

## **REORDER YOUR PRIORITIES!**

**Today's Text:** Haggai Chaps 1-2

**Extracts:**

**Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: “This people says, ‘The time has not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built.’” Then the word of the Lord came to Haggai the prophet, saying: “*Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?*” Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: “*Consider your ways! You have sown much, and bring in little; you eat, but do not have enough; you drink, but you are not filled with drink; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes....You looked for much, but it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away ... because of My house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house*” [Hagg. 1: 2-9]**

*Leona Helmsley was a billionaire New York City hotel operator and real estate investor.<sup>1</sup> Her real estate empire (built in conjunction with her late husband, Harry Helmsley) included the famous Empire State Building. Her only (biological) child died of heart attack in 1982, leaving behind two grandchildren. But, on her death in August 2007, she left a will in which she gave \$US5-8 billion to charities for animals, \$12 million to her dog and nothing to her two grandchildren!*

*On why Leona gave so much to a mere dog, and nothing for her family, she was quoted to have said (while she was still alive) that the dog was the only living creature that showed her any affection. Her action may not make sense to most people but she certainly had her priorities, right or wrong! She was popularly called ‘Queen of mean’ for her tyrannical behaviour towards employees, vendors and customers. She was even once jailed for tax evasion. In deed, she knew her priorities!*

*We all set our own priorities that influence our life choices. But are all such priorities right, that is, acceptable to God? How can we know that we have got our priorities right? How can we reorder them if we find that we are on the wrong track?*

*Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today’s study.*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the following sources: ‘Leona Helmsley,’ From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leona\\_Helsley#Biography](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leona_Helsley#Biography) ; and Bodog Beat Entertainment Buzz/June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008: ‘Leona Helmsley’s Dog Inheritance Slashed,’ <http://beat.bodoglife.com/entertainment/leona-helmsley-dog-inheritance-slashed-38946.html>

## 1. Background: Working harder for less?

The prophecy of Haggai is set in the time of the return of the first wave of exiles from Babylon, following the proclamation of Cyrus, king of Persia. As prophesied by Isaiah [Is. 45: 1-6], God had stirred up the spirit of Cyrus and he made a proclamation to “all the kingdoms of the earth,” saying, “The Lord God of heaven has ... commanded me to build Him a house in Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May the Lord your God be with him, and let him go up!” [2 Chron. 36: 22-23]. As proof of his commitment, Cyrus brought out from idol shrines in Babylon all the articles of the temple earlier plundered by Nebuchadnezzar and encouraged returnees to take them back to Jerusalem for the temple that they were about to rebuild [Ezra 1: 1-11]. Zerubbabel led the returnees to Jerusalem [Ezra 2: 2] where two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, worked with them [Ezra 5: 1, 2].

As soon as the project began, local political leaders (non-Jews who had been resettled in the land after the Jews had been carried into exile) felt threatened and organized opposition against it [Ezra 4: 1-5]. As long as Cyrus was on the throne, they were only able to delay the work. However, as soon as he died, opposition worked harder to stop the whole reconstruction effort. In fact, under king Artaxerxes, they sent a written petition, reminding him, “If this city is (re)built and the walls completed, (the rebellious Jews) will not pay tax, tribute or custom, and the king’s treasury will be diminished. Now because we receive support from the palace, it was not proper for us to see the king’s dishonour; therefore, we have sent and informed the king” [vv. 11-14]. They then drew the king’s attention to official records confirming how rebellious Judah and Jerusalem had been to the empire in the past [vv. 15-16]. They cleverly hid Cyrus’ proclamation from the king’s attention. So, based on the partial information made available to him, the king wrote to his commander in Jerusalem to stop the reconstruction work, which “was discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia” [v. 24]. That is from where the book of Haggai takes up the story.

In the absence of political support, the zeal among the descendants of the returned exiles to complete the temple work waned. So, people began to change their priorities by paying more attention to their individual needs and interests. The temple returned to ruins while the people lived in “paneled houses” [Hagg. 1: 4]. Their emphasis shifted to pursuit of material wealth, to affluence and worldly pleasures. Yet, they could not find satisfaction in material success. For example [v. 6]:

- Their investments were unprofitable in that they sowed much but brought in “a little;”
- They ate well and yet did not “have enough;” they drank but were “not filled;”

- They wore the best protective clothes but no one was warm or comfortable; and
- Inflation consumed their earnings as if they put their wages “into a bag with holes.”

