

QUESTIONS GOD ASKED

9. “IS IT TIME FOR YOU YOURSELVES TO BE LIVING IN YOUR PANELLED HOUSES, WHILE THIS HOUSE REMAINS A RUIN?”

READING: *Haggai chapter 1 verses 1 - 15*

INTRODUCTION

Dealing with priorities has always been a problem for me. All too often what I have seen as a priority has not been deemed a priority in the eyes of those I worked with. All too often it seemed that my priorities were not as important as the priorities of my managers in the workplace, leading often to me being criticised for not doing as I was expected to. It gets even more complicated when working to a number of managers in a line and the same problem arises. Whilst I endeavoured to justify my reasons for my prioritising, very often these were wiped aside by those who felt that I was not taking my work seriously and shirking my responsibilities. At present the clash in priorities seems to be between getting the chapel up and running again, and ensuring everyone's safety and protection. Believe me, this is not an easy balancing act, especially now that COVID figures are on the rise again and the threat of a localised lockdown hangs over our communities.

However, sometimes our reasoning for not completing a particular course of action is more of an excuse than an acceptable reason. Sometimes it is easier to choose the easier tasks to complete and push the more difficult down the list. The mid 18th century English poet and dramatist, Edward Young, is attributed with the saying “procrastination is the thief of time”, meaning that someone who continually puts things off ultimately achieves little. Something I think that all could be guilty of at one time or another – in the workplace, in the home, in our lives, in church.

CONTEXT

Today, I want us to take a look at such a group of people. They started off strong and then they fell off – a bit like our annual New Year resolutions. These people had resolved had dissolved, their initial excitement and enthusiasm turned into excuses. Let's put everything in context. It was after the exodus from Egypt whilst Moses was leading the Hebrews (Israelites) to the Promised Land that God gave instructions

To Moses to give to the people how to worship Him (God) in a portable worship centre, called the Tabernacle. After entering the Promised Land and some time later the people asked for a king like all the other nations around them and so Saul became the first King of Israel, followed by David, then Solomon. David desperately wanted to build a stone Temple for the worship of God, but the honour fell to his son, Solomon and it became the focal point of national pride and of their worship. On the death of Solomon things went downhill and the nation was split into two: Israel with 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel became the Northern Kingdom and was referred to as Israel; the remaining 2 tribes formed the Southern Kingdom, Judah. Because of their disobedience to the will of God, the Assyrians conquered Israel and the ten tribes were scattered in captivity. Seeing this happening to their neighbour you would have thought that Judah would take note, but they continued to lead rebellious lives against the will of God and in due time, the Babylonians conquered them, leading most of the people into captivity but destroying the city of Jerusalem and totally decimated the Temple.

God inspired prophets to tell the people that what had happened was not the final end and that one day they would be able to return home again. After 70 years in slavery in Babylon, the people were permitted to return home and start to rebuild their cities and the Temple. After two years, the foundation for the Temple was completed, but the enthusiasm of the people and their leaders waned. God sent them two more prophets, Haggai and Zechariah to encourage them to finish their project. Ezra was sent to enthuse the people's spiritual fervour, and Nehemiah rallied them to rebuild the walls again. Haggai's message to the people was clear: “It's time to finish what you

started. Get your priorities right.” Direct and to the point. By now, weeds had covered the foundations.

In **chapter 1 verse 1** – we see that Haggai’s message was directed firstly to the leaders and Haggai goes on, not holding anything back to address their excuses (**verse 2**), words that Haggai says are from “Jehovah Sabaoth” – the commander of the armies of Heaven, the One who is personal, present and powerful – the omniscient (all knowing), omnipresent (always present at all times in all places), omnipotent (all powerful) God – the ultimate “promise keeper”. As you read through the book of **Ezra** in the Old Testament, you see that the people were facing opposition from some of the neighbouring tribes, particularly the Samaritans, and you might feel sorry for the Jews after having just been released from slavery, and, after all, they did start the work. In addition, King Cyrus who had allowed them to return home, had now died and his successor was pressuring the Jews to stop their rebuilding work.

Anyone on the Christian pathway, trying to follow Christ daily in their lives, will realise that disappointments and discouragement always seem to be there. If we wait for a time when everything is just right, we could be waiting a long time. The God who encouraged the Jews to get back to their work, is the same God who encourages us. I realise that this scene setting seems lengthy, but by being aware of the circumstances which brought the people to this point, what lessons can we learn from them.

