

Series: “The Minor Prophets”  
“Haggai: Sticking to the Job”

This is the last in this series of messages on the minor prophets. A “prophet” is someone who speaks for God. God chose these men to speak His message to His people at different times in their history. Today we look at the prophet Haggai. Haggai is a very short book in the Bible. Just 2 chapters. But that doesn’t mean it’s not important!

Once more, it helps to look at the historical context, what was happening at the time. The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians around 722 B.C.E. 136 years later the southern kingdom of Judah is defeated and conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem is a war-ravaged city. The temple is in ruins. Many of the brightest and most skilled people are taken captive into Babylonia. About 70 years later, when the Persians come to power, the Hebrew people in exile are allowed to return. They start to rebuild the city and the temple, but then the work stops. This is where Haggai enters the picture. The time is 520 B.C.E.

His message from the Lord is: Get back to work on the temple! It’s been, what – 14 years, 16 years - since any work was done in rebuilding it. “Then the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ‘Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?’” (Haggai 1:3-4). He says you’re taking care of your own houses, but not the house of the Lord – the central place of worship for the Hebrew people! He says God’s house remains in ruins, “while each of you is busy with his own house” (Haggai 1:9b).

Now it’s true, times are tough for the Hebrew people returning to their land. Food is scarce. The physical ruin and destruction of the Holy City is overwhelming and depressing. And it’s easy to think of their own needs of survival first. But Haggai tries to turn the people away from just an inward self-concern to a focus on God – and the temple, which represented the presence of God in their midst. The instructions are clear: “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord” (Haggai 1:7-8).

Beyond urging the people to get back to work on the temple building, the larger message was for the people to turn back to God, and make God the center of their lives. “Take courage, for I am with you” the Lord says to His people.

As I think about Haggai, and the message God speaks through him, two main themes come across to me. First, *it’s important to care for those sacred places in our lives*. The temple was so central to Israel’s faith. It was God’s dwelling place, a reminder of God’s presence. A place that was special, “holy” – which means set apart for God’s use and service.

Now I realize that God’s presence is not limited to a building, or a physical space. King Solomon recognized that in his beautiful prayer of dedication for the new temple he had built. “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built” (1 Kings 8:27).

You can’t box God in a building! You can’t limit God to a designated physical space. God can

be worshiped anywhere. But having those places set aside for God's people to meet: to pray together, worship together, learn together, encourage one another – that's important.

Of course, we have to be careful that we don't worship a building! Perhaps we've heard stories, or been involved in situations, where several churches merged, and how fights broke out over *which building* they were going to keep.

But I've also recognized how important some church buildings have become for me. A little country church I served, some years after I left, closed its doors. I was invited back for the closing service, and it was sad. All the memories. My home church was Ross Street United Methodist. I have wonderful memories of my time at that church growing up. In my late teens and early twenties, as I pursued my call to ministry, there were times when I would just go into the church, by myself, sit in a pew, and reflect and pray. And I would feel God's presence. That congregation just closed, and it makes me sad. That building is more than just brick and mortar to me!

Sometimes church leaders need to take to heart what Haggai is telling the people. Don't be so caught up with your own homes and your own life that you neglect the house of God. I've known some church leaders who have gorgeous homes, but have been content to worship in a church building that looks like a dump. We should do our best to maintain and beautify the buildings that have been set aside for the worship of God.

But the other side of the coin is true: *Any place can become a sacred space*. I think of Christians like Corrie ten Boom, a Christian lady sent to one of the Nazi death camps. Even in the horror of the awful place she was able to pray, and worship, and serve others. I preached at Lancaster County Prison once. I was just a teenager. And when I gave an invitation to receive Christ, some of the prisoners responded. I felt the presence of the Lord that morning in that place. The Apostle Paul wrote some letters while in jail, letters that have become part of the New Testament.

*Our homes can become a sacred space*. Perhaps we have a spot in our house where we pray and read the Bible. If family members pray together. If the love of Jesus and kindness and mercy undergird all of the ups and downs of family relationships. The first Christians met in homes. Their homes were their church buildings, their sacred places. Haggai urged the people not to get so caught up working on their homes and their daily chores that they forgot the temple. Any nation, any people, are stronger when they don't neglect the sacred spaces and the sacred places.

