

BUILD THE HOUSE

Haggai 1:1-15 (Key verse: 8)

“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.”

The message is based on the book of Haggai chapter 1 verses 1 to 15. Key verse is verse 12, we have read it, *“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.”*

The book of Haggai records the prophesy that came from God through the prophet Haggai to encourage and stir up the people of Judah to get back to the work of building the temple. Let’s look at verse 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 Jozadak, the high priest.”* Verse 1 tells us that the prophesy came during the Persian empire and that the people of Judah at that time were under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the governor and Joshua the high priest. These two men had been entrusted by king Cyrus of Persia to lead the people of Judah back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel.

The people of Judah sinned against God and because of that He sent them off into captivity into the land of Babylon under king Nebuchadnezzar (*II Kings 24-25*). The Babylonians were subsequently overthrown by the Medes and Persians (*Dan 5:25-28*). After the takeover, *“the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to...”* ^{Ezra 1:1} release some of the people of Judah to *“go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel.”* ^{Ezra 1:2} These people were not forced by the king to go up. The scripture tells us that *“everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.”* ^{Ezra 1:5} They were moved by the Spirit of God to go and rebuild the temple. In fact, they didn’t waste time. *“In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem”* ^{Ezra 3:8} they began the work.” *And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.”* ^{Ezra 3:11} These are a people on a mission. They knew why they had come and they were doing exactly what they had come up to Jerusalem to do. This even brought them a lot of joy and meaning. Notwithstanding their zeal and passion to rebuild the house of God, the Jews were met with some obstacles. *“...the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials 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 4:4-5}

This opposition, this discouragement and frustration led to the people of Judah stopping work for an entire 16 year period. (Those who work in construction know that the client would’ve fired the construction company at this point. 😊) The work was halted for 16 years and as result, the people naturally took more interest in their personal affairs than spiritual matters. Because of the opposition and the worries that came with that, they shifted their focus from why they had come to Jerusalem in the first place and started pursuing their own personal interests.

It is at this point that the prophesy was received. Let’s look at verse 2. *“This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’”* The people of Judah analyzed their challenges. They realized that they had limited resources and that they were also receiving opposition from surrounding nations. They concluded that the timing was not right. They had to wait for the storm to pass before they can dedicate themselves to rebuilding the house of God. At face value, this sounds like a good enough reason for them to delay the work of God. They were being harassed by their neighbors, especially the Samaritans who had been worshiping God while having idols at the same time. The people of Judah didn’t want those Samaritans to contribute their efforts of corruption and perversion into the house of God. They wanted to maintain a pure religion- this sounds like a noble reason. However, verse 2 says, “These people” and this is not the most endearing phrase by God for the nation that He chose and loves. He does not call them “My people.” (This recalls that time at Mount Sinai when Aaron built the golden calf and God referred to the Israelites as the people of Moses, saying to Moses, *“Your people whom you brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt.”*) ^{Exo 32} Verse 2 immediately tells us that their reason for stopping the work is primarily self-seeking.

Let’s look at verses 3 and 4 to see why. Let’s read them together, *“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?”* Someone said, *“Life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass. It’s about learning how to dance in the rain.”* ^{Vivian Green} The people of Judah were willing to wait for the storm to pass when it comes to rebuilding the temple of God. Yet, when it concerns their own lives, they are happy to learn how to dance in the rain. They think that their problem is timing. They fell into the trap of

02 July 2023

South Africa

thinking that they needed to wait for the “right” time to rebuild the temple of God. However, their lives exposed the fact that they are simply prioritizing themselves over God and His temple. We can never be in want of a “good enough” reason to avoid or delay the work of God. There is always a sense and this idea that we will have enough time at a certain point where we will be able to “fully” devote ourselves to and focus on the work of God. We naturally have this illusion of thinking that our lives will “start” after a certain event in our plans is fulfilled. It usually goes something like this, “After I submit this assignment” or “After I finish my exams.” “Once I graduate” or “once I get a job,” “once I get a car.” Other times, “if I can just get my work under control and manage my time efficiently” or “When I get married” or “Once I’m done raising the kids.” The reasons are limitless and all of which seem noble. Unfortunately, that is not how God looks at these reasons. The Holy One of Israel looks down upon the earth and laments, “These people...they prioritize their miniscule lives over the work that I have given them.”

