“Rebuilding from Ruin”
Haggai 1-2

Over the last few weeks, we have watched with broken hearts as our friends in Texas and Florida—and now the Caribbean islands—have endured back to back hurricanes. Just this week, a major earthquake rocked Mexico City, causing the collapse of buildings and the death of hundreds. In the weeks and months that lie ahead, those who have been affected will somehow have to sift through the rubble and rebuild their lives from what is left.

Picking up the pieces and rebuilding after a time of disaster is never easy. The post-exilic minor prophets know this firsthand!

This morning, I want you to find your place in the book of Haggai, the second shortest book in the Old Testament. In fact, it is so short that you may have a hard time finding it in your Bible. It only consists of two small chapters and 38 total verses. It is third from the last book in the Old Testament, just in case you need a clue to find it. The last three books of the Old Testament are known as the post-exilic minor prophets. That simply means that these prophets had a ministry among the exiles who returned to Jerusalem after their years of captivity.

You will remember from our study that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians were instrumental in God’s discipline of His people. Because of idolatry, God raised up Babylon to use as an instrument of judgment against His wayward people. In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar’s forces leveled the city of Jerusalem to the ground, burned the temple, and carried the people off as captives. They were there in Babylon for some 70 years.

Well, it was not too long after that the Babylonians were also conquered by the Medes and Persians. The house that Nebuchadnezzar built was taken over by Cyrus, leader of the Persian empire. He had a different policy than the Babylonians in that he believed his subjects would be more loyal if they were in their native homeland. So, somewhere
around 536 B.C. or so, Cyrus issues a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. They were permitted to rebuild the temple, and the Persian empire signed off on it.

The background story is found in 2 Chronicles and Ezra:

2 Chronicles 36:22-23 - “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all His people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up.”

The Bible says that it was the Lord God who ‘stirred up’ the heart of Cyrus, and Cyrus himself even acknowledges that the covenant God of Israel placed it within his heart to do this. This is yet one more remarkable piece of evidence in Scripture that our God is sovereign over the nations of men.

Proverbs 21:1 - “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will.”

All of this is the historical context for the post-exilic prophets.

Ezra informs us that approximately 50,000 Jews made their way back to Jerusalem. The first group of exiles returned under the leadership of Zurubbabel, while others returned later with Ezra and Nehemiah. Think about how deadly sin is—there were two million who entered the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. The kingdom thrived under David and Solomon. Now, centuries later, sin and disobedience had taken its toll and the people were reduced to a mere fraction of what they had been.

Yet, in spite of it all, God still honors His covenant with Abraham and his descendants. He isn’t through working!
The first item of business for these returned exiles was to get started rebuilding the temple. The temple was the most significant part of the relationship that God had with Israel. It set them apart as God’s chosen people with whom He dwelt.

As such, the temple was a symbol of:

- God’s PRESENCE with His people
- God’s PROMISES to His people
- God’s PURPOSE for His people

Haggai shows us how the temple represented God’s continuing favor with His people and His intention to fulfill His promises. Aside from his name which means ‘festival,’ there isn’t much we know about Haggai. His simple message was that the people who returned from exile failed to experience the blessing of God because of their neglect to rebuild the temple. I want to show you from Haggai at least three things that were necessary in order for God’s people to rebuild from the ruins.

1. **PROBLEMS to be addressed (1:1-4)**

   “In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?”

Haggai was more than likely an older man when he began his ministry among the returned exiles. There is evidence in chapter 2 that he might have even seen the first temple before it was destroyed, which would mean he was at least in his 70’s. He would have understood the importance of the land and the centrality of worship in the temple to be vital to the people’s success. His experience would lend weight to His message.
A temple that was lying in ruins was an indictment against the people. In many ways, it revealed their isolation from the presence of God because of their sin. It demonstrated their ignorance of God’s Word and was a sign of their indifference toward the glory of God. Therefore, the command to rebuild the temple was a command to take their relationship with God seriously. Mark Dever has pointed out:

- **From the people’s standpoint**, the rebuilt temple would be a clear and public statement that they still wanted and valued God.

