

BaptistWay Bible Series for March 15: Put priority on God's work

March 3, 2009

Some of us probably wish the alarm clock's snooze button never had been invented. I'm sure it was intended to be helpful, giving us an extra five or seven minutes of needed rest before the day begins. But many of us are "snoozer abusers," hitting that button repeatedly until we're late for the day.

As we'll see in our only lesson focusing on the prophetic ministry of Haggai, the Jews had put off putting priority on God's work, bringing God's anger with their procrastination. It was time for them to wake up to God, and for God to speak an awakening word through Haggai. Reflecting on our lesson overview, "Restoring the Future," if the Israelites are going to restore their future, they can't keep hitting the snooze.

Context

In the past two weeks of Bible study lessons in Ezra, we've journeyed with the ancient Jews through a dizzying set of spiritual highs. In Ezra's first chapter, we joined their story as they tasted freedom for the first time in nearly 50 years. Forced into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:1-30; 2 Chronicles 36:1-21), they were freed in 538 B.C. through a decree by Cyrus, the new king of Persia, following Babylon's defeat by the Persian army.

Along with the enthusiasm of their newfound freedom came the enthusiasm

of rebuilding their spiritual heritage and to begin worshipping God in his temple. In Ezra 3, we studied how, just seven months after their return, the Jews laid the foundation for the temple, their national place of worship of Yahweh. It seems they were taking immediate action put their nation on a path to follow God's will and priorities.

Now it is some 18 years later. How do we know that? Haggai is carefully dated by the author (who is probably the prophet Haggai himself) in the second year of King Darius, about 520 B.C. Haggai consists mainly of three sermons given throughout the year on three different days (Haggai 1:1; 2:1; 2:10), with a concluding message (some would say a fourth sermon) to Zerubbabel, the governor, on the final day, after the third sermon.

If you read the remainder of Ezra, you probably noted the Jews underwent many challenges in the intervening years. You also may have read that in addition to Ezra, other prophets were sharing the word of God, including Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1). The most notable challenges were discouragement from their enemies, government red tape from both their territorial governor and the administration of Darius, and their own apathy.

But it's their apathy that we'll focus on in verses 1:1-11 and 2:1-9. Because, as we'll see, it's what God focused on. He called the people to understand that truly honoring God with our lives calls for giving in support of God's work.

Chicken or egg?

In the first chapter, God opens a new discourse with his people in his first message through Haggai, who asks a stinging rhetorical question, "It is time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house (the temple) lies desolate?" (v. 4, NASB).

God then delivers in verses 5-11 a recap of the past several years' events. It's nothing the Jews aren't familiar with. They've been in the midst of a drought and famine, a fact they know too well. But God uses Haggai to deliver not just the "what" of the news, but the "why:" It is the people's sin that has caused the famine. They are responsible. They have built their own homes while ignoring God's home. They have put their own priorities above God's.

Can you imagine how exasperated God must have been with Israel for missing this simple chicken-or-egg scenario? It was their sin that had caused the famine. This is the nation that had lived under the Mosaic covenant—they should have known better. They had, throughout their history, flourished with God's blessings when they obeyed his law and leadership. They had suffered terribly when they disobeyed. Their latest sin had led to their exile by Babylon. They should have known. They should have known better.

While verses 12-14 are outside of our focus, it is of note that the people (starting with the civil and spiritual leaders Zerubbabel and Joshua) immediately heard God's word through Haggai, "showed reverence for the Lord" (v. 12), and moved to act. There is no proof of understanding greater than instant response.

After rebuke, encouragement

The second message from God (vv. 1-9) was given after the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-43), about three weeks after the work was restarted. It opens as a message of encouragement to the people, and in particular to Governor Zerubbabel and High Priest Joshua.

It is totally in God's nature that he rebuked the people for their lost focus in the first message, but offers them a word of encouragement in the second,

after they are now on the same page with God. Our God is both a God of justice and encouragement, as evidenced in the second message. He is a God that knows “the plans that I have for you ... plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope”(Jeremiah 29:11, NASB).

Along with the encouragement, though, comes a challenge—and another rhetorical question: “Who was alive that saw the temple in its glory and what is it like now?” It’s a direct challenge to do a thorough building job that would bring back the glory of the Solomon-built temple.

The final part of the message is both an encouragement of the people and an acknowledgment that times might get tough for them as they rebuild the Temple. “... and all you people of the land take courage’ declares the Lord, ‘and work; for I am with you,’ says the Lord of hosts” (v. 4).

That verse and the rest of the message are a not-so-subtle reminder that our God is not only adequate for any job within his priorities (his will), he is immeasurably powerful.

Questions to explore

- *To what extent do you think neglecting to support God’s work indicates neglect in commitment to God?*
- *If you have found yourself outside of God’s priorities, have you felt God’s reprimand?*
- *What are God’s priorities in your life? How do you know what they are?*
- *How does God’s message of courage for the Jews in Haggai 2:1-9 resonate with you today?*

- *Some of the Jews' most notable challenges during this time were discouragement from their enemies, bureaucratic red tape and their own apathy. How do these challenges still keep us from God's priorities?*