. Fifty years later, Cyrus, the king of Persia, granted the rebuilding of the temple of Jerusalem with the spending of the empire’s money, and so in 536 B.C. there was a return under Zerubbabel, who was the governor, the son of Shealtiel referred to in the first verse of the prophecy of Haggai.

This return under Zerubbabel resulted in an eager turning to the building of the temple, that Cyrus had not only permitted, but which he determined to pay for out of the monies of Babylonia, but that eagerness cooled to hostility, when the Samaritans, and others began to oppose the work and possibly a turn to hostility as a result of the labor that was involved. And I said, Babylon, I meant Persia. So they built their own houses instead, and then in 522 B.C. Darius the Great gained power after the suicide of Cambyses. And two years later after Darius the Great, the great king of Persia come to the throne, Haggai had Zechariah urged the people to rebuild.

The history of Israel may be divided into several eras depending upon whether we think of the exile or whether we think of the world empires that had authority over that eastern world. If we think of the exile, we remember that there was a pre exilic history of Israel, and exilic history of Israel and a post-exilic history of Israel, and in the book of Haggai we are dealing with the post exilic history of the nation.

If we think of the world empires, we can think of the world empires, we can think of the Assyrian empire, of the Babylonian empire, and of the Persian, and we are dealing again with the latter in that case. We know practically nothing about the prophet who

wrote this little book of Haggai. Some of the ancient interpreters have suggested in the light of the statement in verse 13, then Haggai the messenger of the Lord that he was an angel in human shape and that is because the term messenger is the same as the word angel in the Hebrew text. *Mal'ak* means angel, and it also means messenger, but of course that is very, very unlikely. One thing we do know about this prophet if as Jouet said, “Preaching is preaching for a verdict.” This man was a great preacher, for he not only preached for a verdict, but he obtained that for which he was preaching. The children of Israel were stirred by the Spirit of the Lord, and the result was that they came and worked on the temple, and constructed that temple that God and the prophet were concerned about.

If we were to ask what is that purpose of the writing of this brief prophecy of two chapters, we could put it in two words. In the first chapter it is the purpose of correction. And then in the second chapter in which we have three messages of the prophet it is predictive. And three prophetic messages, or messages that relate to prophecy are given by the prophet.

Now, all students of Haggai have noticed that the key word is the expression “consider”. Notice chapter 1 in verse 5. “Consider your ways.” And then in verse 7 “Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways.” And then in chapter 2, and verse 15, “But now do consider from this day onward.” And finally in verse 18 where we have the word twice, “Do consider from this day onward, from the twenty fourth day of the ninth month, from the day when the temple of the Lord was founded, consider.”

That expression “consider your ways,” means to set your heart upon your ways. So it is a word that expresses a very close consideration of the ways of an individual in the light of the word of God. Well, let's turn now to the rebuke of procrastination which we have in the first four verses, and will you listen as we read the first four verses of this prophecy.

“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 Josedech, the high priest, saying, Thus says the LORD of hosts, saying, This people says, The time is not come, even the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt. Then came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it time for you, yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies desolate?”

The time is September the 1st, 520 B.C. in the reign of Darius. Darius began his reign in about 521 B.C. and he reigned until 486 B.C. Darius Hystaspes, is Darius the great. Now, I remember when I was studying Herataus [ph9:18], in ancient Greek, Darius was the great king whom the Greeks repulsed at the battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. He was a great king, and he is the one who is referred to in the first verse of this chapter. Remember that when the children of Israel came back to the land of Judah, when the return came under Zerubbabel and Joshua, they began to build, and then were interrupted, and word was sent back to Darius, and Darius had the records sought for the permission that Cyrus had give for the rebuilding, and he found it and he not only sent word back that they were to allow the children of Israel to rebuild the temple, but also the expenses were to be born by the kingdom of Darius the great.

Haggai says that the time is the first day of the month. That would be September the 1st 520 B.C. It was the custom for pilgrimages to be made to the sanctuary on the Sabbath days, and on the days of the new moons, and since this was the first day of the month it would be one of the new moons. And so Haggai would have had a large audience when he gave this first message, so it was very propitious that he spoke at this time. The text says that in verse 2, “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.”