The answer did not lie with financial gurus or management experts or economic planners. God gave the people an answer through Haggai the prophet, saying, “You looked for much, but in deed it came to little; and when you brought it home, *I blew it away*. ‘Why?’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘*Because of My house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his house*’” [v. 9].

God is also speaking to you right now. Why are you working harder for less? You may be doing two or more jobs and yet you cannot pay your monthly bills. You do not have enough time for rest. Yet, you cannot afford to sleep on the job because they will sack you. You may have medical problems but you cannot afford medical care. You may be a struggling illegal alien abroad but your aged parents and extended family members at home do not know that nor do they care. All they want to know is when the next remittance is coming by Western Union. You may have recently graduated from college (university) or lost a job, but you have searched for a new job for a long time without any success. Why is the going so hard? Is it bad luck or strong enemies at work?

Well, the Lord may be speaking to you right now through Haggai. It may be because of God’s house that is in ruins while you have placed your priority on your material pursuits! God’s house is not just a place of worship but the temple of God within you [1 Cor. 6: 19; 2 Cor. 6: 16]. It is possible that you no longer have time to go to church or even pray. You may owe on your tithes and vows. Spiritually, you have been growing weaker and weaker by living in sin, thus making yourself an easy prey for the devil and his agents. The temple of God in you or your neighbourhood is in ruins!

## 2. The people repented by placing God first before their goods!

The word of God came to Haggai on the first day of the sixth month of the second year of the reign of king Darius [Hagg. 1: 1]. The decree to stop work on the reconstruction of the temple was still in operation. Therefore, what the prophet was asking the people to do was *illegal!* What would you do if you were in the place of Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah? His faith clashed with state policy. Should he rely on the doctrine of separation of church and state to ignore God’s word? He could but the economic hardship would certainly get worse! Should he obey God and risk state sanctions? He could but who could be against the one that had God behind him? The Lord assured Zerubbabel, “I am with you” [v. 13]. God stirred up his spirit, that of Joshua the priest and that of all the remnant of the people. So, on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of that same month, “they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God” [vv. 14-15]. As they were building, “the

prophets of God [Haggai and Zechariah] were with them, helping them” [Ezra 5: 2].

Of course, their enemies did not give up. Tattenai, the governor of the region beyond the River (Euphrates), challenged the Jews to show him the authority for resuming the reconstruction work. They told him that a previous king, Cyrus, had authorized the work and since his proclamation had not been annulled, it remained in effect! He wrote to king Darius to check that out. The king verified and confirmed that the Jews in deed had Cyrus’ authority to do the work. He ordered, “Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God on its site. *Moreover I issue a decree as to what you shall do for the elders of the Jews for the building of the house of God: let the cost be paid at the king’s expense from the taxes on the region beyond the River; this is to be given immediately to these men, so that they are not hindered*” [vv. 3-8]! Zerubbabel did not only obtain the legal authority to do the work; even the state paid for it! The work was completed in less than one month, that is, on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of the seventh month [Hagg. 2: 1].

You may not lose your job if you ask for every Sunday off for worship! You may sell more per week for opting not to open your retail shop on Sundays. You may get to your business place faster by doing your morning devotion before leaving home instead of always skipping it and rushing off. I cannot explain how they will happen but obedience is better than sacrifice. God alone knows what to do. You just cooperate and leave the rest to Him!

Here are the principles that we can learn from today’s story:

a) *Reorder your priorities by putting God first*

Zerubbabel and his people obeyed the word of God and completed the reconstruction of the temple. However, the work was inferior to the grandeur of the temple built by Solomon. In God’s words, “Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing? Yet now be strong...*the glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former... and in this place, I will give you peace*” [vv. 2-9].

