

FIRST THINGS FIRST



Make the right priority your first priority.

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 insistent child calling “Mom!” or “Dad!”
- ▶ 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 as “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’re better equipped to handle all the other things vying for our attention.



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SPECIAL FOCUS

FIRST
THINGS FIRST



What's the longest you've waited in line?

QUESTION #1

#BSFLfirstthings

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE **67**

THE POINT

Always put God first.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

One way to tell what's important to people is to see how long they'll stand in line for something. Think about a time when you stood in line for a long time. Was it to vote in an election? Buy a new product? Get coffee? You likely stood in that line because it was a high priority for you.

When our priorities get mixed up, life gets out of line. Most often, this misalignment occurs because we're selfish. It's far too easy to focus on ourselves, and that selfishness misaligns our priorities.

Before we can have the right priorities, we must understand what God puts first. His goals should come first. When we make His priorities our priorities, we find greater contentment and fulfillment.

How can we get in line with what God wants for us? Haggai 1:2-13 helps us understand how to align our priorities with God's priorities. The story in this passage reveals how God helped a group of people to change their selfish motives and put His goals first.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

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.

The 5th century B.C. was a bleak period in Israel’s history. The great empires of David and Solomon had crumbled. The Jewish people were in exile hundreds of miles from their homeland. When Babylon fell to the Persian army, however, King Cyrus allowed God’s chosen people to return and rebuild the city of Jerusalem (see Ezra 1:1-4).

What they found on their return was complete devastation. The walls were gone. The temple was destroyed. In spite of their dismay, the people obeyed God and started to rebuild the temple (see Ezra 3:8). They cleared the rubble and laid the foundation. After a few years, however, they ran out of resources. They faced opposition from their enemies, and the building stopped for the remainder of Cyrus’s reign.

Enter Haggai. We don’t know much about Haggai, except that by the time Darius became ruler after Cyrus, Haggai was serving as God’s prophet. It was Haggai’s responsibility to tell the people they needed to refocus on obeying God again, starting with finishing the temple.

What are some of the major priorities in our lives?

QUESTION #2

In Haggai's address to the people, we learn two key truths about making obedience to God our first priority:

- ▶ **Delayed obedience is disobedience.** The people rationalized their apathy by claiming it wasn't God's will to rebuild the temple at that time. They were wrong. By delaying their work on the temple, they disobeyed His command.
- ▶ **Our priorities are always less satisfying than God's priorities.** God asked the people to "think carefully" about what they were doing. He then pointed out how they were always dissatisfied, no matter what they did, because they only went after what was important to them. This theme is at the core of our sinfulness. We tend to seek our own interests, not those of Jesus (see Phil. 2:21). Yet it's in pursuing the interests of Christ that we find the greatest satisfaction.

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."

The people during Haggai's time had high expectations. These expectations fell apart when they faced opposition. They stopped working on the temple. They slumped even further when procrastination caused them to stop focusing on God's will. They figured they had plenty of time to finish the temple later, but God wanted them to work immediately.

What do these verses teach us about God?

QUESTION #3

As we see in verses 9-11, we lose out when we place ourselves ahead of God. For one thing, when we're first, we cannot know God's will. When the people stopped focusing on God's priorities, He did things to get their attention. The rain ceased, so that the land stopped producing crops. Many of the people in Jerusalem surely wondered: *What's going on? We're working hard, yet God isn't providing. Why?*

God responded: "Because my house still lies in ruins, while each of you is busy with his own house." Ironically, the people's self-focused hard work resulted in nothing because God took from them what they selfishly pursued.

On the other hand, when God is first, He gives us what we need. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us a key kingdom principle: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you" (Matt. 6:33). When Jesus is Lord of our lives, we can't lose. Sure, we may lose money in a stock market collapse. We may lose a recreation league softball game if our team plays poorly. And we'll all lose our lives to death at some point. For those in Christ, however, we still gain. No earthly loss can compare with the heavenly gain we receive in Him.

The Israelites tasked with rebuilding the temple missed this point. Their priorities got messed up, and their passions became misdirected. Rather than focusing on God first, they focused on themselves. They lost because they didn't put God first. Thankfully, their story didn't end with that loss. The next few verses reveal how they responded and what God did in return.



How can we determine what priority we've given God in our lives?

QUESTION #4

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."

