

Return: Awakening from Spiritual Apathy

Ezra 5:1-2, Haggai 1

“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”

Introduction: *"I'd rather attempt something great and fail than to attempt to do nothing and succeed."* This often quoted statement attributed to Robert Schuller (a man we do not look to often for wisdom) cuts to the core of the point of the passage this morning. God calls His people out of a malaise, out of spiritual indifference and lethargy to get back to the greatest mission we have been given: *seek the glory and pleasure of God through obeying and trusting Him above all else.*

Spiritual apathy comes in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes we describe it like a "desert", a "dry time", a time when we read the words of Scripture and there is no fire, no passion, no greater affection. We pray and feel like the words bounce off the ceiling, never reaching beyond our own ears. Other times we feel like Bilbo Baggins, *"I feel thin...sort of stretched like butter scraped over too much bread."* We get distracted, engaged in activity and busyness of life, but not sure what it is all for. We go through motions, but our passion and affection for God is minimal, and we feel like we are existing but not much else. This leads to apathetic pursuit of God, His Word, sharing the gospel with others, and though we may be attending the things we are "supposed" to, there is no pleasure or joyful exuberance in Christ. We do not "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8).

We are all prone to spiritual apathy at different times. This morning we will look at its causes and cure through the lens the Israelites who returned to the land around Jerusalem after decades in exile with the task of rebuilding the Temple and re-establishing corporate worship to the LORD. After a faithful start of rebuilding the altar, sacrificing, and finishing the foundation, the operation ground to a halt. After showing the opposition that was caused by those who practiced spiritual syncretism in the land, God raised up prophets to get the work going again:

*"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. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak **arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem**, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them."*

The book of Haggai is really a list of **4 abridged sermons** preached over four months time. We are given specific time frames and can date the book from August 29, 520 B.C, until December 18, 520 B.C. I love this short book of sermons because Haggai was a prophet that did his job, preached with conviction, and then blended back into obscurity (may we all be this blessed). This is the ambition of every preacher. You love it because he fit four sermons into two pages, and only did this for four months. He was short, sweet, and to the point. We do not know much of him outside of these sermons, which means he was probably living in the land until God raised Him up for this specific time. He also started with the leaders, and called them to action and the people to follow (and NOT follow Him, but those designated by God). We will look at the first two sermons in chapter 1 which called out the causes and cure of spiritual apathy.

Causes of Spiritual Apathy

Haggai 1:1-11 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: ² "Thus says the LORD of hosts: **These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.**" ³ Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, ⁴ "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?" ⁵ Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. ⁶ 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. ⁷ "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. ¹¹ 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."

Now, before looking at the symptoms of apathy, we have to look at the incubator, the situation that surrounded the people in the land. There were forces beyond their control that they were dealing with daily, that absolutely resonate with us:

1. Unstable political situation - There was freedom to act under the decree of Cyrus, but he eventually died (it happens, even to kings) in 529 B.C and his successor named Cambyses took the throne. This is significant because his major accomplishment was bringing Egypt under Persian control, meaning he most likely marched armies through the area that the people of Israel were living, meaning they would have had to provide food, water, clothing, and shelter for these soldiers, stretching resources thin. After Cambyses died, there was major instability, until Darius the great, or Darius I seized control until 486. But this meant that continuity was gone, that the good will they had under Cyrus was gone, and they were not sure if their window of freedom from the governing authorities would be open much longer. Does any of this sound similar to us?

2. Harsh Economic Realities - Not only did the people face taxes from new governments, they had to rebuild an economy from the ground up. The people came there with little, and often when you have nothing to lose, its easier to risk. But after years they built homes, started businesses, saw children grow up, and had more and more to lose.

3. Opposition was Fierce - The people of the land, the Samaritans, offered their help, but upon the rejection of this request, became huge opponents. They tried to frustrate the efforts of the building project, through direct attack and from indirect measures. They filed a temporary restraining order with Cyrus and the other kings (Ezra 4:5), down to Darius. The main result of this opposition was that the people responded **with fear**, where it was *easier* to stop than push through in obedience.

All this led to a stoppage of building of **16 years**. Sixteen years of kicking the can down the field. Sixteen years of "coulda-shoulda-woulda's". Sixteen years of apathy, of activity without accomplishment. Sixteen years of having a foundation laid for a structure that lied in ruins. Sixteen years of ignoring a mission, or raising a generation of fear driven living, and a legacy of lethargy. At the end of 16 years, God had had enough. So Haggai went to work exposing the symptoms, identifying the sources, and offering the solution.

