

Thought for the Week 3rd May 2020

Hi Everyone! It's good to be able to share with you once again as we continue our enforced separation. As we share a thought from God's word together, I hope that you will find this time a blessing.

The lockdown and social distancing we are experiencing because of the coronavirus pandemic has, I am sure, made us think about how our priorities have changed. In the light of this I would like to take you to a story from the Old Testament book of the Prophet Haggai. It is found in chapter 1 of Haggai verse 1 – 12.

¹ 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: ² This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'These people say, "The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house."

³ Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴ 'Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?'

⁵ Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Give careful thought to your ways. ⁶ You have planted much, but 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.'

⁷ This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Give careful thought to your ways. ⁸ Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured,' says the LORD. ⁹ '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 your own house. ¹⁰ Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. ¹¹ I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labour of your hands.'

¹² Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Johozadak, 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.

First of all, a little bit of historical background. When God called Abraham, he promised to give him a special land and establish his descendants as a great nation. As the story unfolds through the Old Testament, we find the people of Israel as slaves in Egypt then rescued by God through Moses and finally under Joshua, brought into their Promised Land. Under King David a great kingdom was established. David built himself a magnificent palace in his capital, Jerusalem, but he was concerned that a temple for the Lord should be built. But the Lord told him, "Thank you very much, but I want your son Solomon to do it." And so, the great temple of Solomon was built around 950 BC. Years passed and the people of Israel strayed from true worship of God and in 587BC he sent the Babylonians to besiege the city, depose the king and destroy the temple. The people were herded off into exile and the land of Israel was left desolate.

God promised, through the prophet Jeremiah, that he would restore his people and around 516 King Cyrus of Persia allowed some of the exiles to return in order to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem

(you can read the story of this in Ezra). However, although they started well, they soon became discouraged and in the face of fierce opposition from surrounding peoples they stopped working on the temple and concentrated on re-building their own houses and the rest of the city. Then they began to face drought and famine and poverty, and nothing seemed to satisfy their needs. Essentially what the people were saying to God was, *“We don’t have time to build your house – we’ve been too busy with our own houses and our own problems.”*

Into this situation the Lord spoke to them through his prophet Haggai with the message, *“Give careful thought to your ways.”* It wasn’t that the Lord minded them having their own houses, the problem was that there was something fundamentally wrong with their lives. They were so busy working – building, planting, harvesting, eating in order to satisfy all their physical needs that they were totally neglecting God and his priorities for them. As a result, nothing satisfied. They ate but were still hungry, they drank, but stayed thirsty. They put on clothes but were still cold. They made money, but it was never enough. They could not find anything that gave them deep lasting satisfaction. In our contemporary society I think we are in a similar situation to the one in Haggai’s day. Nothing seems to satisfy.

God’s message to them was, *“Stop and think!”* Could that be God’s message to the world of today? I think it is, and maybe the unique situation in which we find ourselves during this pandemic, is God’s saying to us, *“take this time to stop and think!”*

The people back then were not making the connection between what was lacking in their lives and the fundamental spiritual issue at the core of their lives. It’s no different today. Think about it - when things go wrong for us, we turn to experts. I’m personally very grateful for the medical experts who were able to help me recently. We all very much appreciate what our front-line medical workers are doing for those who are suffering from the effects of Covid-19 and we pray for those who are working to produce a vaccine. If we have a financial problem, we go to a finance expert, or if there’s something wrong with the car, we go to a good mechanic. There is a right thing to do in any particular situation. But what if the problem is a more fundamental one – a spiritual one? Haggai was saying to the people of his day, *“there’s a reason why there’s an emptiness in your life, despite all the material things you have, because you are neglecting God’s priorities.”* God wanted the people to glorify him by building a temple where they could focus on worshipping him, but they were too busy in all their own pursuits.

And surely, it’s no different today. Most people are so busy with their own things that God is squeezed out. Even many of those who would claim to be Christian and say they have a faith, neglect the spiritual dimension to their lives.

If you were to read on to the end of Haggai chapter 1 you would see that the people responded to God’s message in three ways. First they recognised that the Lord was speaking to them; then as they listened they were reassured that the Lord was still with them and finally they responded, refocused their lives on God and began to build his temple once again.

What God said through Haggai to his people he is saying to us today – *“give careful thought to your ways!”* During this time of lockdown, we have a great opportunity to take time to realize that the busy hectic lives we formerly led really did not satisfy. In days when a disease we’d never heard of a few months ago can wipe out so many people in a very short time, should we not stop and think about what’s really important and look to God or refocus on him – the one who through his son Jesus has brought us a great salvation?