After God gave them a wakeup call, the people obeyed! God caused a drought that prevented the land from yielding crops, God allowed them to be completely dissatisfied with their work, and God sent Haggai to speak firmly to them and show them their sin and failure. The people listened to God and responded with full obedience.

Their response was more than just outward obedience. Verse 12 says, "the people obeyed the LORD their God." Notice that last part: *their* God. Previously in the passage, God called them "these people" (v. 2), indicating they had broken their intimacy with God through their disobedience. But now the people came back to *their* God. They sought both obedience and a restored relationship.

As a result of their obedience, God made a great promise: "I am with you." The Lord was quick to renew His fellowship with the people when they returned to Him. It's the same with His followers today. When we make God the priority of our lives, He is with us. One of the great promises of God is that "I will never leave you or abandon you" (Heb. 13:5).

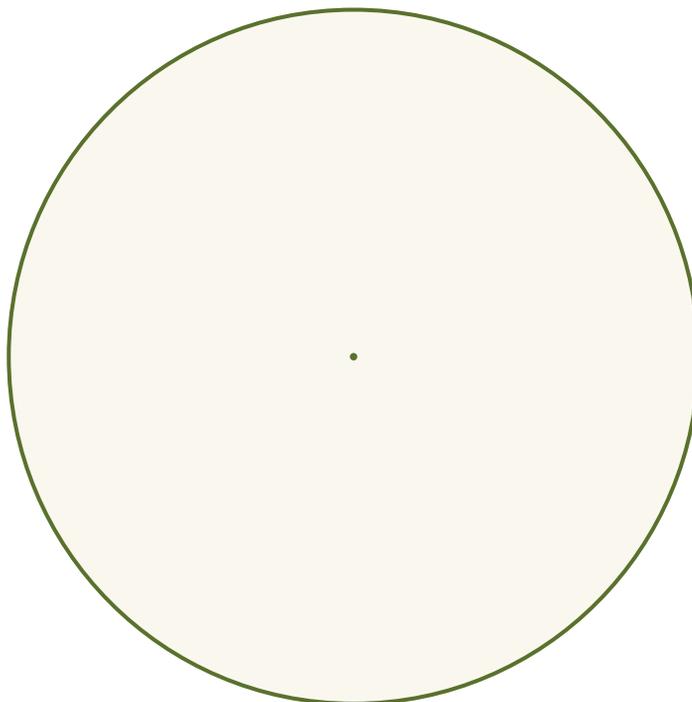
If you continue reading into verse 14, you'll see that the Lord's presence was more than just the equivalent of being in the same room with them. He "roused the spirit" of the people and gave them a new focus on the task of rebuilding the temple. This change was not false hype or misguided enthusiasm. They had heard God's alarm clock. He woke them out of their selfish slumber, and their response was genuine. Consequently, God worked because the people were willing to obey.

Where is God in your life right now? Does He have top priority? If not, then what priorities are above Him? You will never be satisfied with your life until God has first place. In fact, God might be trying to get your attention right now. God promises to provide what you need if He is your priority. Even better, God promises His presence to those who put Him first.

What does it look like for God to be with us as individuals and as a group?

PRIORITY PIE

Use the circle below to create a pie chart that represents how you spend your time in a typical day. For example, make a wedge of the pie that shows how much time you spend at work, with family, in traffic, and so on.



Making God the main priority in your life doesn't mean "reading the Bible" should be the largest wedge in the pie above; rather, it means finding ways to connect with God and serve Him in each of the wedges of your pie. What's one step you can take in that direction this week?

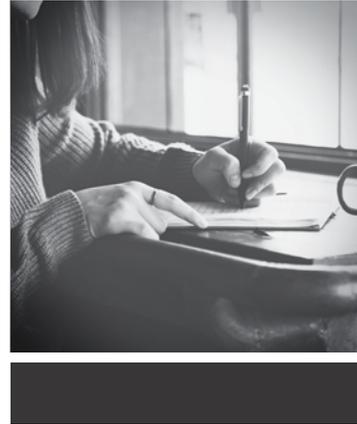
LIVE IT OUT

How will you put God first this week? Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ **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 when your priorities changed for the better.
- ▶ **Pray daily.** Set aside a time each day to pray with God for five minutes. During your prayer time, ask God to reveal how He can be your top priority for 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.

When you see a long line, the temptation is to cut to the front. However, there is no cutting in line with God. You can't create a shortcut in spiritual growth. To grow we must stay passionate and disciplined. God must remain the top priority in our lives.

