

FIRST THINGS FIRST



Ever have those days when everything feels URGENT?

- ▶ The sales pitch urging us to “act now.”
- ▶ The inbox full of emails demanding responses.
- ▶ The unplanned meeting or phone call insisting on our presence.
- ▶ The relentless movement of the clock’s second hand reminding us of all we need to do today.

Some items on our to-do list can and should be labeled “urgent,” but others just try to convince us they’re serious. We simply have to set some things aside for the moment to focus on more pressing matters. But when everything claims some level of urgency—focus on me now—how do we know where to start?

We know we should make first things first—but what’s first?

The Book of Haggai answers this question. As we look at this short book, we’ll see that one thing takes priority over everything else: loving obedience to God. When God becomes our focus, we are better equipped to handle all the other things vying for our attention.

SAM RAINER

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GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 82** as you introduce **Question #1: What's the longest time you've waited in line?**

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG page 83**. Highlight the author's point that if you are willing to stand in line for something it indicates that this is a priority for you.

SAY: "Today we look at the importance of always making God first in your life."

Read **The Point (PSG, p. 83): Always put God first.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask for God's guidance in making God first in every aspect of your life.

SPECIAL FOCUS

FIRST THINGS FIRST



The Point

Always put God first.

The Bible Meets Life

A lot of things vie for our attention, and many of them offer a good "sales pitch" why they should take priority. We also encounter the "tyranny of the urgent," which screams for attention—now! No

doubt we have many things that are important—family, work, and so forth—but only one thing takes priority over all these things: loving obedience to God.

The Passage

Haggai 1:2-13

The Setting

The Persian ruler Cyrus issued a decree in 538 B.C. allowing peoples exiled by Babylon to return to their homelands. Many Jews returned to Jerusalem and began rebuilding both the city and the temple. However, after the foundation of the temple was laid, progress faltered and then ceased. Temple reconstruction did not commence again until God called Haggai in 520 B.C. to encourage the Jewish leaders to rebuild the temple.

Haggai 1:2-8

2 “The LORD of Armies says this: These people say: The time has not come for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt.”

3 The word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai:

4 “Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?”

5 Now, the LORD of Armies says this: “Think carefully about your ways:

6 You have planted much but harvested little. You eat but never have enough to be satisfied. You drink but never have enough to be happy. You put on clothes but never have enough to get warm. The wage earner puts his wages into a bag with a hole in it.”

7 The LORD of Armies says this: “Think carefully about your ways.

8 Go up into the hills, bring down lumber, and build the house; and I will be pleased with it and be glorified,” says the LORD.

KEY WORDS: Lord of Armies (v. 2)—This title emphasizes God as a mighty warrior and leader of the heavenly armies. It also emphasizes His power and sovereignty over all creation.

House of the Lord (v. 2)—The Jerusalem temple, God’s chosen place to receive the Israelites’ worship, sacrifices, and offerings. In this sense, the temple was where God dwelt among His people.

Paneled houses (v. 4)—Wealthy people could afford to have wooden panels installed over the interior stone walls in their houses to provide a smooth texture and luxurious finish.

Obedience to God takes priority.

Verse 2. Haggai 1:1 introduces the speaker of the four messages recorded in this book. “The prophet Haggai” is identified as one in the long line of prophets sent by God to speak His truth with clarity and boldness. We find nothing more about Haggai in the Bible except for brief mentions in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. The name *Haggai* was common in this

STUDY THE BIBLE

Haggai 1:2-8



10 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Review content from **The Bible Meets Life** on page 86 and point out that many things seem important but we must be intentional in determining what takes priority.

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 86.

LEADER PACK: Point to **Item 7: Haggai**.



READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Haggai 1:2-8.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 1 to give more in depth historical setting and background information.

GUIDE: For more information on the phrases *the Lord of Armies* and *The House of the Lord*, refer group members to **Key Words** on page 87 (**PSG, p. 84**).

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 2 to give more explanation to the terms *Lord of Armies* and *House of the Lord*.

Remind group members of the historical events of the building of the tabernacle and the temple. God commanded the Israelites to build a tabernacle, a portable worship tent, so that He could dwell with His people (Exodus 25-40). Later the temple was built in Jerusalem by Solomon (1 Kings 6-8). When completed, God's glory had filled the tabernacle and also filled the temple.

period and comes from a word for “feast” or “festival.” Some scholars suggest that the prophet was given this name because he was born near the time of one of the Jewish festivals.

