

BUILDING THE LORD'S HOUSE

Haggai 1

Nearly seventy years of the Babylonian captivity had passed away. The Babylonian Empire had fallen, and Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire, had given the Jews permission to return to their land. Some fifty thousand of them, plus the women, children and servants, returned from captivity to a devastated land, a desolate city and a temple in ruins. They returned for the purpose of rebuilding the temple of Jehovah which had been destroyed by the Babylonians and restoring the worship of God in the city of Jerusalem.

This challenging task was a work which Cyrus himself had enjoined and upon which the hearts of the people were fixed. It was not, however, to be accomplished at once; and, as the worship of God was a matter of great and immediate concern, they set up an altar on its old site on which to offer sacrifices till such time as the temple should be built.

It was not long after their return until the foundation of the Lord's house was laid. The Samaritans promptly asked for the privilege of assisting them in the rebuilding of the temple. Because they refused to accept their cooperation in the enterprise, the Samaritans became the determined opponents of the Jews and set themselves to the work of obstruction. After frightening the Jews, the Samaritans hired counsellors to frustrate their design, so that the work on the Lord's house at Jerusalem was suspended until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.

Finding the task more difficult than they anticipated, the glow of spiritual ideas and ideals gave way to the cold reality of things. Unwilling to endure hardness, they were easily discouraged because of the roughness of the way. After they relinquished the work of rebuilding the temple altogether, the Jews simply began to provide for their necessities and to build their own houses. Thinking of themselves, they sought their own personal profit. Their attention was turned to the building and ornamenting of houses for themselves. They were more concerned for themselves than for the cause of God. They worked for their own private interests. The ordinary occupations of life had far more attraction for them than the duties of religion. They much preferred the material to the spiritual.

When these Jews first returned, the city was one of rubble and ruin, but now row upon row of new houses could be seen. But, on the hill where the temple had stood there could be seen only the foundation of a new structure. During the fifteen years after the foundation had been laid, while the people were consulting their own interests and taking care of themselves, the building of the temple was neglected. It seemed that they were very well contented for the house of the Lord to lie in ruins. Though they found plenty of time and means for building and adorning their own houses in a costly manner, the Lord's house was left to lie in waste. Are they the only people who have ever acted after this fashion? Have any of us been equally slack in doing the Lord's work? It was with them as it is with us; they were not poor in means, but in spirit.

What was it that prompted them to stop short of the performance of their duty? It was selfishness and presumption. They were actuated by selfishness. Virtually they said, "We must cultivate our land first; we must attend to our own business first; we must build houses for ourselves first; and after all of that is completed we will rebuild the temple." They thought that the erection of the Lord's house could wait. Hard though the times were, the fact remained that they had built for themselves durable dwellings and had enriched them with costly adornments. Surely, if they could do all of this for themselves, they might have done something by way of proceeding with the erection of the house of the Lord. Clearly they had not lacked the ability so much as they did the disposition to do their duty.

Most people think far too much of themselves and about themselves. They are so selfish and so self-centered that they make of themselves, as it were, little suns and would fain have the world turn around their petty orbits. They ponder over themselves, their own imaginary greatness, their own pleasures, their own interests, till such selfish thoughts become a scourge of small cords driving them to despair. They think much of themselves, but their thoughts are wrong. Self-love always hinders any effort to build the house of the Lord. It is certainly fatal to all spiritual interests.

As to the presumption of those Jews who were so remiss in building the Lord's house, verse two reminds us that "This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." This statement reveals the unchangeableness of human nature and character. How modern that sounds! How did they know more about when something should be done than God knew? Were they the judges of times and seasons? How did they dare to suppose that circumstances can modify or set aside obligations? Such presumption implied that they knew better than God. You will remember the occasion at Caesarea Philippi when our Lord Jesus Christ said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day." Peter immediately began to rebuke Christ, saying, "Be it far from Thee, Lord: this shall not be unto Thee." The Lord said unto Peter, "Get thee behind Me, Satan."

How many we have known in the membership of the Lord's churches who were never ready to undertake any work requiring sacrifice! They will usually admit that it is needful, that it ought to be done, that they really intend to do it; but, with these Jews of old, they say, "The time is not come." It has been my observation that these people are not the ones who treat their own business after the same manner. You never hear them say, "It is not the time to build a good business; it is not the time to make money; it is not time to acquire property; it is not the time to provide for old age." Their caution looks to one cause only, and that is the cause of Christ--God's house. Such characters are common; they have handicapped the Lord's churches through the centuries. When God reveals or says that something should be done, it is not for Christians to respond: "The right time has not come." Children of God are under orders. They are to go where and when the Lord directs and leads; they are to say and do what He commands. Ours is not to reason why; ours is but to do, or die.

Those Jews never said they would not do what they had been told and knew they ought to do. They merely said, "The time is not come," or "by and by." But, it was only with reference to obeying God that they adopted this policy of dallying and delaying. They dealt differently with their own affairs. They had finished building their own houses, but with reference to building the Lord's house they said, "The time is not come." It was so easy for them to arrive at the conclusion that the time for building the Lord's house had not come, but they had great difficulty in perceiving that it was not the season to attend to their own affairs.

Always and everywhere, the neglect of the Lord's house is spiritual and commercial folly. So long as this world stands as it is, and sin continues to smite, the Lord's house is a necessity in this community. When completed this beautiful, commodious and impressive building will stand here as an honor to God, a tribute to those who share in its erection, and an asset to this city and county. Since it is the Lord's house, and the one in which the largest congregation in the county worships, it certainly ought to be the very best that we can erect for Him. In all things Christ should be first and receive the best. We ought not to treat Him as the man did who bought his daughter a new grand piano and gave the old second-hand one to his church. That night he could not sleep, for God was saying to him, "So you put the best in your home and send the cast-off to my house!"