My thoughts



Share with others how you will live out this study: **#BSFLfirstthings**



FRUIT THAT LASTS FOREVER

BY ERIC GEIGER

It seems the older we get, the more we hear and think about words like *legacy*, *significance*, and *impact*. As we become more and more aware of the brevity of this life, we long to make an impact, to leave a mark, to be a part of something bigger than ourselves—something that outlasts us.

Your legacy will be people. Your legacy as a Christ-follower will be the people you have invested in, disciplined, and developed as leaders to be used by God in all spheres of life. The Christian faith has always, by God's grace, been transferred from one generation to the next, from one person to another. God's people have always multiplied. We are Christians because others have shared the gospel with us. We have matured because others have helped develop us. Developing others is embedded in our faith because Jesus is a disciple-maker.

Jesus, the Disciple-Maker

Jesus could have chosen any method to ensure the world heard of His gracious sacrifice for them. He is the Creator, so He could have designed a means to communicate or broadcast His life and death to the world. He could have assembled the world to Himself to observe His death or resurrection. Yet He chose to invest in twelve disciples.

From a worldly perspective, Jesus' ministry was not a huge success. His ministry began with a jeer from a disciple—"Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?"—and ended with a lonely death. In the middle, His own brothers did not believe Him, and one of His own disciples betrayed Him. At one time, there were 5,000 men (much more with women and children) listening to His sermons and enjoying the free snacks after the service. But as He went to the cross, few supporters were there. Even after He conquered the grave and rose from the dead, only about 120 waited in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. But His ministry forever changed the world. The disciples Jesus developed bore fruit, fruit that lasts forever. Just as Jesus disciplined them, they poured their lives into others, and followers of Christ have been multiplying ever since.

It is now our turn. It is your turn. Because you are His disciple, you are invited to invest in others, to develop others, to help others become more and more like Christ. From your children, to your grandchildren, to your neighbors, to young people in your church who could benefit from your mentorship and influence, there are people around you the Lord has in your path for a purpose. And that purpose is clear: to disciple and develop. Just as Jesus had a small group of people He poured into, you can and should as well.

Sadly, not all of God's people hold a deep conviction to develop others. And their legacy will not be as impactful as it could be. If we look at Moses and Joshua, his successor, we see conviction for developing others in one and a lack of conviction in the other.

Moses or Joshua?

Conviction for developing others gripped Moses. He understood that leadership is always a temporary assignment—always. We simply steward what the Lord has entrusted to our care for a



season. And part of wise stewardship is developing others and preparing others for life and leadership.

Moses embraced the necessity to develop others. He personally selected and invested in leaders. As you read through the Scripture, you see Moses pouring into Joshua. The younger man observed Moses' righteous indignation when Moses smashed the two tablets (see Ex. 32:17-19), and Joshua sensed the holy communion Moses shared with the Lord as Joshua guarded the tent of meeting (see Ex. 33:11). Joshua was also one of the 12 leaders chosen to spot out the land of Canaan. Through all these critical moments in the life of God's people, Joshua was there with Moses.

Moses understood that leadership is always a temporary assignment—always.

Moses served his people by pouring into the life of another. And immediately after Moses' death, Joshua was ready to lead Israel: "After the death of Moses the LORD's servant, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, who had served Moses: 'Moses my servant is dead. Now you and all the people prepare to cross over the Jordan to the land I am giving the Israelites'" (Josh. 1:1-2).

The leadership legacy of Joshua, sadly, is very different: "Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110. ... That whole generation was also gathered to their ancestors. After them another generation rose up who did not know the LORD or the works he had done for Israel" (Judg. 2:8,10).

After Joshua died, it was only one generation later before people did not even know about the rescue from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, and God's providence for His people. Why the stark contrast? There is no record of Joshua's investing in anyone. We don't see him intentionally developing leaders. We don't read of him pouring into others. And the generation after his leadership doesn't know the Lord.

A soul-searching question: Would a statement about your influence sound more like Moses or more like Joshua? There are young families in your church, teenagers in your church's youth ministry, and others who could benefit from your wisdom, experience, and life. Follow the example of your Lord and invest in others. Then you will have a legacy that lasts forever.

Eric Geiger serves as one of the vice presidents at LifeWay Christian Resources, leading the Resources Division. He is co-author of *Designed to Lead* and *Simple Church*.