

How to Lose in Life - False Priorities
A series on the message of Haggai: part 1 (R. Zuck)

1. Take a moment and consult a study Bible to gain a historical sense of Haggai 1.

In 520 B.C., a prophet spoke to about 50,000 returnees from the Babylonia exile about the problem of twisted priorities, of the dangers of being strapped to a self-centered approach to life.

Seventeen years before Haggai spoke, a stream of excited people hurried along the Fertile Crescent, led by Zerubbabel, headed back to their city. Some were senior citizens who had been in the city decades before and now were returning home. Most of them, however, were younger and had not seen the city, though they had heard about it from their ancestors.

They began the restoration of the city by building the foundation of the temple. They completed the temple in about a year, but then opposition set in and no further work was done on it for 16 years.

During that 16-year period, these 50,000 people were working, not on the temple, but on their own expensive palaces, elaborately paneled, as Haggai tells us, like a king's palace. They were neglecting the very project for which they returned. Their priorities were in the wrong place.

2. Study Haggai 1:2-4. What do you notice about the Israelites?

Verse 2 sounds almost sarcastic, because they had been saying this for 16 years! They had become preoccupied with selfish secular concerns. Their materialistic interests choked out their spiritual concern. The Lord was saying that it is wrong to put those things above Him. They were sold out to their own interests, their own comforts, and their own plans. Their own programs were given priority over God's. They were saying that the temple was less important than their own houses.

Is it possible that you have neglected the cultivation of your spiritual life in preference for self-centered interests? Is it possible that some of your interests and comforts have crowded God out of first place? Is it possible that your priorities are perverted so that even though you are going through the motions, you have neglected God's work and have become preoccupied more with you than with Him?

3. In Haggai 1:5-6, what is the Hebrew context of "give careful thought to your ways?"

The words of "give careful thought to your ways" translates from the Hebrew that states, "set your heart on your ways." In other words, consider seriously what you are doing and look at the consequences of your actions. Haggai was rebuking the people for what they had not done. You think you are helping yourself by putting yourself first, but actually you are doing just the opposite – you are defeating yourself.

Don Hillis, writing an editorial on the Book of Haggai in relation to giving and the stewardship of money, said that the Lord in response to their 16-year lapse let them work themselves into a sweaty lather without giving them the fruit of their labor. Their money was being put into a bag without a bottom. Their sacks were sieves. This is the futility of self-centeredness, the emptiness of things, and the vanity of egocentrism.

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4. In Haggai 1:7-11, the Hebrew statement “give careful thought to your ways” is again used. In what context is this exhortation used?

The statement “set your heart on your ways” was a challenge to do the right thing. In verse 5 this exhortation was a call for reflection, and now in verse 7 it was a call of challenge.

The temple was important because that is the place where the people would bring their sacrifices to the Lord. It was the place of corporate and personal worship of the Lord.

No wonder the Lord continued to say that their work had not proved profitable. They were trying to get blessed by their own efforts, but instead found that famine and poverty was the result of neglecting God and His work. If we, too, disobey God, then things will fall apart no matter what we do.

5. As you read Haggai 1:12-15, how did the people respond?

There was a great response to Haggai’s message of rebuilding the temple and bringing the wood so that He would be pleased and glorified. The people obeyed and showed reverence toward the Lord.

The words “The Lord stirred up the spirit” (v. 14) means that that the Lord motivated and encouraged them to build the temple.

Notice the order: they obeyed, then they worshiped, and then they worked. Haggai’s first message to us is that we examine our motives, our priorities, our schedule, our goals, and our whole orientation to life.