Symptoms

Waiting for the "right time"

"*These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.*" (v. 2) Notice that God referred to them not as "my people", as He often identified them, but as "these people". This lack of personal pronoun showed that He was addressing them based on their response to Him: they in effect distanced themselves from God by their indifference and lack of obedience. Their justification was this: the time is not right, there is too much to risk. Let's wait until there is a better political or financial situation to finish.

This shows that it was NOT IGNORANCE that caused the apathy, but simply a lack of action. How often have we justified our apathy toward our obedience for *the right time: Let's wait until we have more money before we give. Let's wait until we have children to serve. Let's wait until the kids are a bit older to get involved. Let's wait until we have more friends to commit. Let's wait until we know more until we share the gospel with others.* Waiting for the "right time" is merely a deflection, a sanitized excuse for our lack of obedience. God's answer was resounding and clear: the time is now, because the time to start was 16 years ago. But since we cannot go backward, let's move forward in obedience.

Distracted by good things

The second thing that Haggai called out is found in verse 4, "**Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?**" He mentioned paneled houses, which meant the people had enough time and resource to not only come up with functional dwellings, but could get comfort driven upgrades. Solomon used wood paneling on his palace (1 Kings 7:3), which was a sign of wealth. They were so busy building their own homes that they neglected the more important things. Two important things to clarify:

1) **Does this mean we can't use shiplap** (and the Gaines' are wrong?) - Is God against us remodeling our homes? Is He against our comfort? The answer is: no. But it is with this caveat. God was not against home upgrades, but He was against a lack of prioritization. First complete your main mission, and *then* turn to the assortment of other things.

2) **Is this a good verse for church building projects - NO!!!!** Unless it is set in the context of priorities, this is not a passage that should be used to make people feel guilty for redecorating and instead give to a building project. The issue for us is not that this building is the Temple, the issue is to examine our priorities in light of what God has called us to.

All our efforts are never enough

In verse six, Haggai goes all out as a good preacher. He illustrates a single point in five different ways. They have sown a ton of seed, and harvested little. They have sought satisfaction in food, drink, and clothes, but never seem to have enough. Because they feel this tension of never having enough, they keep working more and more to gain more and more, and instead keep putting all their money in bags full of holes, having to work harder for less yield. In other words, they have not found satisfaction in their apathy, and they never would. This was a no win type of life, the kind that looks back on wasted opportunities and vain efforts.

Source

Failure to include God in our plans

Look at verse 9. They looked for much (harvest, resource, yield), but even when they brought home a harvest of wheat, God blew it away. All that was left after the effort was chaff and little grain. We are reminded that if the Lord does not build the house, those who labor do it in vain (Psalm 127:1). This is

so easy to do: we do everything in our own strength, on our own, to the neglect of the greater things, and wonder why we don't experience the blessing of the Lord.

Pre-occupation with our own stuff

Following close behind this is being **busy with our own houses**. Here is the hard part. The people were not pilfering money. They were not accused of idol worship. They were not getting drunk or engaging in illicit immorality. They were engaged in something far more dangerous: apathy. They were content with meager living, nice homes, and little zeal. They looked hard working, and they tried hard. They convinced themselves that they were taking care of their families. They could even point to accomplishments relative to those around them. But all of this was merely window dressing. It was fixing the display mannequins while the store inside remained in shambles.

Misplaced Fear

All of this derived from misplaced fear. When our fear of man is greater than our fear of the Lord, not only are we prone to disobey, we tend to justify apathy. We will fail to risk because we are trying desperately to hold on to what we have. We want to hold onto legacies we have produced, not the glories that God provided through Calvary. We placate ourselves, convincing ourselves that we are being faithful in provision when we are grossly lacking in trust of the Lord.

In all of this, God withdrew the dew, He brought drought, and withheld the blessing from all their labors. He was shaking them out of the malaise. He was graciously withholding so that they would ask the right questions and seek the right answer. God brought their gaze low so they could finally see Him clearly. He wanted them to live an abundant, full, joyful life, but that could not happen UNTIL they looked up and obeyed. **Finish the house so that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord.** *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.* This demands obedience to our mission, which is the glory of God and the satisfaction of all peoples in the person and work of Jesus Christ. **So what is the cure that God called for? What is our hope?**

Cures for Spiritual Apathy

Haggai 1:12-15 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.¹³ Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD's message, "I am with you, declares the LORD."¹⁴ And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God,¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king.