The other truth that emerges for me out of the Book of Haggai is this: *Stick to the job!* They had *started* rebuilding the temple. It was hard work. There was opposition. So they quit. "Get back to work on God's house" Haggai told them.

*Most of the important things in life involve a long-term commitment*. Marriage, for instance. A solid, satisfying marriage isn't accomplished in a year or two! *Healthy parent-child relationships* – have to be worked on, again and again. *A successful career* – can take months or

years of training, years of working in a particular field. *Being an accomplished musician.* I took (I think) maybe 4 guitar lessons. Maybe half a dozen piano lessons. So I'm not a great pianist. I don't play lead guitar. I took 10 years of accordion lessons, and stuck with the instrument, and I'm better at it. Things that matter most are gained through persevering over the *long haul.*

Haggai said to those who had started work on a new temple, but then turned to other things: "Get back to work! Stick to the job!"

*But it's easy to quit, isn't it.* I'm sure the people Haggai was dealing with had some good reasons why they had to pursue other things. It was so difficult re-establishing their life in Judah, starting from scratch, just hoping to survive. It was so easy to quit. Someone has done some research, and discovered that of all the people who make New Year's resolutions, only 8% follow through.

We set out to do things, change things in our lives, set goals for some worthy accomplishment, and there are so many reasons why we get short-circuited: It takes longer than we anticipated. Progress is much slower than we thought. People don't respond as we had hoped. We run into opposition. Things go wrong. Francis B. Chisholm came up with Chisholm's first law of human interaction: "If anything can go wrong, it will." Then he added a corollary to that law: "If anything just can't go wrong, it will anyway."

Our worthy goals and good intentions can meet up with all kinds of obstacles. So we get discouraged, and we quit. When I felt God's call to some fulltime church vocation, I realized it would be 7 or 8 years of higher education. I didn't like school. More than once in college I thought of quitting. I remember my first few days of seminary. My first year of seminary was Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C. I had finished 4 years of college. We got our textbooks. Semester assignments. Term papers due. I was also working at the seminary library. So, I'm walking across the campus, deeply discouraged, thinking: "I just can't start all over again. Three or four more years of this!"

Maybe you can remember getting to that point with something in your life. Maybe you're experiencing that frustration now. "I know this is something important I should do. But I just don't know how I can keep going.....". But often God whispers in our ears, "I know you're feeling beat. I know you want to give up, but don't quit!"

*One of the most worthy goals in life is to be a devoted follower of Jesus.* Having spiritual depth in our life...being able to discern God's will...being able to love people as Jesus loved people – these kinds of things don't happen overnight.

The Bible depicts the Christian life as a distance run, a marathon, not a 100 yard dash. At my age I'm still trying to learn how to be a follower of Jesus Christ! Hebrews, chapter 12, is a wonderful chapter, urging us to hang in there, run the Christian race with patience and perseverance.

Hebrews 12:1, in the Good News Translation, says this, “Let us run with determination the race that lies before us.” Then it holds up Jesus as our example: “Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). Finally, it says, “So do not let yourselves become discouraged and give up” (Hebrews 12:3).

One final thought from the prophet Haggai. *Help is on the way!* When Haggai urged the people to get back on the job of rebuilding the temple, the people went back to the job. “The people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai” (Haggai 1:12).

I’m reading through the Book of Ezra for my devotions. Ezra was an important leader during the days of Haggai. And I came across 2 references in Ezra to Haggai. One of them says: “So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah” (Ezra 6:14).

And God reassures them: “I am with you” (Haggai 1:13). God is with us, to give us the strength and perseverance to keep at the important things that take time to accomplish! One way He does that is to remind us to take one day at a time.

Many times I’ve thought back to something I read about the late bishop Gerald Kennedy, one of the great leaders of our denomination. He told of going to a new place, to a new church assignment as bishop. He became very depressed as he faced many new responsibilities, smog (he was in LA), and the future looked very bleak to him. A friend called and asked how he was doing. Bishop Kennedy shared with the friend all of his worries and complaints. The friend listened, and began to point out the possibilities for the future, and all the hopes waiting to be realized. When his friend finished, Kennedy said, “You make me feel a little bit better. I will stay *until noon*.” He said that was the last time he ever felt so low about the job. And how he learned a lesson: Can I make it until noon?

Don’t give up on the important things of life, the things that take time to fulfill. Stick it out until noon.

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*February 15, 2026*