1 ▶ Verse 1 provides the historical context of Haggai: “the second year of King Darius.” This would have been 520 B.C., which was part of a difficult period for the Jewish people. The Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians in 587/586 B.C. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and most of the survivors were taken into exile. In 539 B.C. the Persians led by Cyrus the Great (559–530 B.C.) overthrew the Babylonian Empire. In 538 B.C., Cyrus introduced a more benevolent approach to conquered nations and allowed those peoples exiled by the Babylonians to return to their homelands and worship their own gods. Over 42,000 Jews went back to Judah (Ezra 2:64). Work was begun on rebuilding the temple with the laying of its foundation. However, opposition arose from the surrounding peoples of the region and the work on the temple ceased (4:1-5). Work on the temple would not begin again until the reign of Darius I Hystaspes (522–486 B.C.) of Persia, when God sent Haggai (as well as the prophet Zechariah—Ezra 5:1-2) to challenge the people to resume the rebuilding of the temple. ◀

Haggai first addressed his message to Zerubbabel, the appointed governor of the Persian province of Judah, and to Joshua, the high priest. These leaders led both the civil and religious aspects of the Jews who had returned from Babylonian captivity. However, Haggai was only the spokesperson (“prophet”) through whom “the word of the LORD” was coming (v. 1).

2 ▶ The source of the message was the **LORD of Armies**, a title which originally had the sense of the Lord as a mighty warrior and the leader of the armies of heaven. In this context the term emphasizes God's sovereignty and power. God's message concerned His temple, the **house of the LORD**. When God established His covenant with the people after freeing them from Egyptian slavery, He commanded them to build the tabernacle, a portable worship tent (Ex. 25:1-8) so that He could dwell among the people (v. 8). When it was completed, “the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (40:34). Later, when Solomon completed the temple in Jerusalem, God's glory also filled it (1 Kings 8:11).

Haggai started by stating a common excuse given by the people for not resuming the work of rebuilding the temple. The people were saying that “**the time has not come**”, implying that other priorities were more pressing. ◀

Verse 3. The text repeats the phrase from verse 1: **The word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai.** The message was from **the LORD**, Yahweh, the name that stresses God's eternal nature. This is the covenant name of God that He had revealed to Moses (Ex. 3:13-15).

3 ▶ Verse 4. Then Haggai asked a question: Though the people were saying that it was not the right time to rebuild the temple, was it the right time for wealthy individuals to live in fine houses while God's house was **in ruins**? Haggai called the fine houses that the leaders lived in **paneled houses**. At that time houses were made of stone or bricks. Since the craftsmen had only hand tools, the interior walls could be rough and uneven. However, the wealthier people could afford to have wooden panels installed over the stones to provide a smooth texture and a more luxurious finish.

Verse 5. Haggai again emphasized God's sovereignty and power by calling Him the **LORD of Armies**. He wanted the leaders of the people—Zerubbabel and Joshua—to see themselves in the light of God's sovereign authority and to respond with the humility God desires (Prov. 3:34; 1 Pet. 5:5-6). Haggai urged the people to **think carefully about their ways**—to consider their priorities. He proceeded to describe specific examples of the people's labor and the results.

Verse 6. Haggai cited five examples to illustrate his point. Though the people (1) worked hard at planting their fields, they harvested little. Though they had enough (2) food and (3) drink to get by, they weren't satisfied. Though they had (4) clothes, they never had enough to stay warm. Though the (5) hired workers got paid their wages, it seemed as though their money bags had holes in them. Haggai's point was clear: no matter how hard the people worked, they never had enough even to satisfy their basic needs.

Verse 7. Haggai followed his list by repeating the Lord's admonition with which he had begun **"Think carefully about your ways."** The sovereign God was telling the people to seriously examine their lives—and to change their ways. Instead of making the rebuilding of the temple their first priority, they had been focused on themselves. He told them to look at the results: all their efforts were failing to provide what they needed.

Verse 8. After describing the results of their wrong priorities, Haggai challenged the leaders to focus on what should have

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 3** on this page and page 90 to show that God clearly was not pleased with the lack of progress on rebuilding the temple. He pointed out that His people were living in their "paneled houses" while His house was in ruins. Point out that the phrase, "think carefully about your ways" is used twice (vv. 5,7) to remind the people to reconsider their priorities.