Honest Self Examination

In order to cure what ails us we must start with a thorough examination. Haggai's command was not to go to a physician or professional, but twice he commanded: **consider your ways** (v. 5, 7). Nothing changes in us until we see the need for something to change. This means that we must begin by being honest about our condition. Because issues like fear and deception are not easily pointed out ("you're being deceived"...."no I'm not!"), other people cannot lead us down this path. We must examine ourselves in light of the only thing that can shed light on our hearts and minds: God's Word. The reason we struggle with self-justification is that we judge ourselves based on cultural norms, or what James 3

would call *worldly wisdom*. I just read an article this week on the life of theologian Karl Barth.¹ He is considered by some as one of the greatest theological minds (albeit wonky on many things) of the 20th century, but even though he studied God's Word his entire life, still had a live-in mistress in the same house as his wife, and continued to justify this decision to the end. His own mother said, "**What is brilliant theology good for if it's shipwrecked in one's own house?**" Honest self-evaluation matches us against Scripture, not our desires, or what culture would say.

Infusion of the Prophetic Word

This is one of the clearest calls to why we need preaching in our lives from the OT. What truly got the people to act? It was receiving and responding to the voice of the LORD. "**Then Zerubbabel...obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him.**" (v. 12). This is the essence of preaching. It is God's voice, His Word calling us to action, to repentance, to hope. Preaching is not mere feel-good phrases or a list of "how to's" in order to have a better life. It is God appealing, exhorting, and calling us to Himself. That is why we all need it regularly in our lives, and it's God's design as to how we actually change. That means we do not predominately judge preaching on relevancy or oratory skill, but on clarity from God's Word.

Retraining in what we Fear

But what change do we need to make in our thinking? Notice that a simple phrase clarified the change in the people, their attitude and action: **the people feared the LORD**. They went from fearing what they would lose, what they'd miss out on, and the people that could take away what was precious to them, and feared the LORD. This meant that their greatest measure of success was fulfilling God's call, God's mission, no matter the cost. They were willing to risk their comfort, public standing, and lives for the sake of the mission.

How does fear of man affect you when it comes to fulfilling our mission? Are you afraid of losing control? Are you afraid of the cost? Are you afraid that what you would gain is not worth it? Are you afraid of failing? The long-term solution for us fulfilling our mission of glorifying God by making disciples of all nations comes when we fear God over man, and the proof will be in the pudding.

Exercise by stepping out in faith

This part of the story ends with a happy ending. The *Lord stirred* the hearts of the leaders and the people, and God reiterated the truth that **I am with you** to accomplish this audacious task. The people stopped making excuses, stopped justifying their apathy, and took the radical step called obedience. They did this because the call was clear, the motivation was high (God's glory was at stake), and the means was a **step out of faith**. It takes faith to believe that giving the way God has called is more glorious than hoarding. It takes faith to believe that saying "no" to acceptable things in this world to engage in better things, the things of our mission, is better. It takes faith to remember that we are sojourners, exiles in this world and our future is more glorious. It takes faith to let go of our control of what we cannot keep to engage in something we cannot lose. It takes faith to believe that God is always doing what brings Him glory, always accomplishes His will, and even when He uses gracious but hard means like withholding the rain, He's doing it to wake us from our apathy.

Concluding Thoughts:

¹ Why I still Don't much care for Karl Barth, [theecclesiacalvinist.wordpress.com/2017/10/02/why-i-still-dont-much-care-for-karl-barth/amp/](http://theecclesiacalvinist.wordpress.com/2017/10/02/why-i-still-dont-much-care-for-karl-barth/)

This past week God has seen fit to once again shake our country to its core, which has caused many to ask questions or even to question God. What was God doing? Where was He? Where He's always been, doing what He always does. We remember:

- **We live in a broken world, and evil is real**, meaning that in unrighteousness "their feet are swift to shed blood" (Jer. 17:9; Romans 3:10-18, 15)
- **Life is a vapor and our days are numbered** (James 4:14; Luke 12:7)
- **God is sovereign and always accomplishes His purposes** - (Psalm 115:3)
- **God takes credit for and His mercy is shown even in the disasters and calamities of the world** (Isaiah 45:5-7; Amos 3:6)
- **God is calling us to hope through repentance, and answers our greatest questions by giving Himself as the greatest answer** (see Job 42:2-6; Luke 13:1-5)

God calls us out of the malaise, out of our apathy, by offering Himself to us as our greatest joy, treasure, and satisfaction. We respond out of self-examination, to the Word of God, a turning from fear of man, and willing to take steps of faith.