Now, notice here, in the opening words that the prophet gives that we have no record that there is any question what so ever of the necessity of the rebuilding of the

house. Those who had come back under Zerubbabel and Joshua to the land of Judah didn't have any question, but that the reason they came back was to build the temple. So there was no argument over the necessity of building the temple, nor so far as we can tell is there any argument over the intention of these who have returned to rebuilding that temple. He didn't have to say to them, “Now, it's necessary to build the temple.” Nor did he have to say to them, “Remember we have come back to build the temple, and so you must remember that the intention is to do that. They all know that. And they all accept that. That's evident. But its obvious that delinquency that has resulted in the building of the temple, is just plain refusal to do their duty, which they new that that should do, and which they had intended to do when they came back. I think that when the prophet says, giving the word of the Lord, “this people says” that there is an indication of impatience on the part of God in referring to the people as this people. “This people says, the time is not come.”

Now, I wonder what they were saying. Were they saying something like this, “We do intend to rebuild the temple. After all that's why came back. And we do have to build it, but the psychological moment has not come for us to do the work of the Lord, because after all we have having opposition, and furthermore, we have to build our own houses don't we?” And evidentially it was just plain procrastination for a duty that they had from the Lord. There is a saying. “I wondered why somebody didn't do something. And then I realized that I was that somebody.” And these have not yet come to realize evidentially that the time to rebuild is now, and in spite of the opposition they are to do God's will.

Now, that has a great deal of personal application doesn't it? How many times can we think of excuses why we should not do something that the word of God sets forth as our plain duty? We can rationalize. We can say we intend to do it. We know we have to do it, but it's just not the right time to do it.

Now, then the content of this complaint is given in verses 3 and 4, “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?” So they were engaged in hypocrisy in order to cover their inequity.

There was an ancient interpreter of the word of God who lived in the day of Henry the VIII, and in speaking about Haggai in his lectures on Haggai, he made a rather interesting parallel between the children of Israel who came back to Judah and the recovery of the truth under King Henry the VIII in the Reformation of England. And he made the comment that there was a likeness, and that when those captives came back into the land of Judah, they came back freed from the captivity in Babylon, from the bondage there, and that just as they came back. And it was their duty to put first things first, and rebuild the temple of the Lord, so he said, “We in Britain who have just been recovered from the captivity of the Roman church through the Reformation here, ought to devote ourselves to the building up of the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

Well, he was applying the word to his day, but I think that there is a sense in which we should apply the word to your day too. We too have been delivered from captivity, and every one of us who had been brought to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus as personal Saviour has come out of a captivity that was even greater than that Babylonian captivity. We have come out of a lost state, and the time to do the will of God is always now.

He went on to speak about Adam and his nakedness in the Garden of Eden, and how he had made excuses after he had sinned. He said, when Adam after he had broken the commandment of the Lord heard the voice of God in the garden, he hid himself, and feared. And you remember when the Lord spoke with Adam, he said, the reason that he feared was that he was naked, but the cause was not really his nakedness. The cause was his wickedness in that he had eaten of the forbidden fruit. And he made also an

application that the cause of our delay in doing the will of God is not some incidental reason, but really is ultimately the wickedness of the human heart.

So Haggai giving the words of the Lord exhorts Judah and these captives and tells them that you are saying it's not the time to rebuild the temple of the Lord, but what are you doing? In the meantime, you have spent sixteen years back in the land building your expensive paneled houses. The Hebrew expression here refers to expensive wainscoting, paneling, the kind of thing that would be done in a very luxurious style of home in that day. So it's time for you to build your paneled houses, while the house of the Lord lies desolate. Then in verses 5 through 11, he speaks of the results of procrastination. It has been said that procrastination is the thief of time.

Now, I know because procrastination is one of my favorite sins, and one of those to which I most easily yield. Who was it that said that he could withstand everything but temptation? And I think I can withstand everything but the temptation to procrastination.

Now, procrastination is more than a thief of time. It is a thief of divine blessing. Notice what follows in verses 5 through 11,

“Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: “Consider your ways! (Set your heart upon your ways. Take a good look at your circumstances, and look at your actions.) 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; (Now, that sounds as if it was really the Lord's will that they become drunk. I don't think that that is what is meant.) You put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns wages, 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 take pleased with it and be glorified, says the LORD. You look for much, but behold it comes to little; and when you brought it home, I blow it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because 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 withholds its produce. And 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.”

