

Out Of The Doldrums, Into The Light

by Steve Zeisler

I was on the Stanford campus for a meeting of the Coalition for Evangelical Ministries last week, and felt a wave of nostalgia. Twenty-five years ago I was doing college ministry as an intern and shortly afterward as a pastor here at PBC. The room we met in last week, upstairs in the Old Union building, is the same room we met in twenty-five years ago. I think I even sat on the same couch! Back then I was very much like the other people who were in the room with me last week young, eager, excited about the possibilities, working with students whose lives were being changed.

I remember visions and hopes and dreams that I had in those days. I remember the enthusiasm of the students, on the threshold of the rest of their lives, wondering what they could do in the service of Christ, many of them capable people with a lot to offer. Events like the Urbana missionary conference would stir our hearts, and we would think, "Where will the Lord send us?"

However, with twenty-five years to look back on, I realize that a great many things have been postponed. For many of us, what we thought we would do, where we thought we would go, and the battles we thought we would engage somehow never took place. The prophet Haggai has powerful insight regarding choices that get postponed in the Christian life.

For the last seven weeks we've been studying through Psalm 18. It's been a challenging passage of Scripture to consider. What is characteristic of most of the psalms, and certainly Psalm 18, is that they are about an individual human soul growing in faith. Psalm 18 is the story of desperation and rescue, renewal, and battle.

But in Psalm 18 there is no reference to community. And because that is an added note that we should consider, we're going to look now at the first chapter of Haggai. This prophetic word takes community seriously. It also helps us with "ordinary life." Psalm 18 is a crisis psalm; the loss of everything is imminent, so the believing heart cries out to God for rescue. But most of the time we're not drowning. Most believers, most of the time battle with routine and emptiness rather than high danger. Returning to the topic of obedience postponed, Haggai 1:1-2:

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built.'"

You know you're in trouble when God starts by quoting you. He more often announces, "Thus saith the Lord," and declares his thoughts and purposes. But he doesn't do that here, he quotes his hearers first. Human statements will face divine examination.

"These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built.'" Do you have any "not yet"s about things that matter to God, about a word from the Lord that you know you should take seriously? We would certainly never say to God, "I'm not at all concerned about the things that matter to you. I reject your thinking." But we too often say what is being said here: "It's not yet time. It's an important issue, and I want to get to it eventually, Lord, but I need to postpone the responsibility for awhile. I'll get around to it as soon as I can (when the kids are grown, when my career has flourished, when I've got my degree, when we pay off the debts, when the circumstances change, when I'm happy and fulfilled)."

A long obedience in the same direction

Let's consider the historical context of this passage so we can make some sense of it. The year is 520 BC. The history of the people of God proceeded in a slow descent from a high point in the reigns of David and Solomon to near oblivion. Ten tribes had been lost, defeated and scattered, never to return. Two tribes remained as the southern kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital. Eventually they were taken into captivity in Babylon for seventy years. The city of Jerusalem had been

One of the songs that comes out of the Babylonian captivity is Psalm 137:

**"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'**

**How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy."**

Then in the course of history, as predicted by Isaiah, God brought Babylon's reign to an end. It was replaced by the kingdom of the Persians. God raised up a Persian sovereign named Cyrus who sent the Jews back to Jerusalem directing them to rebuild their temple to win the favor of their God).

The remnant of the people went back to Jerusalem in 539 BC and in 536 began the process of rebuilding the temple. Then life got hard and they quit. For sixteen years they neglected the job they had begun. They had the tears of their forbears in Babylon who had longed to go back to Jerusalem. They knew their history going back through all the kings, including David, back to the patriarchs. Those who ruled the Persian Empire were watching to see what they would do; Would these people care enough for their God to honor him by the way they lived? And yet they said, "The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be rebuilt.

They had quit because the job was difficult The temple that Solomon had built at the height of his reign, was immense and beautiful. Now the timbers were burned, the stones were scattered, the temple mount was a wreck. There was no easy way to do what God wanted them to do. It was going to take time, "a long obedience in the same direction.]" That was daunting. They also had enemies in their midst who tried both to distract them and later to fight them, who were making it hard to do their work.

Those people were just like us. There aren't quick fixes to most of our problems. So we say! something like what is being said here: 'I would never have the temerity to reject you, Lord. But I do have to tell you that it's not time to deal with your issues. It's time for me to deal with my priorities. I have to protect myself. I have to serve myself. Later, I'll get around to the things that matter to you.'

The building of the temple was the way prescribed for this people to put God first in their life. Each one of us has some calling from him, some word from the Lord about belief that we can exercise, choices we can make, priorities we can adopt, truth we can cling to. It will be different for each of us. And the choice we have is to say, "Yes, Lord," or "Not yet."

Not yet

Let's read on. Verses 3-11 :

Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted mush, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have- enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the Lord Almighty. "'Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore' because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands."