GUIDE: For more information on the phrase *paneled houses*, refer group members to **Key Words** on page 87 (PSG, p. 84).

DISCUSS: Question #2 (PSG, p. 86): **How can we discern whether we're disobediently procrastinating or obediently waiting on God?**

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG pages 85–86** to two key truths about making obedience to God our priority:

1. *Delayed obedience is disobedience.*
2. *Our priorities are always less satisfying than God's priorities.*

DISCUSS: Question #3
(PSG, p. 87): **What excuses do we make to delay our obedience?**

(Alternate: What are some of the major priorities in our lives?)

TRANSITION: “In the next verses, Haggai pointed out the unintended consequences of the people’s delay in rebuilding the temple.”

STUDY THE BIBLE

Haggai 1:9-11



10 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Haggai 1:9-11.

been their first priority—rebuilding the temple. In order to build, they would need to go up into the forests on the **hills** and get the **lumber** that would be required. First Kings 5–6 describes how Solomon procured cedar and cyprus wood from Lebanon which was used in the construction of the first temple. However, 2 Kings 25:9 tells how the Babylonian army burned the temple and houses in Jerusalem when they captured the city. New wood would be required for the rebuilding of the temple. ◀

After giving the leaders God’s command to rebuild, Haggai added that God would **be pleased** and **be glorified** through the new structure. The emphasis on pleasing God is common throughout the Bible. This idea is often found in the Old Testament when describing God’s response to offerings and sacrifices (Ex. 29:18; Lev. 1:9,13,17; Num. 18:17; Ps. 51:17). In the New Testament Paul wrote about the importance of living in ways that please God (Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 5:9; Col. 1:10). The biblical writers also emphasized and gave examples of people giving God glory (Ps. 117:1; Isa. 61:3; Dan. 4:34; Luke 2:20; John 12:28; 1 Cor. 10:31). God spoke through Haggai to challenge the people to focus their priorities on doing what would please God and give Him the glory He deserved by rebuilding the temple.

Haggai 1:9-11

- 9 “You expected much, but then it amounted to little. When you brought the harvest to your house, I ruined it. Why?” This is the declaration of the LORD of Armies. “Because my house still lies in ruins, while each of you is busy with his own house.
- 10 So on your account, the skies have withheld the dew and the land its crops.
- 11 I have summoned a drought on the fields and the hills, on the grain, new wine, fresh oil, and whatever the ground yields, on man and animal, and on all that your hands produce.”

We lose out when we place ourselves ahead of God.

4 ▶ **Verse 9.** God reminded the leaders they had **expected much**, but their expectations and their work had **amounted to little**. How had that happened? God explained it to them: He had **ruined their harvest**. God had intervened in their work to limit the yield of their efforts. God then raised the obvious question: Why had He punished them in this way?

Before he continued to announce God’s message, Haggai proclaimed: **This is the declaration of the LORD of Armies**. With this statement, Haggai affirmed that the very **declaration** of the Lord to His people. Using the title **the LORD of Armies** again emphasized God’s sovereignty and power over all creation. Nothing that was happening to the Jews was a matter of merely unfortunate circumstances.

In answer to the question of why these things were happening, God stated that the reason the people were suffering was **“Because my house still lies in ruins, while each of you is busy with his own house.”** God’s answer was that the people’s priorities were upside down. They had put their own houses and welfare first instead of rebuilding the temple. The great irony was that by putting themselves first they had lost God’s blessings. He had to discipline them in order to get their attention and to show them the foolishness of their decisions.

Verses 10-11. In order to help the people see what had happened and why, God spelled it out for them. He began by stating in no uncertain terms that the reason the people were suffering was **“on your account”**—they were suffering because of their own actions. Because of their misplaced priorities and failure to rebuild His house, God had shut both **the skies** from giving its water and **the land** from yielding its produce. God had not only kept back the rain, but even **the dew**. Normally, rains came in Israel in the fall and spring. During the other seasons, the crops depended upon the morning dew for moisture; but, God had withheld even that form of watering. (for other examples see Deut. 33:27-28 and 1 Kings 17:1). Everything the people and their animals depended upon for food and drink—the grain, the grapes, and the olive trees—were affected by the lack of rain and dew. As a result, they did not have enough bread or wine or olive oil, the basic necessities of their diet.

