

First Things First



Where do we begin when everything seems important?

Ever have those days when everything feels urgent?

- » The sales pitch urges us to “act now.”
- » The notifications of incoming text messages demand responses.
- » The unplanned meeting or phone call insists on our presence.
- » The relentless movement of the clock’s second hand reminds 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, how do we know where to start?

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

The short Book of Haggai answers this question. Here 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.

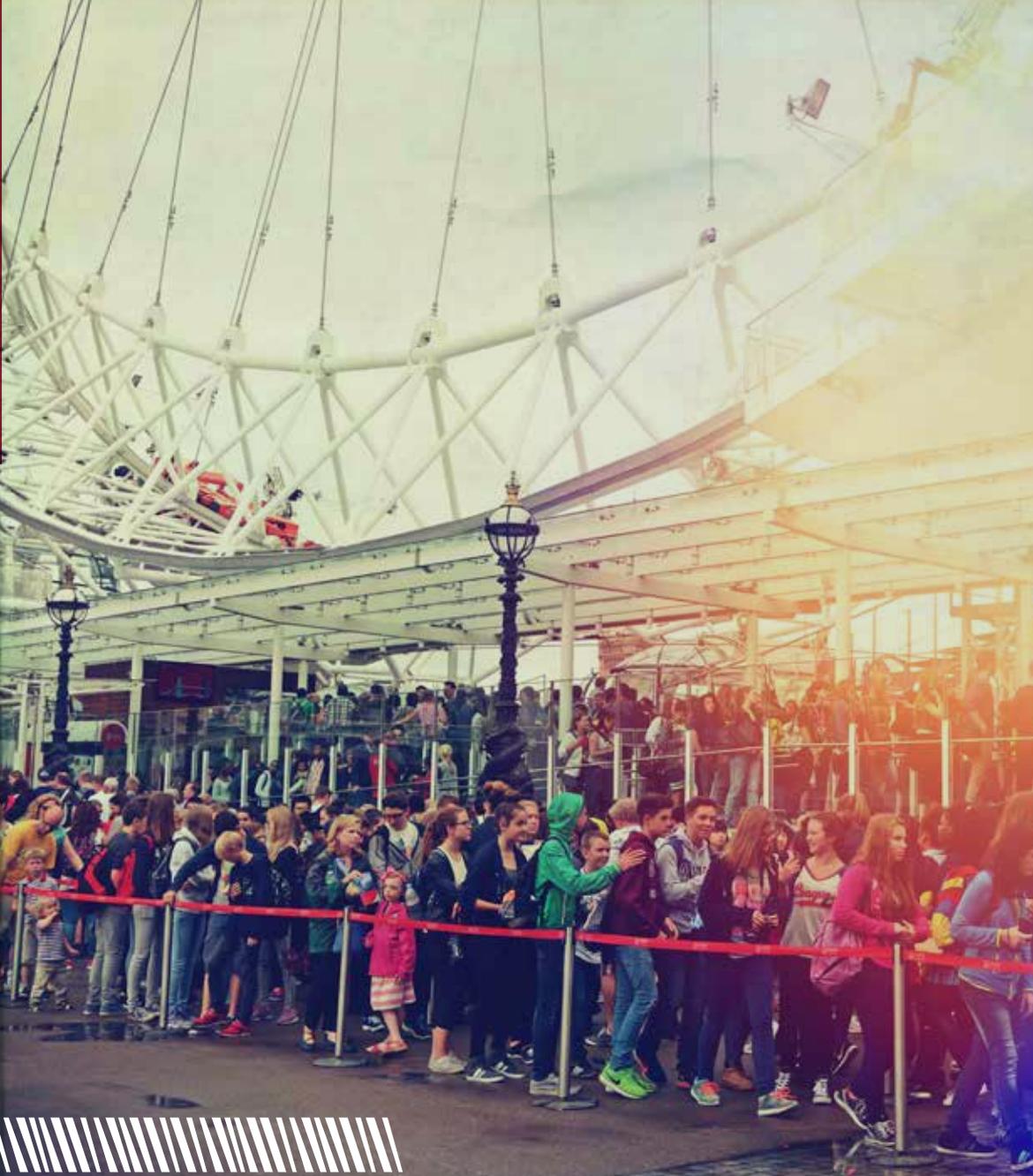


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SPECIAL FOCUS

FIRST THINGS FIRST



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

QUESTION 1

#BSFLfirstthings

Always put God first.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

One way to tell what's important to somebody is to see how long he will 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 are selfish. It is 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 (CSB)

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.

