

Consider Your Ways: First Things First pt. 1

Haggai 1:1-4

Bethany Assembly of God

4/16/2023

Central Proposition: You should put (God) first things first.

Introduction

There are some activities that don't require you to do things in any particular order. For instance, can you imagine going to an amusement park with someone who gets the map, sees how shops and attractions are numbered, and then insists that you do them in the order they're numbered on the map? Your first stop will be the lost and found, even though you haven't been there long enough to lose anything, and you'd better hope you don't have to go to the bathroom anytime soon, because those don't show up until number 57. Some things don't require a particular order. But there are other things that do.

Today, we're beginning a brief series through the Old Testament book of Haggai. There's going to be a lot of information this week because we can't understand the book without knowing how it fits in the big picture of God's redemptive plan and I feel a responsibility to help God's people comprehend the "whole counsel of God," so to speak, and to help those who are younger in the faith to develop literacy in God's Word to help them as they read the Scriptures themselves. So, we need to do a quick flyover concerning what brought us to this point in the Bible.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The pinnacle of His creation was humanity, a man and a woman. He made them to rule His physical creation with Him, like stewards or caretakers. He created a garden called Eden that they were supposed to take care of and where they could learn about God's creation and reproduce. Genesis says that God would "walk in the garden in the cool of the day," a metaphor for the relationship that God had with Adam and Eve. Eden was the place where Heaven and Earth met and God talked to people. In other words, it was a temple.

There was a tree in Eden that God commanded Adam and Eve could not eat fruit from. They could eat from any other tree, but not the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, as a result of the temptation of a serpent in the Garden, a symbol of the devil, Eve and Adam ate from the tree and they were banished, exiled forever from the garden, and as a result, from the place where Heaven met Earth and God came to relate to them. However, He gave them a promise that it wouldn't be that way forever and that Eve would bear a son who would crush the serpent's head, undoing the curse on creation and separation from God's presence.

From that moment, the earth was filled with sin. At one point, God saw that people's thoughts were so evil all the time that He sent a flood to wipe out the population, sparing only Noah and his family who obeyed His voice. When the earth was populated again, God began to fulfill His promise to undo the curse and He started with one man, Abraham. He called Abraham

to be set apart, to leave his family and their idolatry and pagan worship practices and promised to make Abraham a great nation, God's own people. Hundreds of years passed and Abraham's family grew under the direction and blessing of God. They eventually ended up in Egypt where they were prolific and increased in number and wealth so much that the rulers of Egypt became afraid of them and enslaved them. For hundreds of years they were enslaved in Egypt, but God did not forget His promise or His purposes. He called a man, Moses, to lead them out of slavery, and through signs and miraculous provision, He freed Abraham's descendants from Egyptian slavery and led them to Mt. Sinai where God entered into a Covenant or an agreement with them. He would be their God and they would be His own people, a nation that did not serve other "gods" or create its own laws but who followed God and His ways. He gave them a law to follow and the centerpiece of the covenant was that He would be personally present with them. He gave Moses blueprints for building a Tabernacle, a mobile temple, a place where Heaven would once again meet earth and God would live among His people.

God's presence went with the Jewish people as He led them to the Promised Land, and eventually, the people settled in that land, though it wasn't without problems as they continually rebelled against God and doubted His plans. Once they were settled, God allowed King Solomon to build a permanent structure – a temple – where God's presence would dwell, where heaven would meet earth, and where people could worship and honor God.

But God's people, Israel, continuously broke His commandments and did not honor God's presence among them. They didn't follow God's law. Their country was full of injustice, bribery, greed, and worst of all, idolatry – the people who were supposed to worship and follow only the Lord God served a whole array of other so-called "gods."

Because of this, God allowed them to be captured by their enemies. It was in 587 B.C. that the kingdom of Judah in the Southern part of Israel was defeated. In that year, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and his army captured Jerusalem, the capital of Judah.

After about 50 years, Cyrus, King of Persia, conquered Babylonia and instituted policies that allowed exiled peoples to return to their homelands and reinstitute worship to their indigenous gods. It was at this time that the first wave of exiles returned to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the temple and the city, but were quickly discouraged by threats from surrounding nations and the work came to a halt. Ezra 4:4-5 tells us that from the time of Cyrus to the time of Darius, about 15 years, no work was done on the temple. Now, the Lord was displeased with this and so He decided to send a prophet to the people to show them the error of their ways. They were supposed to be His people, marked by His presence, but they weren't showing any urgency in honoring Him and rebuilding the temple. They were treating the temple as if it was an optional facility rather than the place of His presence among them.

And so we come to Haggai. We don't know much about Haggai except that he was the prophet that God raised up to address His people's apathy and inactivity and encourage them to be faithful and honor God by rebuilding the temple. As we study Haggai, you'll find a refrain repeated multiple times throughout his messages that will serve well as a theme for the book: ***Consider Your Ways***. Think about what you're doing. Look at what's happening to you. Pause

and ponder what's going on in your life. The first message Haggai brought to the people concerned their priorities.

1. You can remember who's (actually) in charge.

Read **Haggai 1:1-2**.

- Notice the emphasis placed on who was in charge. First, we read about Darius, Emperor of Persia. As far as it concerned the Jews at the time, this guy ruled the world.
- Notice from whom the message comes, "Thus says the Lord of hosts." (v. 2) Who is the Lord of hosts? It means something like, "The Lord Almighty." He has all the powers in heaven and on earth at His disposal. If you're going to put first things first, you need to remember who is in charge.

