

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(September 6, 2009)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Ancient Guides for Troubled Times (studies in the Minor Prophets)

The Cancer of Comfort

(the prophecy of Haggai)¹

Study #3

Introduction: Worse than poverty...

You are probably as aware as I am of the grim statistics regarding poverty in under-developed and third world countries. The human toll resulting from scarce or poorly distributed resources is staggering.²

¹ As you might have discerned, I am not preaching these sermons chronologically. However, there is an historical movement in the twelve Minor Prophets (and sadly, this historical movement is not perfectly reflected in the order in which they appear in our Bibles). The books divide naturally into four sets of three:

- **FIRST**, there are the prophets to Israel - Hosea, Amos, Jonah. These are the prophecies written to the northern Kingdom. This Kingdom fell to Assyria in 722 BC. These books were all written in the 8th century BC.
- **SECOND**, there are the prophets to Judah - Obadiah, Joel, Micah. These three prophets wrote from the southern Kingdom of Judah, prior to its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Obadiah wrote about the coming destruction of one of the Jews' inveterate enemies, Edom (descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin apostate brother). Joel wrote about the coming destruction of Judah, and Micah warned of destruction if Judah didn't repent.
- **THIRD**, there are the exilic prophets - Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Nahum. These prophets wrote either immediately before or immediately after the destruction of the southern Kingdom, during the period of the exile.
- **FOURTH**, there are the post-exilic prophets - Zechariah, Haggai, Malachi. These prophets ministered in Judah after the seventy years of Babylonian exile.

² Three billion people (1/2 of the world's population) live on less than \$2 per day. Very conservatively, approximately 25,000 people - many of them children under the age of five - die daily of poverty-related causes. About 28% of children in

Poverty here in America is usually not so grave, but it is undeniable that poverty exists. Many people in our own city live hand to mouth, and (if activity in our own benevolence ministries says anything), poverty is real and rampant here in San Antonio.

Maybe you have experienced poverty, firsthand. At either the present time or at some time in the past you know what it is to go without. Not to go without cable or Starbucks, but without bread.

It's tough to be in a situation where you don't have the means to meet your daily needs, or your own needs plus those of your family.

I am honored to interact with a few people each week who face poverty, because we get calls and visits from people in need of material help. Your contributions to the Food Pantry and the Benevolence Fund allow us to say "Yes" to some of these folks.

Lots of these people, living on the ragged edge, have soft hearts toward God. Maybe you were drawn to dependence on God during a time in your life when you lacked daily bread. I know it happens and amazed at how God can use anything - even poverty and deprivation - to build faith and character in His people.

But there are plenty of others in poverty-stricken situations who have turned away from God. Some in poverty become bitter or jealous or are constantly frustrated.

There is no question that poverty is dangerous, not only for the body, but also for the soul.

No matter how dangerous poverty may be, however, the Old Testament prophet, Haggai, assures us that there is a condition that is even more dangerous for the soul than poverty.

He opens our eyes to that condition in one of the shortest books in the Old Testament, and it will be our great privilege to take a look at Haggai this morning, a book that I believe is tailor-made for you and me.

developing countries are underdeveloped or suffer from stunted growth because of poverty. (Sources: Rick Warren's P.E.A.C.E. Plan; UNICEF website)

We'll jump into Haggai's prophecy in just a bit. First, let's orient to his life and times.

Judah's downward spiral

Prelude to an exile

The spiritual vitality Judah had known under David and Solomon eroded quickly during the reigns of succeeding kings.

God's people strayed from God and to discipline her, the Lord allowed Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian King, to invade Jerusalem.

The final destruction came in 586 B.C. when the magnificent Temple Solomon built was destroyed and the city was sacked. But the exiled Jews were taken from Jerusalem and the only homes they had ever known as much as twenty years earlier, to be re-settled in Babylon.³

Exile, for those in Palestine

For those Jews who had been left behind in Palestine, things were awful. While they were allowed to remain in their homes, they were living as the conquered.

The leaders had all been taken. And these poorest of the poor were forced to pay exorbitant taxes to their Babylonian overlords.

Those seventy years for the Jews in and around Jerusalem were days of poverty, oppression, and spiritual defeat.

Exile, for those in Babylon

The exiles who had been taken to Babylon were living in a foreign land, far from home. But it would be wrong to think of the refugees living a life of squalor and deprivation in Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar's purpose in removing these people from Palestine was not so much to punish them as it was to keep them from rebelling against the new regime.

