

## **“Build the House”**

*Minor Prophets, Major Implications – sermon #9*

Haggai 1:1-15

Have you ever witnessed a long-term building project, something that lasted over a year? When my family and I lived in Houghton Lake, there was one particular house on the main highway like that. It was a business and residence that was clearly being expanded. They were adding walls, re-shingling the roof, putting on siding...well, at least they should have been. I don't know when this family started their project, but in the eight years we lived there, they never finished it. In fact, the last time we drove through Houghton Lake, the house still wasn't done!

If you are anything like me, you know that sometimes we start projects, and it takes a long time to finish them, if we ever do. I get distracted. Last week, I repaired a bicycle. It was stop-and-go work; I had to go to several different stores over the course of two weeks; I had to take things apart, clean them and reassemble them; I had to oil and grease. I couldn't work on it every day, but eventually, I got it done. I like to see things finished. Have you ever watched a child get a Lego set and only play with the individual pieces? Not likely. It takes time, but the point is to have the complete project done so you can use it and enjoy it. I think it's safe to say, we like our Lego sets built, our bicycles rideable, our homes warm, dry, decorated and furnished, because that makes all these things useful and livable. Until we complete them, something is missing.

Let me be clear this morning: this is not a sermon about a building program. At least, not for us. But it is a lesson about a building program in Israel's history

that stalled, and the reasons that it stalled are very similar to the reason our churches stall and decline today. And if we listen to the words of God in Haggai, we may find a better way to be the church, making and nurturing disciples of Jesus Christ and making a real difference in our world today.

Haggai was a prophet during one of Israel’s greatest building programs in the Old Testament: the Second Temple. The First Temple was built by King Solomon, but it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and the people were sent into exile. Then, in 540 B.C., King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and set up the Persian Empire, the largest empire in world history at that point. It eventually stretched from Europe to India. (PICTURE) One of the things that made the Persian Empire so great was Cyrus’s policy of letting the conquered people practice their own customs. Cyrus intentionally freed the exiles captured by Babylon and sent them back home, with the means and resources to rebuild their little kingdoms. That, of course, included Israel. There was a practical reason for this policy: it created goodwill in his subjects, and it gave the Persian-appointed officials a central location for governing and collecting tribute. In Israel’s case, the temple was the center of the community and administration, as well as the identity and religion of their people.

At first, the temple rebuilding project got off to a great start. You can read in the book of Ezra how the remnant first rebuilt the altar, made sacrifices, and got the foundation laid for the Second Temple. But then, the work stopped. There were several reasons: local opposition (the Israelites felt bullied by their neighbors); weariness (they were tired, maybe a little scared); and loss of focus. So God sent Haggai to admonish the people and encourage them.

The book of Haggai is a rhetorical conversation, really. God puts the words in the people’s mouth. “‘It’s not time to build God’s house,’ they say.” (Hag 1:2) Notice, Haggai uses the word *house* to describe God’s temple. It’s not a business – it is the dwelling place of the Lord. The temple symbolized God’s presence with the people. But God’s house was in ruins. How could God live in an unfinished mess? Haggai pointed out that the Israelites had taken care of their own homes, but not God’s. This may have been out of necessity – after all, they needed warm houses to live in. But the Israelites got so wrapped up in their own things, they procrastinated on the temple work.

I have three or four projects lying around the house and garage right now that I’d like to get to, but they are not high priorities for me. However, when my car broke down last week, I spent a lot of time and effort getting it fixed. Why? Having a safe, working car is one of my priorities.

The Israelites forgot that their most important priority was to honor God. God even pointed out, they were working hard to survive, but still not satisfied. The harvest was small, the oil and wine were scarce, and the people were hungry. “Consider carefully what you are doing,” God says. In fact, this phrase is repeated several times in Haggai. Other versions of the Bible say, “Give careful thought to your ways.” “Look at what’s happening to you.” “Think it over, baby!” (That’s my version.) Jesus said the same things when he talked about discipleship. “Count the cost.” “Don’t just build the foundation and walk away.” (see Luke 14:25-33) As believers, we are not supposed to live our lives haphazardly. With every action, we are supposed to honor God.

This was the Israelites’ problem. God told them, “Build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored...” (Hag 1:8) But in neglecting the temple, they were dishonoring God. It is the same for us today. God wants to receive honor from our choices and our actions. When we neglect the kingdom of God to work on our own little kingdoms, we dishonor and displease God.

I don’t know about you, but I want to make God proud. I’m not trying to coerce God. I’m not trying to bribe God. I just want to respond to God out of the gratitude for what he has done for me. It’s like a child drawing a picture for their parents. “Look what I’ve made for you!” If you are a good parent, and God is, you take that picture and put it on the refrigerator. And you smile, because you know your child has learned to be a giver, the way you showed them.

