

# Re-Prioritizing Our Lives

Haggai 1

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on 12/26/2021

## Introduction

- ❖ Let's begin with a question. **What is the biggest priority in your life right now?** What takes up the bulk of your time and attention? What are you always talking about? What do you lie awake at night thinking about? What do you end up dreaming about? What do you spend the most of your money on? What do you worry the most about? What is your biggest fear? Your answers to these various questions tend to revolve around the same thing – revealing your biggest priority. So what is it?
  - Is it school? Your grades? Getting into that university or program? Is that what you're always thinking about and talking about?
  - Is it being in a relationship? Is that your biggest priority? Or perhaps it's the person you're in a relationship with? Your significant other? Your spouse? Perhaps your children? Does your life revolve around family or your aspiration for family?
  - Is it your job? Vocational success? Making the big bucks? Is that what you dream about? Or perhaps the priority is not *your* success but that of your children? Is that what keeps you up at night? The fear that your kids might fail and not obtain to what you would deem success? Is that what worries you the most?
  - Or is it what people think of you? Your reputation? How well liked you are? How unique you are? Do you dread the thought of being rejected or ignored?
  
- ❖ What is your biggest priority? **Now have you ever noticed that even after you get what you want – after you meet your goals and gain whatever you were pursuing – that for some reason you're still left feeling unsatisfied and unsettled?**
  - You get that grade you've been stressing over, but then you realize there is yet another exam on the horizon. It seems to never end.
  - You enter into that relationship you've been longing for, but now you realize it's added greater complexity to your life. Or you get married or you start a family, but strangely that void in your life is still there.
  - You get that dream job you've been chasing, but now it demands more of you than you expected. It's what you've always wanted, but now it might cost you people and things that you never expected to lose or give up.
  - You're accepted by your peers and colleagues – you're in the in-crowd – but then you realize your deep longing for acceptance and love is still unmet.
  
- ❖ What's going on? Why is it when we pursue these priorities – even when we achieve them (to one degree or another) – that we're still left feeling unfulfilled and restless? **This morning I want us to consider the possibility that the restlessness we feel is the result of *misplaced priorities*.** That means the real question we should be asking ourselves is not just, “What *is* my biggest priority?” but “What *should* be my biggest priority?” What does God's Word say *ought* to be of first importance? **I think it goes without saying that what we *ought* to prioritize is not always first on our list.**

- ❖ **But I'm convinced that because of our misplaced priorities, we have placed ourselves on a path of perpetual frustration.** And if we don't make a change, we're asking for a life of chronic restlessness. Perhaps you've heard of St. Augustine, the 5<sup>th</sup> century bishop and theologian. But you probably didn't know that he grew up as an unconverted, hedonistic, womanizer with lots of money and time on his hands.
  - But even with access to all worldly pleasures, he was never satisfied. In his autobiography *Confessions*, he famously prayed to God saying, ***“O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.”***
- ❖ What he meant is that we have been created in the image of God with a God-sized void that can only be filled by God. **So we will always be restless trying to fill that emptiness, until we fill it with God, until we find our rest in him.** That is basically the message of Haggai in a nutshell. This morning we'll be in chapter 1.
  - Who knew that the shortest book in the OT would have such a relevant message that stretches so long across time to reach us today? **Here in Haggai, we see God confronting his people – who are in living in perpetual frustration – confronting them for having misplaced priorities.** Friends, as the New Year approaches, this is the time for self-evaluation and a reconsideration of our priorities in life.

### Setting the Scene

- ❖ Let me begin by offering some background information. **Haggai was a prophet preaching in Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile.** If you recall, it was because of Israel's idolatry and unfaithfulness that God eventually gave them up to the Babylonians, who destroyed Jerusalem, burned the temple, captured the people, and took them into exile.
- ❖ But after 70 years had passed, in accordance to God's will, the Babylonians were defeated by the Persian Empire. And in the year 536BC, God prompted the Persian King Cyrus to allow a large contingency of Israelites (~ 50,000) to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city.
  - This is chronicled in the book of Ezra. Now there we read about the first attempt to reconstruct the temple. They laid the foundation, but not long after, Cyrus died and their pagan neighbors – who had opposed the resettlement of Jerusalem – were able to secure a royal decree from the next king to stop the temple reconstruction (4:17-24).
    - **So by the time of Haggai, sixteen years had passed since their return.** It was 520BC. We're told in v1 that a new king has ascended the throne of Persia, King Darius. And in the second year of his reign, the prophet Haggai shows up with a word from the Lord to call out the leaders of Jerusalem.
- ❖ **The temple of God remained unfinished but apparently life went on.** The rest of the city was rebuilt, and in time everyone got used to life without the temple, without the worship of God. There were more pressing issues at hand, so God and his temple were crowded out of their list of priorities. This was the spiritual state of Jerusalem and its inhabitants when Haggai showed up with a word. **Friends, my goal is to walk us through the chapter by pointing our four key observations and drawing out applications along the way.**

