NEW YEAR STUDY 2020 – Revisited (05 May 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)

In the beginning of the year, the LORD gave WITS UBF clear direction for 2020 through His word on Haggai chapter 1.Through Haggai 1:8 the LORD pressed upon our hearts that we should build His house. We accepted that building the LORD’s house is not something we do passively, but practically by taking action. And as part of the UBF ministry we said that there are 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 we can build it by establishing house churches for campus mission.

In the beginning of the year, when we accepted God’s direction, we had no idea that a worldwide Covid-19 pandemic would break out. We also could not even imagine that our lives would be forced to a standstill with a national lockdown. The question we have to ask ourselves now, after 5 weeks of lockdown……….are we as a ministry still on track to follow God’s direction for us to build His house? To answer this question, I want to briefly revisit what we have learned through Haggai 1 and so evaluate whether what we are doing now as a ministry….. is still part of God’s direction for us in 2020.

The first thing we learned from Haggai 1, was that to build the house of the LORD we must place God as first priority in our lives**.** When we consider the prevailing circumstances around Haggai 1, we remember that already 2 and a half years had passed, since Darius became king of Persia. This was significant, because for 15 years prior to Darius’ reign, the Israelites were forcefully stopped from building the House of the Lord in Jerusalem. Yet, when Darius became king of Persia, the Israelites were free to resume building the house of the LORD. Surprisingly, however, the Israelites did not do so. Even after two and a half years since Darius became king, the Israelites in Judah, had still not begun rebuilding the temple. It still stood there, a ruin with only a foundation. The question was, why did the Israelites not build the house of the LORD?

**In short: they prioritised maintaining their lives over building the house of the LORD.** The very reason these Israelites returned to Jerusalem 17 and a half years earlier was to rebuild the house of the LORD. Building the house of the LORD was their **first priority in life**. So much so that they risked their lives traveling from Babylon to Jerusalem without any soldiers to protect them from bandits of robbers on the way. They were determined and ready to put their lives **on the line to build the house of the LORD**. Just as God wanted them to. However, after initially making a good start, the unfavourable circumstances changed their priorities. We know this, because during two years after Darius became king, the Israelites could easily have gotten back to work and build the house of the LORD. Yet, they did absolutely nothing. Their excuse was: The time has not yet come for the LORD’s house to be built.’ This was absolute nonsense. Firstly, the time to build the house of the LORD came 17 and a half years earlier, when the LORD sent them to Jerusalem for that very purpose. Secondly, while failing to build the house of the LORD, the Israelites managed to build paneled houses for themselves. This showed that, failing to build the house of the LORD was **not a matter of not the right time**…**But it was a matter of priority. Simply put, the Israelites prioritised maintaining their own lives over building the house of the LORD.**

**What about us? Like the Israelites, we made a good start at the beginning of the year to build the house of the LORD. But then, we were forced to retreat to our homes and have been** under lockdown for the last 5 weeks. The lockdown might have changed our circumstances, but it did not change God’s direction for our ministry. He already knew in the beginning of the year that we will be in this situation. Yet, He gave us the direction to build His house. So we cannot now say, because of the Covid-19 lockdown, the time has not yet come for the LORD’s house to be built.’ The time has definitely come. And now just as before, God’s direction for our ministry is to build His house. The question is, are our priorities still in check? Despite the change in circumstances, are we still prioritising the building of God’s house as our first priority? Or has the unfavourable circumstances led us to prioritising building panelled houses for ourselves over the building of the LORD’s house?

The truth is, despite the lockdown……despite the fact that we cannot have any contact sessions….. we can still build the house of the LORD through online sessions.

1. We can still have online bible studies.
2. We can still write bible testimonies and come together online to share them with each other.
3. Also, we can still uphold our spiritual life through morning devotion.
4. And lastly, we can still pray and help our graduates to establish house churches for campus mission.

Looking back at the last 5 weeks, I really thank the LORD for helping our leaders to continue upholding each of these building blocks. We have continued with online bible studies. We have continued to write and share testimonies. We have continued to pray and encourage our graduates to establish house churches for campus mission. I believe, we also have kept up our spiritual life through morning devotion. Therefore, despite the lockdown, I believe WITS UBF is still on the right track and is obeying the direction the LORD has given us in the beginning of the year. I really thank the LORD for this!

Nevertheless, we should continue to observe the priorities of our hearts, as we go about building the LORD’s house. Is building the house of the LORD still our FIRST priority? Sadly, I must confess that I have fallen into temptation to maintain my life as first priority, instead of building the house of the LORD. My mind has been overly preoccupied with how to launch my digital agency. Now, more than ever. Due to the loss of income last month and the reluctance to continue to tutor small children, I have pressured myself to as soon as possible start generating income through digital marketing. But the more I push, the more I fall into despair because I still have so much to learn. There are still so many things that I have to figure out before I can actually sell my services or sell any products online. This has discouraged me so much. And many days I fall in despair. But through writing this short review, I realised that this was because my priorities have changed. When I carefully considered my ways, I realised that though I have made sure the ministry moves forward, my heart has been corrupted. Because I am constantly worried and under pressure to maintain my life through generating income through launching a digital agency. This is wrong and I want to come back to my senses. I want to have a pure heart to sacrifice my life to build the house of the LORD as my first priority. So He can take pleasure in it and be honored. I deeply repent of my sin to maintaining my life as first priority. And return to the LORD to build His house as first priority.

