

Text: Haggai 1:12-15

Title: “God First ... Repentance”

ILLUSTRATION – Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church and all around the world believers are praying for brothers and sisters in other lands who suffer for their faith in Christ. One of the recent stories comes out of North Korea where a few people meet on a riverbank with their fishing gear. They load into their boat and ease out into the river. When they’re far enough away from the shore they dig through their gear and pull out their Bibles. This is the only place they feel safe to worship and read their Bibles, but they are constantly on the alert. In North Korea if someone is caught reading the Bible they could be sent to prison for 15 years. It’s happened to many of their loved ones. Suddenly there’s the sound of an approaching boat. They frantically hide their Bibles because they fear it is the police. But they are relieved when a man in the boat greets them in the name of Jesus. He, too, is a believer and he knows what they are doing. The man asks to see their Bibles. There are only a few among the believers and most of them are falling apart; but they’re like a treasure to these believers. The man picks up a box of new Bibles and passes it across to the other boat, and there’s a celebration. They cherish the Word of God and they clutch their new Bibles to their chest. They in turn give him the few old, worn out Bibles they had. They will be refurbished and given to still other believers. The man blesses them and steers his boat back to the shore. He took the old Bibles back to the hotel where he was staying, but soon they disappeared. He later discovered that a janitor had found the Bibles. But instead of reporting it, he took the Bibles with him. As it turns out, the janitor is a believer and he took the Bibles to a tiny house church of four believers who had been praying to have a copy of God’s Word.

Amazing things happen when the people of God encounter the Word of God. And that’s what we see happening in the little two-chapter book buried in the last pages of the OT ... the book of Haggai. Turn there with me. If you go to Matthew in the NT, take a left and go three books you’re at Haggai. Or you can use the table of contents.

If you missed last week let me give you the backstory of Haggai. In one of the most amazing events in history a Persian king named Cyrus showed amazing favor to Jewish exiles who had been captives in a land known as Babylon for seventy years. The Bible tells us that God put in on the heart of Cyrus (though he probably didn’t know it was God) to let the Jews go back to their homeland that had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The Lord had already told his people through prophets like Jeremiah that after seventy years they would be restored to their

homeland. Now His promise was fulfilled and the Jews were supposed to rebuild their city and, most importantly, the Holy Temple of the Lord that had been destroyed. The Temple was more than just a building; it symbolized the power, presence and glory of Almighty God. When Haggai comes on the scene the Jews had been back in Jerusalem for about eighteen years. The city had mostly been rebuilt. Life had returned to normal with one glaring exception. The Temple of God still was just a bare foundation. So God confronted the people through Haggai. They had plenty of time and money build their lovely homes, but they had ignored the Temple of God. Again, this isn't just about a building. To ignore the Temple was to ignore God. So they had their priorities all messed up. They spent enormous amounts of money on luxuries for their homes, yet when the Lord told them it was time for them to rebuild the Temple they said, "Not now. Tell God He can wait."

And if they were hoping that somehow this would make them happy, well, it wasn't working. God showed them through the preaching of Haggai that while they planted much they harvested little. They would eat but it would never fill them up. Drink, but it would never quench their thirst. Put on nice clothes, but it didn't keep them warm. They put their hard earned money into bags with holes in them. Isn't that the way it goes? We cram our lives full of possessions and experiences that we think will make us happy, but they really don't. We all have a God-shaped hole in us that we may try to fill with the things of this world. But we will never be satisfied and fulfilled in life until we put God first. And that was the message of Haggai. Put God first. They were to go up into the mountains, bring down the wood and rebuild the Temple of God.

This was the message God sent through Haggai. We know little about him. He's on the scene three or four months and then he disappears. But God used him like a load of dynamite to explode the complacency of God's people and get them back on course. Notice how they responded. **Read Haggai 1:12-15.**

Believe it or not this is one of the most remarkable movements of God in the history of His people. Usually when God sent prophets to rebuke and correct His people they were mostly ignored. Nothing changed. But in this case God's messenger Haggai comes on the scene, proclaims God's Word and amazingly there is immediate repentance. Everything changed. Once again they put God first in their lives.

So if today you find yourself bogged down in spiritual complacency God's Word shows how to repent and put God first. It starts with...

1. OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF GOD

The people knew that when they heard this obscure prophet speak that God had sent him and that they were listening to the very voice of God through Haggai. Through His Word God brought them face to face with their spiritual problem. And v.12 tells us what they did.

Haggai 1:12a - Then Zerubbabel ... Joshua ... the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him.

I'm amazed at the unity of brokenness and obedience you see here. Everyone ... the main political leader, the main spiritual leaders and the "whole remnant" of the people repented and obeyed. As a nation they had been complacent and disobedient for eighteen years and now as a nation they turn back to God.

This all starts with God speaking to them. And the primary way God speaks to us today is through the Scriptures. If you're not in the Word regularly on your own, and if you are not exposed regularly to the teaching and preaching of the Word of God you will stay stuck in your complacency and disobedience.

Hebrews 4:12 - For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

God's Word has a way of quickly and effectively cutting through the clutter in our minds and hearts and to compel us to obey. What has God told you to do that you haven't obeyed? Delayed obedience is disobedience. That's where repentance starts, but also there's ...

