

# Voices: Not-so-Minor Prophets: Haggai

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Haggai takes place after those taken in the Babylonian exile have returned to their homeland. Persia is the major ruler now, and the rule in Persia's reign is those once captivated can return home.

The Israelites, who were in captivity, can now go home. Further, not only can they return to Jerusalem, but they can do what they have been waiting for: rebuild. In particular, they can rebuild the temple.

Haggai, though, is not a book about the perfect execution of a long-awaited project; it is, first, about apathy. The people are quicker to build their own homes before they get to work in the Lord's temple. Apathetic, Israel needed a prophet to remind them of their priorities.

Haggai—like all the prophets—seeks to stir a response in listeners, to encourage conviction when necessary. Teachers and preachers can walk through the book of Haggai and its themes by asking at least four prompting questions that encourage listeners to think.

## Focus

**The first questions** to ask are about apathy. Are there aspects of the Lord's work for which we are apathetic? Do we procrastinate the work God would have us do because we are too busy 'building' our own lives?

Are we more concerned with building and maintaining our own homes—literally or metaphorically—than the house of the Lord?

Haggai prompts questions about what it is we are working toward in our

own lives in place of or preceding what work God would have us do.

Haggai also deals with unmet expectations. Once the people get to building, the temple is not what it once was. This temple is not like Solomon's; it will lack the grandeur of Solomon's temple.

Even still, this is the perfect opportunity for Israel to remember what the purpose of the temple was. The temple was created to be a place where all who call on the name of the Lord could worship in his presence together.

## Purpose

We might need a similar reminder about the purpose of our buildings and, even more so, the purpose of our mission as the church. The church moving forward may look different than it has in the past. We may need to restructure our staff, rethink how to evangelize and re-envision how to welcome people into our congregations.

New media, urban sprawl and an increasingly post-Christian nation will mean many of our churches will have to reimagine how to make use of their buildings and mission.

I do not have the answers to these questions, nor could I treat these issues sufficiently in this space. What we do need to remember, regardless, is what the purpose of the church is as we move forward.

As we move forward in this adapting world, the church must remember to hold fast to the teachings of our faith, the authority of Scripture, and the commitment to gather and care for the world.

**The second question** to ask those we teach or to whom preach is: What do you believe is the purpose of the church? It is simple but so much of preaching and teaching should be reminding people repeatedly of ancient

truths in new contexts.

## Purity

Later in Haggai, the people are rebuked for rebuilding the temple with impure hands. Haggai uses a parable to teach the people if you are going to do the work of the Lord, be holy.

The people are supposed to be faithful and holy in their whole lives. We are not supposed to segment our lives into holy things and unholy things. We cannot work with soiled hands.

**The third question** is: If we are to move forward doing the Lord's work, are we doing that with a holy life? God calls his people to holy lives, and even more so when we are doing his work. Are you doing the Lord's work with holy hands?

## Hope

Ruined expectations and apathy are not the only themes of Haggai. We are not left with the disappointment of a nation, but rather, with the call for Israel to get to work in hope. Israel needs to get to the Lord's work, remember what the purpose of their work is, and do that work with holy hands.

Common to the prophets, Haggai speaks about the coming kingdom of God. We must get to work here and now, because God has invited us to that work. Our getting to work now, though, should be interpreted by God's work to come.

God is involved. Our world and churches may look different, but God always is concerned about the work and well-being of his people, in any age.

**The fourth question** we can ask our listeners: Does God's future work interpret the work you are doing now? Do you have hope God is at work making all things new?

Haggai, like many of the other prophets, convicts us, but the book does not leave us to feel convicted. We are supposed to feel compelled and encouraged when the book ends.

Asking prompting questions as we teach can encourage listeners to be introspective, as Haggai does. God is asking us to look within, but also to look without toward God's good future.

Asking questions about focus, purpose and purity should conclude with a question of hope. The prophet is stirring his people to answer to their God, but also to know the Lord is answering them—and us—with a word of hope.

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