

FIRST THINGS FIRST



Ever have those days when everything feels URGENT?

- ▶ The sales pitch urging us to “act now.”
- ▶ The inbox full of emails demanding responses.
- ▶ The unplanned meeting or phone call insisting on our presence.
- ▶ The insistent child calling, “MOM!”
- ▶ The relentless movement of the clock’s second hand reminding us of all we need to do today.

Some items on our to-do list can and should be labeled “urgent,” but others just try to convince us they’re serious. We simply have to set some things aside for the moment to focus on more pressing matters. But when everything claims some level of urgency—focus on me now—how do we know where to start?

We know we should make first things first—but what’s first?

The Book of Haggai answers this question. As we look at this short book, we’ll see that one thing takes priority over everything else: loving obedience to God. When God becomes our focus, we are better equipped to handle all the other things vying for our attention.

SAM RAINER

Sam serves as senior pastor of West Bradenton Baptist Church in Bradenton, Florida. He is the president of Rainer Research and co-founder/co-owner of Rainer Publishing. Sam is married to Erin, and they have two daughters.

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

SAY: “For this special session we will be discussing the priority Christ should have in our lives.” Invite members to turn to **page 3** in the **Personal Study Guide (PSG)** and review session titles.

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture (**PSG, p. 82**) as you introduce **Question #1: What’s the longest you’ve waited in line?**

OPTION: IN ADVANCE, prepare a smartphone timer with a loud alarm and set the timer for 30 seconds. Call for two volunteers to play a game. Instruct volunteers to take turns shouting out examples of things that vie for our attention. The person who hasn’t gone when the timer goes out has to sit down. Call for another volunteer and repeat the game. **Say:** “A lot of things may be important, but they should not take priority over loving obedience to God.”

SPECIAL FOCUS FIRST THINGS FIRST



The Point

Always put God first.

The Bible Meets Life

A lot of things vie for our attention, and many of them offer a good “sales pitch” why they should take priority. We also encounter the “tyranny of the urgent,” which screams for attention—now! No

doubt we have many things that are important—family, work, and so forth—but only one thing takes priority over all these things: loving obedience to God.

The Passage

Haggai 1:2-13

The Setting

The Persian ruler Cyrus issued a decree in 538 B.C. allowing peoples exiled by Babylon to return to their homelands. Many Jews returned to Jerusalem and began rebuilding both the city and the temple. However, after the foundation of the temple was laid, progress faltered and then ceased. Temple reconstruction did not commence again until God called Haggai in 520 B.C. to encourage the Jewish leaders to rebuild the temple.

Haggai 1:2-8

2 Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.

3 Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet, saying,

4 Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste?

5 Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways.

6 Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes.

7 Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways.

8 Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord.

KEY WORDS

the Lord's house (v. 2)—The Jerusalem temple, God's chosen place to receive the Israelites' worship, sacrifices, and offerings. In this sense, the temple was where God dwelt among His people.

cieled houses (v. 4)—Wealthy people could afford to have wooden panels installed over the interior stone walls in their houses to provide a smooth texture and luxurious finish.

Obedience to God takes priority.

Verse 2. Haggai 1:1 introduces the speaker of the four messages recorded in this book. With this brief introduction, the author clearly intended to identify "Haggai the prophet" as one in the long line of prophets sent by God to speak His truth with clarity and boldness. We find nothing more about Haggai in this or any other book of the Bible except for brief mentions in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. The name *Haggai* was common

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life (PSG, p. 83)**. Highlight the author's illustrations of ways we often get our priorities out of order. Make the point that when we make God's priorities ours, we will find greater contentment and fulfillment.

Reinforce the importance of having God as our top priority by reading **The Point (PSG, p. 83): Always put God first.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to help us always place Him first. Thank Him for loving us so much that He desires this kind of relationship.

STUDY THE BIBLE

Haggai 1:2-8



15 minutes

GUIDE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 86.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Haggai 1:2-8.

LEADER PACK: Point to **Item 7: Haggai**. Use the chart to give a brief overview and context of the Book of Haggai..