So, the exiled Jews' treatment was humane. They were allowed to buy homes and land. Most of them assimilated comfortably into the culture of Babylon.

Many of them continued to worship the Lord, of course. But, in most other ways, they fit in and were doing quite well in the land of captivity, thank you.

At the same time, they always remembered their homeland. The older ones, especially, would have longed to return to Jerusalem. And all of the exiled Jews longed for God to restore Israel to her glory days.

For seventy long years, they lived and worked in Babylon.

Geo-political earthquakes affect Judah!

Then, something happened on the larger world scene that blew hope into the sails of the Jews.

While they were in exile in Babylon, the rising power of the Medes and the Persians swept south toward Babylon. Under the leadership of King Cyrus I, the mighty Babylonian Empire was defeated, swiftly, completely, and decisively in 539 BC.⁴

Instantly, there was a new ruling power in the Near East - the Medo-Persian Empire. And as it is when any new administration comes to power, certain new policies were put in place when the Medes and the Persians conquered the Babylonians.

One of the chief differences between Persia and Babylon had to do with the treatment of conquered peoples.

³ In all, there were three deportations, resulting in over 70,000 men, women, and children being removed from their homeland and taken hundreds of miles away to a foreign land.

⁴ In that year, Cyrus defeated Belshazzar (see Daniel, chapter 5) and established sovereignty over all the lands controlled by Nebuchadnezzar and his descendants, the Babylonian Kings.

While Babylon exiled their defeated foes to foreign lands to keep them from rebelling, Persia's policy was to keep them in their homeland and to rule over them **in place**. So, King Cyrus' first order of business was to get the Jews out of Babylon - and send them back home to Jerusalem!

And with the Persian installed governor, Zerubbabel (a great Jewish patriot), leading the way, 42,360 Jewish men, women, and children made the long journey from Babylon to Jerusalem in 538 BC.⁵

The oh-so-depressing return to Jerusalem

Imagine their shock when they pulled into town. After generations of longing to see Jerusalem again, they returned to nothing but wreckage. The returning Jews saw rubble, broken down walls, desperate poverty and a depressed population.

Most depressing would have been the view of the site where the magnificent Solomonic Temple had once stood.

Of course, only the oldest of the returning exiles would have had any memory at all of the Temple.

Men and women in their eighties might have remembered it from when they were taken to Babylon as children. But there would not have been many of that age in this group of returnees.

Most of what any of the exiles knew about the Temple came from what they had been told by parents or grandparents while in captivity.

They would have heard the reports of the Temple's glory and majesty, the beautiful cedar within and without, the gold plating, the thick drapes, the columns and porches, the holy place and the Holy of Holies.

But the Babylonians had destroyed the Temple. They looted it, then broke it down, then burned it.

⁵ Thus we have a 70 year captivity, dating from 608 BC (first deportation) until 538 (return under Zerubbabel). Others calculate the 70 years from 586 (destruction of Jerusalem) until 516 (rebuilding of Temple under Zerubbabel).

And the Jews coming back from Babylon looked at the rubble and wept for what had once been.

The leader of the returning exiles, though, didn't allow the weeping to continue for long. Governor Zerubbabel knew what needed to be done. He called his fellow Jews to a great work - "*Come on, guys. Let's rebuild the Temple!*"⁶

Governor Zerubbabel: "Come on - Let's rebuild the Temple!"

And that is exactly what they did! The exiles began almost immediately upon their return to Jerusalem to rebuild. They cleared rubble and started collecting materials. They laid the Temple's foundation.⁷

But then, very soon after the project began, construction on the Temple came to a screeching halt.

The Jews' had enemies who had handed a negative report to King Cyrus, alleging that the Jews were rebuilding so that they could revolt against his regime. When Cyrus heard that report, he told them to stop!

And for several years, this work stoppage remained in place.

Here is the critical time line you need to understand if you are going to "get" the message of Haggai:

- The work began, with the people gung-ho, under Zerubbabel in 538 BC and continued for several years.
- Then, the work stopped because of various pressures on the workers - political, social, economic, even military.
- Then, (in the latter years of the reign of Cambyses and especially) with the ascendancy of Darius I, the threats and pressures that led to the work stoppage were removed - **but the work continued to lay dormant.**⁸

⁶ Haggai may have returned from Babylon with the remnant under Zerubbabel.

