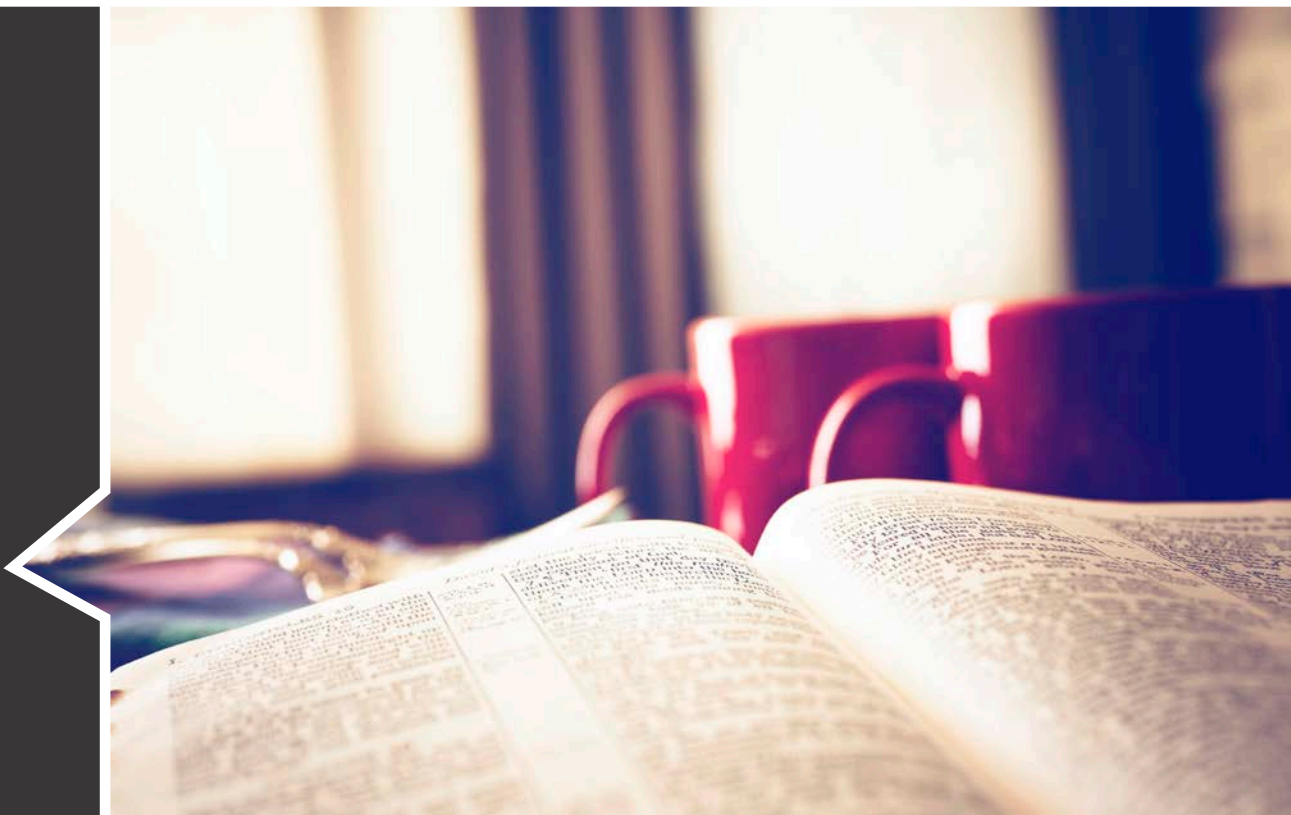


# FIRST THINGS FIRST



## ***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.

# SPECIAL FOCUS

# FIRST THINGS FIRST



*What's the longest you've waited in line?*

**QUESTION #1**

#BSFLfirstthings

*Always put God first.*

## THE PASSAGE

Haggai 1:2-13

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

One way to tell what's important to somebody is to see how long he will stand in line for something. Think about a time when you stood in line for a long time. Was it to vote in an election? Buy a new product? Get coffee? You likely stood in that line because it was a high priority for you.

