

## Pride and Avarice

Secretary of State James Baker once gave Ronald Reagan a briefing book to study before the next day's World Economic Summit in Williamsburg, Virginia. In the morning, Baker was dismayed to learn that the president had not even bothered to open it and frankly asked him why. "Well, Jim," Reagan replied, "*The Sound of Music* was on..."

- Ronald Reagan said plainly what we all know is true
  - We all have priorities
    - We only have so much time and so much energy, and we all have to make choices

During Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, the antics of his daughter Alice scandalized sophisticated Washington society.

One day a White House visitor objected to Alice's habit of wandering in and out of the Oval Office while her father was discussing important business. "I can be president of the United States or I can control Alice," Roosevelt retorted. "I cannot possibly do both."

- Teddy Roosevelt reminds us of the other truth in setting priorities
  - Choosing one course of action naturally requires forgoing other courses of action
    - We can't have it all in life
    - We must make choices, even the choice to do nothing at all
- Today I would like to share with you the story of a prophet sent to the nation of Israel to teach them this lesson

[Hag. 1:1](#) ¶ In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying,

[Hag. 1:2](#) "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'This people says, 'The time has not come, even the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt.''"

- Haggai was one of the men of Jerusalem captured by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 586 BC when the Southern Kingdom of Judah was led into captivity

- After 70 years of captivity, the Jews found themselves under the authority of the Medo-Persian empire which had conquered the Babylonians
  - Cyrus King of Persian granted the Jews the opportunity to return to their land, but only a remnant choose to return, perhaps 50,000 or so
  - Three waves of refugees chose to return
    - And among the first group of about 50,000 Jews was a man named Haggai
      - His name means festive one
      - We know nothing else about him or his family
- Haggai was one of the final three prophets sent to Israel as recorded in the OT
  - Besides Haggai, in the years after the return from exile Israel heard from Zechariah and finally Malachi
    - Zechariah and Haggai knew each other and worked together while Malachi came about 100 years later
- Haggai was the first of those three to bring God's word to the returned men and women of Israel
  - And as we read, Haggai started his prophetic ministry in the first day of the sixth month of the second year of King Darius
    - No OT prophet dates his period of ministry with more precision than Haggai
    - And based on this description, we know that this man's ministry began on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 520 BC.
- When God spoke through Haggai, He begins by quoting the voice of the people of Israel
  - Saying, "The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord"
    - God is referring to the rebuilding of the temple
      - Remember, when Nebuchednezzar stormed into town some 100 years earlier, he laid waste to the city

- The homes, the city walls and the temple itself were utterly destroyed
- If we study a little history of how God brought the Jews back from Medo-Persian, we learn he had a specific reason for delivering them out of captivity

[Ezra 1:2](#) ¶ “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

[Ezra 1:3](#) ‘Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

[Ezra 1:4](#) ‘Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.’”

[Ezra 1:5](#) ¶ Then the heads of fathers’ *households* of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

- The King of Persia says God has directed him to release the Jews so that they might rebuild God’s house
  - And the people themselves echo that point of view when they first assemble for the trip back to Jerusalem
    - The trip is all about returning to build God’s house
- Well, it doesn’t take long for the nation to lose focus and forget this purpose
  - They started building and managed to lay the new foundation relatively quickly
    - But when opposition arose from the Gentile nations around Jerusalem, the people stopped
    - And for 15 years nothing more was done to build the temple
- Fifteen years is a long time, when you think about it
  - What were the people doing during those 15 years, I wonder?
    - They were sent back with the instruction to build the Temple, but that work has stopped
    - Why didn’t they begin working again?

- Surely they must have remembered God’s instructions and looked for anyway possible to start building again?
- Sadly, the text gives us a different picture
  - As God quotes the people saying that the time wasn’t right
    - They were procrastinating
    - They were making excuses for not obeying
- Another way to say what the Jews were expressing here is “We don’t have time for this yet”
  - Of course, to a procrastinator, it’s never the right time to do anything
  - And this is especially true when we have something else we would rather be doing
    - Again, it’s a matter of priorities
- So what was keeping the nation of Israel so busy that they couldn’t find an opportunity to do the work God had brought them back to the land precisely to do?

[Hag. 1:3](#) Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying,  
[Hag. 1:4](#) “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house *lies* desolate?”

