

Text: Haggai 1:12-15 (Pew Bible pg.937)

Title: “Moving Beyond Discouragement”

INTRODUCTION

Open your Bibles to the book of Haggai. It might take you a moment; it's the second shortest book in the OT. As you're turning let me remind you that tonight we'll begin a summer study featuring John Piper's book "Don't Waste Your Life." I encourage you to join us for what could be a life-changing study.

ILLUSTRATION – Let's board our special helicopter that has flown us over some important segments in the OT history of God's people in our study of the prophets. We hovered over the Northern Kingdom (Israel) as God spoke through His prophets. We hovered over the Southern Kingdom as God spoke through other prophets. Then we hovered over Babylon as God spoke through the prophets during the seventy years of captivity in Babylon. But then the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians who allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, and the last group of the prophets who were used by God to encourage the people as they rebuilt their lives and their country.

As we hover over Jerusalem, it looks a lot different than it did 100 years before. Where once it was a radiant city with the Temple of God at the center of the city, now it looks like Ground Zero after 9/11. We can see that many of the citizens of Jerusalem had rebuilt their homes, some of them very lovely. But on Mt. Zion where the glorious Temple once stood it still looked like ruins. Oh, several years before they at least had started to rebuild the temple, but for many years nothing further had been done.

We can't see if from the air, but on the ground among the people there was an air of discouragement. They just couldn't seem to move beyond their present situation. The Jews have returned to their homeland but things are still a mess. And they were paralyzed by their discouragement.

Have you ever been paralyzed by discouragement? Have you ever been so disheartened about something that you simply didn't know what to do? Or maybe you knew what needed to be done, but you couldn't bring yourself to get on with it? If you've ever felt that way, or if you're feeling that way now, you really have a jump on grasping the truth of God's Word in the book of Haggai; because that's what you find here ... some people who are standing in half-finished business, and they can't seem to get on with it.

Into that setting 2500 years ago God sent a prophet named Haggai to encourage the people to move on beyond their discouragement to accomplish something extraordinary. And by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the prophet Haggai is speaking to those of us today who need to move on beyond discouragement.

So what is at the root of this demobilizing, demoralizing, paralyzing discouragement? The symptoms of discouragement:

1. HOPELESSNESS CAUSED BY AN OVERWHELMING TASK (1:1-2)

Haggai 1:1 - 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 Jehozadak, the high priest:

Haggai 1:2 - This is what the LORD Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come for the LORD’s house to be built.’ ”

Now this relates particularly to two important men ... Zerubbabel and Joshua. Zerubbabel is the governor ... the civic leader. Joshua is the high priest ... the spiritual leader. They have a huge assignment. They are trying to lead the people to do something extraordinary, but they are bogged down. We know from reading the book of Ezra that about 50,000 exiles returned to Jerusalem to a city that looked like it had been bombed. At first they were enthusiastic about rebuilding their lives and their city. They had a great day when the cornerstone of the foundation of the Temple was put in place. But that was about 15 years ago. And so the Lord comes to Zerubbabel and Joshua to say, “I know what you’re facing ... what seems to be an overwhelming task that has left you feeling hopeless.

ILLUSTRATION – I experience this every time I need to clean out my garage. I let things pile up for months. And then on a Saturday morning I go out and look at the overwhelming task and ... I go back in the house and watch golf.

Maybe you’re staring at an overwhelming situation that has left you feeling hopeless. “Why should I throw myself into something that there doesn’t seem to be much hope for change. My marriage is too far gone. I’m too far in debt. I hopelessly addicted to this habit. I’m battling cancer that just keeps coming back.” You’re not alone if you’re facing hopelessness caused by an overwhelming situation. Another symptom...

2. FEAR CAUSED BY OPPOSING FORCES

Now this is not stated very directly in Haggai, but we know it is the case by reading the parallel history in Ezra and Nehemiah. Haggai was a partner with Ezra in the rebuilding of the Temple. Nehemiah’s job was rebuilding the walls of the city. Listen to what he says about his enemies:

Nehemiah 4:1 - When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews,

Nehemiah 4:2 - and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?”

Nehemiah 4:3 - Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!”

The people Haggai speaks to were facing the same kind of opposition.

I'm telling you that we have a vicious spiritual enemy in Satan. One of his choice weapons is discouragement and fear. He will try to strike fear in your heart ... fear of failure, fear of what other people will say, fear of difficulty and so much more. The Bible says we must resist him. Satan is the father of lies, and he will lie to you to intimidate you and cause you fear.

Now as we dig down a little deeper we see there is a spiritual component to this discouragement. They've actually brought it upon themselves. There's...

3. APATHY CAUSED BY SELFISH PRIORITIES (1:3-11)

Now the problem that the Lord sees is this: The exiles who have returned have rebuilt their homes, but the central part of their faith as a people, the Temple, has been left completely unfinished. Just a foundation stone has been put in place. And the people have said, "No, it's not time. We'll see to that business later when we can get around to it." And this apathy is caused by selfish priorities.

Haggai 1:3-4 - Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

The Lord says, "You have time and money for everything else except the thing that ought to be the top priority in your life. What's the deal?"

Now there is a law of sowing and reaping found throughout the Bible when it comes to this matter of giving. And we see it here. Times were tough in Jerusalem, and there was a spiritual reason. The people were selfishly spending everything on themselves while neglecting the priority of their worship of Almighty God, and the construction of the Temple for His glory. And consequently there was a famine in the land.

Haggai 1:5-6 - Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have 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."

Do you ever feel that way? A little later in Haggai 1 the Lord continues this challenge.