No matter how far away you have strayed from God’s presence, He will replenish all your losses when you return *as if* you have never been away! The new temple may look inferior to the former one. For example, you may have to be humble, no longer arrogant and boastful. You may now have to be a follower, no longer a leader. You may now be poorer because you can no longer rely on stolen wealth. You may be publicly disgraced because you have confessed to a hideous crime that may land you in jail. God says you should be strong because in this new temple that may look inferior in appearance to your former empty self, you will have peace. For

the first time in your life, you may sleep soundly because God has taken care of your enemies and your needs. Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” [Matt. 6: 33]. That implies that you have come to Jesus who will take the heavy yoke from you and give you rest [Matt. 11: 28]. Is that not an irresistible offer?

b) *Stay on course thereafter!*

Two months after the completion of the work (on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the ninth month), the word of God came again to Haggai. The temple had been rebuilt but not the conduct of the worshippers there. The priests and the people still paid lip service to holiness before God, like their ancestors [Hagg. 2: 10-16]. Therefore, they needed to reconsider their ways because even when God struck them in those days with blight, mildew and hail and in all the labours of their hands, yet they did not turn to Him [v. 17].

Some people make the serious effort to put God first but only on a tentative basis. When the returns are not immediately available, they cannot wait to backslide and return to worldly ways. God is not a vending machine where you put cash and get your purchase back immediately. Sometimes, He wants to test whether you want Him or His goodies. Those who come to God must first trust Him and believe that He rewards those who *diligently* seek Him [Heb. 11: 6]. So, after putting God first, you must continue to put Him first from that point on. The God of Sunday should be the same God in your office or business and at home for the rest of the week. That way, He knows that your temple has been reconstructed. Then He will begin to speak to you and guide you on a daily basis. When you wander to the right or to the left, you will hear His voice and you will come to the true way [Is.30: 21]. He will bless you materially. You will no longer be forsaken nor will your descendants beg for bread [Ps. 37: 25].

c) *Be blessed!*

God promised that “from this day forward,” He would bless them, even when the seed was still in the barn and the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree had not yet yielded fruit [Hagg. 2: 19]. In other words, their blessings would come first from God before the work of their hands began to bear fruit. He promised Zerubbabel that He would shake heaven and earth, overthrow “the throne of kingdoms,” the chariots and their riders [vv. 21-22]. Was it not king Darius that paid for the reconstruction of the temple, even before the returnees planted and harvested enough to fund the completion of the work?

The apostles demonstrated to us what it means to put God first. For example, Peter gave up fishing and became a fisher of men. When his mother-in-law was

sick, Jesus healed her [**Matt 8: 14-15**] (medical insurance). When Peter was required to pay taxes, Jesus paid it for him [**Matt. 17: 24- 27**] (social security). After Christ's ascension to heaven, when Herod had killed James, he arrested Peter and put him in jail, hoping to also kill him. Peter could afford to fall asleep in chains (peace) because he knew that God would not forsake him. Jesus sent His angels to set him free (protection) while Herod died a miserable death soon after (victory) [**Acts 12: 1-10, 16-24**]. So also will God keep in perfect peace those whose eyes are stayed on Him because they trust in Him [**Is. 26: 3**].

### 3. Conclusion: Christ is your signet ring!

God told Zerubbabel, "I will take you, Zerubbabel, My servant... and will make you like a signet ring for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts" [**Hagg. 2: 23**]. A signet ring links and seals two branches together. If you look at the genealogies of Jesus, Zerubbabel is linked on one line to Solomon and Joseph, Christ's earthly foster father [**Matt. 1: 12**]. Jesus received the throne of His father, David, through that link [**Lk 1: 32-33**]. Zerubbabel is also linked on another line through Nathan, another son of David [**Lk 3: 27**], to Mary, Christ's mother, through whom Jesus avoided the curse that God had put on Jeconiah (also called Coniah), that his descendants would never prosper sitting on the throne of David [**Jer. 22: 24,30**]. The signet ring removed from Jeconiah before the exile [**Jer. 22: 24**] God handed over to Zerubbabel after the exile. Therefore, he was the signet ring linking the lineage of Solomon and Nathan, the sons of David [**Matt. 1: 6; Lk 3: 31**] to Christ!

Through Zerubbabel, the old temple of Solomon was linked to the rebuilt temple. The glory of this new temple was said to be greater than that of the first. That is because the glory of this new temple is the glory of God incarnate, Jesus the Christ! When you heed the call and give your life to Christ and remain faithful to Him, you have rebuilt this new temple. Then Christ will dwell richly in you and you will no longer be unfruitful in your spiritual walk. He will supply your earthly needs and assure you your salvation.

Clearly, Jesus is your signet ring to God and to the world!