When our priorities get mixed up, life gets out of line. Most often, this misalignment occurs because we are selfish. It is far too easy to focus on ourselves, and that selfishness misaligns our priorities. Before we can have the right priorities, we must understand what God puts first. His goals should come first. When we make His priorities our priorities, we find greater contentment and fulfillment.

How can we get in line with what God wants for us? Haggai 1:2-13 helps us understand how to align our priorities with God's priorities. The story in this passage reveals how God helped a group of people to change their selfish motives and put His goals first.

## 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.

Fifth century B.C. was a bleak period in Israel's history. The great empires of David and Solomon had crumbled. The Assyrians had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Babylonians had destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Jewish people were in exile hundreds of miles from their homeland. When Babylon fell to the Persian army, however, King Cyrus allowed God's chosen people to return and rebuild the city of Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4).

The governor, Zerubbabel, and the high priest, Joshua, were among the first to return. What they found in Jerusalem was complete devastation. During the Babylonian occupation, the entire

city was destroyed. The walls around the city lay in ruins, so that God’s people had no defense against potential attacks.

The temple also had been reduced to rubble. This was especially discouraging to the people because the temple was part of their identity—and now it was gone. Despite their dismay, the people obeyed God and began to rebuild the temple (3:8). They cleared the rubble and laid the foundation of the temple. But after a few years, they ran out of resources. They faced opposition from their enemies who were already in the land, and building stopped for the rest of Cyrus’s reign. The people became discouraged again (4:1-24).

Enter Haggai. We don’t know much about Haggai, but by the time Darius had become the ruler, he was serving as God’s prophet. It was Haggai’s responsibility to tell the people they needed to refocus on obeying God again. God sent Haggai to Jerusalem to urge the people to resume their work on the temple. Their initial fervor of returning home had waned. They needed a fresh challenge; God spoke that challenge through Haggai.

**What are some of the major priorities in our lives?**

## QUESTION #2

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. But instead of following God’s plans, they apparently had begun to build their own houses. Some of these homes must have been quite nice—Haggai called them “cieled houses”—but God was not impressed. By delaying their work on the temple, they disobeyed.

When we delay obedience to God, we are actually disobeying. Procrastination ruins priorities. Discouragement begins when we stop obeying God. One of Satan's greatest lies is "you've got time." Never challenge God's work or His timing.

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. They never had enough to eat or drink. Their clothes didn't keep them warm. No matter how much money they earned, it never seemed to be enough. (Does any of this sound familiar to us today?) This theme is at the core of most of our sins. We tend to seek our own interests, not those of Jesus (Phil. 2:21), yet it is in pursuing the interest of Christ that we find the greatest satisfaction. We will always be far less satisfied with our own priorities.

God was not pleased with His people. In fact, when He first spoke to Haggai, He called them "this people." God was still in a covenant relationship with the Jews, but a problem obviously existed in their relationship: disobedience. God was not done with them, however; He simply wanted to get their attention.

## DIGGING DEEPER



### THE LORD OF HOSTS

*Yahweh-Sabaoth* (1 Sam. 1:3; Jer. 11:20; cp. 1 Sam. 17:45). This

can also be rendered "the LORD Almighty." It represents God's power over the nations and was closely tied to Shiloh, to the ark

of the covenant, and to prophecy. The title designates God as King and Ruler of Israel, its armies, its temple, and of the entire universe.

"The Names of God," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. eds. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1172

God wants to get our attention as well. He wants us to find our satisfaction in Him, and we do that by making obedience to Him our priority. Just as He told the people through the prophet Haggai, God is pleased when we build on His priorities.