God wants His people to prioritize the work that He has called them to do, in this case, to build His house. In fact, the more the Israelites delayed the work of God, the more they suffered. Look at verses 5 to 6 and verse 9 to 11. *“Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “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.” “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 your own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.”* When the people of Judah looked at their lives, they thought that they did not have enough to put towards the temple. They thought that they were too poor and unprotected to do the work of God. They thought that their lack of resources was some providential justification for them to stop the work. All the while, their lack of resources resulted from the fact that they had stopped the work of God. (They looked around and thought “This must be a sign that we should stop the work”) Because of their perverted priorities God took away His blessing from the works of their hands. He took away their efficacy, productivity and ability to become truly and really useful.

“This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways.” How is our life? What is our focus and where are we going? Are we prioritizing the work of God, of building His house? Or do we vainly hope that a better time will come in the future for us to devote ourselves? Are we running a consistent academic and work track record while we neglect the work of God? Scripture says, *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* Can we honestly say that when God looks at our lives He will utter the same remarks of excellence, adoration and appreciation that our lecturers and employers make. Will He say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant?” We don’t have to answer those questions here. Let them be a dialogue between each of us and our God in whom we profess faith. That will enable us to test ourselves and thus make our time here today useful. Amen!?

Now, what are the works of God and what can we do to prioritize the same over the affairs of our lives? You can imagine the Israelites crying to God, “We were censured by the nations around us and the Sidonians will not bring down to us the cedars of Lebanon. How are we to rebuild the temple?” Let’s look at verse 8. Let’s read it together, Let’s go. *“Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord.* The people of Judah probably thought they needed elaborate materials or at least half the resources that Solomon had to continue building the temple. They thought it was complicated so that it became easier for them to mind their lives rather than rebuild the temple. So, God gives them the simplest solution. These guys were in exile for 70 years and you can imagine that they must have had hectares and hectares of forests with lots of trees for timber. Thus God says to them, *“Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored.”* God was not concerned that the temple would not be as magnificent as it was in the time of Solomon. He just wanted them to rebuild the temple. This is one of the things that really cripples our work for God. We look at what others have done or are doing and we think “Nah, I could never. Some people are just gifted more.” Yet God’s way is simple. He doesn’t want a bunch of robots that run on a similar algorithm in a production line. He wants us to just show up and do the most simplest of things. *“Go into the mountains and bring down timber.”* You don’t need to write a code for that. Just pick up an axe and go cut the thing down. Do what can be and is doable. Amen!?

Now I know that we are not the people of Judah and definitely we are not rebuilding a temple. So how can this message apply to us today? Do we have a temple and what does this going up into the mountains look like for us? Listen to what Peter says, *“As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living*

02 July 2023

South Africa

stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." ^{1 Pet 2:4} Amen! The people of Judah needed to rebuild the temple so that God may once again dwell in their midst, and they can be able to offer sacrifices to God. In Christ we are called to be members of His Holy Universal church by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are called to serve God through the church and, as it were, offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. God sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross so that by trusting in Him we may have life. This life that we have, we live it serving God as living sacrifices by building His house. If you were here last week, the word said, "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." ^{Rom 12:1} Through the church we worship God and pray, and we also study and teach His word. In our local church, we also write testimonies and do devotionals. These are what is called the means of Grace. These are the things that we can do to build the church, the house of God, today. We can also contribute to its sustenance financially as well as consciously making a decision to put ourselves out as custodians and defenders of our local church. What I mean by that is that sometimes it's easy to hide among a group and claim associative allegiance while knowing in one's heart that you're not fully with the group...maybe waiting for the "other shoe" to drop or perhaps waiting for clarity of "God's calling", whatever that means, but people say such things. Unfortunately, we cannot build the house of God with that attitude. We will always stand on the fence and never give our all.