- In His second statement to the nation, God displays the biting wit that so often characterized Jesus’ comments to the Pharisees and other hypocrites of his day
  - God says I hear you say it’s not time for you to build my house (even though I ordered you to do it)
    - OK...I guess it’s time for you to dwell in your paneled houses while my house lies desolate?
    - Ouch
  - God asks if now is the right time for them to build their houses
    - After all, if time is the problem here, then God turns that excuse back upon the nation of refugees and asks the same question any parent would ask

- Son, you tell me you don't have time to clean your room, but you have time to earn the next level in your video game
- Daughter, you don't have time to complete your chores, but you have time to talk chat with friends
- Honey you don't have time to mow the lawn, but you have time to watch football...
- Is time really the problem here?
  - It sure is convenient that the time has come for these people to build their own homes
    - But yet the time hasn't arrived for them to obey God's command to attend to the Temple
- Actually, the situation is a little worse here than meets the eye
  - When God's says they are living in paneled houses, the word for paneled is Hebrew is actually a bit of a reference to the Temple itself
    - Paneling meant covering the interior of a room, including the walls and ceiling, with wood
      - The only other mentions of paneling in the entire Bible are references to the construction of the Temple itself and one mention of the palace of King Jehoiakim
    - Homes in Palestine were generally constructed of stone blocks covered by a plaster walls on the inside.
      - There was rarely any ceiling at all,
      - Just timbers and stone blocks used to provide a roof and more plaster to keep out the rain
  - So when God describes their homes as paneled, it tells us they were engaged in much more than simply building their homes
    - This was a lavish kind of construction
    - They were selecting interior treatments so extravagant that they could compare with God's house or the home of a presumptuous King
- And if that weren't enough, where did the wood come from for these paneled ceilings?

- Well consider these verse from Ezra describing the early work of building the temple

[Ezra 3:6](#) From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid.

[Ezra 3:7](#) Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

- When the temple construction first began, before the foundation had yet been laid, the people, we're told, paid to have expensive cedar wood brought from Lebanon to the Temple mount
  - This was to be the wood that would be used for the paneling inside the Temple
    - But after the foundation was laid, all worked stopped for 15 years
  - So what happened to the wood?
    - Well now we know
    - The people took it and began to use it for their own homes
- Now we can really appreciate the meaning of God's comments
  - The nation neglected God's command to build His house
    - And they said it wasn't time yet
    - But it wasn't time yet because they were too busy building their own homes
      - And to make matters worse, they were stealing from God to richly appoint those homes
    - They didn't have time to serve God, but they had plenty of time to build their own homes in a lavish style
- Let's be clear, God wasn't unhappy with Israel simply because they took time to build their own homes
  - God isn't cruel and uncaring
    - He understood that the people needed shelter and He didn't object to them spending time to build their own homes

- What he objected to was their greed and dishonesty and selfishness

- You see the truth was that they had long ago finished building their homes
  - After all, they had been living in them for the better part of 15 years
    - And those homes were perfectly adequate for the task of housing the people and protecting them from the elements
  - But that wasn't good enough for the people
    - They needed more than shelter
    - They needed a personal palace
      - They needed a monument to themselves, something to show off to the neighbors
      - They needed a home that rivaled God's temple or Jehoaikim's palace
    - In today's terminology, we might call it materialism
  - And they added insult to injury with their claims that time was an obstacle to building God's temple
    - In reality, it was just an excuse for their selfish focus
- Not surprisingly, there are consequences for this kind of self-serving lifestyle
  - Look what Haggai says next

[Hag. 1:5](#) Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, "Consider your ways!

[Hag. 1:6](#) "You have sown much, but harvest little; *you* eat, but *there is not enough* to be satisfied; *you* drink, but *there is not enough* to become drunk; *you* put on clothing, but no one is warm *enough*; and he who earns, earns wages *to put* into a purse with holes."

- After pointing out their sinfulness, God calls out to them to consider their ways
  - The phrase literally means mind your path
    - Another way to put it would be "Think about it," but with an emphasis on the past tense
  - So, God is saying take a moment and think back on the past 15 years of your life and the decisions you've made
    - And when they think back on thpse past 15 years, what did the Jewish remnant find?

