

Realizing our Potential

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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Bible Text: Haggai 1:1-15
Preached On: Sunday, August 4, 2019

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open up to one of the last of what I might want to call the obscure prophets of the Bible, the book of Haggai. Now the book of Haggai is actually the third to the last book of the Old Testament and today will hopefully be the last time that you have a first sermon from this book of the Bible because next week as we roll into Zechariah and Malachi, we find ourselves in much more familiar territory, but for those of you that are guests and visitors, we're not simply walking through this section of the Old Testament just because but we are walking through the Scripture in its totality over a period of about three years, typically a chapter maybe two chapters a day, and today as we come to the two chapter book of Haggai, we actually find ourselves in a very different situation than Zephaniah and Habakkuk and Nahum and some of the more obscure prophets. To begin with, number one, we actually know not only when Haggai lived but when the Lord gave him this vision. In fact, in just a moment we're gonna read it was in the sixth month of the first day in what we now know as 520 BC or the second year of Darius' reign.

The second thing that's a little bit different is that Haggai finds himself on the other side of the exile. In fact, when you study the prophets, most of them are what we call pre-exilic, they're giving warnings to the northern kingdom, to the southern kingdom, if they do not repent of their ways, judgment is going to ensue. The Assyrians took the north. The Babylonians took the south. There are few of the prophets that actually spoke and prophesied during the exile, the latter half of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, but there are a few, in fact, three who are on the post-exilic side. When we come to the book of Haggai, the Israelites have come out of captivity. They've been allowed to go back and rebuild that famous Jerusalem wall at the hands of Nehemiah. They've been allowed to go back under the direction of Ezra and to restore the temple, even though we're some 80 years away from that.

So we have a very unique perspective. We have the exact date. We're on the back side of the exile. In fact, we also find ourselves with this position, alongside of Ezra and Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are the last books of the Old Testament, in fact, there's about to be 400 years of silence until we hear that famous birth narrative that, behold, Immanuel has been born. Today as we turn to Haggai 1, 15 very simple verses, that not only hopefully convict us but encourage us to realize our potential, it says,

1 In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month, came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet unto Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest, saying, 2 Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the LORD'S house should be built. 3 Then came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet, saying, 4 Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste? 5 Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. 6 Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes. 7 Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. 8 Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD. 9 Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house. 10 Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit. 11 And I called for a drought upon the land, and upon the mountains, and upon the corn, and upon the new wine, and upon the oil, and upon that which the ground bringeth forth, and upon men, and upon cattle, and upon all the labour of the hands. 12 Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Josedech, 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 did fear before the LORD. 13 Then spake Haggai the LORD'S messenger in the LORD'S message unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith 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 Josedech, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and did work in the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, 15 In the four and twentieth day of the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king.

This chapter in the Bible begins with a rebellious people who are fit and satisfied with their lives but by the time you get 15 verses down the road, you discover that they have made an incredible decision to do as the Lord has directed. They realized their potential. They realized what God desired to do in their lives, wanted to do in their lives, and was fully capable of doing in their lives and today I want you, I want myself, I want us as a church, as a family of faith, I want us to realize the potential that God has for us.

Now our realizing our potential for the days ahead does not neglect the blessings of yesterday but allow me to use a definition of potential by one of my old coaches, he said that potential means you ain't done it yet. And so when we talk about realizing our potential and we talk about greater trust, greater faith, greater days of walking with the

Lord, what that means is not relishing on the blessings of yesterday but cherishing the promises of tomorrow.

Several things I just want to walk through in this text of Haggai 1. The first one is this, the providence of God. Now I know providence is one of those big theological words that at times can be difficult to define and at other times can even be decisive among the brethren, so allow me to give somewhat just an everyday common definition of providence. Providence is God moving in the background whether you see his hand or not. These Israelites that found themselves in their homeland in 520 BC, they were not alive when they went into captivity. You see, the captivity had taken place over 70 years and they were 16 years into their new homeland. They had not been there when Isaiah declared they should repent of their ways. They were not there in the captivity, most likely they were conceived and born during the captivity but they were not the ones who rebelled, they were not the ones who had fallen short in days gone by, yet they were the ones who went with Nehemiah, they were the ones who went with Ezra, they were the ones who believed the decree of Cyrus and went back and desired to rebuild not just the temple but the walls of Jerusalem.

