

After The Return: Haggai

[Haggai]

INTRODUCTION

- A. As was stated in our last lesson in this short series, the history of the Israelites is well-known, from the exodus from Egypt and the wilderness wanderings, to their conquest of Canaan and their settlement and growth, through the judges and kings, the divided kingdom and the eventual fall of each. And — as was prophesied by God — the Israelites would eventually be taken into captivity to a foreign land, and there they would be for 70 years until He brought the faithful ones — the 'remnant' — back to Jerusalem and Judah. All of this we know and, as we saw in the last lesson, there was a time when those taken into captivity returned to Jerusalem and Judea after the 70 years were fulfilled.
- B. It is again that period after the return from captivity that we will consider today and for the next lesson as we consider the Israelites **After The Return**. While we have spent a lot of time considering the Israelites before and during the initial settlement in Canaan, let us spend some more time in considering their lives **After The Return**. What did they do once they returned? What was the attitude of those who returned? Did they abandon the ways of their forefathers whose actions had led them to captivity? Did they learn the lessons from the former unfaithful ones, or were there still some problems that needed to be resolved? Are there any lessons for us today when we consider that period in their history? Well, it must be obvious that there is because we will be studying this and at least one more lesson's worth.
- C. For today, let us consider the example of the Israelites **After The Return** as it is recorded in the book of Haggai. The events recorded in this book take place during the same period as some of those found in the book of Ezra, specifically during the time for the temple's rebuilding. Haggai was one sent by God to stir them up to start the rebuilding again, after those who opposed them resorted to force and the king's edict to cease building. Now, after about 16 years of inactivity, God speaks to the people to admonish them to finish what they had begun. Within this book, too, we have an outline of their lives that will serve as a pattern for those who sincerely seek to please God, to do the work He has commanded, and who seek to be a part of God's house. Let us see that *“whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction”* (**Rom. 15:4**) and let us be instructed.

I. AFTER THE ISRAELITES' RETURN

- A. A DELAY.
 1. **The Adversaries of Israel.** To see the true situation of the Israelites at the time this book opens, we must back up a bit to the record of Ezra, where we find that the rebuilding of the temple had faced a delay due to the fact the adversaries of Israel *“heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD”* (**Ezra 4:1**) and then tried various ways to delay them or halt the construction altogether, discouraging the people or troubling those who were rebuilding (v. 4), hiring *“counselors against them to frustrate their purpose”*(v. 5), and finally writing a letter to the king which accused them of treasonous intents. Their last effort was the one that halted the rebuilding efforts.
 2. **Approximately Fourteen Years Delayed.** The efforts of their adversaries succeeded in delaying the rebuilding process *“until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia”* (**Ezra 4:24**) — a

period of about 14-16 years [depending on how time is counted]. No doubt, the Israelites were now in no hurry to attempt to rebuild because the ruling powers had commanded they cease, and they were not looking forward to surrendering their recently-regained freedom.

B. BUT THE PEOPLE WERE NEGLIGENT.

1. **'Now Is Not The Time.'** After awhile [fourteen years] and with no further rebuilding taking place, God wondered why His house — the temple — had not been completed. It wasn't that He didn't know what had happened, but that the people had ceased making it a priority and, when asked, would only say, *"The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD"* (**Hag. 1:2**). To them, the time to build was 'later' rather than sooner; they were now in no hurry to complete the rebuilding of God's house. The efforts of their adversaries to discourage the work apparently worked! Now, they had no apparent interest in restarting the rebuilding process, but would only keep putting it off until sometime later.
2. **They Did Not Neglect Themselves.** The sad part about this was not just that they had neglected the Lord's house, but that they found the time to build up their own houses — and not just shacks and huts; they living in *"paneled houses"* (**Hag. 1:4**) while the temple lay in ruins. Their homes were built now for comfort and that is just what happened to them: they got comfortable. Then they forgot about the Lord's house. It's not as if they couldn't see it every day they walked into the city! Its location was one that was higher in altitude and it would have taken effort to ignore it, but they did. It seems they purposefully forgot and neglected the Lord's house, even as they made comfortable houses for themselves.

