*01* NEW YEAR STUDY 2020

BUILD THE HOUSE

Haggai 1:1-15

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. (8)

What is your main priority in life? Think about it for a moment. What is the one thing, you absolutely do not compromise, no matter how sick or broke or busy you are. The one thing, for what you will push everything else aside to ensure it gets done. What is that in your life? Or who is it? In general, the one thing all of us prioritise above everything else in life…..is maintaining and securing our lives in this world. We are prepared to do whatever it takes, to ensure that we are safe and secure in this fallen world. **It was no different with the Israelites in today’s passage**. Like us, they worked very hard to build and live in luxurious houses. While leaving the LORD’s house as a ruin.This contrast in condition between the LORD’s house and their own luxury houses vividly revealed that their first priority in life was ………not to live for the LORD their God………. but to live for themselves. Their own wellbeing was more important than the honor and pleasure of the LORD. Hence, they build up their own houses and left the house of the LORD in ruin. But the LORD could not accept this from His people. So to help them set their priorities in life straight, He in love commanded them to carefully consider their ways and then to build the house of the LORD. I pray that by listening to today’s message, you and I deeply repent of always making God second even third priority in our lives. Also, I pray that you and I decide to from now on…..put God first in our lives. Practically, how can we do this? We can do so like the Israelites, by building the house of the LORD. Amen!

Now at the time of today’s passage, the house of the LORD, that is the temple in Jerusalem, was still in ruin. When I say ‘in ruin’ I mean, there was no building at all; only a foundation. This was because, about 70 years earlier, the Babylonian army (2 Kings 25:8-12) completely demolished God’s temple. They first stripped the temple of all the gold, silver, wood and other valuable materials. They then burned it……and finally tore it down, brick by brick. Until, it was completely demolished…..flattened……… to be a mere pile of rubble. The demolition of the LORD’s temple was a vivid illustration of the LORD’s judgment on His people. It also served as a symbol of God’s ruined relationship with His people. Yet, after 70 years in Babylonian exile, the LORD allowed a small group of Israelites to return to Jerusalem. They came with one clear mission: to rebuild the ruined temple of the LORD. And so restore their ruined relationship with LORD as first priority in their lives. That is why, as soon as this group of Israelites arrived back in Jerusalem, the first thing some of the heads of the families did, was to give freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site. (Ezra 2:68) Seven months later, they rebuilt the altar of the God of Israel and then 5 months later, eagerly began with construction of the temple by laying its foundation. At that time all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD. (Ezra 3) But then opposition against the building of the LORD’s temple arose. The surrounding nations set out to discourage the Israelites and made them afraid to go on building. (Ezra 4) They even hired councillors to work against the builders and so frustrate their plans. To the point that they obtained a letter from the Persian King to compel the Israelites…..by force……. to stop building the temple of God. Thus, after about a year back in Jerusalem, the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a COMPLETE standstill. Fortunately, after FIFTEEN years, Darius became the new king of Persia. And under his rule, the Israelites were once again allowed to continue building the temple.

**Look at verse 1.** Already 2 and a half years had passed, since Darius became king of Persia. Yet, surprisingly, the Israelites in Judah, had still not begun rebuilding the temple. It still stood there, a ruin with only a foundation. Why?! We would expect that the moment Darius became king of Persia, the Israelites would have immediately started to rebuild the temple, right?! So why did they do nothing? Look at verse 2 (Read) Why on earth would they say this?! The very reason these Israelites returned to Jerusalem 17 and a half years earlier was to rebuild the house of the LORD. And so restore their relationship with Him, as first priority. Consequently, the time to build the LORD’s house most definitely already came! So why would they now say: The time has not yet come for the LORD’s house to be built.’

Well, **humanly speaking**, there might have been a couple of reasons. For starters, the land was still desolate after 70 years of neglect, the work to sustain their lives was hard, they were generally poor (Haggai 1:6), lacked manpower, suffered crop failures and drought (Haggai 1:10-11), and on top of that had hostile enemies resisting the work (Ezra 4:1-5). So we can say that at the time, life was really tough. Consequently, the Israelites thought, the time has not yet come for the LORD’s house to be built.’ **I mean, if God wanted them to build His house, would He not make it easier for them?**