BOOK OF HAGGAI

TIMELINE:

- 605–586 B.C. – Israelites exiled to Babylon
- 539 B.C. – Cyrus, ruler of the Persian Empire, takes Babylon with little resistance
- 520 B.C. – Cyrus issues a decree allowing the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the temple
- 520 B.C. – Construction of the second temple begins under Zerubbabel's and Joshua's leadership
- 520 B.C. – Discouragement reinforced by opposition from transplanted people brings work on the temple to a halt
- 518 B.C. – Haggai and Zechariah encourage the people to resume construction of the temple
- 518 B.C. – Work resumes on building the temple
- 518 B.C. – Temple completed

OVERVIEW:

Haggai's message is a sixth-century prophetic call to returnees to rebuild from Babylonian exile. Dating around 520 B.C., the original message was written in Hebrew after they returned from exile in Babylon. Summary: When Haggai pronounced God's command to rebuild the temple, young Zerubbabel and Joshua led the group of the returnees and encouraged them to resume the prophesied work on the temple.

GUIDE: Use **Bible Commentary 1** and **DIGGING DEEPER** on **PSG page 86** to provide background information about the title Haggai used for God as well as the importance of His temple.

DISCUSS: **Question #2 (PSG, p. 85):** What are some of the major priorities in our lives?

in this period and apparently comes from a word for “feast” or “festival.” Some scholars suggest that perhaps the prophet’s parents gave him this name because he was born near the time of one of the Jewish festivals.

Verse 1 also reveals that “the word of the LORD by Haggai” came “in the second year of Darius the king.” This would have been 520 B.C., part of a long and difficult period for the Jewish people. Israel split into the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel about 930 B.C. Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and Judah fell to the Babylonians in 587/586 B.C. At that time, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and most of the survivors were taken into exile. In 539 B.C., the Persians led by Cyrus the Great (559–530 B.C.) overthrew the Babylonian Empire. In 538 B.C., Cyrus allowed the peoples exiled by the Babylonians to return to their homelands and worship their own gods. Over 42,300 Jews went back to Judah and got to work rebuilding the temple (Ezra 2:64–3:). However, opposition arose from the surrounding peoples of the region and work on the temple ceased until the reign of Darius I (522–486 B.C.) of Persia (4:1-5). At that time, God sent Haggai and the prophet Zechariah (Ezra 5:1-2) to challenge the Jewish leaders and the people to resume the rebuilding of the temple.

Haggai first addressed his message “unto Zerubbabel,” the appointed “governor of Judah, and to Joshua, ... the high priest.” These two were the civil and religious leaders for the Jews who had returned from Babylonian captivity. But Haggai was the only spokesperson who “prophesied ... in the name of the God of Israel” (v. 1).

1▶ The source of the message was the **LORD of hosts**, a title which conveyed a picture of the Lord as a mighty warrior and the leader of the armies of heaven. God’s message concerned His temple, **the LORD’s house**. When God established His covenant with the people after freeing them from Egyptian slavery, He commanded them to build the tabernacle, a portable worship tent (Ex. 25:1-9) so that He could “dwell among them” (v. 8). When it was completed, “the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (40:34). Centuries later, when Solomon completed the temple in Jerusalem, and the priests brought the ark of the covenant into the most holy place, God’s glory came down and filled it as well (1 Kings 7:51–8:11).◀

Haggai started his message by stating a common excuse given by the people for not resuming the work of rebuilding the temple. The people were saying that **the time is not**

come to resume this work, implying that other priorities were more pressing.

Verse 3. The text repeats the phrase from verse 1: **Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet.** The message was from *the Lord*, Yahweh, the name that stresses God's eternal nature. This is the covenant name of God that He had revealed to Moses (Ex. 3:13-15).

2 ▶ Verse 4. Then Haggai asked Zerubbabel and Joshua a pointed question: Despite the people's pronouncement that it was not the right time to rebuild the temple, was it the right time for wealthy leaders like them to live in **cieled houses**—fine, paneled homes—while God's **house lie waste**? At that time houses were made of stone or bricks. Since craftsmen had only hand tools, the interior walls could be rough and uneven. However, wealthier people could afford to have wooden panels installed over the stones to provide a smooth texture and a more luxurious finish. ◀

Verse 5. Haggai again emphasized God's sovereignty and power by calling Him the **LORD of hosts**. He wanted the leaders of the people—Zerubbabel and Joshua—to see themselves in the light of God's sovereign authority and to respond with the humility God desires (Prov. 3:34; 1 Pet. 5:5-6). Haggai urged the leaders, **consider your ways**. Then he described specific examples of their labor and how little they had been able to accomplish in their own strength.

Verse 6. Haggai cited five examples to illustrate his point. Though the people had **sown much** in their fields, they harvested **little**. They never had enough to **eat** and **drink** to be **filled**. Though they had clothes, they were never warm. Though the hired workers earned wages, it seemed as though their money went **into a bag with holes**. Haggai's point was clear: no matter how hard the people worked, they never had enough even to satisfy their basic needs.