C. THEY IGNORED GOD'S WARNINGS.

1. **Their Failures And Lack.** What added to the sad situation of God's people at this time is that they also seemed to be ignoring God's warnings to them. He admonishes them twice to *"Consider your ways"* (**Hag. 1:5, 7**), reminding them, *"You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes"* (v. 6), and, *"You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away"* (v. 9), and, *"the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce"* (v. 10). In other words, no matter what they did, it failed, whatever they sought, they could not find, and whatever they had, they lost.
2. **God's Doings.** We might attribute such things to "bad luck" or just life itself, but God reveals to them what they probably already knew: He was behind it all, and because they had neglected His house for the comforts of their own houses. Again, He said, *"when you brought it home, I blew it away"* (v. 9); and, *"I have called for a drought on the land and the hills"* (v. 11). And for what reason did God do these things? Hear Him: *"Because of My house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house"* (v. 9). The message could not be clearer!
3. **They Began to Rebuild.** Having now been reminded of the great work that was left neglected for so long, heard that their failures and lack were because of God's unhappiness with their neglect, and with the motivation of Haggai and, later, Zechariah, the people were stirred to now work and complete the work, and they began in earnest *"on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king"* (**Hag. 1:15**). Ezra's record shows that the work of rebuilding the temple was completed *"on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king"* (**Ezra 6:15**), which was about four years in the completion of it.

D. THE FUTURE OF GOD'S PEOPLE.

1. **God Would Bless Them.** Not long after this was begun (about a month later, **Hag. 2:1**), God spoke to

the people through Haggai again and reminded them of the greater glory of the earlier temple, asking, “*Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?*” (2:3). [Those who would remember the former temple were few, due to age!] But lest they be discouraged at this reminder, God also tells them He would be with them and bless them in its rebuilding (vv. 4, 5) and in their produce (vv. 16-19). He made it clear that he was displeased with their neglect, and now pleased when they put Him first in their lives and worked for Him instead of self.

2. **The People Needed Cleansing.** Before they got too far into the work of rebuilding, though, God had a question for them. To demonstrate the need for personal cleansing, God commanded that they ask the priests if an object becomes holy when it is touched by something holy [2:12; the answer was, "No"], then asked if something holy would become defiled if it was touched by something defiled [2:13; the answer was, "Yes"]. The point being made here is that they people would not become holy by working on the rebuilding of the temple, but it would be defiled by them; they needed to sanctify themselves before working on this holy house of God for, as they stood, they were unclean and all they did would be considered unclean! They had not been offering sacrifices according to the Law, but out on the open altar erected when they first returned to Jerusalem. God would not simply accept their sacrifices nor them simply because they came and offered *something*; they had to do it according to His ways, and with pure hearts.
3. **A More Glorious House.** God also promised to them that, at some point in the future, He would “*fill this temple with glory*” (2:6, 7). Note first that God did not necessarily promise the temple itself would be more glorious by its construction and appearance, but that it would be *filled* with glory; what would make it “*greater than the former*” (v. 9) was not the material from which it was constructed, or even the architectural beauty of it, but what God put in it. That “*the treasures of all nations shall come in*” (v. 7) points to Christ's coming and a glory greater than anything these people had ever witnessed. That "shaking" of which He spoke was referred to by the writer of Hebrews when he was speaking of the everlasting kingdom, the church (**Heb. 12:25-28**) — a far more glorious house than any physical structure!

II. THE LESSONS FOR US

A. FIRST THINGS FIRST.

1. **Seek God First.** God had expressed His displeasure to His people for their neglect of Him and His house while they busied themselves making their own houses comfortable and a place to which they would retreat. It was not until they put God first and His work was done that He would be pleased. What, do we suppose, God thinks of His people today when they neglect His house, the church, and are busying themselves with making their physical lives comfortable and making this world our home instead of looking forward to the heavenly and eternal home? The answer for God's people then was the answer for God's people now: “*seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness*” (**Matt. 6:33**). First things first!
2. **A Spiritual Mind Is Needed.** There can be no doubt that the basic problem with the Israelites at this time was that they were materially-minded and not spiritually minded. Their material interests led them to make their own lives comfortable while neglecting the place where their spiritual duties should have been carried out [through sacrifices at the temple]. If we are to be the people we need to be and ensure we are doing what is most important, we must, of necessity, have a spiritual mind (cf. **Col. 3:1, 2**).

