

Chapter 19, the return home

Timeless Truth: God's grace provides a fresh start.

Chapter Summary

After generations of idolatry, God's people had been defeated by the empires that controlled the ancient world. The Assyrians had conquered the Northern kingdom, deported the people, and re-populated the land with exiles from other countries. Their practice was to redistribute people from conquered nations throughout their vast empire. The foreigners who were resettled in northern Israel intermarried with the few remaining Jews and became the half-breed Samaritans.

The Babylonians were next on the world scene. After each of their three conquests of the Southern Kingdom, the Babylonians deported Jewish captives to enclaves in Babylon and sought to assimilate them into their culture. Now, 70 years of captivity had elapsed. Kings and kingdoms rise and fall; world empires come and go. The next world power, Persia, was more benevolent. They preferred the benefits of high taxation and the favor of the various gods. So King Cyrus issued a decree to repatriate all aliens to their homelands while allowing them some degree of self-rule. And thus the people of Israel began their journey home.

Under the guidance of the Hebrew leader, Zerubbabel, nearly 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem. They were intent on rebuilding, and the temple was the first priority. They rebuilt the altar and prepared sacrifices in accordance with the Law of Moses. Fifty years had passed since the temple had been torn down by the Babylonians, and at last God's people were again able to worship as God had instructed. The foundation of this humble temple could not compare to the magnificence of its predecessor, but the process had begun, and God was leading the way.

The locals didn't necessarily roll out the welcome wagon for the repatriated Judeans. They made a backhanded offer of help as an attempt to sabotage the temple rebuilding project. Zerubbabel didn't fall for their scheme, but the Jews were intimidated and construction halted.

Sixteen years later the prophet, Haggai, spoke on God's behalf. He twice urged his people, "Give careful thought to your ways." He reminded them that the temple had to be built as a place of honor and glory for God. The LORD encouraged His people and they returned to their work. Though the new temple would not have the splendor of the old one, God promised that His unsurpassed glory would return. Zechariah agreed; Jerusalem would again teem with life and prosperity because the people would live righteously. God promised to shower Jerusalem and Judah with His goodness and make Israel a blessing to the world.

When the building resumed, a new antagonist, Tattenai, wrote to King Darius hoping to obstruct progress. Darius searched the royal archives and discovered that his predecessor, King Cyrus, had given his royal thumbs up to the rebuilding of God's temple. In a fitting twist of events, Darius penned a letter back to Tattenai charging him with responsibility for funding the temple reconstruction. The plot backfired, and in 516 B.C., the temple was completed.

It had been 70 years since the people were first taken captive. This long and painful season of discipline brought much needed change to the hearts of God's people. In the Lower Story, God brought them out of captivity again. He returned them to the Land of Promise where they rebuilt His temple and their lives.

But the Upper Story once again rings with echoes of delivery from bondage. The LORD had redeemed His people from foreign captivity as God's great, over-arching plan continued unabated. This story of liberation and restoration is a poignant reminder that this world is not our home. Like Israel, we wait in joyful anticipation of our journey to a land of eternal promise (Heb. 11:16) where all things are new and home will be forever.

A priority is the thing that gets done first. It is the most urgent or most critical for success. It is the driving force of our thinking and our actions. It is not the same as a response to immediate demands around us. Sadly, many of us fail to analyze what controls our choices. We confuse the tyranny of the urgent with what is most important for reaching our goals. The prophet Haggai challenged the leaders and the people of Jerusalem to reset their priorities. He challenges us today to “give careful thought to our ways”