⁷ They also began to celebrate the Jewish feasts as prescribed in the Law. Enthusiasm was high under Zerubbabel's leadership (along with that of Jeshua - or Joshua - the priest).

⁸ The second of the kings of the Medo-Persian Empire was Cambyses, who was also very friendly to the Jews and sympathetic to their re-building efforts. He eased some of the restrictions against their building, but it was Darius, who followed Cambyses, who really cheered for them to rebuild.

The prophet Haggai marches onto the scene at a time when there was NO reason to NOT build, there was every reason TO build, yet the people of God were NOT BUILDING.⁹

We really don't know much about Haggai, the man. We gather from his book that he was bold, more than willing to speak his mind, courageous, and truthful. There was a bit of an edge to Haggai. I kinda like him...

His book consists of four prophecies given to the people living in Jerusalem within about four month's time. In one way or another, they all had to do with the Temple.

- The second message (Haggai 2:1-9) assured the people that the Temple they have started building will be more glorious than the one Solomon built.¹⁰
- The third message (Haggai 2:10-19) gave the Jews the promise that God would bless them beyond their wildest dreams because of the Temple that they were building.
- The fourth message (Haggai 2:20-23) was a promise of special blessing on Zerubbabel for his labors in making sure that the Temple-rebuilding project came to completion.

All four of the messages Haggai delivers are great messages. All would have been extremely timely for the Jews of Haggai's day, and all four contain encouragement for us, too.

However, today, the one we are going to focus on is the first message.

⁹ Zechariah, too. Both prophets are mentioned as being prime motivators in the building effort in Ezra 4.

¹⁰ That was a tremendous promise (it looked like a ridiculous one) because the glory of the Solomonic Temple was legendary. How could their puny efforts at Temple building overshadow the Temple that Nebuchadnezzar had built? Simple. When the glory shone in Solomon's Temple, it was only in the hidden Holy of Holies. But into the Temple that the Jews under Zerubbabel were building would walk, in about 500 years, the Son of God Himself! Jesus would be the One who would make the second Temple more glorious than the first.

Dating the Prophecy (v. 1)

[1] In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month¹¹, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel¹² the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua¹³ the son of Jehozadak, the high priest

Early on in the reign of Darius (in fact, just after securing his throne) he enthusiastically encouraged the Jews to complete the work on the Temple.

Darius remembered Cyrus, the first Persian King, and how helpful Cyrus had been to the Jews.¹⁴ So, he decided to be equally helpful. He told the Jews to return and then he equipped them with the materials and money they would need to rebuild.

Notice, however, the timing of Haggai's message.¹⁵ He is speaking eighteen months **AFTER** Darius became king.¹⁶ This was a full year and a half **AFTER** Darius had told them to re-start re-building and had resourced them for the Temple reconstruction project - and there is no building going on.

¹¹ Unusually for a prophet, Haggai dates all of his prophecies. The sixth month of the year in the Jewish calendar is Elul, roughly September for us.

¹² He was the grandson of Jehoiachin (1 Chronicles 3:17, 19) and was appointed by Cyrus to be governor of Judah (Ezra 5:14). Born in Babylon, he is also referred to as Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:8 and 5:14, 16).

¹³ Joshua was the son of Jehozadak who was the high priest at the time of the Babylonian invasion. (1 Chronicles 6:15)

¹⁴ Cyrus even gave them the gold that Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from Solomon's Temple to help in the rebuilding. And, for one of the wildest prophecies in all the Bible, check out Isaiah 44, where Cyrus is actually named by Isaiah, over a hundred years before he was even born. Isaiah predicts that Isaiah will be God's special instrument to bring about the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and, in particular, the Temple. God calls Cyrus, the King of the Persian Empire "**My Shepherd**" and His "**anointed**"! Amazing.

¹⁵ Haggai is actually mentioned in the historical book that records the building of Zerubbabel's Temple (Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14-15)

¹⁶ Darius ascended the throne in 521 BC. That makes the date of Haggai's prophecy 520 BC.

Haggai addressed the people on the first day of the month - a day of worship for the Jews - with a message from the Lord.¹⁷

The Prophecy: “Consider Your Ways!” (vv. 2-11)

“It’s a timing thing” (v. 2)

He starts off by quoting what the people of Jerusalem have been saying. They are saying that the timing for investing time, sweat equity, and money into Temple building just isn’t right.

