

Minor Prophets' Major Gripes, X

Haggai on Priorities

August 17, 2003

REBULIDING THE TEMPLE

The warnings of the Minor Prophets - to this point - have fallen on deaf ears, and God's judgment has come to the Israelites.

- They were deported and exiled to Babylon (605–586 B.C.)
- Solomon's Temple, in Jerusalem was destroyed (586 B.C.)
- This is where it stood: Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

47 years later (539) Persian King Cyrus toppled Babylon; and in a bid to increase loyalty and establish buffer zones around his empire, Cyrus released the Israelites and issued this decree:

Let the temple be rebuilt ... The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. ... the gold and silver articles ... are to be returned ... - *Ezra 6:2-5 NIV*

Within two years the altar was finished, sacrificial practices re-established, and the huge temple foundation was laid.

... many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. - *Ezra 3:12-13 NIV*

Judah's neighbors didn't want Israel to becoming strong; so:

1. They tried to infiltrate and disrupt the project. (*Ezra 4:2*)
2. They upset, intimidated, and threatened them. (*Ezra 4:4*)
3. They [even] hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia. - *Ezra 4:5 NIV*

But guess how far all this bullying and political pressure got them. Actually, it worked out really well for them.

- The project pretty much ground to a halt ... for 10 years.

ROYAL SOAP OPERA

When King Cyrus died (530) he had two sons: Cambyses and Smerdis.

- Cambyses [kam-BIGH-seez] assassinated his brother, kept the murder a secret, and went off to conquer Egypt ... and died.
- While he was gone the custodian of the palace found a guy who looked like (murdered) Smerdis and proclaimed him king.

This was Artaxerxes [ahr-tuh-ZUHRK-seez]. He ruled for seven months in 522 B.C. And while he was king, Judah's Trans-Euphrates' neighbors wrote him a letter ... we have a copy of it:

... the Jews who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city (blah, blah, blah) That is why this city was destroyed (blah, blah, blah) you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates. [Sincerely, your servants] - Ezra 4:11-16 NIV

Wanting to act responsibly, Artaxerxes sends this reply:

... this city has a long history of revolt against kings (blah, blah, blah) now issue an order to these men to stop work (blah, blah, blah) Why let this threat grow, to the detriment of the royal interests? - Ezra 4:17-22 NIV

And so the temple project was not only halted, but hopeless.

Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. - Ezra 4:24 NIV

Darius [duh-RIGH-uhs] was the real Smerdis' third cousin (are you following all this?). He retained the loyalty of the Persian army and overthrew Artaxerxes (a.k.a. Pseudo Smerdis).

HAGGAI TO THE RESCUE

It is against this backdrop that our hero: the Minor Prophet Haggai [HAG-eye] comes onto the scene ... on August 29, 520 B.C.

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 ... These people say, "The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built." - Haggai 1:1-2 NIV

The book of Haggai is very gentle compared to the other Minor Prophets. These people weren't prideful or rebellious, just *busy*. It's been sixteen years since their release; they've built up houses, businesses, and families.

- They had a foundation with an altar ... they could get by.
- They weren't telling God "No." just "Not right now."

Q: Sound familiar? You ever put God on hold ... just for a while?

- It's a trap to believe that our busyness is only temporary

Haggai had a simple message: "Consider your priorities."

Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin? – Haggai 1:4 NIV

This wasn't just a guilt tactic to get the temple built. Haggai had a heart for these people and how their misplaced priorities were affecting the whole of their lives.

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." – Haggai 1:5-6

Q: Does it ever feel like your purse (wallet) has a hole in it?

When our priorities are out of order we feel out of alignment in every area. We work hard we play hard but there's an emptiness. On the flip side: when we put the Lord first in our lives we find peace, joy, and satisfying purpose in the smallest things.

... the purses of heaven have no holes in them. Your treasure will be safe – no thief can steal it and no moth can destroy it. Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be. – Luke 12:33-34 NLT

The problem isn't the volume of demands or the lack of time; it's not identifying what's worthy and giving it top priority.

- Our values are directly reflected in our priorities

Unlike other Minor Prophets, the people didn't ignore Haggai. He spoke on August 29, and they got to work on September 21:

They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius. – Haggai 1:14-15 NIV

And they were discouraged by October 17!

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? – Haggai 2:3 NIV

We are so quick to get discouraged by what we perceive as a lack of progress in our spiritual efforts and personal changes. But, it is our duty to remain active in our faith and put first things first. It is the Lord's duty to watch over the progress.

When Tattenai (TAT-ih-nigh) governor of the Trans-Euphrates saw them rebuilding, he fired off this letter to King Darius:

... The people are building [the temple] with large stones (blah, blah, blah) We questioned the elders ... This is the answer they gave us: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple (so on and so on) King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God." ... - Ezra 5:7-17 NIV

King Darius made a search of the royal archive and found that original memorandum from King Cyrus. And Darius wrote back:

Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. (blah, blah, blah) Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God: The expenses of these men are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop. (blah, blah, blah) I decree that if anyone changes this edict, a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it. - Ezra 6:6-12 NIV

Through Haggai, God made a promise to those discouraged workers:

"... I will fill this house with glory," says the LORD Almighty. ... "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," - Haggai 2:7-9 NIV

- Four years later (March 12 516 B.C.) the temple was completed.

And 500 years later He entered this temple's courts in physical form. He never did that in Solomon's temple! The progress and the end results belong to the Lord.

I wonder if Jesus was thinking back to these people when He talked about counting the cost of following Him.

For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." - Luke 14:29-30 NIV

Our faith will end up half-built and abandoned unless we:

1. Count the cost.
2. Refuse to get discouraged by things we cannot control.
3. Keep our priorities straight.

Q: Do you work hard, play hard, but still find something missing?

Q: Do you have any abandoned spiritual projects; acts of faith you plan on doing, someday ... when you get the time?

- As we restore our priorities God restores the joy of our salvation.