Firstly, proceed, don’t procrastinate. Even though they faced some huge problems, God summarizes their lame excuse in **verse 2**: **“These people say, ‘The time has not yet come for the Lord’s house to be built.’”** By referring to them as “these” people and not “my people,” God was indicating that they were not acting like His people because nothing had happened for 16 years! None of them are saying that it wasn’t important to rebuild the Temple. They just didn’t think the time was right. Sound familiar? When we put something off, we think we’ll get to it later; and then a month goes by, then a year! Then the excuses arrive, just as they did for the Jews of Haggai’s day. “I’ll get around to making God a priority...I promise.” Their excuses sound reasonable and justifiable, but all too familiar. But listen. Excuses always sound that way.

- I have too much going on to make it to church every Sunday. I mean, come on, it’s my only day to sleep in!
- People at church are hypocrites and I don’t like some of them.
- I can’t commit to anything right now because of other things. Maybe later.
- I’ll give myself totally to the Lord when I am ready.

We need to learn to prioritize God, not just our own pleasures. Then the God of the angel armies asks a very penetrating question, which gets to the very heart of the issue. It’s not that they were unable; they were unwilling. Some of us would be more honest if instead of saying, “I can’t,” we would say, “I won’t.” The question is presented: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” Did you notice the contrast between the desolate Temple and their ornate houses? Vividly brought out by saying, “you yourselves.” They were all about themselves, not about God. Also, notice that they are not just spending time building their homes; they are now living luxuriously in them. When you see the word “panelled” houses, don’t think of anything cheap and quick. Panelling back then was made out of cedar or oak. It was usually only used in the palaces of kings. It’s quite possible that the panelling that had been reserved for the temple rebuilding was now being used in their homes. We know from **Ezra 3 verse 7** that King Cyrus had provided money to buy hardwood to rebuild the temple and it is likely that they used this instead for their own homes. We know that most houses were normally modest dwellings built of stone, but these homes were luxurious while the Lord’s home, the Temple, was in ruins. In contrast to what they were building for themselves, the word “ruins” means that God’s house was “desolate and decaying.”

How can they say the time is not right after God had moved a pagan king to send them back to do the job? He had even given them both materials and money. Simply put, they didn’t get care about

God. They were much more into their own pleasure. This is the exact opposite of what King David said years earlier when he realized that he was living in a nice home but there was nothing built for God. In **2 Samuel chapter 7 verse 2**: ***“Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.”*** Later he wrote this in **Psalm 132 verses 3-5**: ***“I will not enter my house or go to my bed - I will allow no sleep to my eyes, no slumber to my eyelids, till I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob.”***

They stopped doing the main work that they had been commissioned to do – that’s why they were sent back to the land. They had lost sight of the might and the majesty of God. Likewise, our main job today is to bring glory to God by living out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, to connect people to Jesus and to equip them to be growing and faithful followers. That’s why we’re here! But like them, our default setting is selfishness. If we give no thought to how we’re living we’ll automatically live our own agendas.

Here are the two lessons God wants us to learn today:

- Let’s proceed and stop procrastinating
- Let’s prioritize God and stop living for our own pleasure

The bottom line is that the people were living like they could do life without God at the centre. If you continue reading on, you see how well they fare. Likewise, it is very easy for us to live our lives without God in His rightful place. They thought God was nice; they just didn’t see Him as a necessity. They had settled in the land and settled spiritually as well and then Haggai comes on the scene and issues a warning.

Are you living without the Lord at the centre of your life? Have we lost sight or forgotten the might and majesty of our God? We’re not called to build a physical temple. This church building is not “God’s house” either, even though that is how we refer to it. The church body is God’s temple now. **1 Corinthians 3 verse 16** asks us ***“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?”***

The Christian’s body is God’s temple now - **1 Corinthians 6 verses 19-20** – ***“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.***

How is God’s Temple among the people of Beulah, Bethel, Zion, Warrington, Treoes, Barry today? It is time to get our priorities right. Recorded in Matthew’s gospel are Jesus’s words, spoken in His “Sermon on the Mount” – ***“But seek first His kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”***

PSALM 48

How great is my God!

He soars above our poor intellects like a snow-capped mountain over a sun-baked desert. He scatters the profound theories of wise men and women like leaves pushed around by a winter wind. He shatters the assemble might of world governments as an earthquake levels a city, He reaches down in tenderness to earth’s poor creatures and draws them to Himself.

Consider with me, the greatness of my God. Measure His judgements; embrace His eternal love. Stand tall in your faith, courageous in your commitment for He is truly a great God.

HAGGAI chapter 1 verses 1 - 15

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:

² This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘These people say, “The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD’s house.”’

³ Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴ ‘Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?’

⁵ Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Give careful thought to your ways. ⁶ 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.’

⁷ This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Give careful thought to your ways. ⁸ Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured,’ says the LORD. ⁹ ‘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. ¹⁰ Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. ¹¹ 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 labour of your hands.’

¹² Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak, 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.

¹³ Then Haggai, the LORD’s messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: ‘I am with you,’ declares the LORD. ¹⁴ So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, ¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.