Fifth century B.C. was a bleak period in Israel’s history. The great empires of David and Solomon had crumbled. The Assyrians had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Babylonians had destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah. 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 (Ezra 1:1-4).

The governor, Zerubbabel, and the high priest, Joshua, were among the first to return. What they found in Jerusalem was complete devastation. During the Babylonian occupation, the entire city was destroyed. The walls around the city lay in ruins, so that God’s people had no defense against potential attacks.

The temple also had been reduced to a pile of rubble. This was especially discouraging to the people because the temple was part of their identity—and now it was gone. In spite of their dismay, the people obeyed God and started to rebuild the temple (Ezra 3:8). They cleared the rubble and laid the foundation of the temple. After a few years, however, they ran out of resources. They faced opposition from their enemies who were already in the land, and the building stopped for the remainder of Cyrus’s reign. The people became discouraged again (Ezra 4:1-24).

What are some of the major priorities in our lives?

QUESTION 2

Enter Haggai. We don't know much about Haggai, but by the time Darius had become the ruler, he was serving as God's prophet. God sent Haggai to Jerusalem to urge the people to resume their work on the temple. The people needed a fresh challenge, and God spoke that challenge through Haggai.

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

1. **Delayed obedience is disobedience.** The people rationalized their apathy by claiming it was not God's will to rebuild the temple at that time. Since they experienced disappointment and opposition, they kept repeating, "The time has not come" (v. 2). The saying became so common it almost sounded like a national slogan. The only problem was, they were wrong.
2. **Our priorities are always less satisfying than God's priorities.** God asked the people to "think carefully" (v. 5) 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. No matter how much they planted, they never had a good harvest. They never had enough to eat or drink. Their clothes didn't keep them warm. No matter what they accumulated, it never seemed to be enough.

God was not pleased with His people. In fact, when He first spoke to Haggai, He called them "these people" (v. 2). God was still in a covenant relationship with the Jews, but a problem obviously existed in their relationship: disobedience. God was not done with them, however; He simply wanted to get their attention.

Haggai 1:9-11 (CSB)

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."

What excuses do we make to delay our obedience?

QUESTION 3

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

QUESTION 4

The people during Haggai's time had high expectations for rebuilding the temple. Unfortunately, these expectations fell apart when they confronted opposition. Work on the temple came to a halt. The reconstruction effort slumped even further when procrastination caused them to stop focusing on God's will.

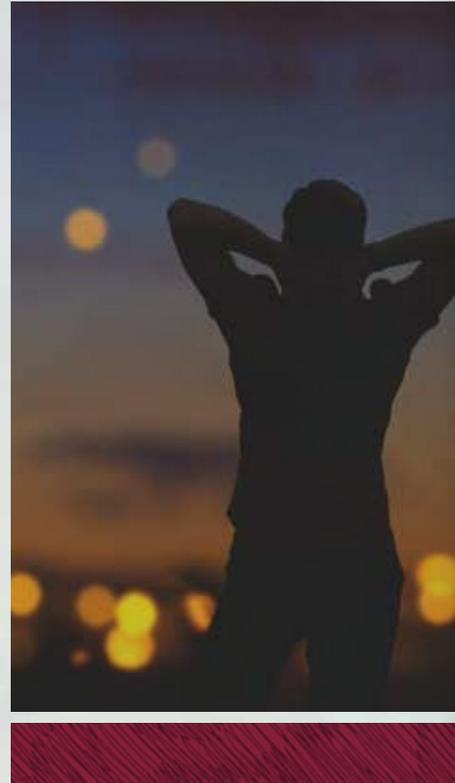
As we see in verses 9-11, we lose out when we place ourselves ahead of God.

When we are 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 are working hard, yet God is not providing. Why?"

Rebuilding the temple was significant because God associated with His people through that structure. By disregarding the temple, they were ignoring God. God removed His blessing from the people in Haggai's time because of their misguided priorities. Ironically, their self-focused hard work resulted in nothing because God took from them what they selfishly pursued.

We cannot know God's will when we put ourselves first. The only way we can discern God's desires for our lives is to make Him our priority. When our priorities are misguided by selfishness, we can get trapped in the vicious cycle of working harder and being less satisfied. However, we can break this cycle of frustration.

When God is first, He gives us what we need. When God is first, we do not need to worry about anything; He will provide what we need.



"When our priorities are misguided by selfishness, we can get trapped in the vicious cycle of working harder and being less satisfied."

SAM RAINER

FIRST PRIORITY



What distracts you from keeping God first in your life?

Draw a symbol that represents your response in the space below. Then, identify one way to overcome this distraction with God's help and note that next to your drawing.