The prophet first speaks of the human loss in verses 5 and 6, and as a result of their failure to put first things first, they have sown a whole lot, but they’ve harvested very little. That’s almost relevant to today. Isn’t it? You eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied. You drink, there is not enough to be satisfied in your drinking. You put on clothing, no one is warm, and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes. Inflation too.

Now, you can see that these people were suffering, and the prophet attributes this directly to the Lord. There are those who say that God is not really interested in such things as that, and that God’s activities do not really touch providentially the affairs of the life of a nation or the affairs of the life of a Christian man or a woman. It’s evident the prophets of the Old Testament did not believe that. They believed that the things that happened to them were given to them by a God who controlled the elements, and being a God who controlled the elements he was able to discipline them through the elements. And I am sure that if you read the word of God, you believe that too. The experiences of your own life are experiences, which a providential God brings to you.

Now, not of our experiences, which are, bad are designed to discipline us for evil that we may have committed. Some of them are designed to educate us to deepen us in our spiritual life. No one can speak for someone else. I could not possibly say that God sent you some difficult trial or testing because you have sinned. Nor could you say that of me. Those testings come frequently to deepen our spiritual life. To depend our relationship to the Lord, to cause us to get down upon our knees and pray more fervently, to cause us to run to the word of God and search the Scriptures for the comfort of the promises, and to prepare us for the life beyond this life, because this life is just a

kind of anteroom to the life that is the great mansion of God beyond. And this is temporary, but that is eternal. But God does control our circumstances, and the things that happen to us, do happen to us with a purpose, and it is well for us in passing through all of our experiences.

As the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrew says, to be exercised by these things, to get down upon our knees and ask God why this has happened. Why that has happened? What does he wish that we learn from this experience? So he tells them you have poor crops, you have blights, you have droughts, you have failing trades. You are miserable, and you put your money in a purse and discover that it's not there when you look for it, so consider your ways. Twice he says, “Consider your ways.”

Now, I love the expression. It really is an expression of very close attention to something. Set your heart upon your ways. In other words, turn and take a good look at the thoughts the activities of your life. That's the divine appeal, and now he expresses the judgment and there's a strong note of contempt in verse 9, “You look for much but behold it comes to little.” I couldn't help but think about the day in which we live, in which we have high taxes and inflation. The government is stealing constantly from us by inflation. That's my interpretation incidentally. That's not inspired. [Laughter] That's just my interpretation that the government is stealing from me, and we are too dumb to realize that that's what they are doing.

Now, of course I am smart enough to know it, [Laughter] but I mean our country is not smart enough to know that. That's exactly what they are doing by the policies that they are following. There is a strong note of contempt here, as God speaks about the judgment that he has brought to them, and after he says, “You look for much, but behold it came to little. He says, when you bring it home. I blow it away.” That expression in the Hebrew text may be interpreted in several ways. The normal interpretation. The most common interpretation is that God blows away the results of one's labor, but it may be translated to sniff at in contempt, and that may be the meaning, so when you bring it

home, I sniff at it in contempt. “Why declares, the Lord of hosts? Because of my house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house.”

Adversity is a summons to set our heart upon our ways, and to take a look at our circumstances and our conduct in the light of the will of God for us. It may be that you’ve been neglecting the word of God. It may be that you really have never studied the will of God in the past year or two. That the kind of reading and study of the word of God is the kind of reading and study that you might do when you open the Bible on Sunday, and think about Monday while the sermon is being preached. It’s possible that as you set your heart upon your ways, you discover that you really do not have much of a prayer life anymore. Or it may be that you have discovered that really you have not considered your property and your possessions in the light of the will of God too, or just your Christian life, your witness, your testimony, your relationship to wife or husband or children, as the case may be, the things that God sets forth in his Word as the will of God for us. “Consider your ways.” Take a look at your circumstances.