The lockdown is not an obstacle to building the house of the LORD. Instead, the real obstacle is losing focus and changing our priorities during the lockdown. Indeed, because of the lockdown we have so many uncertainties about maintaining our lives. Some of us have lost income, others are unable to study, others are worried of losing their jobs, and students are under pressure to complete the semester. Also, due to the lock down we are not always able to reach or connect with students. It therefore makes sense that now we might be more concerned about maintaining our lives than ever. But it does not justify changing our priorities. The LORD is still God and He still deserves to be first priority in our lives. Moreover, He promises that if we build His house as first priority, then He will bless us with all we need and more…….. to sustain our lives in this world. In contrast, if like the Israelites, we make maintaining our lives as our first priority, the LORD will blow away the work of our hands.

The LORD told the Israelites in verses 9-11. *“*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 his 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 oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands.” The LORD made it abundantly clear, that He would not bless His people while they prioritised their own lives over building the house of the LORD. Therefore, we must obey the LORD’s direction for our ministry as first priority in our lives. Whether there is a lockdown or no lockdown. Building the LORD’s house is our first priority. Because this is the direction the LORD has given us this year. Let us accept this in our deep hearts and live it out every day; regardless of the circumstances around us. Amen!

I know, that this is much easier said than done. Also, accepting God’s direction is much easier than actually carrying it out. It was no different for the Israelites. In verse 8, the LORD commanded the Israelites: Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house. This required time…..it required sacrifice…..it required energy…..it required dedication…..because they had to physically stop what they were doing, put on their shoes and practically go up into the mountains……while they could easily have stayed in their fields and take care of their lives. They then had to work hard to cut down the trees and bring down timber to the building site. And physically build the house of the LORD. This entailed many hours of sweat and struggle. Indeed, it was not easy to do. Especially, because of the urgent need to take care of their lives. Yet we see in verses 12-13 Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.

We must follow in their footsteps. We can do this by spending quality time with God’s word, sacrifice our sleep to prepare for bible studies, spend our energy contacting sheep, dedicate ourselves to observing God’s word and writing sincere testimonies and continue to meet online for bible studies. Indeed, just like the Israelites who had to physically stop what they were doing, put on their shoes and practically go up into the mountains……so we too must do what is necessary to prepare God’s word, accept it in our hearts and share it with those under our care. Indeed, that is why it is not always easy to build the LORD’s house, even during the lockdown. Because we are naturally lazy, we compromise time, we sleep and want to be entertained, we don’t want to struggle with God’s word. Yet, that is exactly what the LORD has called us to do….He requires us to go up the mountain….cut down the trees and bring it down so we can build His house. We can do this by investing our time and energy to observe His word, spend time with Him in prayer, and take care of His sheep online…..to build His house. **Amen.**

On the point of spending time with God’s word. As we know, reading and understanding God’s word is not easy. Therefore, we are tempted to simply rely on our own understanding, or accept the views and explanations of others like commentators or authors or other pastors on the passage. However, though these resources might assist us in understanding the context of a passage, we must receive God’s word personally as revealed to us with the help of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, as tempting as it might be to bring other authors and commentators and our own head knowledge to the passage…..it can be a massive distraction and even obstacle for the Holy Spirit to work in us through His word. Then how can we avoid relying on secondary sources to make sense of God’s word to us?

We need to spend time carefully reading and analysing the text. To see, what message the LORD wants to reveal through the text. It takes time and energy. And if we truly want to obey the LORD’s direction to build His house this year, then we will make time to do exactly this……carefully read and analyse the text without distractions of secondary commentaries of the passage. I want to suggest, that this be our main focus for the remainder of the lockdown. For students, graduates, leaders and missionaries…..we should all spend quality time with the bible by sincerely preparing for bible studies and writing testimonies as we carefully read and observe the text. Until, the Holy Spirit reveals one word personally in our hearts. Amen.

In conclusion: In the beginning of the year, the LORD gave WITS UBF direction to build His house through serving 1 student through 1-1 bible study this year, by writing and sharing bible testimonies with each other, by maintaining our spiritual life through morning devotion and by establishing house churches for campus mission. The LORD has been faithful in helping us to do all of this online, despite the lockdown. However, in these uncertain times we must guard against prioritising our own lives over building the house of the LORD. We can do so by spending quality time with God’s word – to personally and sacrificially observing His word until the Holy Spirit reveal God’s truth in our hearts. Amen.

Our prayer topics for the remainder of the lockdown is:

1. Continue to build the house of the LORD online
2. Guard against prioritising our own lives over the LORD’s direction to build His house.
3. Spend quality time observing and analysing the word of the LORD, until the Holy Spirit reveals one word in us.