Verse 7. Haggai followed his list by repeating the Lord's admonition: **Consider your ways**. The sovereign God was telling the people to seriously examine their lives—and to change their ways. Instead of making the rebuilding of the temple their first priority, they had been focused on themselves. He told them to look at the results: all their efforts were failing to provide what they needed.

Verse 8. After describing the results of their wrong priorities, Haggai challenged the leaders (and through them the people)

SUMMARIZE: Refer group members to **PSG pages 85-86** to the bullet points. In Haggai's address to the people, we learn two key truths about making obedience to God our priority.

1. **Delayed obedience is disobedience.** *The people rationalized their apathy by claiming it was not God's will to rebuild the temple at that time. God had already told them to rebuild, and His plans had not changed.:*

2. **Our priorities are always less satisfying than God's priorities.** *God asked the people to "think carefully" about what they were doing. He then pointed out how they were always dissatisfied, no matter what they did, because they only went after what was important to them. No matter how much they planted, they never had a good harvest.*

DISCUSS: Question #3

(PSG, p. 87): What excuses do we make to delay our obedience?

(Alternate: How would you summarize the illustrations in these verses?)

GUIDE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 2 on page 89 and the **KEY WORDS** on **PSG, page 84** to further describe the extravagant “cield houses” of the people compared with the Lord’s house, which still lay in ruins.

TRANSITION: “In the next verses we’ll see the consequences of the people’s disobedience.”

STUDY THE BIBLE

Haggai 1:9-11



10 minutes

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Haggai 1:9-11.

GUIDE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 3 on page 91 to explain why the Lord had chosen to punish the people as He did.

to focus on what should have been their first priority—rebuilding the temple. In order to build, they would need to **go up to the mountain** and get the **wood** that would be required to **build the house**.

After giving the leaders God’s command to rebuild, Haggai told them God would **take pleasure in and be glorified** through the new structure. The emphasis on pleasing God is common throughout the Bible. We find this in the Old Testament when describing God’s response to offerings and sacrifices (Ex. 29:18; Lev. 1:9,13,17; Num. 18:17; Ps. 51:17). In the New Testament Paul wrote about the importance of living in ways that please God (Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 5:9; Col. 1:10). The biblical writers also emphasized and gave examples of people giving God glory (Ps. 117:1; Isa. 61:3; Dan. 4:34; Luke 2:20; John 12:28; 1 Cor. 10:31). God spoke through Haggai to challenge the people to focus their priorities on doing what would please God and give Him the glory He deserved by rebuilding the temple.

Haggai 1:9-11

9 Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

10 Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit.

11 And I called for a drought upon the land, and upon the mountains, and upon the corn, and upon the new wine, and upon the oil, and upon that which the ground bringeth forth, and upon men, and upon cattle, and upon all the labour of the hands.

We lose out when we place ourselves ahead of God.

Verse 9. God reminded the leaders of the limited results of all their hard work (see v. 6). Though they had **looked for much**,

their expectations and their efforts **came to little**. How had that happened? God explained that He had intervened in their work to limit the yield of their efforts. God then raised the obvious question: **Why** had He punished them in this way?

3 ▶ With the phrase, **saith the LORD of hosts**, Haggai again affirmed these were not his own words, but the very declaration of the Lord to His people. Using the title *the Lord of hosts* yet again emphasized God's sovereignty and power over all creation. Nothing that was happening to the Jews was a matter of merely unfortunate circumstances.

To answer why these things had happened, God stated that the people were suffering **because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house**. The people's priorities were upside down. They refused to make the effort to rebuild the Lord's temple, while they were busily working on their own houses. They had put their own houses and welfare first instead of rebuilding God's temple. The great irony was that by putting themselves first they had lost God's blessings. He had to discipline them to get their attention and to show them the foolishness of their decisions. ◀

Verses 10-11. In order to help the people see what had happened and why, God spelled it out for them. Because of their misplaced priorities and failure to rebuild His house, God had shut both **the heaven** from giving its water and **the earth** from yielding its **fruit**. God had held back not only the rain, but even **the dew**. Normally, rains came in Israel in the fall and spring. During the other seasons, the crops depended on the morning dew for moisture; but God had withheld even that form of watering. We see other examples of God's providing the dew (Deut. 33:27-28; Zech. 8:12) or withholding it (1 Sam. 1:21; 1 Ki. 17:1). Water or the lack of it affected everything the people and their animals depended on for food and drink—grain, grapes, and olive trees. As a result, they did not have enough bread, wine, or oil, the basic necessities of their diet.