## The Mis-Prioritization of God

- ❖ The first observation that I see in vv1-4 is this: **The mis-prioritization of God usually occurs subtly and unintentionally.** In other words, if God has fallen down your list of priorities, I realize it's probably not something you intended to do *and* perhaps you did not even notice it until God's Word confronted you.
  - This is usually the case. Most of us have the best of intentions. We want to prioritize God and the things of God. We're not trying to ignore him. **But even those with good intentions can fall into bad habits and have misplaced priorities – where God eventually gets crowded out of our lives.**
  
- ❖ This is what happened to the Israelites in Haggai's day. **They started off well. Their willingness to resettle Jerusalem was commendable.** Remember, their exile lasted 70 years, so for most of them, all they knew was Babylon. They had never been to Jerusalem. It was a foreign land, yet it was their homeland. So when the opportunity came to return and rebuild, these were the faithful that answered the call.
  - When they got there, they started on the temple, but opposition arose and the rebuilding stopped. **And as time passed, they drifted, subtly and unintentionally, into a lifestyle where God and his house were no longer priorities.** Listen to v2, *“Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.”*
  
- ❖ **The general consensus among the people was that the timing was not right to try again to rebuild the temple.** First of all, the royal decree was still out there so any attempt would be considered treason. Second, they were in an economic downturn. There was a drought going on. The crops were failing. **They were more worried about putting food on the table than about the state of God's house.** I am sure they thought they would eventually get around to rebuilding the temple. But right now wasn't the right time.
  
- ❖ But Haggai goes on in vv3-4 to challenge them to reconsider their priorities. *“<sup>3</sup>Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, <sup>4</sup>“Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?”* The temple is in ruins but you're living in paneled houses? What does that say about your priorities?
  - Now the mention of paneling on the houses does not imply that they lived in rich, fancy homes but simply that they were finished homes. The paneling was one of the last pieces added to ancient Palestinian homes. It was part of the finishing touches.
    - **So perhaps they're not guilty of extravagance, but they were guilty of drifting into a lifestyle where God has been relegated to a low priority or crowded out altogether.** That's why Haggai called for re-prioritization.
  
- ❖ There's a story of a time management expert who spoke to a group of business students. He pulled out a large, wide-mouth jar and filled it with fist-sized rocks. When he couldn't put any more in, he asked, “Is this jar full?” The class responded, “Yes.” He said, “Really?” Then he pulled out a bucket of gravel and poured it in, shaking it down through the cracks.

- ❖ Then he asked, “Is the jar full?” The students were onto him, so they said, “No.” “Good,” he replied. He dumped in a bucket of sand. Once more he asked, “Is the jar full?” “No,” they shouted. Again he said, “Good.” He poured in a pitcher of water until the jar was full to the brim. Then he said, “We’ve been talking about time management, so then what is the point of the illustration?” One student ventured, “No matter how full your schedule, if you try hard, you can always fit more in.” “No,” the speaker replied, “that is not the point. **The point is, if you don’t put the big rocks in first, you’ll never get them in at all.**”
  
- ❖ Do you see the connection? **God is the biggest, most important, most fulfilling priority in our lives.** He’s that big rock that we need to fill that God-sized emptiness. But we’re often so caught up with other priorities that when God finally does cross our mind, we’re left trying to cram in into our busy lives. **But God cannot be crammed in, God must be placed in first if he’s going to be in your life at all.**
  - If you’re like me, rarely do you ever deliberately try to push God out of your life or intentionally drop him down your list of priorities. Instead, what happens is that we drift. **We simply drift into a lifestyle where God is no longer a priority.** This usually happens so slowly and subtly that we often don’t realize it until it’s too late. He’s becomes that huge rock sitting outside the jar.
  
- ❖ **And like the Israelites, we can always come up with another reason why it’s not a good time to make a change.** *“I know I need to put God first. I need to make him a greater priority in my life. But right now I have this really huge exam coming up. Right now I’m trying to establish some financial stability. Right now my kids are so young and need so much attention. It’s just not a good time.”*
  - **Let’s face it, there will never be a “good” time to re-prioritize God.** There’s always another excuse you can find. Until you realize the seriousness of the matter – until you see what’s really at stake – you’ll keep putting off God for another day.