[2] “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘This people¹⁸ says, “The time has not come, even the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt.””

Despite the fact that King Darius had paved the way for work to be re-started on the Temple, the good work was quagmired. Why? Well, the Jews of Haggai’s day said it just wasn’t time to work on the house of the Lord.

OK. As they say, timing IS everything. So, if it isn’t time to work on the Temple, what is it time for?

It’s a GREAT Time to Build (our houses)!! (vv. 3-4)

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

Work stopped because of opposition - OK

It’s easy to see what had happened. Initially, the Jews had a great vision for right worship to take place in the right way at the right place.

They were eager to be involved in this great work of Temple re-building. But after some good amount of effort and time spent working on the project, they were forced to stop.

When they stopped, they became involved in other things. Chief among those “other things” was building houses for themselves.

Now everybody’s got to live somewhere. And building a house is a very important thing. Who can blame the Jews for getting busy doing other important stuff when they couldn’t work on the Temple anyway?

But some Bible scholars¹⁹ suggest that the work on the Temple was interrupted for fifteen years.

Some of that time is easily explained because the intense opposition of the enemies. But, some of the time of the work stoppage is harder to explain.

There were years when there was no opposition. And there was a full year and a half when King Darius was cheerleading for them to start building again. They could have started building again. But they didn’t. Why didn’t they?

In a word, they were preoccupied with building structures to magnify the Kingdom of ME and so had no interest in building a structure that would advance the Kingdom of God.

Again, people have to have housing. But they had been building these houses for a decade and a half.

And these are “paneled” houses - a term used to describe homes whose interiors are accented by cedar paneling. They are lavish homes. These are pocket emptying, energy draining, time consuming, passion-for-God-devouring homes.

Now we are beginning to see the problem in Jerusalem. Service to God has been placed second to comfort and convenience.

The Jews had succumbed to a deadly disease that has afflicted and continues to afflict many of God’s people. It’s making the rounds today. The CDC (Christian Disease Center) has declared a pandemic of *affluenza*.

¹⁷ Sometimes written “Jeshua”)

¹⁸ “This people” as opposed to “My people!” speaks of God’s displeasure.

¹⁹ Men who have spent more time than I have putting together a Haggai chronology!

The cancer of comfort had eroded their spiritual passion.

Haggai's question, "*Is it really time for you to live in paneled houses while God's house remains unbuilt?*" is a rebuke to their spiritual apathy.

It was a matter of priorities. God's Kingdom or the Kingdom of ME? These Jews were coming down solidly on the side of the Kingdom of ME.

That's the situation. Haggai calls the people to self-assess.

Time for Self-Assessment (vv. 5-7)

[5] Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, "CONSIDER YOUR WAYS! [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. [7] Thus says the LORD of hosts, CONSIDER YOUR WAYS!"

Consider your ways! (6th century B.C.)

The Jews of Haggai's day had returned from Babylonian exile with money in their pockets, nice clothing, and plenty of supplies. But, nothing seemed to be working out for them now that they were back in the Promised Land.

Crop failures and food shortages meant no ready cash. No cash meant that those high quality weaves from Babylon were starting to look pretty ratty.

Had they had eyes to see, they would have seen the chastening hand of God. But they were so intent on the advance of the Kingdom of ME that they were insensitive to God's discipline.

So Haggai suggests: "*Consider your ways.*"

It is hard to imagine a healthier exercise for any child of God - in Haggai's day or in our own - than this: **Consider your ways.**

To the Jews of Haggai's day, the question would have led to soul-searching about the rightness of working on the rich cedar paneling in their personal homes while the house of God lay unbuilt on its foundation.

That Jewish person in the sixth century BC might have thought long and hard about Haggai's question and come to the conclusion that there was something wrong with his "*ways.*"

He might have remembered that years earlier, he had been willing and eager to work on the Temple. That he had given time, energy, and money to help in the beginning stages.

Now? The fire for involvement in the work of God has died down. It's barely a glowing ember.

Oh, he still attends weekly Sabbath worship on the foundation stones of the future Temple. But the enthusiasm for worship is a distant memory and advancing God's Kingdom work isn't even on his radar.

A consideration of his ways would have led to the conclusion that his ways have somehow gotten off track.