Why is that important? Because you and I today much like the Israelites in the days of Haggai, we lived in a blessed culture and a blessed society. You don't believe me? Just travel anywhere else in the world and when you come back here, you will kiss the tarmac and thank God for fried chicken, I'm telling you what. You and I live in a blessed culture, in a blessed society, and by the providence of God, by how he has moved irrespective of you or myself in days past, we enjoy the privilege of freedoms and liberties much like the Israelites of their days. But we have to question ourselves, have we fallen into the same trap? What did they say here in verse 2? The people said, "We don't need to build a house. It's okay. Everything's going well." The Lord said, "No, no, it's time to build the house." Let me put that in 21st century vernacular: it is time for you and I to take our faith seriously. It is time for you and I to allow the bar to be raised by God and not lowered by man.

Now for 16 years the Israelites went about their daily lives saying, "Well, we'll get around to it one day." How does that translate to us today? It's only been about 60 years, for about the last 50 or 60 years what we know as the church of Jesus Christ has sat on our "blessed assurance" and said it's not that big a deal. It'll eventually come around. It's not that serious. It's not of concern. We're gonna talk about that in just a moment because we need to grasp the real perspective here. Notice what it says beginning in verse 3, "You have built your cieled houses," and by the way, that means your glorious houses, your houses of great opulence, "you have increased your amount of food, you have increased your amount of wealth and yet the house of God remains unbuilt and barren." Allow me to transfer that perspective to our lives today. Over the last 50 or 60 years, the average income and the level of wealth of our culture and even our community has been on the rise. The increase of education level, the increase of transportation, the increase of networking, the increase of opportunity and privilege, in fact, over the last half century, the standard of living has risen and the standard of holiness has fallen dramatically, and that's exactly what was happening in their day. They were increasing food, they were

increasing their finances, they were increasing their neighborhoods but the house of God was much in decline. In fact, allow me to challenge us today, we live in a world that tells us we're so busy acquiring and attaining that the things of God can just be relegated to a side bar of our life. The much the opposite is true. Notice what God said, "You eat and you don't have enough. You work," and I love that statement when he says, "you put money in a bag and it's got holes in it." It doesn't matter how much effort, how much attention we give to things, it seems like every time we take two steps forward, we take three steps back and the perspective that we need to grasp is could it be because we've raised our standard of living and lowered the bar of holiness, we find ourselves in a continual state of discontent?

We're no different than the Israelites of 2,500 years ago. I'm not gonna bore you with all the statistics but can I just say it's not pretty. The average person who determines that church is important to them today attends a service or a Bible study three times a month, 30 years ago it was three times a week. Giving of our resource to missions and just to the "work of the church" as a whole has actually fallen to a level less than the percentage during the Great Depression. And yes, we, and when I say we, whether you know it or not, you're in a Southern Baptist church, we the most evangelistic of all the denominations in America are baptizing less people today than we did when we came out of WWII and yet the American population has increased threefold. When you read the words of Haggai, you kind of look back 2,500 years ago and say, "Man, those folks were in a mess," we need to read it and say, "We're the ones that are in a mess."

So I want you to ponder something. I know that's a strange word to use at a time like this. I just want you to think about something. Notice what the Lord says in verse 5, "Consider your ways." Verse 7, "Consider your ways." And here's what I want you to ponder: is it really worth it? Is it really worth it when we see our bank accounts increase more than the missionaries we put on the field? Is it really worth it when we see the, shall we say, the development of earthly kingdoms increase over the expansion of the kingdom of God? Is it really worth it to take two steps forward and end up falling three steps back? Because what you discover is when you allow the Lord to be in charge, you don't have to take a step forward, you just trust him and he takes a leap four or five steps in advance. In fact, it was the Israelites when they came out of Persia, when they came out of captivity, they didn't have the financial resources, they didn't have the networking capacity, they didn't have the education of what did the Lord do, he went before them and what we're gonna study next week in Zechariah, he says, "It's not by might nor by power but by my Spirit," says the Lord.