The words of the Lord in these verses mirror the warnings given to the Israelites when they entered the promised land—obedience to the Lord would bring blessings, while disobedience would bring punishment (Deut. 11:13-17; see also Deut. 28). By refusing to rebuild the Lord's temple, the people failed to fulfill their covenant obligations, and the Lord was judging them for their failure.¹ The Lord declared in verse 9 that He had ruined their harvest; now in verse 11 He acknowledged He **called for a drought upon the land**, which affected its produce, the people, and the animals. What was happening to the people was not the cycles of nature alone. It was the judgment of God. One commentator has

SUMMARIZE: As we see in verses 9-11, we lose out when we place ourselves ahead of God (**PSG, p. 87**):

- **When we are first, we cannot know God's will.**
When the people stopped focusing on God's priorities, He did things to get their attention. The rain ceased, so that the land stopped producing crops.
- **When God is first, He gives us what we need.**
In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us a key kingdom principle: Seek God first. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). When God is first, He will provide what we need.

DISCUSS: Question #4
(**PSG, p. 88**): **How can we determine what priority we've given God in our lives?**

(Alternate: When have you seen the damage caused by misaligned priorities?)

TRANSITION: "In the next verses, we see how the people respond to the Lord's reprimand."

STUDY THE BIBLE

Haggai 1:12-13

10 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Haggai 1:12-13.

GUIDE: Use **Bible**

Commentary **4** on this page and page 93 as well as the **KEY WORD (PSG, p. 89)** to explain the biblical meaning of God's *remnant*.

SUMMARIZE: Refer group members to **PSG pages 89-90** to describe what happened after God's "wake-up call."

The people listened to God and responded with full obedience. Their response was more than just outward obedience. Notice that last part of verse 12: "their God." Previously in the passage, God called them "this people" (v. 2), indicating they had broken their intimacy with God through their disobedience. But now the people came back to their God."

(Continued on next page.)

noted, "The implied contrast between people and nature is striking. The elements of nature modeled obedience to the divine will, while Haggai's community modeled inattention to divine priorities."²

Haggai 1:12-13

12 Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Josedech, 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 did fear before the Lord.

13 Then spake Haggai the Lord's messenger in the Lord's message unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith the Lord.

KEY WORD

remnant (v. 12)—Prophetic term for a small group of Israelites who survived God's judgment of the nation by repenting and trusting in God's mercy for their future.

God is with those who place Him first in their lives.

4 ▶ Verse 12. So how did the people respond? They **obeyed the voice of the LORD their God**—not only Zerubbabel and Joshua, but also **all the remnant of the people**. The *remnant* was a common term the prophets used to refer to a small group of Israelites who survived God's judgment of the nation by repenting and trusting in God's mercy for their future. Though God had judged the nation, He would purify those who remained and be merciful to them.

Haggai began his message from the Lord by referring to the Jews who had returned from captivity as "this people" (v. 2). Now that the people began to obey God, the author called them the *remnant*, a more positive term that reflected their covenant connection to God, who had created their nation and preserved a small minority after sending them into exile.

The people responded to Haggai's message with obedience because they recognized **the LORD their God had sent him**. They knew hearing Haggai's word was the same as hearing the voice of the Lord their God. Though they respected Haggai, it was the Lord they feared and revered and obeyed. ◀

Verse 13. Apparently, the people responded quickly to Haggai's message. Though Haggai began by addressing only the leaders Zerubbabel and Joshua (v. 1), perhaps he was also speaking to a gathering of the people. Or perhaps he spoke first to the Zerubbabel and Joshua, who then in turn conveyed his message to the rest of the people. Either way, all of the Jews in the land heard **the LORD's message** through Haggai, and they all responded with reverence and obedience.

As soon as the people committed to start rebuilding the temple, God sent another message through Haggai. His message was simple: **I am with you**. God made the same promise to Jacob (Gen. 28:15), to Moses (Ex. 3:12) and to Joshua (Josh. 1:5). As David expressed his desire to build a temple, God reminded David how He had always been with him (2 Sam. 7:9). When the angel appeared to Joseph to tell him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife although she was already pregnant, he told Joseph to name Mary's Son Emmanuel, which is translated "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). Paul wrote to encourage the Philippian believers by telling them, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). No thought can be more encouraging or motivating for the people of God than to know that God is with them to enable them to carry out His will!