However, these unfavourable circumstances were not the real reason why the Israelites failed to build the LORD’s house. Look at verse 4. Despite the harsh circumstances, the Israelites managed to build for themselves paneled houses.(The NLT translates it as ‘luxurious houses’). If the circumstances were so tough that they could not build the house of the LORD, how could they manage to build luxurious homes for themselves? Indeed, failing to build the house of the LORD was **not a matter of not the right time**…**or a matter of life being hard……. But it was a matter of PRIORITIES**. Initially, when the Israelites first arrived back in Jerusalem from Babylon, their first priority was to build the house of the LORD. However, during the 15 years that they were unable to build, their priorities in life changed. Instead of regarding their relationship with God as first priority in life, the gradually moved away from the LORD to instead focus on their own wellbeing. Hence, they build and lived in luxurious houses, all while the LORD’s house remained a ruin. What a big shame! **Indeed, even these days it is so easy for us to say that the time has not yet come for me to build the house of the LORD. Be it because of study pressure, work pressure, finance issues, family matters, or simply because we think we are not ready. The truth is, however, it is not a matter of the right time…….or a matter of life being hard or busy……. Rather, it is a matter of PRIORITIES. If God is first priority in our lives, then we can and will find time build His house. However, if our own wellbeing is more important than the LORD, we too like the Israelites will find many excuses why we cannot build the house of the LORD.**

Look at verse 6. (Read) Ironically, when the Israelites put their own wellbeing ahead of their relationship with God, they experienced the exact opposite of what they expected from their hard labour. Though they planted much, they harvested little. Though they ate, they never had enough. Though they drank, they never had their fill. Though they put on clothes, they were not warm. Though they earned wages, it disappeared as though they were putting them in pockets filled with holes! Due to their hard labour, they expected much but it turned out to be little (9a).**Why did this happen?** Look at verse 9b. The LORD said: What you brought home, I blew away. Look also at verses 10-11. The LORD also called for a drought on the fields…. and the mountains……, on the grain,the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produced. He even put a drought on men and cattle, and on the labor of [their] hands.” Why did the LORD do all this? As a loving God, was He not supposed to bless the work of His people’s hands?

Look again at verse 9. The LORD answers our question very clearly. He refused to bless the work of His people’s hands, “Because of [His] house, which remain[ed] a ruin, while each of [them was] busy with his [or her] own house. Put more simply, the LORD refused to bless the work of His people’s hands because their priorities in life were upside down. They were more concerned about their own houses….than the house of the LORD……they were more concerned about their financial wellbeing and security in life than the honor and pleasure of the LORD…..They were more concerned about doing their own work….than doing the work of God. To them, the LORD was second priority! Their first priority was to take care of their own lives. That is why, no matter how hard they worked, the LORD could not bless the work of their hands. Instead, He blew it away. For He could not accept the twisted priorities of their hearts! The LORD is God Almighty and therefore demands to be the absolute top priority in His people’s lives. He will never settle for anything less. Therefore, the LORD Almighty warned His people to (look at verses 5 and 7) “Give careful thought to your ways.” To realise, that the way they were living was not pleasing unto the LORD. **What about you and me? We stand at the beginning of a new year; filled with new opportunities and challenges. Before we really start to take them on, it is a good idea for us to also give careful thought to our ways. What has been your top priority in life? How has the LORD treated the work of our hands? These are very important questions that you and I must carefully think about. Because, the answer to these questions will directly determine, not only what you and I will practically do as first priority in our lives this year……but also whether the LORD can bless the work of our hands…… or not. Therefore, let each one of us, here and now, give careful thought to our ways. And deeply and sincerely repent for making the LORD as a second or third priority in our lives.**

The question is, if you want to place the LORD as first priority in your life, practically what should you do every day, every week and every month of this year? (even the rest of your life) As the saying goes: talk is cheap….and action speaks louder than words. Indeed, it is easy to say the LORD is first priority in my life, but it is not what we say that the LORD looks at but what we do that He considers. So if the LORD truly is first priority in your lives, what will the LORD see you do this year? Look at verse 8. Can we read today’s key verse together? 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. For the previous two and a half years, material wellbeing was the main priority in the Israelites’ lives. This was the real reason why they failed to build the house of the LORD….. yet build luxurious houses for themselves. During this time, the LORD patiently waited for them to realise their sin. He even blew away the work of their hands and placed a drought on them, so they could come to their senses. Yet, when this did not work, the LORD sent the prophet Haggai to tell His people straight: get your priorities back in order by “going up into the mountains…… bring down timber…… and build the house of the LORD.