When we set our minds on the physical and material things, that will be our focus and that will become what we value most (cf. **Matt. 6:21**); but if we set our minds on the spiritual things, it is then that we emphasize the spiritual work that must be done — teaching God's word, striving to live righteously, and striving to save souls. First things first!

3. **Seek to Please God In All Things.** Another factor in the people's neglect of God's house is plain old selfishness; they desired to be comfortable more than they desired God's house to be completed! Brethren, anytime we put our personal desires above God's commands and desires, our priorities are mixed up! We must, as Paul put it, “*make it our aim to please Him*” (**2nd Cor. 5:9**), rather than pleasing ourselves. First things first!

B. DO NOT IGNORE GOD'S WARNINGS.

1. **The Time of Our End Is Unknown.** For God's people in today's lesson, the warnings God had sent them were in regard to their neglect of His house, the temple, and the need for them to get back to the work. For us, we cannot say with any certainty that God uses natural disasters, drought, and destruction to send us a message, but He **has** warned us of the coming of His Son and the fact “*that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night*” (**1st Thess. 5:2**) and we must, as a result, prepare for that last day.
2. **Life Is A Vapor.** And beyond not knowing when Christ is coming, none of us knows how long we have on this earth. We could die at 17 in a car wreck, at 23 of pneumonia, at 36 of a congenital heart problem, at 47 of diabetes, or we could live to 100 and simply die of old age. Let us be reminded, “*Man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them*” (**Eccl. 9:12**), and, as James writes, “*You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes*” (**Jas. 4:14**).
3. **Deny Self.** As was noted in today's study, the problem with God's people at this time was that they were too busy focused on their own comforts and pleasures to be involved in and complete the work of rebuilding God's house. The answer was for them as it is for us today if **we** seek to please God: deny self. As Paul said to Titus, the gospel message has come into the world, “*training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age*” (**Titus 2:11, 12**). As God taught the people through the example of what was holy and what was defiled, let us also see that we cannot come to God on our own terms; if we are defiled [by **His** definition], we cannot expect that He will accept whatever we offer to Him and in whatever way we decide to offer it. We must abide by **His** rules and come to Him having purified ourselves through the blood of His Son.

C. THE MORE GLORIOUS HOUSE IS HERE.

1. **The 'Latter' Temple Being Filled With Christ's Glory.** For the people of God in today's story, they were given a promise by God that He would “*fill this house with glory*” and “*The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former*” (**Hag. 2:7, 9**). Again, God was not speaking of the visual beauty or the superiority of building materials, but what His house would become by His making. The “*the treasures of all nations*” [“*the Desire of All Nations*”; NKJV] was Christ, and the glory He would bring would surpass anything they had ever known, for He would bring forgiveness and access to God to **all** men — not just a few in a small part of the world!
2. **There Is Peace Through Him.** God, to the Israelites, promised, “*in this place I will give peace*” (**Hag.**

2:9) and, again, that peace would be fulfilled in Christ when He came and died for the sins of all men, bringing peace between nations and — most importantly — peace between man and God where, before, there had been only enmity. As Paul reminds us in the letter to the Ephesians, “*He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility,*” and reconciled “*us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility*” (**Eph. 2:14-17**).

- 3. His House: The Church.** Finally, let us see that the “*latter glory*” of which God spoke was not in the physical building of the temple, but in His spiritual house, the church. Let us be reminded of Paul's words to Timothy that identified God's house as the church (cf. **1st Tim. 3:15**), a spiritual house founded upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, its head, and let us then recall that God established the church for His glory and for the glory of His Son, and “*to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever*” (**Eph. 2:21**).

CONCLUSION

The return of the Israelites, of course, came about because they first *left* the ways of truth and followed the nations around them. Once they returned, though, the work wasn't over. For one who would come back to God in obedience to the gospel, you must know that such a step is just the first of many and there is a long road ahead and much work to be done. If you choose to take that step, know that God expects you to be involved in the work and to put Him and his work before your own earthly comfort. If you are not willing to put Him first, you are not worthy of being called His child.

Will you come?