- Well, God begins to list the things they have experienced over those past years
  - In verse 6 God tells them they have sown much, but they haven't harvested much, and they're never satisfied
  - They drink the wine of their fields, but there isn't even enough to get drunk –
    - Which is a blunt way of saying that they received very little production from their vines
  - They have clothing but not enough to be warm
  - They earn wages but they put their money into purses with holes (money burns a hole in their pockets)
    - It's a picture of inflation
    - Money seems to disappear before their eyes
- What's most fascinating here is that opening statement – Consider your ways
  - God says think back, consider the path you've been on
    - It suggests these people had become oblivious to the realities of their situation
      - Every year they were working harder and harder and yet never achieving what they wanted?
    - But they hadn't stopped to ask the obvious question
      - Why?
      - Why was everything so hard and unfruitful?
      - So God asks the question for them...consider your ways
- It's been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result
  - If that's true, then maybe we're looking here at a kind of insanity
  - The Jews of Haggai's day were working overtime day in and day out seeking satisfaction by the same methods year after year yet never finding any

- As God says, they planted ever bigger fields trying to gain enough produce, but they never had enough
- They cultivated ever more grape vines but the wine was never enough
- They worked harder and harder to earn their money
  - And they used that money to buy expensive paneling for their beautiful houses
- But the money never went far enough
  - They can't get ahead, in fact, they're always a little behind
  - Life doesn't satisfy the way they intended
- And through it all, they were telling God we don't have time to build your temple
  - It's not time yet
- Yet they never stopped to ask the obvious question
  - Why it was that they could never make it work?
- Perhaps it was insanity
- But if the Jews in Haggai's day were guilty of chasing after an insane lifestyle, what would God say about our culture?
  - Can you identify with the Jews of Haggai's day ?
  - Have you experienced the insanity of trying the same things year after year, working for a satisfaction that never seems to come
    - Or when it comes it never lasts?
      - It's always one paycheck away
      - One more promotion away
  - Have you ever stopped to ask the question Consider your ways? Why is life not giving you the satisfaction you expect, despite the hard work?

- You know, it wasn't always this way for those Jews that left captivity
  - When the people first arrived in Jerusalem and set themselves to the task of building the temple, they experienced remarkable progress and hope and reward

[Ezra 3:10](#) ¶ Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel.

[Ezra 3:11](#) They sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, *saying*, "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

[Ezra 3:12](#) Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' *households*, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy,

[Ezra 3:13](#) so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.

- The joy of the nation at seeing just the foundation of the temple laid was so great that it was heard far away
  - These people found real joy in a meaningful thing – seeing God's temple built up – even when the building was but a modest step
  - The joy came not from the architectural accomplishment
    - Rather it came from obedience to God's word and for bringing glory to His name
    - Because there is real meaning and joy in obedience, and there is lasting satisfaction in directing glory to Him
    - And for a time, the nation enjoyed that satisfaction
- In our walk as Christians, we have a similar opportunity – a similar choice as these men and women did in Haggai's day
  - As believers in Jesus Christ, God has released us from a captivity - the captivity of our sinful nature before faith
    - When we were slaves to sin, we had no hope to serve God much less please Him

- We were trapped by that sin into a life of selfishness
- Then we were released by our faith to made alive again in Christ and to be called to a new life lived in the Spirit
- But we weren't released from our old nature so that we might embark on a life of selfish pursuits

[1Pet. 2:9](#) ¶ But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God's* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; [1Pet. 2:10](#) for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.

- I believe many in the church experience a kind of first blush of excitement in their walk with the Lord
  - In many ways, new Christians are like the Jews who experienced the joy of seeing a new foundation laid in obedience to God
    - While the Jews rejoiced over a new temple of stone,
    - New Christians are to rejoice in building a temple for the Lord
      - By presenting our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is our spiritual service of worship.

[Eph. 2:19](#) So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household,  
[Eph. 2:20](#) having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*,  
[Eph. 2:21](#) in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord,  
[Eph. 2:22](#) in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

- And in that service, we see true satisfaction and joy
  - But so often today the church experience fails these new Christians
    - The excitement is squandered
      - We receive the new believer, but then the church turns serving God into a religious spectator sport

- Laboring to build God’s temple gives way to attending church once a week while we spend most of our time working to build the American dream
  - And as their enthusiasm is robbed by dissipation, their joy goes with it
    - There can be no joy in serving self, for we were saved so that we would serve Him
      - And God won’t allow His children to find satisfaction elsewhere
- Consider what God tells the nation of Israel through Haggai

[Hag. 1:7](#) ¶ Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Consider your ways!

[Hag. 1:8](#) “Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified,” says the LORD.

[Hag. 1:9](#) “You look for much, but behold, *it comes* to little; when you bring *it* home, I blow it *away*. Why?” declares the LORD of hosts, “Because of My house which *lies* desolate, while each of you runs to his own house.

[Hag. 1:10](#) “Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew and the earth has withheld its produce.

[Hag. 1:11](#) “I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands.”