The words of the Lord in these verses mirror the warnings given to the Israelites when they entered the promised land—obedience to the Lord would bring blessings, while disobedience would bring punishment (Deut. 11:13-17; see also Deut. 28). Through their refusal to rebuild the Lord’s temple,

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary **4** on this page and page 92 to explain how these verses declare God’s punishment and judgment on His people for their failure to make rebuilding God’s house a priority.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG pages 87-88**, to the statements that summarize verses 9-11, that we lose out when we place ourselves ahead of God:

- *When we are first, we cannot know God’s will.*
- *When God is first, He gives us what we need.*

DISCUSS: **Question #4**

(PSG, p. 89): How can we determine what priority we’ve given God in our lives?

(Alternate: What do we lose by not putting God first?)

TRANSITION: “Finally the leaders and the people got the message and obeyed the Lord, and they received affirming words from Haggai.”

STUDY THE BIBLE

Haggai 1:12-13



15 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Haggai 1:12-13.

GUIDE: For more information on the term *remnant*, refer group members to the **Key Word** on **PSG page 89**.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 5** on this page and page 93 to provide further explanation of the term *remnant* and the connection to the obedience of the people.

the people were failing to fulfill their covenant obligations, and the Lord was judging them for their failure.¹ God stated in verse 11 that He is the one who had **summoned a drought** on the fields and all the produce of the land, on the people and on the animals. What was happening to the people was not the cycles of nature alone. It was the judgment of God. One commentator notes, “The implied contrast between people and nature is striking. The elements of nature modeled obedience to the divine will, while Haggai’s community modeled inattention to divine priorities.”² ◀

Haggai 1:12-13

12 Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak, and the entire remnant of the people obeyed the LORD their God and the words of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. So the people feared the LORD.

13 Then Haggai, the LORD’s messenger, delivered the LORD’s message to the people: “I am with you — this is the LORD’s declaration.”

KEY WORD: Remnant (v. 12)—Prophetic term for a small group of Israelites who survived God’s judgment of the nation by repenting and trusting in God’s mercy for their future.

God is with those who place Him first in their lives.

5 ▶ Verse 12. So the people **obeyed the LORD their God**—not only Zerubbabel and Joshua, but also **the entire remnant of the people**. *Remnant* was a term used by the prophets (Isa. 10:20-22; Jer. 31:7-11; Amos 5:15); it referred to the people of Israel who returned from Babylonian captivity, the small group of Israelites who survived God’s judgment of the nation by repenting and trusting in God’s mercy for their future. Though God had judged the nation, He would purify those who remained and be merciful to them. Now that the people had begun to obey God’s call, they were called the

remnant, a positive term that reflected their covenant connection to God.

The people responded to Haggai's message with obedience not merely because of his passion or eloquence but because they recognized that **the LORD their God had sent him**. They knew that hearing Haggai's word was the same as hearing the voice of the Lord their God. Though they respected Haggai, it was the Lord they feared and revered and obeyed. ◀

6 ▶ Verse 13. As soon as the people committed to start rebuilding the temple, God sent another message through Haggai. His message was simple: **"I am with you."** God made the same promise to Jacob (Gen. 28:15), to Moses (Ex. 3:12) and to Joshua (Josh. 1:5). As David expressed his desire to build a temple, God reminded David how He had always been with him (2 Sam. 7:9). When the angel appeared to Joseph to tell him to take Mary as his wife, he told Joseph to name Mary's Son Immanuel, which is translated "God is with us" (Matt. 1:23). No thought can be more encouraging or motivating for the people of God than to know that God is with them to enable them to carry out His will!

Haggai recorded that God kept His promise by working in the hearts and minds of Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all the remnant of the people to encourage them to get busy rebuilding the temple (Hag. 1:14). Less than four weeks after Haggai delivered his message (v. 1), the people had made the necessary preparations and began working on the house of the Lord of Armies, their God (vv. 14-15). The construction of the temple that was begun on September 21, 520 B.C. was completed on March 12, 515 B.C.³ ◀

Every generation has to deal with the same question that faced the Jewish people in Haggai's time: What or who should have ultimate priority in my life? Jesus answered that question many times (for example, see Matt. 8:18-22; 10:37-39; Mark 12:28-31). While Jesus acknowledged we all have needs like food and clothing, He said these things should not be our first priority (Matt. 6:25-32). Instead, our primary focus should be "the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (v. 33). Jesus said that when we put God and His will and ways first, then He will take care of all our needs. God's call and His promise are clear, but do we love Him wholeheartedly and trust Him? If we do, then we will always put Him, His will, His worship, and service to Him first in our lives.