- **From the world’s standpoint**, it would be a sign that the God of Israel had not gone out of business when Jerusalem fell.

- **From the Lord’s standpoint**, the temple was a visible sign of the covenant that bound Him and His people together.

In order to motivate God’s people to rebuild, however, Haggai has to boldly confront some problems that had resulted in their paralysis.

**External Pressure**

Ezra tells us that as soon as the exiles got to Jerusalem, the first thing they did was to lay the foundation for the rebuilt temple. However, progress came to a halt. Work stopped for 16 years. Around 520 B.C. Haggai enters the picture. It was then that God spoke through the prophet to ignite a fire in the hearts of the people. Ezra also tells us that some of the people who were living around the outskirts of Jerusalem became envious that the Jews who returned were rebuilding the temple. They threaten and harass them, and even send an official letter to Artaxerxes who had become king after Cyrus. Artaxerxes then issues a decree that the work was to cease.

Ezra 4:24 - “Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”

So one of the first hurdles for these returned exiles to overcome was unforeseen external pressure from those who opposed them and their work. Pressure tends to paralyze!
Postponed Obedience

Ezra is quick to point out that both Haggai and his contemporary Zechariah were instrumental in getting the work jump started once again. The Bible says:

Ezra 5:1 - “Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.”

They knew that God’s people were under a divine mandate to rebuild the temple, regardless of the opposition and obstacles. The people’s failure to rebuild was not an issue of opportunity—it was an issue of their obedience.

Haggai says that the people were guilty of making excuses. Verse 2 says, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.” It became an easy way out. Chalk it up to ‘poor timing;’ this was how they defended their inaction. It was really a lack of faith.

Misplaced Priorities

Haggai says that their excuse for not rebuilding the temple was the timing, yet he shows how ironically it was the time for them to dwell in ‘paneled houses’ while the temple was still in ruins.

“Paneled” - idea of well-constructed, even lavish houses

They were guilty of elevating their own interests above God’s.

They were more concerned about their own personal comfort than they were about their relationship with God. The people were busy with activity, but they were ultimately busy with their own things while apathetic to the things of God.

It is obvious that the people had their priorities all out of whack, but if we were totally honest, could we not say the same thing about ourselves? Are we really any different from them?
We let the pressure of our circumstances become an excuse for why we ‘can’t’ do something that God has commanded us to do. We are good at coming up with excuses. The allegiance of our heart often belongs to lesser things. Yet this text reminds us that God is jealous for our affections. He yearns for our worship, and as a gracious God who knows what is best for us, He will not let us become content with anything less than full devotion to Him.

2. PRACTICES to be considered (1:5-11)

“Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. 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.”

Life without any fulfillment

You will notice here in these verses that the phrase ‘consider your ways’ is used a couple of times. The idea is that God wants His people to stop and take inventory of their lives.

Haggai uses the imagery of eating but never being satisfied, drinking but never being filled, clothed but not warm. They were busy, but they weren’t blessed. They were active, but they were also spiritually anemic. They were discontent in the land because they were disregarding the Lord.

Labor without any fruit

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. 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. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. 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.”

No matter how hard they worked, it was like running in circles—they never really got anywhere. God had struck the land with drought because of their spiritual neglect.

God says, “You need to get serious about obedience!” He tells them to quit making excuses, quit dragging their feet, and build the house. The reason He gives is two-fold:

• for My pleasure
• for My glory

Rather than seeking their own pleasure, they are to seek the pleasure of God. The glory of God is to be their motivation. God delights in their obedience, and His name is glorified when they serve Him and do what He commands.

Matthew 6:33 - “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

I realize that we are not like Old Testament Israel in the sense that we are not under a ‘prosperity covenant’ like they were. Our blessings are eternal in nature and based upon Christ’s obedience. Yet the principle remains true.