- God speaking through Haggai tells the nation to get back on track
  - Go back to the mountains, and bring back wood to replace what they’ve robbed from the temple
    - And then get back to work building the temple
  - What you found before amounted to very little
    - And that you bring home blew away in the end
  - Because they neglected the thing God command them
    - The rebuilding of His House and His Glory
    - And substituted a pursuit of self for your call to holy service...
- Then God says the most surprising thing of all
  - God withheld the rain, withheld the produce, dried up the mountains, grain fields, new wine, oil, cattle

- He ensured that all the labor of their hands came to nothing
    - God may have used Haggai to gain their attention
    - But God had been working all during the previous 15 years to make sure that when the message came they would be ready to listen
  - Their frustration at never getting ahead in their pursuit of happiness hadn't been bad luck, or lack of effort, or poor timing
    - When they were planting more and more but the fields were drying it up, it was God
    - When they planted more vines but the wine never went far enough, it was God
    - When they worked harder and harder every year but the money never went far enough, it was God
  - God was determined to show His children that they can't get no satisfaction outside His will
    - The Jews had the paneled houses, and large fields, and 2 camels in the garage, and the big screen tapestry – but no joy
    - Does this sound familiar?
- In the gospels, Jesus tells a parable describing the various outcomes that will inevitably result from the preaching of the Gospel,
  - He uses a picture of seeds and soil to describe four possibilities
    - He begins with a hardened unbeliever, with a heart like packed soil, who rejects the gospel outright
    - Then a second condition where an unbeliever appears to sprout to life giving an impression of belief, but in time and testing he is shown to be a fraud and soon withers
    - In the final response there's the Christian who flourishes in faith, pictured by a plant that grows to maturity and produces abundant fruit for the master
  - But one condition stands out above the rest
    - It's the third response in the parable

- It's the one where a person, has been given new life, and begins to grow in the soil
      - But before long that growth stops and the fruit never comes
      - Why? Because the plant is robbed of its strength and energy by thorns and thistles
        - The cares and pleasures and worries of this world stunt it's growth and block the harvest
- The lesson of that parable is essentially the same as this account in Haggai
  - When we spend our lives serving ourselves, it's a wasted crop
  - And serving ourselves means giving our energies to the pursuits of the world
    - Robbing from God what He has reserved for His use in His temple
      - The Jews of Haggai robbed God of wood needed for His temple
      - While we rob Him of our service to and in the Body of Christ, which is God's temple today
    - And for both the Jew then and the church today, we make excuses to God
      - It's not the right time to serve God
      - Maybe tomorrow
- God may grant us the blessings of homes, and fat bank accounts, and successful businesses and many other cares and riches of this life
  - But we weren't saved to build our houses, nor our bank accounts, nor our businesses much less our own reputations
  - We were saved to worship and glorify Him
    - And to serve His Body in the Church
    - And to witness to His Son in the world
  - Those things will give us joy and satisfaction and eternal reward

- But don't take my word for it
  - Consider the words of Peter written to you and I

[1Pet. 4:1](#) ¶ Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose (because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin), [1Pet. 4:2](#) so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh - no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

[1Pet. 4:3](#) For the time already past is sufficient *for you* to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries.

[1Pet. 4:4](#) In *all* this, they are surprised that you do not run with *them* into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign *you*;

[1Pet. 4:5](#) but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

[1Pet. 4:6](#) For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to *the will of God*.

- Peter minds us that the time past is more than enough time devoted to serving ourselves and our own lusts
  - Like the Jews in Haggai's day, we've had our 15+ years
  - It's time to give our effort and time to God's desires
    - Consider his final line
    - For this reason the gospel was preached to you and I
      - That though we should be judged by the deeds of our flesh (and condemned accordingly)
      - Instead, we have been saved to live in the Spirit, according to the will of God
- I can't say what is God's will for you or for this church
  - I can say this on the authority of scripture
  - God has saved us to spend an eternity with Him
    - And the only thing preventing us from entering into His presence right now is this corrupt body we still occupy
      - But the moment God chooses to remove this body from us, we will instantly be with Him

- And our opportunity to serve Him in this age will have ended
- And then the evaluation is to be made
  - Scripture tells us that we will stand before Christ and be judged for what we did in the body, whether good or bad
    - And that judgment will be the basis for how the Lord rewards us in the next age, whether in honor, privilege or something else
- How sad it would be if the legacy of our churches and our of own lives was to squander this opportunity on paneling our homes
  - Rather than on building the Temple of God which is the Body of Christ
  - How much will we have lost?
- It's not too late
  - The word of Haggai came to the Jews in their day, and as a result, the temple work began again and in a few short years, it was complete
  - And it's never too late for our work either