Consider your ways! (2009)

Can you hear Haggai calling you to, "**Consider your ways!**"? What would a consideration of your "ways" reveal about where you are, spiritually, today?

What if you were to conduct a rigorous inventory of where you are investing your time, energy, and money? Would it show that your heart is beating fast for God? Would it show that your spiritual passion is as great now as it ever was - even greater!

Or would it reveal that you have laid aside a concern for the eternal to work on your "paneled house"?

Today, "paneled houses" take all kinds of shapes. For our purposes today, a "paneled house" is anything that takes us away from a single-minded focus on God and His purposes.

A paneled house might be a house or it might be a car. It might be a favorite hobby or the Internet. It might be a person - a child or a spouse or a close friend. Or your paneled house might be something else altogether.

So. What if you or I “*consider our ways*” and have to admit that we are not giving our time, energy, resources, money, skills, talents and abilities to advance God’s Kingdom, but are instead working hard to advance the Kingdom of ME?

If any of us were to come to that conclusion when we **consider** our ways, it will be clear that we need to **change** our ways.

Speaking to the Jews in Jerusalem, Haggai gave advice that rescued those folks from God’s discipline and restored them to spiritual passion.

He told them to take up their saw and hammer and trowel - and get back to building the Temple!

The Assignment (vv. 8-11)

[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.

Remember.

Life in Babylon had not been that bad. The basic necessities of life were taken care of - and were more than taken care of. The Jews had prospered in Babylon!

But now that they are back in Palestine, they have real freedom to serve God in ways they hadn’t in seventy years. It was now possible to invest time, energy and sweat and money to advance God’s Kingdom.

And God’s promise was that if they would again give themselves to investing in His work, He would withdraw His discipline and would bless them beyond measure.

What an awesome privilege! Engaging in Temple building was a huge way to say, “**Thanks, Lord!**” AND a way to place themselves in line for God’s rich blessing.

So, stirred to action by Haggai’s words, it was back to the good work of Temple rebuilding they went!

We Will Build It; He Will Come (vv. 12-15)

[12] 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 showed reverence for the LORD. [13] Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke by the commission of the LORD to the people saying, “I am with you,” declares the LORD.” [14] So 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 SIXTH MONTH IN THE SECOND YEAR of Darius the king.

Amazing. Twenty three days after the prophecy, the Jews were back on the job. That’s just a little more than three weeks between the prophecy and the mammoth undertaking to re-start the work of re-building the Temple!

Do you know what I learn from this?

That it just doesn’t take that long to turn things around if God’s people are serious about change. Three weeks, give or take a day or two, and they are up and running again.

The entire orientation of the people changed.

Before, they didn’t really care all that much about the Temple of God. Now they are sold out to building it.²⁰ The people internalized Haggai’s message. They took his words to heart and put feet to their faith.

²⁰ It took about four years to complete the Temple, as we read in Ezra 6:15 - And this temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

Conclusion:

I am of a mind that Haggai could very possibly be among the most relevant of all the Minor Prophets to us here at Northwest Community Church. Speaking to a group of people who were busy with their own lives - improving on them, meeting needs that were more than “basic” - he suggested to them, “*Consider your ways.*”

The dangers of poverty are obvious! Empty stomachs and tattered clothing can’t be ignored. The dangers of affluence and upward mobility are less apparent and so much more insidious.

Affluence can easily morph into *affluenza*. Busyness in the pursuit of comfort can so easily lead to *spiritual lethargy*.

The Jews of Haggai’s day were spending so much time, energy, and money on themselves that they didn’t have anything left to make investments in the work of God. Their passion for material comfort was the death of their passion for God.

Brothers and sisters, let’s not allow the cancer of the pursuit of comfort to rob us of the joy and fulfillment and eternal reward we will receive when we get involved in God’s eternal work!

Would you commit to taking time today or some time this week to “*consider your ways*”?

If you do, and if, after consideration of your ways, you become convinced that you have been building a “*paneled house*” (Remember, a “*paneled house*” can stand for anything that gets in the way of whole-hearted devotion to the Lord!) will you be willing to back away from giving primary time, attention, money and resources to THAT so that you can re-invest those resources in THE WORK OF JESUS?

There is no future in investing in the Kingdom of ME. The only future is investing in the Kingdom of God!

***But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.***

[Matthew 6:33]