Haggai recorded that God kept His promise by stirring up the spirits of Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all the remnant of the people to encourage them to get busy rebuilding the temple (Hag. 1:14). Less than four weeks after Haggai delivered his message (v. 1), the people began working on "the house of the LORD of hosts, their God" (vv. 14-15). The construction of the temple that was begun on September 21, 520 B.C. was completed on March 12, 515 B.C.³

Every generation has to deal with the same question that faced the Jewish people in Haggai's time: What or who should have ultimate priority in my life? Jesus said that when we put God and His will and ways first, then He will take care of all our needs. If we love Him wholeheartedly and trust Him, then we will always put His will, His worship, and service to Him first in our lives.

1. Richard A. Taylor, "Haggai" in *Haggai, Malachi*, vol. 21A in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2004), 134-35.

2. *Ibid.*, 135.

3. *Ibid.*, 144; Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, vol. 10 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 119.

As a result of their obedience, God made a great promise: "I am with you" (v. 13). The Lord was quick to renew His fellowship with the people when they returned to Him. It's the same with His followers today.

DISCUSS: Question #5
(PSG, p. 90): **What does it mean for God to be with us?**

OPTION: IN ADVANCE, print the text of Haggai 1:13 on a large sheet of paper. Call for a volunteer to read aloud the verse. Play the song "He Is With Us" by Love & The Outcome. The link to this video can be found at BibleStudiesForLife.com/AdultExtra. Encourage participants, while the song is playing, to write their experiences of recognizing God was with them in a particular situation.

(Alternate: How can we help one another keep our priorities straight?)

DO: Invite volunteers to share responses to the activity on **PSG page 90: "First Place."**

LIVE IT OUT



5 minutes

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:**
Always put God first.

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out** (PSG, p. 91; see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Emphasize the importance of putting God first in all that we do.

PRAY: "Father, help us to be obedient to You and Your priorities. Thank You for always being present with us."

NOTE: Remind group members that **PSG pages 6-9** are there to journal one another's prayer requests.

LIVE IT OUT

God must remain the priority in our lives. To help keep God as the top priority in your life, choose one of the following applications.

- ▶ **Mark the date.** Write today's date in your Bible next to the first chapter in Haggai. Pray that God will make today a spiritual marker, a time when you made Christ your top priority.
- ▶ **Pray daily.** Set aside a time each day where you will pray to God for five minutes. During your prayer time, ask God to reveal how He can be the top priority for you that day.
- ▶ **Serve.** The priority of Christ's lordship is seen in how you serve Him. Get involved in the life of your church to worship and serve Christ by serving others this week.

When you see a long line, the temptation is to cut to the front. However, there is no cutting in line with God. You cannot create a shortcut in spiritual growth. We must be passionate and disciplined to keep God as our first priority.

BIBLICAL
ILLUSTRATOR



Part of the Temple Mount structure called Zerubbabel's Marking, which is clearly defined in the midday sun. The marked change in the style of stonework along this vertical line clearly shows the smooth, precisely cut stones of Herod's extension to the temple platform on the southwest corner. The rougher, more pronounced stones along the wall to the north most likely are stones dating to Solomon, which Zerubbabel reset after the Israelites returned from exile. The lower four courses of these stones appear to be undisturbed and are possibly in their original positions.

Haggai is the only person named Haggai in the Old Testament. Like seven other prophets, Haggai provided no information about his parents or ancestry. Other than his name, we know nothing of his personal life.

Haggai gave no details about his call to ministry, but he referred to himself as a prophet five times (1:1,3,12; 2:1,10).

According to Scripture, Haggai was the first prophet to preach in Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity—the postexilic period. He likely returned to Jerusalem from Babylon with Zerubbabel in 538 B.C. Haggai carefully dated each of his messages. His first prophecy was “in the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month” (1:1). On the Hebrew calendar “the sixth month” was called Elul; this included portions of our August and September. “The first day” of Elul in 520 B.C. (Darius's second year) was August 29. Haggai's last message came less than four months after the first. Ezra recorded the historical background for Haggai's ministry and mentioned Haggai by name.

The excerpt above is from the article “Haggai: Prophet of the Return” (Spring 2015), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

From the time we come to Christ through repentance and faith, Jesus assumes the throne of our lives and becomes our first priority in all things.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, “Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All,” on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.



MINISTRY GRID
training made simple

Get expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid.

MinistryGrid.com/web/BibleStudiesForLife