God addressed the leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua, first. They were going to play an important role in leading the way for rebuilding the Temple and so God started with them.

- God delegates authority to leaders who have a stewardship to carry out on His behalf. That's what God did in Eden with Adam and Eve. It's what He did with Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Zerubbabel and Joshua, and now, with us.
- When Haggai first speaks to Zerubbabel and Joshua, he simply reminds them of the excuses the people are making. Their job wasn't to listen to the excuses of people but to the voice of the Lord and then lead the people to follow the Lord of Hosts rather than their own hearts.
- It's still the responsibility of leaders in the church. Our primary responsibility is not to try and respond to all the various voices we might hear but to listen to the direction of the Lord and lead the church to follow.

I want to point out another area of really important leadership: the family. I've heard a concerning conversation in Christian circles lately about demons and generational curses or "bloodline curses." It seems like people are looking for a formula to identify what those "curses" might be and then break them. Two things concern me deeply about this. One is that the Bible says very little if anything about so-called generational curses but it is being sensationalized. The second concern is that this teaching seems to describe a formulaic prayer as "authority," substituting that for the real authority and stewardship God has given to parents.

Read **Joshua 24:15**

- There's a pattern in Scripture for how families are led; it goes from Old Testament to New Testament. When God's people, Israel, had come into the Promised Land, there was false worship passed down through generations. How would that be broken? It would be broken when one generation made a decision to repent and serve the Lord. How could Joshua say, "As for me and my house, we will serve

the Lord.”? Because God gave him stewardship, the responsibility to lead his family, and he was making a stand.

- This same idea carries into the New Testament. When Paul and Silas were miraculously freed from prison and the Philippian jailer was about to kill himself because he knew he would be in big trouble because all his prisoners had escaped, Paul stopped him. The jailer asked how he could be saved, to which Paul and Silas responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you *and your household*.” (**Acts 16:31**)

Was Paul saying that there is some kind of spiritual trickle down effect with salvation – that it gets mysteriously passed from a father to the rest of his family? I don’t think so. I think Paul knew that the household structure at the time meant that where the dad went, the family would follow.

- God has delegated authority to parents to lead their families. This starts with husbands and fathers, hopefully working together with their wives. Where there isn’t a father present, then a mother must pick up that responsibility.

Probably the most central passage to spiritual warfare in the Bible is **Ephesians 6:10-17**. There, Paul says that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces. Since this passage comes at the end of the book, it functions as a summary of what Paul has already written, so if you want to put on the armor of God and stand against the schemes of Satan, the way to do it is to obey what was written in the first five and a half chapters of the book.

Just prior to this passage about the armor of God, Paul writes what is known as a household code; he tells Christian families how to relate to one another.

- “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” (**Ephesians 5:22**)
“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” (**Ephesians 5:25**)
“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” (**Ephesians 6:1**)
“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (**Ephesians 6:4**)

Based on the biblical evidence from both the Old and New Testaments, let me suggest to you, parents, that like the first spiritual warfare that happened in the Garden of Eden, the spiritual warfare you do on behalf of your family will primarily be taking responsibility for the things God has placed in your care. He has given you an authority as the leader of your family and spiritual warfare will not be so much about identifying generational curses as about making the decision the Bible calls you to make, “Choose who you will serve,” and then leading your family to do the same.

You need to set an example of prioritizing God in your life and then lead your family to do the same. They should see your love for God's Word. They should note the importance of prayer in your life. And, you should raise them in the instruction and discipline of the Lord.

Parents, God has made you leaders in your house so that you can set the direction for the future, not so that you can listen to the voices making excuses. He speaks to the leaders first so that they can set the course.

2. You can cut the excuses.

Read **Haggai 1:3-4**

- Haggai is now talking to the whole community. They were all making the excuse that it wasn't yet time to build the Lord's house.

How pious we can make our excuses sound. We could put these terms into our contemporary Christianese and it would sound something like, "This isn't God's perfect timing," or "This just isn't the season for that yet." But the truth is, it's always the season to put God first and do what honors Him.

There are some who haven't returned to church since COVID. You're still saying you're not sure it's time to go back to church. It's time to go to work, and school, and the grocery store, and the movie theater, and an amusement park, but not prioritize church?

When you talk to other believers and you find yourself making excuses for why you haven't been at church, haven't been involved...it may be time to consider your ways. If, in your thoughts – your inner dialogue – you find yourself constantly making excuses to yourself for why you aren't doing what you know should be a priority, you may need to consider your ways. If you are constantly beginning your prayers, "Lord, I know I should, but..." it's probably time to consider your ways.

Conclusion

When compared to the reality of their lives, the excuse the people made for not rebuilding the temple turned out to be lame. They said the time for building God's house hadn't yet come; meanwhile, apparently the time for them to put roofs over their heads and perhaps panel the walls and decorate and try to make themselves comfortable had come. The issue wasn't one of timing; it was a problem of priorities.

Some things in life don't require a particular order, but there are other things that have life changing, perhaps even eternity changing consequences if you don't prioritize. This is why Jesus teaches us to order our lives in this way, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (**Matthew 6:33**)

Jesus lived the kind of life that prioritized the Kingdom of God above everything else. Jesus is both the pattern and the strength for those who will prioritize their lives with God first.

Consider your ways. Remember who's really in charge and cut the excuses. Choose today whom you will serve...