I want you to ponder, I want you to consider your ways: is it really worth the exchange and sacrifice that we're making today? Because what we find out is as we make our way to verse 9, is you and I, much like the Israelites, are in a predicament. It says, "You looked for much and, lo, it came to little, and when you brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? Saith the LORD of hosts. Because my house that is a waste. You run every man into his own house. Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew and the earth is stayed from her fruit." I want you to notice two words: because and therefore. You see, the predicament that the Israelites were in is that because they neglected the things of

God, therefore God withheld the blessings and favor that they so needed from him. The dew was stayed. The fruit was stayed. In other words, that which they needed for sustenance and survival he withheld from them because they didn't do what Matthew 6:33 says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you." By the way, go back and read Matthew 6. Do you know what all these things are, food, clothing, shelter? The same things that are being mentioned in the book of Haggai.

So it allows us to ponder and it allows us to look at this predicament we're in, could it be that because verse 10 sounds like a headline out of a newspaper, that our problem isn't scientific based, thought it may be scientifically observed, though our problem, though it may be academically observed is not academically based, could it be that the struggles and the issues that we're having not only in the agricultural world but in the financial world, the relational world, whatever world we find ourselves in is not because of the reasons the world has given us but because verse 9 says we've neglected the things of God? You see, the simple predicament is this: we run faster, we work harder and we burn the candle at all three ends, so to speak, to acquire and yet what occurs? We receive little. And what the world preaches is actually backwards from what the Lord declares. He says if you'll reverse the model, if you'll place me first, if you'll put me at the primary position of your life, I can bless, I can honor and I can do more than you could ever imagine.

Let me just stick to agriculture for a moment as we observe what we're seeing even in our day when it comes to the agricultural world. You understand that when the Israelites did exactly what the Lord asked them to do, they actually got more than one harvest in a year. Sometimes they received two and on certain years the Lord blessed them with three when they were in preparation for some type of an environment such as a drought. What was the Lord declaring? It's real simple: God can do more with your little than you can do with your lot.

Which brings us to the possibilities. What would it look like in your home, what would it look like in mine, what would it look like in our church, what would it look like in our community if we decided to do as the Israelites did? What if we heed the words of God and say, "Do you know what, God? You've got a point. Just like Jeremiah said, we're no longer gonna trust in chariots and horses, we're gonna trust in you." You pick up the story in verse 12 and that's exactly what happens. It says that the remnant rose up. Now remember last week we talked about in Zephaniah the impact of the remnant. It was those faithful 10%, at least that's the mathematical equation the Lord gave us. It was those that did not bow the knee to Baal in the book of 1 Kings, it's those famous 144,000 in the book of Revelation, it is any and all who do not go the way of the world but the way of God. It says here that the remnant of the people, they obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, the words of Haggai the prophet, and the word God sent him and the people did fear the Lord, and what does it say in verse 13? "I am with you, saith the LORD."

So let's talk about some possibilities here. You know, the Lord says that those who wait on him, he will lift up on eagle's wings. So what are the possibilities in our lives? And let's just walk through a metric here that I'm sure you're most familiar with. Oftentimes when we come into an environment like this when we want to speak to the totality of our

life, we often talk about our treasures, our time and our talents. It's kind of the summation of who we are to the Lord so let's talk about that for a moment. What if we reversed the model and said instead of doing things the world's way, let's do it the Lord's way? What if we truly trusted him not just with 10% but with all of it? What if we trusted the Lord and said, "Okay, God, I know you can manage this more than I can"? You know, one of the things that makes, and this may sound weird for a pastor to say but it makes me proud when I walk around, is that you would be amazed how much we as a body of believers give to missions, how much we give that doesn't even go to this facility, this place, and all the incredible ministries that we locally do here in Lee County. In fact, last year did you know not only through our regular giving but our extra offerings we gave over a million dollars to missions? Interesting the amount of money that we gave to missions last year is roughly pretty close to the amount of money that we still have left on the debt of this property and I know many of you are familiar with this, but if you've forgotten allow me to remind you, do you know what we decided to do when this building is finally paid off? That money that's in our regular budget, not the 10% that we automatically give but the other percentage that we go above and beyond? As soon as this facility is paid off, we're doubling that. Do you know what we're saying? No, we want to do more to get the Gospel not just in our county but around the world. Those are the possibilities that if we knock that out, then all of a sudden the Gospel goes forward with twice the ability that even it is going today, and yet have you seen how many people and how many places we're already sending, can you imagine the possibility of sending more? By the way, let me invite you at the welcome time at the next service we're actually gonna commission two of our young people to the mission field, two of those that we're continuing to send.