Remember what God says, "Give careful thought to your ways." You are a member of this ministry. You are at Wits UBF. Amen! Think about your life. What are you doing here and what is it that you hope to achieve? God is calling us to build His house, and we are in this house His house right now. Not next year, not in 5 years' time but today we are in His house Wits UBF and we are here for a reason: to build this His particular house. Amen! Let us therefore be encouraged and determined. Let us make the conscious choice to do our part. To do what we can to build the house of God. If you're a messenger, die on the message and give your all and build this house. If you're a bible teacher, die on the bible and prepare thoroughly to feed your sheep and desire to share the mysteries of the word with the same. And if you be a bible student, show up, prepare for the study. Read the passage in depth and come and hope to teach your bible teacher something. And as a bible student, who is seasoned, desire to also grow into a bible teacher and enjoy the privilege and pleasure of affecting and influencing someone's life with the word of God. And experience that joy when you hear them say, "Jesus Christ is LORD." Amen! Finally, let us all write and share our testimonies in our respective groups. Let us prepare testimonies and peruse the word of God in search of mysteries hidden therein. Some of us have the privilege to prepare messages. We have the opportunity to look at the passages in ways that we never thought possible (maybe I speak for myself there.) Testimony writing is intended to afford all of us that opportunity to dive into the word and analyze it with the same level of depth if not more. So, we are here, right!? Either we build the house of God or we do not. But we must make a decision to build the house. If not this one, then let's not waste life. Let's find a house that we want to build. A place where we can pour ourselves in, for God's sake. Amen!?

Someone may ask, "Why should I bother building the house of God? Why does He need me to do that?" We want to say unequivocally to that person, God does not need you or anyone. He is fully glorified in Himself. Arthur Pink puts it this way, "He is solitary in His majesty, unique in His excellency, peerless in His perfections. He sustains all, but is Himself independent of all. He gives to all, but is enriched by none." ^{Sovereignty of God. AW Pink} And the Westminster's Divines say, "God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He hath made, not deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them: He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things, and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleaseth." ^{Westminster's Confession of Faith.} Basically, God does not need us. Amen! Or as Jesus would put it, "And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."

Now, since God does not need us, why the farce of building His house? Why should we do it? The first question of the Westminster's Larger Catechism is "What is the chief and highest end of man?" For this generation, that translates, "What is the purpose of man?" (Do we know the answer?) The Catechism answers, "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." We have come into this world to glorify God and to enjoy Him in this world and in the world to come. In his book, Ecclesiastes, the wise teacher declares all things meaningless if they are not pursued, done or enjoyed in light of God's glory and His honor in eternity. So, we build the house of God because it expresses our meaning and our purpose. It makes our lives to have a purpose that transcends our limited time in this world and promises us a reward in eternity. This is not really us doing it for God, but rather for ourselves, to honor Him so that He may be pleased with us, His creature and more so, His children. Amen!?

There was a time in my life in the ministry when I was unsure about whether or not I should build the house of God within Wits UBF or if I should go elsewhere. Basically, I was concerned with two factors: one, I worried about marriage, and wondered whether or not I'd be able to find a partner that I like and one who would be able to enjoy serving with me in our demanding level of commitment and service. Yes, that's a real thing. The way we do church here maybe a little bit a lot for some, so you want to ensure that all angles are covered. Nevertheless, over time it became clear that God provides for His children according to their needs. So, even in this regard, will God provide for His servant when in this regard. The second thing was concern over the individualistic nature of the ministry. It was as if the ministry popped out of nowhere. UBF began in 1961 and you want to ask, how did it start and where did the founders come from. Today we talk about Mormonism and Jehovah's witness as appearing out of nowhere and not linked to church history in any way. Nevertheless, that became also clearer overtime and I even had to come to this understanding even after becoming a shepherd. But I know now with every fibre of my being that this is certainly the house that I want to help build and the hope is for this message to help you ask yourself the same questions and see what you find.

In concluding,

We only have one life to live and this life we have it now to live. We cannot defer the opportunity to live today for later. We cannot hope that we will later in life have enough resources and time to do the things that supposedly matter to us today. God called the people Judah out of Babylon and sent them out with the purpose of rebuilding the temple. They thought they didn't have time and didn't have resources and ultimately 16 years passed and the work remained to be done. Yet on other fronts, their personal lives were flourishing, even though in a limited sense. They had built themselves houses and were now fully established in the land and yet deserted the house of God. God said to them *"Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house."* In deed when they obeyed the word of God to go and build the house of God, God was with them as we see in verses 12 through 15. God has also called us to be members of His house in which we offer burnt offerings. We each have something that we can do to build the house of God. Let us, therefore, come together and work together to do our part. This is our duty and it is how we can live lives that express gratitude in view of God's mercy. Amen!