### **The Serious Matter of Misplaced Priorities**

- ❖ That leads to our second observation: **The matter of misplaced priorities is more serious than you think.** At first, all this talk of re-prioritizing your life seems like good advice. Like the kind of advice you might get from a fortune cookie or a self-help book.
  - But this is a far more serious and far more spiritual matter than you might think. The matter of misplaced priorities is actually a matter of idolatry. Yes, idolatry! In the Bible, idolatry is not just bowing down to a tree or statue. **Idolatry is defined as the valuing of something (anything!) over God as more worthy of your trust, of your affection, of your worship.**
  
- ❖ And you can easily determine what you worship – what are your idols – by looking at your priorities. **We prioritize that which we worship.** So you may profess Jesus as Lord, but your priorities reveal who or what really has your heart. It could be grades, money, relationships, career, position, or power. These are what we call functional gods. **Jesus is God in name, but these things are gods in function.**

- ❖ **Look back at Haggai and just consider what kind of functional gods the Israelites prioritized over the one true God.** According to vv4-6, I see the following: Housing, Work (sowing/harvesting), Food and Drink, Clothes, and Money (wages).
  - Notice how none of these are bad things in and of themselves. They are things everyone needs. So why did God rebuke the Israelites for pursuing them? **The answer is because even good things can become evil if we want them too much.**
  
- ❖ John Calvin said, *“The evil does not usually lie in what we want but that we want it too much”* In other words, for the most part, our priorities are not bad in and of themselves, but they become evil when we want them so much that we neglect more important things, namely God. When that happens, those lesser priorities become our “idols”. **So misplaced priorities are really the symptoms of a more serious, underlying disease in the heart called idolatry.**
  - Granted, the Israelites were not bowing down to their homes or their food or their clothes. **But by prioritizing these things and neglecting the temple of God, they were communicating to the world that their homes, food, and clothes were more valuable (more to be desired) than God himself.** They were glorifying these lesser priorities instead of glorifying God. They were practicing idolatry.
  
- ❖ This means that idolaters are not just tribal people wearing grass skirts dancing around a statue of stone. **Idolaters can look like you and me and can be sitting in this sanctuary.** An idolater is anybody who considers his or her more immediate priorities – whether it be food or clothes or school or career or family or relationships – as more reliable, more satisfying, more valuable than God and his glory. **To misplace your priorities is just as evil as worshiping a statue because your neglect of God’s glory is just as much of an insult.**
  
- ❖ Now hear me out. **Please don’t get the impression that prioritizing God means denying or neglecting all other priorities in life.** God is not against the various priorities that represent the gravel, sand or water from our illustration. He just knows that you’ll never make room for him if you don’t prioritize him first.
  - It’s not wrong to want a house over your head or food in your belly. It’s not sinful to pursue excellence in school or career. It’s a good thing to cherish your family and friends. **The Christian life does not deny the goodness of these life pursuits. But it does intend to prioritize all these pursuits under our highest pursuit of God.**
    - The bottom line is this: **Let’s not take the matter of misplaced priorities lightly.** This is a serious spiritual matter. This is a matter of idolatry. And if you still don’t see its seriousness, God has ways of opening your eyes.

### **A Divine Wake-Up Call**

- ❖ That leads to our third observation. God takes your misplaced priorities seriously (even if you don’t), and I have little doubt he’s already been trying to get your attention. Based on what I see in vv5-6 and vv9-11, this is our third observation: **The frustration of your plans and pursuits is a divine wake-up call.**

- ❖ **In other words, God is willing to bring your plans to futility in order to wake you up and open your eyes to see your idols (functional gods).** All in hopes of preparing your heart, so that when his Word comes calling, you'll be ready to obey.
  - So notice in v5 and v7 how God repeats the same phrase, *“Consider your ways.”* Look at your life and the result of your toil. He wants the Israelites to see the folly of their ways due to their misplaced priorities. Look at v5, *“<sup>5</sup>Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. <sup>6</sup>You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.”*
    - So apparently the Israelites had finished houses; and fields where they can plant crops; and clothes to wear; and jobs and wages. **But they still lived in perpetual frustration.** Still they were fruitless. Still they were unsatisfied.
  
- ❖ Let's keep reading in v9. *“You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.”* **So here is a clear connection between their neglect of God's house and their present frustrations.** And God says he is the one who blew away whatever little they had. *Why?* Why would God blow away their hard work? Because his house lies in ruins while each is busy with his own house. Look at v10, *“<sup>10</sup>Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. <sup>11</sup>And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.”*
  
- ❖ So the Lord is the one who called for a drought in the land. God is the one who frustrated their plans and pursuits. It clearly says it in the text. Have you ever wondered why God does the same in your life? **Have you wondered why he allows so much disappointment?** Were you convinced he had it in for you? **It should be apparent by now that God's intent is to wake us up from spiritual slumber.** It is a wake-up call to re-prioritize.
  - There are times when the Heavenly Father allows his children to experience frustration and disappointment until they finally give up their stubborn self-sufficiency and self-reliance. **He brings them so low, so that when the Word of God comes calling – calling them to re-prioritize – their hearts are ripe and ready to respond with obedience.** In v12 we see just that. The Israelites and their leaders were humbled and brought low until their hearts were ripe and ready for the Word of God to convict and instruct.
  