How about our time? It's easy to talk about the treasures, what about our time? How often does reading the Bible or praying or even coming to church become an afterthought instead of the forethought? What would our lives look like if we put our time with the Lord before our time at work? Our time with the Lord, listen, even before our time with our family?

What about our talents, the abilities, the gifts, the skills the Lord has given us? I'm not just talking about those that are capable and able of teaching or singing or playing, but you know one of the greatest gifts that a Baptist can possess, are you ready for this? It's called a smile. That's kind of a rare gift in our lives but nonetheless, do you know how many people walk on this campus for the very first time who are walking through, as David said, the valley of the shadow of death? And sometimes those of you with a gift of a smile, the Holy Spirit operating and moving through you, just standing there on the outside, standing in the hallway, offering a cup of coffee, you'd be amazed how far it would go.

Here's my challenge to us today. We talk about the remnant, we talk about potential, I've read the whole Bible front to back, not just part of our reading program but I've read it through, and I've read how it ends and it's not pretty in the days before the Lord's return but here's what I would challenge us to be: Goshen. You say, "What do you mean, Goshen? This is Opelika." Let me tell you what Goshen is: Goshen was that place in the midst of Egypt where the people of God were faithful to the promises of God even

though the plagues surrounded them on all sides. Goshen was the place that even the Egyptians ran to when the flies began to swarm because they knew something was different there. You didn't reside in Goshen by happenstance, you resided in Goshen because you said, "It is more important to put the things of God before the things of man."

I want you to realize your, mine, our potential, our potential to be the remnant, our potential to make a difference, our potential to be Goshen doesn't happen because of an abundance of resources or a plethora of physical skillsets, it happens when we place the Lord in his proper place which is the first place in our lives.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe today you're that individual, maybe you're here in this wonderful facility, maybe you're on the other side of the cameras, but maybe you're that individual today who said, "Do you know what? This passage sounded like a recording of my life. All I do is strive and work and get nowhere." Maybe there's never been that time, maybe there's never been that place in your life where you've yielded to the Lord, you've yielded to Jesus Christ and said, "Jesus, save me." I've got great news for you, the Bible says in the book of Romans 10 whoever calls on the name of the Lord should be saved. Maybe you're that person today and you're saying, "But I don't know how to do that. I don't know what to say." Can I encourage you just to cry out to the Lord and not a cry that has to be audible, not a cry that's the same word or the same phrase maybe I would use but maybe your cry would sound something like this. "God, today I just want you to know that I finally have realized the problem and it's me. I've also realized the solution and it's Jesus Christ. God, today I believe, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much, God, I believe he was born on my behalf. God, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe, I believe that when Jesus Christ went to the cross, he bore the punishment of my sins. And God, I believe that three days later when he rose from the grave, he made it possible for my sins to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I'm tired. I'm tired of running from you, I'm tired of running away from you. Today I'm running to you and I am simply believing that through the blood and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I can be and shall be forgiven and saved. The best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who had that conversation. We'd love to have a conversation with you. In fact, in a moment we're gonna stand and sing and just invite you. We've got a team of folks here who would love to hear your story, they'd love to be privileged to pray with you. Just step out and step forward. We'd love that opportunity. But maybe you're here today and you had that conversation with the Lord years ago, maybe it's been decades ago and you realize you're kind of like the Israelites, it's been 16, 26, 36 years since that conversation, maybe today is the day that you took the Lord and your faith seriously from this day forth.

Heavenly Father, as we come to this time of decision, thank you that as your word says your arm of grace and mercy is longer than our life of rebellion. Help us, O God, today

*to simply just be where you need us to be. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray.
Amen.*

I'm gonna ask you to stand as John leads us, whatever decision, I'll be right here at the front.