I. The People's Problem: Misplaced Priorities

- A. *Misplaced priorities* sent them into exile in the first place. For years the Israelites failed to honor YHWH as the only true God. They worshiped idols and trampled on the Law. So God disciplined them using a foreign power and expelled them from His Promised Land. Throughout the seventy-year captivity in Babylon, the Israelites had become comfortable in their new home. By that time, most exiles had actually been born in Babylon and had only the stories of the Promised Land passed down from their grandparents. Then in 539 B.C., Persian King Cyrus conquered Babylonian King Belshazzar and changed the foreign policy for all exiles. A year later he issued a decree that allowed all ex-patriots to return to their homelands (which were now within the Persian empire), restore their gods, and enjoy a good deal of autonomy—as long as they didn't forget to pay their taxes and pray to their gods for the king!
- B. *Misplaced priorities* allowed many Judeans to stay in Babylon instead of returning to Jerusalem. Many of the exiles knew nothing of their Promised Land. Their only experience was life in Babylon. When King Cyrus gave them the freedom to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple, only about 50,000 chose to do so. Why would God's people *not* return to their Promised Land? Though the Bible does not specifically state their reasons, a few ideas come to mind.
 1. **Comfort.** Life in Babylon was pretty good. People had jobs and homes, families and friends. If it's not broken, why fix it?
 2. **Fear of the unknown.** They only knew Babylon; why leave the known for the unknown?
 3. **Too much work.** Jerusalem had been destroyed. The temple had been razed. Those who returned would have to overcome so much. Daily living would be difficult.
 4. **Spiritual apathy.** Some exiles failed to learn from their past mistakes. They continued to undervalue those things that God values, like the Promised Land and the temple.
- C. *Misplaced priorities* distracted the discouraged temple builders. When the exiles returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel, they began by taking care of their essential needs. The city was in ruins, so they took several months to prepare appropriate housing for themselves. Then they began their temple rebuilding project. So far, so good. But when the local people—most likely Samaritans, a mixed people, half Israelite and half Assyrian—discouraged and frightened them, their building project stalled. There were so many other pressing needs that the people were vulnerable to paralyzing fear. Their fields were overgrown from years of disuse; their roads, buildings, and houses needed repairs. Their original priority of worshiping God in a rebuilt temple quickly took a backseat to the struggles of daily life. The altar and foundation were laid, but the remaining work went undone for sixteen years.

II. The Prophet's Prompt: Reconsider Your Priorities

- A. The prophet prompted them to set a **new priority: to please God and honor Him** (Haggai 1:8). After sixteen years of unfinished temple work, the LORD raised up the prophet Haggai to speak to Zerubbabel and the people of Jerusalem. The people procrastinated temple building

presumably because they lacked the financial resources, and the drought had caused further hardship (p. 266, or Haggai 1:7-11). They had wrongfully concluded that these were legitimate reasons to forego the work of the LORD.

- B. However, the prophet told them that these were precisely the reasons that they should rebuild the temple. Realigning their priorities to reflect *God's priorities* would result in pleasing God and giving Him glory. The drought and the financial struggles were divine consequences for their *misplaced priorities*. GOD was behind their poor harvest and their dwindling livestock population.
1. God spelled out His reason for wanting the temple built: “so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored” (p. 266, Haggai 1:8). To do God’s will and His work in spite of opposition, fear and struggles is an act of faith. And without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6).
 2. These Jews were still living under the covenant of the Law. They were to understand the divine blessings and consequences of obedience and disobedience.
 - a. *If you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:...the LORD will strike you with...scorching heat and drought and...the LORD will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder; it will come down from the skies until you are destroyed.*
–Deuteronomy 28:15, 22-24
 - b. *You will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little because locusts will devour it. You will plant vineyards and cultivate them but you will not drink the wine or gather the grapes, because worms will eat them. You will have olive tress throughout your country but you will not use the oil, because the olives will drop off.*
–Deuteronomy 28:38-40

III. The Proper Perspective: Response and Realignment

- A. The people responded by faith: they believed the Word of the LORD from the mouth of Haggai. They obeyed because they feared the LORD—they had reverential awe of Him. Unlike their forefathers, who largely ignored and disbelieved the prophets, this generation of returning exiles listened to the prophet and believed him.
- B. They realigned their priorities based upon God’s will and Word. They acted upon the prophet’s prompt and within three short weeks, the temple construction was back under way. They did not just say they believed him; their outward actions demonstrated their inward priorities (p. 266).
- C. By prompting the people toward new priorities, Haggai motivated them to action that secured the believers’ religious identity, strengthened leadership and most importantly glorified God.
- D. The LORD, not the prophet, was responsible for stirring the hearts of the leaders Zerubbabel and Joshua, as well as the spirits of the people. The prophet brought the message, but only God can change hearts!
- E. Once again the people were disappointed with the results of their efforts. The artistry, size and glory of this temple could not compare to the grandeur of Solomon’s gold-covered masterpiece. Once again the people were ready to quit in discouragement. But God’s word through Haggai encouraged them to continue on in obedience and to work (p. 267, Haggai 2:4). The people struggled to see the Upper Story. They were focused on the Lower Story. But God had a plan to glorify His temple by displaying His sovereignty over the foreign powers. All the earth’s wealth is the LORD’s. He filled His house with gold and silver when King Darius ordered governor Tattenai to do so (p. 271-273, Ezra 6).