3. PROMISES to be embraced (1:12–2:23)

“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.”

Haggai stands out from the rest of the minor prophets in that his message is received. Many of the other prophets were rejected and the messages they preached were not welcomed. Yet Haggai’s message is welcomed, and the people obey.
The people listen to Haggai, and both leaders—Zerubbabel and Joshua—lead them to begin rebuilding. The text says, “And the people feared the Lord.” It was obedience from the heart.

That’s the difference that hard times often makes on hardened hearts. God uses pain to get our attention, and we are often much more sensitive to His Word once we’ve come through the valley of hardship. The pain of the exile was still fresh to them.

In the verses that follow, notice that Haggai emphasizes some wonderful promises from God to encourage the people to build.

“I am with you” (1:13)

The promise of God’s presence with His people is what gives them the courage and confidence they need. They are not on their own, nor are they to work in their own strength. We read in verse 14 that God stirs up their spirit. It simply means that He had awakened within the people an intense desire to work on rebuilding His house. Progress comes only by means of God’s powerful presence with His people.

In chapter 2, notice that God instructs Haggai to speak once more to Zerubbabel and the people. Obviously when they looked at what was being rebuilt, those who were old enough to remember the former glory of Solomon’s temple knew that what they were building paled in comparison. It could very well have been quite discouraging.

Both Zerubbabel and Joshua, as well as the people they led, needed to know that their efforts were not in vain. Neither is ours when we work diligently for God.

1 Corinthians 15:58 - “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not vain.”

God tells them to get to work, “for I am with you according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt.” This was to be their confidence. Regardless of all that had happened, the Lord still says to His people, “My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not.”
The promise to be with the people anticipates God being with His people in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is ‘Immanuel’ which means ‘God with us.’ 1 Corinthians 3:16 says that believers are God’s temple, and that God’s Spirit now dwells in us. If God is IN us, and if God is FOR us, than who can be AGAINST us? This is our confidence!

“I will bless you” (2:6-9; 19)

Their blessing was predicated on their obedience. As they were obedient to build, God would be faithful to bless.

God says in 2:6 that the time is coming in the future when “I will shake the heavens and the earth…I will shake all nations so that the treasures of all nations will one day come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of Hosts.”

Even though it didn’t seem like it, the future was brighter for God’s people than the past. The future glory of the temple would be greater than the glory it had known in the past!

As Christians, you and I are the undeserving recipients of the obedience of Christ. God freely bestows blessing upon us because Jesus was obedient in the sinner’s place. Our obedience to Him is now an act of loving worship, made possible through Christ’s death and resurrection.

To have Christ as your Lord demands your submission to Him. How can I call Him ‘Lord’ if I refuse to don’t do what He says?

“I have chosen you” (2:23)

God declares that He will take Zerubbabel and make him His ‘chosen one’ who wears His signet ring. This is a promise of hope that God has not cast away the Davidic kingdom, but that He still intends for a son of David to rule and reign. In spite of their sin and failures, God’s gracious purpose in bringing blessing to the world would still be realized.

Application:
• Obedience to the will of God isn't easy or convenient

• God with us is our confidence

The prophet Haggai shows us how:

Jesus is the greater Temple! In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form.

Jesus is the greater High Priest! He is the One who ushers into the Father’s presence.

Jesus is the greater King! He is building a house for His Father, and gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.

As Christians, you and I must be consumed with passionate obedience to Jesus. His kingdom, His rule, His glory must be the primary concern of our lives. The New Testament shows us the mystery of the church, something that was hidden to the prophets, but revealed to us. The church is now the temple of God in whom His Spirit dwells.

1 Corinthians 3:16 - “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”

Think of it—we who believe in Jesus, the church, we are the temple of God! Because of the finished work of Jesus Christ, God is now pleased to dwell in us.

Jesus is building a great house, one person at a time, and the invitation is extended to you to be part of it:

1 Peter 2:4-6 - “As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.”