- ❖ So consider your ways. **Are you restless?** Has the fruit of all your hard work and labor been disappointing (meager at best)? Have you become disillusioned with pursuing success in school or career? Have you come to realize the emptiness is still there even though you have that relationship you've always wanted?

- ❖ **Are you frustrated with God because he has frustrated your plans?** But what if he is trying to get your attention? To wake you from spiritual slumber. To realize that your priorities are out of sync.
  - So what do you do with this wake-up call? You're feeling the conviction. You see the misplaced priorities and what's more, the underlying idolatry. You see the need to re-prioritize your life – now what?

### **The Promise and the Power You Need**

- ❖ Here is where our fourth and final observation is so very helpful. For those of you convicted and wanting to make a change, notice this: **God supplies the promise and the power needed to re-prioritize your life around Him.** Our gracious God never makes a demand of us without supplying whatever we need to keep it.
  - Let's keep reading in v12. *“<sup>12</sup>Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.”*
- ❖ **Notice how the fear of the LORD played a part in motivating a change in their priorities.** On one level, you need the fear of God in you before you can start re-prioritizing. Once you realize who it is you've been neglecting – who it is you've insulted by treating as lesser than your other priorities – then holy fear kicks in and changes start to take place.
  - But we all know that's not enough. **Certainly the fear of God can motivate change, but it can't sustain it.** Subtly and unintentionally, we'll slip back into those bad habits. Our hearts are prone to wander, so we end up chasing a thousand other priorities. The fear of the Lord can motivate us to act, but to sustain us, we need more.
- ❖ **We need a promise from his Word and the power of his Spirit.** And that is exactly what we see God providing his people at the end of chapter 1. Look at v13. *“<sup>13</sup>Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD's message, “I am with you, declares the LORD.””*
  - The Lord sends Haggai one more time to deliver a message. **A simple four-word message: “I am with you.”** You've neglected my house, my glory. You've prioritized other things above me. You've valued them as more precious than me. You've committed idolatry. Yet, I am with you.
    - That's a promise. A promise to never leave them; to never forsake them. And then in v14 we see the Lord stirring up their spirits to faith and action. *“<sup>14</sup>And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God.”*

- ❖ Imagine what the Israelites were thinking, “The Lord is with us. No matter the opposition. No matter the roadblocks. The Lord is with us. He’ll provide for us. He’ll protect us. He’ll preserve us. So why are we worried? Why are we chasing after houses, food, clothes, money – putting so much time into these things? **The Lord is the biggest, most important, most fulfilling priority in our lives, and we don't have to chase after him like we do these lesser things.** He’s the one chasing us. He’s drawing near to us. He promises to be with us.”
  
- ❖ And by the end of chapter 1, their priorities have changed. **Whatever they were doing before – they put down. Whatever they were chasing – they stopped.** The Spirit stirs them up, and they devote themselves to the temple. All the while trusting that all the things they were worrying about and chasing after will be provided for by their good God who has promised to be with them.
  - **And some five hundred years later, their God would go so far to keep that promise that he actually came down to be with them *in person* – in the person of Jesus, the Son of God incarnate.**
  
- ❖ Before Jesus came, you would have to go to the temple to be with God. The temple was the symbol of God’s nearness, his presence with his people. **But now something greater than the temple has come** (Mt. 12:6). In fact, Jesus spoke of himself as the temple of God (Jn. 2:20-21). **The temple in Jerusalem – made of wood and stone – was just a symbol of God's presence.** Jesus is that reality. He is Emmanuel. God with us.
  
- ❖ And upon his death for our sins, his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension to the Father – our Lord Jesus promised to be with us. To send his own Spirit to live in us. The New Testament says that a Christians’ body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 6:19). **For the Christian, God is with you in the deepest, most immediate, most intimate sense.** What more is there for God to do to prove he really meant it when he said, “*I am with you*”?
  
- ❖ Christian, if God is with you – if his Spirit is living in you – why do you worry? If God is for you, who can be against you? **If he did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?** (cf. Rom. 8:31-32) The *all things* would include all the priorities pulling you in every direction.
  - Why then would you spend your days chasing after them and putting them first over the very God who is for you in Christ, with you in Christ, and willing to graciously give you, with Christ, all these things?
    - I pray that the Spirit of God stirs up your spirit this morning – that you might devote yourself to seeking first God – and his kingdom and his righteousness – trusting that all these other priorities will be added unto you.