1. Richard A. Taylor, "Haggai" in *Haggai, Malachi*, vol. 21A in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2004), 134-35.

2. *Ibid.*, 135.

3. *Ibid.*, 144; Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, vol. 10 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 119.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary **6** to explain the message of God, "I am with you." Show how this message was communicated many times to God's people to encourage and motivate them "to know that God is with them to enable them to carry out His will!"

DISCUSS: **Question #5**

(PSG, p. 90): What steps can we take to make sure we have the right priorities in life?

(Alternate: What does it mean for God to be with us?)

DO: Encourage group members to take a few minutes to complete the activity **"PRIORITIES"** on **PSG page 90.**

LIVE IT OUT



5 minutes

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:**
Always put God first.

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out** (PSG, p. 91; see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Emphasize that making God our first priority is always in our best interest. When we obey God first, we receive the benefits of knowing that God is pleased and that He is with us.

PRAY: "Father, remind us continually to seek You and Your kingdom first, with the sure and certain knowledge that You know what is best for us and promise to be with us."

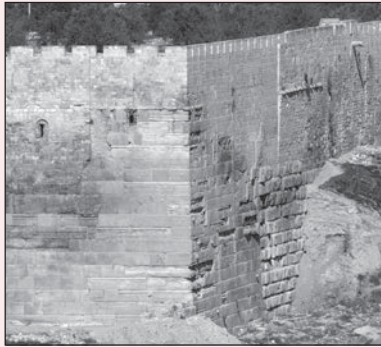
LIVE IT OUT

When you see a long line, the temptation is to cut to the front. However, there is no cutting in line with God. You cannot create a shortcut in spiritual growth. To grow we must stay passionate and disciplined. God must remain the priority in our lives. The following three suggestions will help you keep God as the top priority and stay in line with Him.

- ▶ **Mark the date.** Write today's date in your Bible next to the first chapter in Haggai. Pray that God will make today a spiritual marker, a time when you made Christ your top priority.
- ▶ **Pray daily.** Set aside a time each day where you will pray to God for five minutes. During your prayer time, ask God to reveal how He can be the top priority for you that day.
- ▶ **Serve.** The priority of Christ's lordship is seen in how you serve Him. Get involved in the life of your church to worship and serve Christ by serving others.



BIBLICAL
ILLUSTRATOR



Part of the Temple Mount structure called Zerubbabel's Marking, which is clearly defined in the midday sun. The marked change in the style of stonework along this vertical line clearly shows the smooth, precisely cut stones of Herod's extension to the temple platform on the southwest corner. The rougher, more pronounced stones along the wall to the north most likely are stones dating to Solomon, which Zerubbabel reset after the Israelites returned from exile. The lower four courses of these stones appear to be undisturbed and are possibly in their original positions.

Haggai is the only person named Haggai in the Old Testament. Like seven other prophets, Haggai provided no information about his parents or ancestry. Other than his name, we know nothing of his personal life.

Haggai gave no details about his call to ministry, but he referred to himself as a prophet five times (1:1,3,12; 2:1,10).

According to Scripture, Haggai was the first prophet to preach in Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity—the postexilic period. He likely returned to Jerusalem from Babylon with Zerubbabel in 538 B.C. Haggai carefully dated each of his messages. His first prophecy was “in the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month” (1:1). On the Hebrew calendar “the sixth month” was called Elul; this included portions of our August and September. “The first day” of Elul in 520 B.C. (Darius's second year) was August 29. Haggai's last message came less than four months after the first. Ezra recorded the historical background for Haggai's ministry and mentioned Haggai by name.

The excerpt above is from the article “Haggai: Prophet of the Return” (Spring 2015), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

From the time we come to Christ through repentance and faith, Jesus assumes the throne of our lives and becomes our first priority in all things.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, “Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All,” on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.

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Free additional ideas for your group are available at
BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra