

## Message for Sunday, August 14, 2022

### Prioritizing the Work of God Amidst Difficult Seasons

#### HAGGAI 1:1-11

Pastor J.R. Cuevas

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#### A Call to Build the House of the LORD

**1** In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jozadak,<sup>[a]</sup> the high priest:

**2** This is what the LORD Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD’s house.’”

**3** Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: **4** “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”

**5** Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. **6** You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”

**7** This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. **8** Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD. **9** “You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house. **10** Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. **11** I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.”

## **MESSAGE:**

I distinctly remember an instructional rebuke that my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Mrs. Colleen Liu, gave to one of my classmates who had failed to complete his homework. She asked him why he had not homework from the night before. My friend started to explain himself by saying, "Oh, because yesterday, I had to go to soccer practice, and..." when she stopped him. She looked at him straight in the eye and said, "You never put soccer before your schoolwork." What Mrs. Liu was trying to teach my classmate was what my parents had also been trying to teach me that year – the integral life skill of never neglecting your priorities. This is true of all practical matters in life.

But more importantly, this is true when it comes to the spiritual matters.

Without a doubt, the last two years has been a difficult season for the world and – because we are in the world – the church with the outbreak and spread of COVID-19. First, there was the actual outbreak of the virus itself that disrupted all gatherings including Sunday gatherings. What was a regular occurrence on Sunday mornings became virtually non-existent for many. Second, there were the quarantine and Shelter-in-place quarantine laws made it very difficult to gather without the fear that we could somehow get in trouble with law enforcement. As a result of both of these, many Christians are not as active or invested in the ministry of the church as they previously were. Third, the many travel restrictions and laws against public gathering impacted our economy negatively. Many suffered from lost jobs and pay-cuts. And because of this, what naturally had also dropped has been financial contribution to God's church. As a result from a lack of ministry and a lack of contribution, many churches have either had to shut down or face the threat of having to do so.

But are the trials and realities that we currently are experiencing in our nation and state enough of a reason to neglect the work of God? Did God, in his Word, ever give a protocol to pause from the work of missions, outreach, and disciple-making – all which are a part of the building of His church – in light of either a pandemic or economic recession or political persecution? Is there ever a legitimate reason to put aside the work of God? A little over 2500 years ago, the people of God thought so.

During that time, the Jews had begun rebuilding of the temple when they returned to Jerusalem from exile. However, due to Gentile opposition and false accusation made against them, the rebuilding of the house of God temporarily ceased for approximately 16 years during which the Jews struggled economically as a people. It was then that God commissioned the prophet Haggai to exhort and instruct the Jews about how they had neglected His work, and how they needed to consider their ways and reconsider their priorities and re-engage in the

rebuilding of the temple. This is a prophecy in which God repeatedly calls His people to consider how they had misplaced their spiritual priorities.

But though the book of Haggai was written to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Jews, it was written for us Christians today as well. Through the instructions of this book, we Christians are called to consider whether or not we are truly exhibiting the correct priorities in life, for the exaltation of God's glory and the experiencing of God's blessing in life is directly impacted by it.

First, we must beware of the **deception** that can cause us to neglect God's work. The Jews fell prey to this. During times of cultural persecution, political decrees that spoke against God's work, and economic hardship, they said to themselves, "The time has not come for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt" (Haggai 1:2). They were deceived into thinking that they needed to focus solely on rebuilding their own households rather than investing in the rebuilding of God's house. They made the mistake of thinking that it was permissible to neglect God's work for the sake of taking care of their own households. And that's why God says several times, "Consider your ways" (Haggai 1:5, 7). He said that they were dwelling in paneled houses while His house lay desolate (Haggai 1:4). They were doing so much work for their own selves, and had done nothing for the Lord. And thus God tells them, "Go up to the mountains, bring wood, and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified," (Haggai 1:8). Even in times of economic hardship, when their households were struggling, they were to commit to doing God's prescribed work in building His house.

The reason why such a pattern can be deceptive is because God does indeed tell us to care for our own households. God never tells us to neglect our homes and our families for the sake of His work. In fact, in books like Malachi and Nehemiah, we see negative examples of people who wrongly neglected their own families for the sake of God's work. To care for one's household is indeed a good and necessary endeavor. That's why it's easy for a Christian to be deceived into thinking that they can neglect God's work for the sake of taking care of our families. But while God calls us to care for our own homes and families, so He has also called us to invest in His kingdom work. It's not either or, but rather both. Even when there may seem to be pragmatic reasons to cease from doing God's work for a season, we must heed the Word of God and always be abounding in the work of the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58). We cannot wait until it is the "right time" to do so, because there will never be a convenient time. And we must beware of the many excuses that we can come up with as to why we can't be invested in God's work of building up His spiritual house – His church – today. It's not to say that our ministries have to look exactly the same in all periods and seasons of life. There's room for flexibility, adjustments, and changes. But one thing is for sure: we must beware of being deceived into thinking that we can neglect the work of God.

Second, we must know the **discipline** that God may carry out if we neglect His work. The Jews during Haggai's time did not realize that the reason they were struggling financially was because God was disciplining them for their neglect of His work. He said, "Because of you the sky has withheld its dew and the earth has withheld its produce. I called for a drought...on all the labor of your hands," (Haggai 11:11). God was not going to destroy the Jews after bringing them back to Jerusalem. He had no plans to harm them, but rather He had plans to prosper them (Jeremiah 29:11). But part of that meant that He needed to discipline them for their wrongdoing so that they would repent. And, in this particular case, His means of disciplining them was withholding financial prosperity and causing economic hardship upon them as a people. Only by returning to doing His work would He lift His hand of discipline from them.

We must remember that God is fully sovereign over world history, human society, political affairs, and the flow of the economy in every part of the world. He can provide for whomever He wishes, and He can withhold provision from whomever He wishes. But one of the things we do see in the Bible is that God always honors those who prioritize the right things. Because Solomon prayed for wisdom, God provided for him far more than he could have imagined (1 Kings 3:9). Jesus instructed that if we seek His kingdom and righteousness first, God will provide all of our needs which He already knows before we ask (Matthew 6:32-34). At the same time, 2 Corinthians 9:6 says that those who sow sparingly will also reap sparingly. Those who neglect to invest generously in the work of God are those who will also reap sparingly. Many times, God disciplines His children who neglect His work by causing financial hardship. This is so that we could consider our ways, repent, and re-engage in His work.

On one hand, yes, it is never an easy time to invest in the ministry of the church. We have an adversary, Satan, who is always opposing the work of God and has manipulated the world system to put up resistance. But on the other hand, it is always the right time, because now is the season of salvation. Christ is alive, is in heaven, reigns over all of heaven and earth, and has poured out the Holy Spirit upon His people. For the last 2000 years – amidst all opposition and resistance and affliction – He has continued to build His church through one saved soul at a time who has placed his faith in Him and in Him alone. He loves His church, and gave Himself up for her in order to forgive her and sanctify her and build her. Our duty, in the midst of an ever-changing and ever-resisting world, is to continue to invest in making disciples of Christ of all nations and in every region of the world (Matthew 28:18-20). The work must go on.