Haggai 1:9 - "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 his own house."

And God was using all this to get their attention. The Lord says, "Give careful thought to your ways. Just look at your situation. You don't have enough. Everything you invest in turns to nothing. Do you think there's a connection between your frustrating financial situation and your neglect of the work of God? Why should I entrust my wealth to you? What will you do with it? I have poured financial blessings into your life for you to use for my work, and you have only spent it on yourself. Why should I give you more?"

Now the Lord never rebukes us without also correcting us.

Haggai 1:7-8 - This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD.

Why is this such a big deal to the Lord? Why is the rebuilding of the Temple something that the Lord would be pleased and honored in? Answer: The rebuilding of the Temple would be a powerful statement by the people that they still worshipped and valued the Lord God. It would demonstrate their commitment to the Lord as the highest priority in their lives. It would demonstrate to the surrounding nations that they still took their covenant with God seriously.

And that’s still true today for us as the NT people of God. As we invest what God has given to us in His Kingdom’s work, we are saying, “Christ is important to me. I’ll show that by the way I spend my money and my time. I want a watching world to know the He is the highest priority and the highest value in my life.”

This is a timely word for our church. Scripture passages like this help churches like ours as we face the challenge of renewing our physical campus. Next September we will begin in earnest to raise the funds needed to get started on the next phase. We have the opportunity to leave a “lasting legacy.” Many decades ago the church of that day, a few of whom are still with us, made the commitment to do something for the future. They built this beautiful sanctuary. There are generations to follow us.

Now there’s one more symptom of discouragement that we see in this situation. There’s...

4. DOUBT CAUSED BY UNREALISTIC COMPARISONS (2:1-3)

We see this if we jump ahead a few verses to Haggai 2. One of the most paralyzing symptoms of discouragement is self-doubt. What’s happening here is that some of the people are older and they can remember the “good ol’ days.” They saw Solomon’s Temple in all its glory and grandeur. They remember the Golden Age when Jerusalem and the Temple were magnificent. As the rebuilding gets under way it quickly becomes apparent that this new temple will be nothing compared to the old one from Solomon’s day. And the Lord knows this, and He knows that the people know this. And he asks some questions:

Haggai 2:3 - ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?’

In fact, Ezra 3:12 tells us that some of the older people wept, while everyone else was rejoicing. It’s as if the Lord is saying, “Yes, it doesn’t look like the old temple. It isn’t perfect; it isn’t even all that beautiful. But I never asked you to build Me something bigger and more beautiful than the last one. I simply asked you to obey me.”

You see, unfair and unreasonable comparisons can be one of the most paralyzing things in life. People say, “If I can’t be the biggest and the best, I won’t even try. If I can’t be perfect, I won’t even

try.” Quit comparing yourself to other people. God is only looking for faithfulness to what He tells you to do or be ... not what He has told someone else to do or be.

By the way, later the Lord will tell them, “It doesn’t look like it did before, but I am doing a new thing. I will fill this Temple with glory, in fact, the glory of the present Temple will be greater than the glory of the former one. Be encouraged.

So here we have this discouraging situation. Will the people be able to push through these difficult circumstances and get on with the life God has for them?

Then something happened! Suddenly the tide shifted. Spirits were lifted. Look at it:

Haggai 1:14 - So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel ... and the spirit of Joshua ... and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God,

Now what caused this remarkable turnaround? What changed? What happens for us when we are moved beyond discouragement? Three things:

1. WE ARE AWAKENED BY THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD (1:14).

“*The Lord stirred up the spirit...*” – This shows me how dependent we are on the grace of God. It can’t be just a matter of pulling ourselves up by our boot straps, as they say. We need the Lord. The whole situation would have continued to be bogged down in discouragement if God hadn’t come down and done something.

“*The Lord stirred up the spirit ... of Zerubbabel ... of Joshua ... of the people...*”

What does that mean? The word for “stirred” pictures one being awakened and roused to action. This occurs in their “spirit.” The work done in the spirit of man is done by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit awakens us from the sleep of discouragement.

And as a result...

Haggai 1:14b - They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God...

A revival began. We read about it in the book of Ezra. Now if you go back a couple of verses you see exactly how the Lord by His Spirit awakened the people from the sleep of discouragement. We are awakened by the Spirit of God and...

2. WE ARE ENCOURAGED (EDIFIED) BY THE WORD OF THE LORD (1:13; 2:4-5).

Haggai 1:13 - Then Haggai, the LORD’s messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: “I am with you,” declares the LORD.

Now Haggai speaks this same thing again in more detail in...

Haggai 2:4-5 - But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'

Now so often the word of the Lord comes through other people. So here is one person (Haggai) saying to other people (Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people), "God told me to tell you He is with you. God told me to tell you to be strong and go forward." We need those kinds of encouraging voices in our lives and in our church. We need people around us who help us hear God say, "Be strong. Move forward with the work I've given you to do. Don't be afraid."

Note: There will always be people who will be critical and discouraging in their talk. In the days of Haggai, Ezra and Nehemiah there was Sabbalat and Tobiah. But then there are people like Haggai who step up and encourage others that with God's help it can be done.

When we are awakened by the Spirit of God and encouraged by the word of God, we will be ...

3. WE ARE ENERGIZED TO DO THE WILL OF THE LORD (1:12).

Haggai 1:12 - Then Zerubbabel ... Joshua ... and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.

This is what happens when a person is saved ... awakened by the Spirit, edified by the Word and energized for the work. This is what happens in times of meaningful renewal and revival in our lives.