- F. The Lord reminded them of His presence, just as when they came out of Egypt. His presence should alleviate their fears. Their responsibility was to respond by faith and realign their priorities to His.
- G. We, like the returning exiles, are to “give careful thought to” our ways.
 1. *Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*
–Psalm 90:1-2
 2. *Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity.*
–Ephesians 5:15-16

IV. Implications and Applications

- A. As the seasons in our lives change, the outworking of our priorities may look different, but the core principles should remain aligned to the will of God.
 1. The Bible makes clear that our relationship with the LORD should be our first priority. But how does that play out in our daily lives? How much Bible study time or prayer time or service time demonstrates that God comes first?
 2. Some people have suggested that our checkbooks and our calendars reveal our true priorities. But the same outward result could be motivated by very different causes. For example, the man who works two jobs or long hours could either be avoiding his wife and children, driven by greed for material wealth, or providing for the legitimate needs of his family so that his wife can be a stay-home mother. Nevertheless, the checkbook and calendar/day-planner do provide a tangible tool to help us really assess where we put our resources.
 3. Priorities begin with the motivation of the heart. The man who spends every Saturday and Sunday on the golf course instead of with his family and in worship, and the woman who continues to max out her credit cards and blow the family budget have self-centered priorities that are out of line with God’s clear principles in His Word. Self-centeredness is always contradictory to God.
 4. Circumstances and life changes affect our priorities. The addition of a newborn baby changes our checkbooks and calendars. The chronic illness or death of a loved one changes our checkbooks and calendars. Life happens, and the practical results of our inward priorities are constantly fluid. Every believer struggles to balance the Upper Story priorities with the Lower Story of daily life.
- B. We should discourage comparisons when doing the Lord’s work. The key is to stop listening to ourselves and to listen to the Lord. He is responsible to take our “fishes and loaves” and to multiply them to His glory.
- C. I should not procrastinate doing the Lord’s work. But if I do, I should get back to work quickly when I realize my mistake.
- D. I should expect opposition, obstacles and struggles when I serve the LORD. The LORD’s enemies are always at work against Him and me. I should persevere anyway.
- E. I should align my priorities to the Lord’s will when I hear and know it.
- F. What we do with our time reveals what we value (with the cautions noted above).
- G. How we spend our money reveals what we value (with the cautions noted above).
- H. Good things can become the worst enemy of the best things. The Israelites’ personal wants superseded the best thing—doing the will of God.
- I. The Word of God and other believers can help us keep a proper perspective on priorities if we allow ourselves to be accountable.

- J. Unbelievers have a different value system and are therefore not good accountability partners for godly priorities.
- K. Like Haggai, we have a responsibility to lovingly question another believer's actions if they appear to be harmful to his or her relationship with the LORD or others.

Questions

1. How did the LORD fulfill His word spoken by Jeremiah? Look up Jer. 25:12 and 29:10. What happened to the king of Babylon? (See p. 256-257 for further insight.)
2. Look up Isa. 44:28 - 45:1. About how many years had passed between Isaiah's prophecy and Cyrus' edict? What does this teach you about God?
3. Why do you think many of the exiles chose to stay in Babylon instead of returning home to the Promised Land? How do you suppose God viewed that choice?
4. How did the temple builders and worshipers regard their covenant, the Law of Moses (p. 264-265)? Compare their view of the Law to the Israelites' attitude before the exile.
5. When the temple was re-established, some were overjoyed, and some were heart-broken. Many churches go through periods of growth, reconstruction and challenge. How should we respond when mixed feelings pull us in opposite directions?
6. What difficulties did the Jews experience in their rebuilding efforts? How did they respond to adversity? How can you use this story when facing adversity?
7. Zechariah's message claimed that people from other nations would be attracted to the religion and the God of the Jews (p. 269-270). What was to be the basis for this attraction? In what ways should our church be attractive to outsiders?
8. Once they resumed work on the temple, opposition resumed from Tattenai and others (p. 270). What examples of irony can you find in the correspondence between Tattenai and King Darius? What support do you find that "the eye of their God was watching over" them?
9. With Zechariah's encouragement, the people completed the task God gave them. Who in your group needs encouragement? Make a list of specific needs to pray for, and check on them next week.