

Life: Haggai's message of hope

January 16, 2013

This LifeWay Bible Studies for Life lesson for Jan. 27 focuses on Haggai 1:2-9; 2:4-5, 9, 18-19, 23 17-18, 21.

It's so easy to get disoriented, lose focus and even ignore long-held priorities. This especially is so in times of transition.

Haggai had been charged by God to speak to the remnant of Israel, those who had survived to see their homeland again after enslavement. As they came back home to restart their lives, they had forgotten to honor God. The evidence was seen in their intention to feather their own nests at the expense of the house of God.

God, through Haggai, asked the people to reconsider their actions based on the outcome of their efforts: "Give careful thought to your ways. 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."

These are words that need little translation to land right in the middle of our lives in 21st century America. In a time of economic uncertainty, these words also should gain a careful hearing. Is it true all of our economic woes are to be blamed on global forces over which we have no control? Is it easier to blame Congress for our financial situations than to "give careful thought" to our personal ways? Is there any way in which our lives could be improved economically if we were just more intentional about how we lived, worked and invested our resources?

It is vital we keep a careful balance in our thinking about "God's house." On a mission trip to Latvia, we visited a seaport that had become home to native Russians who had been abandoned there when the Soviet Union fell

apart at the end of the Cold War. City slums were filled with children of all ages living on the very edge with little or no adult care or supervision.

Within a short walking distance of these slums, the Russian government was investing millions of dollars to restore an ancient Orthodox church. When we walked into the sanctuary, the priest was upset our women were wearing sleeveless dresses, even though it was the middle of summer.

We were appalled the priest was so attentive to the dress of tourists but seemingly blind to the appalling needs of the children living in squalor nearby. His sanctuary was filled with priceless art and gold-painted walls.

However, when we got back home, I realized many of our churches must look the same way to those who live in poverty in the shadow of massive sanctuaries. If we invest too much in what we call “the Lord’s house” and yet fail to pay attention to the children of God dying nearby, there is nothing about that kind of investment that surely honors or pleases God.

In Haggai’s day, the neglect of the Lord’s house had simply become the most evident witness that the people of God were neglecting their highest spiritual values in their private lives. We can tell a great deal about our true priorities, no matter what we claim, by how we spend our time, how we spend our money and how we treat people.

These were harsh words for the people of God to hear. It’s unusual for the words of the biblical prophets to not sound harsh. That’s because they are speaking truth to our greatest areas of neglect. Yet, this is not how God would leave God’s words with the people. There were words of encouragement to come as well.

As our youth leave home to go to college, get married or start a career, it is vital parents remember these are significant times of spiritual transition as well. We need to encourage our youth in those times of transition so they also will remember their long-held values and priorities.

God promised the people at least three things: God would be with them; the people would know the peace of God; and the blessing of God ultimately would be theirs.

We can do the work of God now, no matter how costly or even frightening, as long as we know what we are doing truly honors God. Knowing what truly honors God takes great discipline. It requires the study of God's word, commitment to the community of God's people and the willingness to always stand corrected.

We also can do the work of God as long as we know that, in the end, God is faithful to us. We constantly should ask ourselves how we can be more faithful to God. We should do so, however, under the umbrella of certainty that God has promised God's faithfulness.

No matter what God calls us to do, we are not alone in any sense of the word. We have the presence and peace of God upon which we can rest every moment of every day. We also can trust we will never invest anything in the kingdom that, in time, God will not bless and honor.