Now, the lesson that the Lord is, through the prophet, bringing home to the captives who have returned is the lesson of priorities. There was nothing wrong in building a house. There is nothing wrong in building a house today either. There is nothing wrong in the material aspects in our lives because we have to have that. We do have to have clothes. We do have to have a place to live. We do have to eat. We do have to save some money.

Now, we do have some necessary things to keep before us, but the lesson of this prophecy as is the lesson of so many places in the word of God is the lesson of priorities, of putting the Lord’s interests first. The temple of the church of Jesus Christ, and all that has to do with that is the preeminent thing and our relationship to it. So the results of procrastination are divine discipline, and they were experiencing the terrors of that. It’s a terrible thing to discipline by the Lord.

Now, the response of the people in verses 12 through 15,

“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 LORD’s messenger, (In the Hebrew text that reads something like the Lord’s messenger in the Lord’s message. Beautiful expression.) spoke the LORD’s message 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.”

Twenty-four days after he has preached his first message. This is only one of the four messages, and it’s the only one of the four messages that the prophet gave that has a description of the response to the message, and this of course is a favorable response. Every preacher reading this is amazed at the response of the people, and not only preachers but anyone else. It’s amazing that Israel should respond as they did to the voice of the Lord their God.

Now, I want to just single out three things in this response, and want you to note them, and first of all the hearing. In verse 12 we read, “Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua and the remnant of the people, (Notice the expression.) Obeyed the voice of the LORD their God,” In the Hebrew text that really means to hear, but to hear the voice in the Hebrew connotes hearing it favorably. And notice also in this verse the joining of the voice of the Lord and the words of Haggai the prophet. So they heard the voice of the Lord. And they heard the words of the prophet. So God’s voice, and the prophet’s words are joined together. And perhaps that’s one of the reasons that we don’t

see response, as we ought to because in this case the words of the prophet were really the voice of the Lord, or the voice of the Lord was really preached in the words of the prophet. Perhaps one of the reasons we don't really see so much response is because we see so little preaching of the voice of the Lord from the pulpit.

How important it is that the man who stands up to minister the word of God should preach the word of God. And in Haggai's effective and faithful delivery of the voice of the Lord in the words of the prophet, we have an affective delivery and consequently an affective response. Oh, if preachers would only preach the message of the Lord.

Now, of course there was some good listening here too. How do we listen to preachers? I am sure that it takes only a brief observation of churches and congregations to reveal the fact that we have a great deal to learn yet, about how to listen to the word of God. If you hear most response to preaching it's something like this. “Wasn't that a great message today.” Or, “Doesn't he use the English language beautifully? He certainly is a master of illustrations. Hasn't he got a good sense of humor?”

I like that beautiful text which we have on our bulletin. I don't know whether we still have it on the bulletin or not. Do we, Mrs. Ray? Acts 10:33. I love that text because I think it expresses so beautifully the response that we should give to the word of God and the attitude that we should have when it's preached. In Acts chapter 10 in verse 33 in Cornelius' house. Cornelius says, "And so I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now, here we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." Isn't that beautiful? “Now, we are all here present to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

Now, if preachers would remember that their duty is to preach the message of the Lord, perhaps we would have kind of response more, but the proper response as we sit in the pew is to be there, and to be waiting for the voice of the Lord through the words of his servant, and I think I see something of that here. “They obeyed the heard the voice

of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai the prophet as the Lord their God has sent him.” So that’s good listening, and I am sure it was good preaching. The second thing that is mentioned here is the fact that they showed reverence for the Lord. The Hebrew text says, “They feared.” They showed reverence.

Now, I think that is something that is important too. They showed reverence for the Lord. Now, that is vertical reverence. That is vertical fear. Horizontal fear is what usually characterizes us. Now, the Bible says, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. In other words, to be before the Lord remembering that he is great sovereign, omnipotent God, and to listen for his voice is the beginning of divine wisdom. But often we are characterized more by the fear of man. Horizontal fear, than we are the fear of the Lord. And the Bible says the fear of man is a snare. So shall it be the fear of man, which brings a snare, or shall it be the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom? And these saints showed reverence for the Lord. I like that.

Now, then finally they did something else that’s rather surprising. They did the will of God. Listen verse 14, last part of the verse, “And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts their God.” Now, of course when they responded by hearing the Word, and when they feared before the Lord they received a promise. The Lord said to them in the 13th verse, “I am with you.” What a beautiful promise that is. Incidentally, I’ll give you a little quiz.