**What excuses do we make to delay our obedience?**

**QUESTION #3**

---

### ***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.

The people during Haggai's time had high expectations. But these expectations fell apart when they confronted opposition. They stopped working on the temple. They slumped even further when procrastination caused them to stop focusing on God's will. They figured they had plenty of time to finish the temple later, but God wanted them to work immediately. As we see in verses 9-11, we lose out when we place ourselves ahead of God.

**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. Many of the people in Jerusalem surely wondered, "What's going on? We are working hard, yet God is not providing. Why?"



God responded: “Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.” The people were working on the wrong things. They built nice homes for themselves but neglected work on God’s temple. God removed His blessing from the people because of their misguided priorities. Ironically, their work resulted in nothing because God took from them what they selfishly pursued.

We cannot know God’s will when we put ourselves first. The only way we can discern God’s desires for our lives is to make Him our priority. When our priorities are misguided by selfishness, our work does not glorify God. As a result, we get trapped in the vicious cycle of working harder and being less satisfied.

**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. When Jesus is Lord of our lives, we can’t lose. Sure, we may lose money in a stock market collapse. But for those in Christ, no earthly loss can compare with the heavenly gain we receive in Christ.

The people tasked with rebuilding the temple missed this point. Their priorities got messed up, and their passions became misdirected. Rather than focusing on God first, they focused on themselves. They lost because they did not put God first. Thankfully, however, their story did not end with this loss. The next few verses reveal how they responded and what God did in return.

**How can we determine what priority we’ve given God in our lives?**

**QUESTION #4**

---

## **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.

After God gave them a wakeup call, the people obeyed! God caused a drought that prevented the land from yielding crops, God allowed them to be completely dissatisfied with work, and God sent Haggai to speak firmly to them and show them their sin and failure. 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.

As a result of their obedience, God made a great promise: “I am with you.” The Lord was quick to renew His fellowship with the people when they returned to Him. It's the same with His followers today. When we make God the priority of our lives, He is with us. One of the great promises of God is that “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Heb. 13:5).

If you continue reading into verse 14, you'll see that the Lord's presence was more than just the equivalent of being in the same room with them. He “stirred up the spirit” of the people and gave them a new focus on the task of rebuilding the temple. This change was no false hype or enthusiasm. They had heard God's alarm clock. He woke them out of their selfish slumber, and their response

was genuine. Consequently, God worked with them because the people were willing to obey.

Where is God in your life right now? Does He have top priority? If not, then what priorities are above Him? You will never be satisfied with your life until God has first place in your life. In fact, God might be trying to get your attention right now. God promises to provide what you need if He is your priority. Even better, God promises His presence to those who put Him first.

**What does it mean for God to be with us?**

**QUESTION #5**

# FIRST PLACE

***God tells us in the first commandment to have no other gods but Him.***

***From the list below, circle anything that takes your focus off of God:***

- |               |               |                  |
|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| job           | sports        | television       |
| money         | house         | home improvement |
| car           | relationships | hobbies          |
| entertainment | recreation    | religion         |

What can you do this week to keep your focus on God as your first priority?

.....

.....

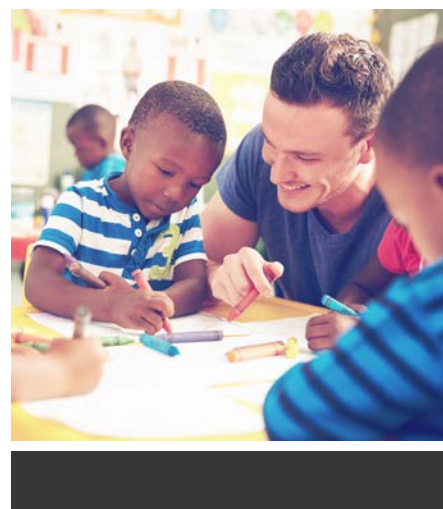
.....

# 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.



Share with others how you will live out this study: [#BSFLfirstthings](#)