But why, do you think, if they did this would the LORD accept it as the way for them to put God first in their lives? It is because in order to build the house of the LORD, the Israelites would practically have to stop with whatever they were busy with….. to instead build the LORD’s house. In other words, they had to physically put down their working tools, lock the doors of their luxurious houses, put on their walking shoes……and physically walk towards the mountains. Then, with determination go up into the mountains. This takes time. It also requires much energy and effort. Yet, once they reached the top of the mountains, they had to work hard to cut down the trees and collect the timber. Thereafter, they had to physically bring down the timber to the sight of the LORD’s temple. Then, physically and practically build the house of the LORD, by placing one log of wood on top of the other. **Here we can learn a very important principle about how to put God as first priority in our lives. Many believers make the mistake of thinking that if they passively sit and pray, then God is first priority in their lives. Yes, prayer is important! But from our key verse, we can learn that placing God as first priority in life requires ACTION! They had to physically and practically go up into the mountains, chop down some trees, carry the timber down to the building site and lay one log on top of the other. Likewise, if we truly want to put God as first priority in our lives, then we cannot merely pray passively for campus mission. But we must also take action, by physically and practically go to campus and see students face to face. We will switch off our cell phones, put down our pens, close our books, prepare the bible study questions and physically walk to campus. Once we get there, we will find a venue, open our bibles and spend time with one precious brother and sister.**

But to do this is really not easy. Look at verse 8 again. It reads: ‘build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,’ says the LORD. Yes, to build the house of the LORD is something we do for the LORD! Not ourselves. Hence, for the Israelites to build the house of the LORD, required selfless work with one goal in mind and one goal only: For the LORD to take pleasure in it and be honored.

Then how did the Israelites respond to the LORD’s instruction? Look at verse 12. They obeyed the voice of the LORD their God! The LORD was pleased with this, that at that exact moment, He declared (Look at verse 13) ‘I am with you!’ For the previous two and a half years the LORD could not be with His people. He simply could not dwell among them because their priorities were upside down. Yet, after they repented and decided to obey the voice of the LORD, the LORD immediately said: “I am with you.” Did this mean that now the LORD would solve all their problems and simply let them live in prosperity? Not at all. Look at verse 14. It meant that the LORD stirred up the spirit of the leaders, both Zerubbabel the governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the high priest. He also stirred the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. For what purpose? To strengthen their hearts so they could actually come and begin to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God. Here we can learn that without God’s stirring of our spirits, we can never be concerned about His work on campus. Without the moving of our spirit, how can we ever leave our busy lives to sacrificially serve one brother or sister on campus? Indeed, if the LORD is not with us…..if He does not stir our spirit…..we can never build the house of the LORD on our campus.

In Conclusion. What is your first priority in life? It is easy to say, the LORD. However, to honestly answer this question you and I both must carefully consider our ways. Indeed, now we stand at the beginning of a new year. So it is the right time to do this. Many of us, like the Israelites, are so busy building up and securing our own lives that we too say that the time has not yet come FOR ME to build the house of the LORD. So we make many excuses why we cannot come for bible studies, write bible testimonies, attend worship service, and serve students with the word of God. However, through today’s passage, we have learned that it is not a matter of time. It is also not a matter of whether the situation is favourable or not to serve the LORD. Rather, it is a matter of PRIORITIES! Is it a priority for you and me to build the house of the LORD? Here, it is our actions, not our words that will answer this question. It is whether we actually make the time to physically come to campus to meet students for 1-1 bible studies or not, that answer this question.

But as we have said, it is not easy for selfish sinners like us, to give up our time for the LORD. So what should we do? Like the Israelites, we should simply decide to obey the voice of the LORD. Whether we think we can build the LORD’s house or not, does not matter. Instead, by faith and willingness, we should simply make a firm decision to build the LORD’s house. Once we do this, the LORD promises to be with you and me. He will surely stir our spirits and so help us, to daily overcome our sinful desires to practically build His house on campus.

Then how can we build the house of the LORD? Our UBF ministry has 4 specific ways whereby the LORD has instructed us to build His house. 1. We can each build it by serving 1 student through 1-1 bible study this year. 2. We can build it by writing bible testimonies and coming together to share them with each other. 3.We can build it by maintaining our spiritual life through morning devotion. 4. And for some us, when the time is right, we can build it by establishing house churches for campus mission. Indeed, on our own, we can never do any of these things. However, once we decided to obey the voice of the LORD, He will be with us. He will stir our spirits and make sure that we practically build His house, so he can take pleasure in it and be honoured.

This is the direction for our ministry this year; to build the house of the LORD. I sincerely pray, that each one of you embrace this direction….. and regardless of whether you think you can do it or not…..simply obey the voice of the LORD. Then let’s see, how the LORD stir our spirits and help us to build the house of the LORD in 2020. Amen.