So how did the Israelites get out of their slump? This part is important, so let’s read it again. (Hag 1:12-14)

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Then Haggai, the Lord’s messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: “I am with you,” declares the Lord. <sup>14</sup> 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...”

It is critical that we understand the order of events here. First, Haggai preached the message of God, to challenge the Israelites and wake them up. Then, Zerubbabel and Joshua, their two leaders, responded, and all the people obeyed and feared the Lord. It was after their obedience that God promised to be with them and renewed their spirits, and finally, they finished the work on the temple.

So many times, we get this out of order. We go straight to the work, thinking, “If I just build this right, if I just do this thing, then God will be happy with me.” But God does not just want our results: God wants our lives. God wants our obedience. Do you know what it means to “fear the Lord”? It means to worship the Lord. To make God’s priorities our priorities. When we have a right relationship with God, the rest falls into place. When God stirs up bold, spirit-filled leaders in the church, and the people follow them, God is honored, and God then provides the presence and the energy to do God’s work.

You cannot work effectively for God if you don’t have a healthy relationship with God. The primary reason our churches do not grow and experience the renewed Spirit of the Lord is that we are content to keep God at a distance. God is “over there,” while everything is going great in my little kingdom. But God will not accept second or third place in our lives. God wants to be first. It is only when people “seek first the kingdom of God” that everything else is given to us. (Luke 12:31) We spend too much time trying to do the opposite. We seek things for ourselves, and then we try to add a little of God’s kingdom on top. That simply won’t bring us any satisfaction in life.

The reason you were created is to worship God Almighty. You are placed on this earth to honor the Lord. Everything we do should flow from this truth. So, as a church, I invite us this morning to “consider carefully our ways.” Will we work with God to continue building the kingdom of heaven here in Bellaire and in the world? If we choose to honor God, God will renew our spirit and God will grow the church.

So let me get practical. When you become a professing member of the church, you make a vow, in front of the whole congregation, to do three things. If you are a member, you have made a promise to God and to everyone here to support the church in five ways: with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness. Let’s review each one briefly.

Your prayers: a church that prays together, stays together. Prayer is having a conversation with God, speaking and listening through the Holy Spirit to draw our hearts and minds into a right relationship with God. Prayer is not just giving God a laundry list of requests. It is centering ourselves so that we are a part of what God is doing in this world. Prayer is the number one thing from which every other ministry flows.

Your presence: as a member of this church, you promise to show up. You promise to be there for the others. The Apostle Paul says the church is the Body of Christ, made up of many members, and we all are a part of it, everyone. (1<sup>st</sup> Cor 12:27) If one part is missing, the other parts cannot function. Your presence matters to God and to the church.

Your gifts: Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” Our resources, our money, everything we

have...it all belongs to God. Romans 5:8 tells us how God shows generosity: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Christ gave his whole life to save us. Our gifts pale by comparison. And yet, God gives us the great satisfaction of knowing that when we give to the church, we are giving to the mission of transforming and saving lives through Jesus Christ. That’s an incredible return on our investment, I’d say.

Your service: The church works together to build God’s kingdom. Every act you do for others, you are doing for Jesus Christ himself. (Matt 25:40) When you watch the children in the nurse, you are watching Christ. When you teach Sunday School, you are teaching Christ. There is no shortage of opportunities to serve in Christ’s Church. One of the most exciting ways we share the gospel in Bellaire is through our annual Vacation Bible School. And you already have a job, even if you didn’t know it. You are all VBS recruiters. You may have a specific job you can do. And you may know someone who can do another job. And you can ask them. You can invite friends and neighbors with children to attend. We don’t have one recruiter in our VBS; we have over one hundred of them! We grow in faith by serving. What do you do to build God’s kingdom?

And finally, your witness. This is the easiest one, actually, because if you are doing the other four – prayer, presence, gifts, and service – then you are naturally leading others to Christ. When you do all of the above, someone will ask you, “Why would you do that?” And then you simply give your witness: “Because I’m grateful for what God has done for me.” If you know, love, and serve the Almighty God, you have a witness. You just need to share it with someone.

Are there physical projects we could do on this church building?

Absolutely. If you want to know about them, I can tell you. But the important thing to understand from Haggai is that we are God’s house. Paul says in Ephesians 2:19-22 “<sup>19</sup> ...you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

Let’s build God’s house together!

**Memory Verse:** Haggai 1:13 (GNT) –

Then Haggai gave the LORD's message to the people: “I will be with you--that is my promise.”

**Reflection Questions:**

- 1.) Have you ever worked on a long building project? How quickly did you finish, and who motivated you to do it?
- 2.) Do you ever get discouraged in your faith? What opposition do you encounter when working for God?
- 3.) Whom does God send to encourage and challenge you? How do you respond to those leaders and friends?
- 4.) How do you express your thankfulness to God?
- 5.) What will you do to build God’s house here on earth?