Returning to our scripture story, we note that, as is ever the case, God had His man to deliver His message to His people at the appropriate time. His name was Haggai, and he seems to have been raised up for the express purpose of challenging the people to build the Lord's house. Unless they built it, they would never enjoy the divine favor.

Haggai's message contained a strong rebuke. He was as scathing as any of the prophetic company, dismissing men's feeble excuses for their neglect of the task of temple-building by telling them that they had been busy and lavish enough in the building of their own houses. His proclamation of God's Word also had the other aspects of encouragement and promise, and these elements predominated over those of rebuke and warning. He sought to convince the people that this enterprise of temple-building was in the line of God's purposes and therefore a venture in which His interest was strongly engaged on their behalf, and as a result of which they would experience His richest blessings. With all the earnestness of his soul, Haggai challenged the people and called upon them to build the Lord's house. That was what God wanted them to do with their time, energy and income. He wanted them to build His house and glorify His name.

In challenging the people Haggai said, "Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways." "Set your heart upon your ways"—your thoughts, your motives, your purposes, your words and your actions. Thoughtlessness is the source of so much evil. People do not always intend to do wrong, but they allow their minds to wander into other courses, and they become preoccupied with other matters.

Admitting the severity of the times, Haggai pointed out to the people that the way in which to have improved these would have been by their discharging faithfully their duty to God. In very vivid language he described the depressed state of things then prevailing, but his contention was that God had visited them with such adverse experiences in retribution. They had forgotten God's claims and had selfishly cared for their own personal interests. Knowing their hearts and observing their ways, God had withheld from them the dews of heaven and had caused drought to prevail, that by their loss and failure they might be led to reflection and to a truer and a more devoted life.

Their efforts to improve their secular condition had been unsuccessful. The ground produced very little. Why was this? It was not because they did not work. It was not because the seed was bad or the soil was poor. The reason was that they had neglected the great duty which God had laid upon them. Because they had neglected to build the Lord's house, the curse of heaven rested as a mildew upon all their operations. If they had faithfully and obediently discharged their duty, as God had directed them, prosperity would have attended all their efforts. But God would not give them any respite as long as His house remained in ruins.

Haggai vividly portrayed the story of those years in a series of contrasts. He said, "Ye have sown much, and bring in little." There had been an extensive sowing each year, but the harvests had never been commensurate with the sowing. They sowed much, but they had reaped little. "Ye eat, but ye have not enough." There had been food but not enough and such as to satisfy their hunger. "Ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink." There had been water, but their thirst had never been quenched fully. They knew what it was to be hungry and thirsty. "Ye clothe you, but there is none warm." There had been raiment, but all of them had known the chilling experience of inadequate clothing. They knew what it was to be cold. "He that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes." There had been money but not enough to make both ends meet. The cost of living had become much higher. Food and clothing had reached exorbitant prices. Money had lost its purchasing power. Due to the high cost of the necessities, hard-earned wages were parted with at once, just as if they had been put in bags with holes. No one had been able to accumulate any capital. Nothing had been put aside for a rainy day. This living according to a false principle had worked out disastrously. God was punishing them. It was impossible for them to separate sowing from reaping, and the same is true of us. Their undertakings failed, their health suffered, and misfortune dogged their steps. Their earnings went into bags with holes, and the leakage was due to the fact that they were not faithful in obedience to the commandments of the Lord God.

An explanation of the cause of their depression is not lacking. They forgot God. To say the least, they made His cause secondary. They postponed the building of the Lord's house, so that they might have time and money for their own secular affairs. They thought that poverty could be averted by failing to build the temple, but their disobedience brought poverty upon them. God simply would not permit His people to make His house secondary to their houses. In this respect, as in all others, God has not changed since Haggai's day. His honor and glory are still matters of great concern and importance to Him.

God said to those disobedient Jews, "Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little." Naturally, they looked for much because they had sown much. Having sown extensively, it is not surprising that they looked for large harvests. But their crops had not been in proportion to their sowing. Even the little that they did reap disappeared immediately. "And when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it." What they got, little as it was, withered in a disappointing and a deepening distress. Why? God answers this question, "Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house." In other words, they put selfish interests first. Trying times come because God's people let His house go to waste, fail to attend its services, look to His honor and proclaim His message.

Through His prophet God told His people to "Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord." He let them know that, if they would get on with the job and give the building of His house the priority to which it was entitled, they would be the recipients of His blessings. If they would build the Lord's house, their seed would then be energized by the God of harvests. God called upon them to take the strength which they had received from Him and use it in building His house. He reminded them that, in the days when the Lord's house was first built, the people were willing, they brought their gifts, they gave their labor, and God gave them strength. The same God Who was with the people in the days of Solomon would be with them. The God Who wrought then is the God Who will work now.

Can't you imagine Haggai fastening his eyes on some who had been saying they would never see again anything as grand and beautiful as the Lord's house was in the days of their childhood. "As though," said he, "that had marked the limit of God's resourcefulness, or used up the best and last of His ideas." God never becomes jaded or spent. "The glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former." Somebody asked Turner, the artist, "Which is your finest picture?" "My next one," was his reply. God is like that. He is never exhausted or overtaken by any. Joseph Parker said, "The great preaching is still to come." The greatest things are yet to be accomplished.