2. REVERENCE FOR THE CHARACTER OF GOD

The last sentence of v.12 says, "And the people feared the LORD." They took God seriously. They understood the character of God, that He was holy and mighty and Lord of all. And they had a reverence for Him. Now the reference here to fearing the Lord in this instance is not about being afraid. Some people should be afraid of God. Don't trifle with Him. But in this instance this fear is a picture of people understanding who God is and realizing He is worthy of worship and obedience. He is Lord and we should rightly respond to His authority in our lives.

ILLUSTRATION – My friend Richard Ross likes to remind us how easy it is to treat Jesus like a little Jesus doll we keep in our pocket. We like to have Him close. It gives us a sense of comfort and security. But He really has no say in the way we live our lives. He doesn't really have any power over our lives. He's there for our support, but that's it.

Repentance means we obey the Word of God and it means that we start taking God seriously. Then next there's an...

3. AWARENESS OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

When you move toward God the way the people do here in Haggai, God moves toward you.

Haggai 1:13 - Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD.

What reassuring words ... "I am with you." You might expect God to say, "I'm against you." In spite of all of their disobedience and complacency God is still on their side.

The Lord is saying, "I don't you to do this work *for* Me. I want you to do this work *with* Me." There's a huge difference. If you see the Christian life is just going through religious motions you're missing it. It is the God who created you living in you by the Spirit of His Son Jesus Christ. Your life becomes an overflow of His presence in you. It's supernatural.

God's presence and power always move in the direction of His will. When we obey and reverence Him we can expect His presence with us.

EXAMPLES – God knows we need this kind of reassurance when we step out in faith and obey Him. In Genesis He spoke Isaac and Jacob, "I am with you." He spoke the words "I am with you" to Moses just before he led Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. The Lord spoke to Joshua as he was about to lead the people in to possess the Promised Land. He said, "Joshua, I am with you." The Lord told Jeremiah when He called him to be a prophet, "I am with you." God gave His Son Jesus the name "Immanuel" which means, "God with us." In the NT Jesus gave his disciples the mission to go and make more disciples of all nations ... to teach and to baptize. And then He said this: "I am with you always." The Lord

encouraged the Apostle Paul in his missionary travels not knowing what he was going to face. He said, “Paul, I am with you.” Do you need to hear those words today, facing whatever you are facing ... “I am with you?”

God is faithful. When we repent and move toward Him in obedience to His Word and reverence for who He is then He moves toward us with grace and mercy. “I am with you.” Then all of this leads to them being...

4. MOTIVATED BY THE STIRRING OF GOD

Haggai 1:14a - So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people.

God speaks through His Word and then He us stirs by His Spirit. To be stirred up means to be energized, inspired and motivated. God was at work in their spirit.

ILLUSTRATION – I played football in high school, but it wasn’t my favorite sport. I remember one particular practice where as a wide receiver I was to run a pattern where the quarterback would release the ball before I made the last cut in my pattern. So the split second I turned the ball would be there and I better be ready to catch it. Well at this practice I wasn’t particularly motivated and I sort of loafed through the pattern and before I knew it the ball hit me upside the head. And shortly after that Coach Froman was in my face yelling at me for loafing and I was to get back on the line and try it again. Well, you can bet that I ran the pattern the way I was supposed to because I was motivated.

Philippians 2:13 says, “It is God who is at work in you both to will and to do His good pleasure.” He stirs up our spirits to want to do His will and to actually do it. If God is at work in that way in us how can we say to God, “Well, not now. Maybe later”?

When we obey the Word of God and reverence the Person of God and feel the presence of God and are motivated by the stirring of God than inevitably we will give...

5. ATTENTION TO THE WORK OF GOD

Haggai 1:14b-15 - They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius.

If you do the math here from what we know in v.1 and v.15 you see that it takes them about three weeks to actually start rebuilding. The repentance of their hearts was immediate, but the repentance of their hands took a few weeks. And that's understandable. Remember the Lord told them in v.8, "Go up into the mountains, bring down the wood and build the house of the Lord." So they obeyed immediately and in a few weeks (not months or years) you see the fruit of their repentance.

Everything here is in the proper order. When the Lord got in their faces about this they could have just grabbed their shovels and their picks and said, "Let's get her done." No, this was first a spiritual problem. They needed to get right with God, put Him first, then do the work.

This is the Gospel. If you're here today without Christ the Lord calls you to repent of your sins and come to Christ. This starts with obedience where you quit trusting in your own righteousness to save you and trust in Christ. You worship and have reverence for God when realize who He is and what Christ has done for you. Then the miracle comes when Christ comes to live in you by His Holy Spirit. He literally comes to be with you. And the Holy Spirit then stirs your new heart to desire and to do the will of God. This is so far from religion where we just try to be a better person. Christ comes and makes you a new person with new desires to do the will of God.

So what are you waiting for? What is your unfinished business? Don't leave today without receiving Christ as your Savior. Dad, have you been disobeying God by neglecting your family? Repent and obey. Has God convicted you about witnessing to a coworker? Repent and obey. Has God called you to rearrange your financial priorities so you can begin be generous to the work of God in through your church? Repent and obey.