Now, it says here, that they obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and they showed reverence, and so then the Lord said, “I am with you.” So you see our obedience gains the presence of the Lord. Do you believe that? I don’t. I don’t believe that. I don’t believe that we gain the presence of the Lord by our obedience.

Now, as I read this I notice that Haggai had the word of the Lord inspired by the Spirit of God he spoke the voice of the Lord. And it was the word of God, as used by the Spirit of God that brought the obedience of the people and the fear. For it was produced

by God. Just as in verse 14 it says, “So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, and the spirit of Joshua, and they came and worked.” You see always it is the divine initiative.

Now, of course God is a great and gracious, and so when he works in our lives some divine virtue, or performs in us some divine work, he then rewards us for something that he has done. Isn't that amazing? We have a great God, a God who acts on the principle of grace. That's what I love about our God. He is a gracious God because if everything depended upon my obedience. I am sorry. Human inability resides very deep down in my heart. I find it very difficult to contend with the principle of sin in my members. I find myself just like Paul that there is a struggle going on constantly, and I am losing it every time, when I am fighting it in my own strength. I find another law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bring me into captivity to the law of sin, which is in my members. That is my experience. And I am so grateful that our great God is a gracious, enabling working God, who brings out of the inability divine ability to perform his will, and then rewards me for what he's done. How great.

I think that I'll keep my God, and I don't want the Arminian God. I do love this promise. “Lo, I am with you.” It is repeated again, in chapter 2 verse 3. I'll talk more about it next time. That's a great promise. It's the promise of Matthew chapter 28 in verse 20, “And Lo, I am with you always.” All the days to the end of the age, and it's great to know that when we have God with us, we always have the majority. Let those opposers in Jerusalem who are the servants of Darius oppose the work of God, but God will overcome. And when you stand of the Lord's side. Everything is great.

Now, it says that they came and worked. That Hebrew word is a word that often connotes ministry. It's not the kind of work that's just labor, but it's labor as kind of ministry before the Lord. In other words fellowship with God transfigures work, labor and makes it a ministry.

My wife used to go to Sulphur Springs, Texas to teach a Bible class every week. And a number of ladies in Hopkins County came to the knowledge of the Lord through her

Bible teaching. She was really an outstanding Bible teacher until about fifteen or twenty years ago, she said, “I’ve come to the conviction women shouldn’t teach.” And she hasn’t taught since. That was her own conviction. I am not necessarily saying it was inspired. [Laughter] But anyway one of the ladies that she lead to the Lord through the Bible teaching down there, said after she had come to know the Lord as her Savior. “Now that I have been saved, I don’t mind washing the dishes.” Some of you ladies are looking so surprised. [Laughter] What before had been labor and work had now been transfigured by the fact of the relationship to the Lord. All of the daily activities become ministry when we have come to know the Lord.

Well our time is just about up, and I remember that little worked of the stanza. “I love a finished speaker. Yes, indeed I do. I don’t mean who’s polished. I just mean one who’s through.” [Laughter] So let me sum up what we are saying here in these verses. First of all, procrastination in life and work leads to decay spiritually and materially. If as Christian believers we allow the interests of ourselves to take precedence over the interests of the Lord, spiritual decay sets in. And often with the spiritual decay, material and physical decay sets in too. Priorities the setting of proper priorities is the remedy. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and it’s righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.” It is possible for us to have a saved soul, and a lost Christian life. And finally, the power for performing the will of God is really in the Lord. “So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, 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. (That’s what meant by Philippians 2:12 and 13,) Work out your own salvation.” Speaking to believers. “Work out your own salvation.” In other words, work out from your life that which God had worked in. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. What a great promise. Let’s close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for these lessons that have come to us from Haggai the prophet and from the remnant of the people who returned from the captivity in Babylon. Oh, God, we do praise Thee and thank Thee for the help that the words of God are to us today as they were to them then. Enable us Lord to set the proper priorities in our lives. Enable us to respond to the disciplines of life and the providences of life. And, oh God, help us to accomplish the work, the ministry, which Thou hast for each one of us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.