Haggai 1:12-13 (CSB)

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 wake-up call, the people obeyed. God caused a drought that prevented the land from yielding crops, He allowed them to be completely dissatisfied with work, and He sent Haggai to speak firmly to them and show them their sin and failure. Finally, 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" (v. 13). The Lord was quick to renew His fellowship with the people when they returned to Him. It's the same with His followers today.

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. 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 list of priorities 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 it.



What steps can we take to make sure we have the right priorities in life?

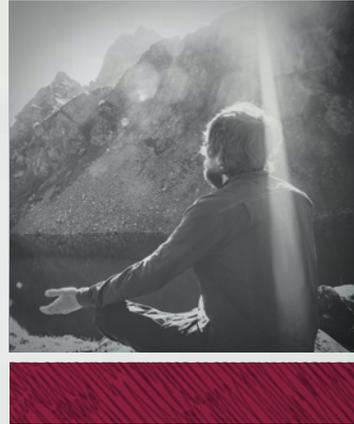
QUESTION 5

LIVE IT OUT

How can you place God above everything else in your life?

- » **Assess.** On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being “Low” and 10 being “High”), how would you rate your level of daily commitment toward God? What steps can you take to change your place on that scale?
- » **Begin each day with Him.** Carve out 10-20 minutes to read Scripture and pray. Be vigilant about protecting this time and reducing distractions. This act demonstrates the priority you place on God’s Word and your relationship with Him.
- » **Pursue a lifestyle of devotion.** Audit your daily and weekly routine. Does your calendar reflect devotion to God? Are you making time to seek Him and serve Him? Be ready to say yes the next time an opportunity arises to serve God by serving people in your church or community.

There will never be a shortage of distractions competing for your attention that rightly belongs to God. Be steadfast in your pursuit to put God first. God promises to provide what you need if He is your priority. **Even better, God promises His presence to those who put Him first.**



My thoughts



HOW TO DISCERN THE VOICE OF GOD

BY MARY MARGARET COLLINGSWORTH

One of the most crucial pieces to life as a Christ-follower is learning to listen to the voice of God. We have to position ourselves to be able to hear from Him. We have to learn to listen to God because it's a key part of being in relationship with Him.

Our lives are so filled with noise that we probably miss His voice on a regular basis. If you're anything like me, there's very little silence in my life. When I get into the car, the radio kicks on and I listen to it all the way to work, or I make a phone call. When I sit down at my desk, I often plug in my headphones to listen to music as I work. As soon as I get home, I turn the TV on for some background noise while I get

dinner ready. At bedtime, I often watch a show on Netflix until I fall asleep.

I've given God very little opportunity to speak because my life is so loud.

We have to learn to listen to God because it's a key part of being in relationship with Him.

I wish I could give you a recipe for listening to God, but I can't. It's not that simple. We can look at Scripture to see that God uses so many ways to speak to His people—a burning bush, a wet fleece, a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, the words of prophets, His own voice, fulfillment of prophecies, through thunder and earthquakes, and countless other ways. He uses His Word to speak to us—it's His letter to us as believers.

Here are a few things to think about:

- » What's your motive in wanting to hear from God?
- » Have you put a timeline on hearing from God?
- » How have you made room for God to speak into your life?
- » What does God's Word have to say?
- » Are you actually listening?

One crucial thing to remember—God never contradicts His Word. If you feel like God is prompting you to do or say something that is against what is in Scripture, it's time to re-evaluate. We have to learn the difference between listening to our own head and heart, and listening to the voice of God. There's a critical difference between the two.

John 10:27 says, "My sheep hear My voice, I know them, and they follow Me" (HCSB). When we are in relationship with Jesus, we know His voice. We know when it's Him, and we trust Him, whatever it looks like. It's so similar to a mom knowing her child's voice or cry—we learn to hear the voices of those we love and spend time with.



We have to learn the difference in listening to our own head and heart, and listening to the voice of God.

If you feel at a loss for what it looks like to hear from God, first give yourself room to hear from Him. Aside from your own quiet time with Him, pray that He would make you aware throughout the day of how He's working. When He prompts you to speak or act, don't miss out on the opportunity to be His hands and feet. Ask other believers what this looks like in their lives, and ask God to speak to you.

When **Mary Margaret Collingsworth** isn't coordinating leadership events for women or hosting the {MARKED} podcast, you can find her watching Florida Gator football, cooking with friends, or reading a good book. She loves teaching God's Word, Mexican food, a good pair of jeans, and calling Nashville home. Follow her on Twitter: @marymargaretc.

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