There are two main points I want to make about this remarkable analysis of human life. Then we'll look at the renewal in verses 12-15. First, "Give careful thought to your ways! Does your purse have holes in it? However much you earn, does it never seem to be quite enough? However hard you work, are you never satisfied? However much there is to eat, does it never seem quite as satisfying as you hoped it would be? However hard you try in

relationships, are they always inadequate?" People who will make ten times this year what they made a decade ago still find that it's not enough. People who have pantries full of food and live in beautiful homes find that life is not satisfying, though when they lived-in cramped quarters, they dreamed of having what they have now. Give careful thought to your ways Are all the things you're doing to make yourself happy making you happy?

Further, note that the Lord takes credit for arranging that our self-centeredness will prove dissatisfying. Consider his analysis: "Do you know why you're not happy? I called for a drought. [I assume there was a real drought that took place at this time. But this: dryness is --more profound than that.] I blew away all the work of your hands. Everything you do I'm going to make unsatisfying. I'm going to make you unhappy living for yourself. I'll take responsibility for it,?' says-the Lord. Give careful thought: What should we conclude if our souls are dry and our hearts unsatisfied?

Renewal within a community

Good news follows the difficult self-discovery, in verses 12-15. There: are five steps to it, describing what it means for God to remake people, to bring about real change.

Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: "I am with you," declares the Lord. So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius.

This revival would be a lasting one. They would succeed in building the temple this time; they wouldn't just start on the project and quit again when it got hard. It is important to note that there was a community of leaders that listened together: a prophet, a priest, and a king. (The governor was a descendant of David who should have been king in Israel.) This group of leaders was hearing God together and leading people in common. Then all of the remnant heard the word of God together. They responded together and obeyed together.

Most often our determination to be reformed, our New Year's resolution that this time it's going to be different, this time we'll put the Lord first, flashes and ends quickly because we're doing it by ourselves. What is happening in this passage is that a community of people are hearing God together, responding together, and making changes together. I want to stress that as a point of application. We need to be in relationship, as hard as that is in Silicon Valley. Everybody works too hard, and we live too far apart; there are a hundred reasons why it's hard to have vital, life-changing community. But every one of them has to be resisted. We need to be

a remnant that is making progress together.

The process of renewal

Let's look at the five steps articulated here that describe real renewal. First, verse 12 says that all the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God. The Hebrew word for obey is *shama'*. It's one of the great words of the Old Testament. The distinguishing cry of Jews to this day is known as the *Shama'*: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). The word "hear," to listen intently, is translated "obey" here. The heart of the word means to listen, to take God so seriously that you hear intensely, at a deep level, what he's saying. The reason this hearing-based word can be translated "obey" is that if you hear this way, you've already decided that you're going to do what you hear. The first step comes from a determination, a willingness, a turning back to the words of God, to the authentic source. They knew that this prophet was God's mouthpiece, and they listened carefully to him. Jesus made the useful observation that those who have ears to hear should hear. Are we listening? Do we long for the words of God?

Second, it says at the end of verse 12, "And the people feared the Lord." To fear the Lord means to respect him, to bow before him, to magnify him. It really means to shut out all the alternatives. To fear God means that he is at the center of everything, and all the other clamor and all the other demands fade in importance.- They listened intently and-they feared the one who spoke to them: It became unthinkable now to say, "Not yet" to God.

Verse 13 raises the third step in this renewal process. "Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: 'I am with you,' declares the Lord." Here is the wonderful, merciful response of God assuring us of his presence. Our hearing him, trembling in fear before him, kneeling before him, and adoring him brings about in his heart a message of hope for us: "I am there beside you. I am for you. All of the new awakening that is taking place is going to have eternal results." We have the wonderful reassurance that we're not trying to be the best version of ourselves that we can be for God; we are receiving life from him.

So the people, with the reassurance of the presence and love of God, come to the fourth step. Verse 14: "So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people." There was an inner change, a new sense of purpose and vitality, a spiritual renewal that took place. And they could see it in each other. They were speaking again of hope in God, though they were only a remnant, though their city was surrounded by enemies, and though the responsibility was difficult. Circumstances hadn't changed, but if God was with them, they could achieve their calling.

In the fifth step in this process of renewal, they did something. Verse 14:

"They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius."

The renewal didn't peter out the way a general enthusiasm for the things of God might. The outcome was practical: They got started on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month of the second year of King Darius. There was a time for the change to issue itself in action. They could look back in very specific terms to when they started to do something about their responsibility, after years of delaying. It's that specific implementation of some obedience that is a critical, final component of renewal. Good intentions are not enough.

I'm convinced that this revival would not have taken place if the people had not heard the word of God together and responded together, reinforcing obedience in one another. That's the point of application that I want to leave you with. Anybody can have a short burst of feeling that they're going to be a different person for God's sake, that peters out and go nowhere. As I mentioned, looking back to my time in college ministry after twenty-five years, there were so many young people I knew in those days, who earnestly wanted to go somewhere for the Lord. And so many of them are saying, "Not yet," twenty-five years later. Anybody can be a flash in the pan, but as God begins to challenge us as a community, and as we reinforce life for each other, things will begin to change.

Catalog. No. 7139
Haggai 1:1-15
Single Message
Steve Zeisler
November 24, 1996

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1996 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.