Your Best Days (Haggai)
Consider Your Ways

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)
Your Best Days: Consider Your Ways
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Background Notes
Key Scripture Texts: Haggai 1:1-11

The Text
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 for the LORD's house to be built.'" 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 paneled 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 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." 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 the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," 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 his 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 oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands" (Haggai 1:1-11).

Introduction
Carefully dated, Haggai experienced this Word of Yahweh on August 29, 520 B.C.E. How often do we get to know the exact date God spoke to a biblical character? As we noted last week, the whole book of Haggai follows a careful chronological plan, diarized like ancient Persian annals from the royal library. The Jews learned a great deal about recordkeeping while living as exiles in a foreign land. Haggai even follows the months and days of the Babylonian lunar calendar. Whoever put this book into its final form made sure that the day-timer of God’s revelation to His restored people was in proper form. When the Word of the Lord was scarce, Judah could not afford to miss a single entry!

Learning to give close attention to the Word also means giving close attention to oneself. The disciplines of spiritual life include many things. People who journal their daily meditations on the Word, usually comment on how they feel and what they need and where they plan to go. A walk with Jesus in the Word deserves the honor of the day timer so that we might not miss any important instruction from the One whose Word is “a lamp to our feet and a light to our path” (Psalm 119:105).

Therefore, it’s not surprising that along with the diary details comes this reminder early in the book (Haggai 1:5, 7; echoes of that instruction also appear in 2:15):

“Give careful thought to your ways” (NIV)
“Consider your ways” (KJV, NAB)
“Consider how things are going for you” (NLT)
“Consider how you have fared” (NRSV)
“Set your heart to your ways” (YLT)

The underlying Hebrew says, “Set your heart toward your ways.” That is, face up to the reality you have created and observed where it has taken you. In other words, get out of your fantasy world with its magical view of life and think long and hard about where your actions have taken you. Don’t ignore the facts on the ground. What the prophet does for the people of God is give them a good dose of reality so that they will stop living where the only reality is their private one.
Back in the land, the little province of Judah was idling and coasting, accepting the benevolence of the Persian Empire, and leaning back in relief that at last they were home again where life would quickly return to normal. Of course it’s hard to imagine normalcy when your capital city is a fire-charged ruins. It’s hard to see everything as whole and well when the worship of God is missing its temple. After all, you are not just any people returned from exile: you are God’s people, the chosen ones, whose seventy years in a foreign land has left deep rifts in your soul and in your community. Thinking that everything is fine under those circumstances is to accept less than the best and to live in denial. You are destined for greatness, the harbinger of Yahweh’s glory, and a witness to the nations that He is the true God.

As the prophecy of Haggai begins, the serious admonition of 1:5, 7 shapes everything God says to Judah in the opening oracle because He directs His Word “to your heart.” The Hebrew word lēbāb, meaning “heart,” has to do with more than the physical organ. Rather, the heart denotes the center of human judgment and discernment (see 1 Kings 3:9). For prophets, the heart must discern the “times” (Isaiah 41:22; Haggai 2:15, 18), especially in knowing what must happen now under the present circumstances. The heart must find its proper object of focus — of what it must pay attention to. In this case, the heart should concern itself with its “ways.”

In some parts of the Old Testament, “ways” have to do with God’s commandments (Deuteronomy 31:29; Hosea 14:9; Psalm 18:21). However, in Haggai’s usage, “ways” are about human behavior and the success (or failure) it brings. We might use the more colloquial expression: “how’s that working out for you?” “The way a person takes and the goal that he thereby achieves … how we fare … Haggai’s people is now asked to consider the connection between what is done hitherto and the miseries if its present situation.”

Things have not turned out well for Judah back in the land. Being in the land is not enough to guarantee blessing from God, since the land itself is the blessing of God for His people who are rightly related to Him. The people can easily lose the land, and, as the opening verses of Haggai explain, they are presently at risk. This week’s study has to do with “stop, look, and listen,” with a view to altering the course of our lives. God seeks a mindful people who are able to navigate the minefields of a mindless society.

Who, What, When, and Where: The Word of God in Real Time (Haggai 1:1)
There is nothing abstract about the message of Haggai. The prophet lives at a specific time when certain people are in power in Persia and in Judah. The prophecy is set “in a world-wide context, in a way unparalleled in any earlier prophetic book…” You are encouraged to re-read the first week’s study for all of the historical details, but suffice it to say that when Haggai writes about the second year of King Darius, he is connecting the event of his writing with that well-known historical figure. This is much like what we find in Luke 2 where Caesar Augustus is the Roman Empire when Jesus is born. Or in Matthew 2 when Herod is King of the Jews when magi come looking for Jesus. Or, in Luke 3, which most closely parallels the structure of Haggai 1:1,

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar— when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthothd of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert (Luke 3:1-2).

The writer tells us that really important things are happening in a world run by really important people, and in such a world, “the Word of the Lord came…” to relatively unknown prophets like Haggai or John who will rouse a stagnant society of relatively unknown subjects into crucial action. Darius may be in charge, and he may issue proclamations to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, but it takes a prophet to bring the motivating Word of the Lord, just as it took John to be the forerunner of Jesus. Stacked up against Darius, Haggai or Zerubbabel or Joshua seemed like pygmies in the presence of a giant. Yet, the final editor of Haggai felt the need to put these small people in the context of a big world and to say that what those small people did mattered.

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2 Wolff, 36.
Two types of leaders guided God’s people back from exile. 1) Zerubbabel had credentials in the line of David. He was a royal personage who, under different circumstances, might have become the new king of Israel. But it was not meant to be. Instead, the Persians granted him the lesser title of “governor of Judah (or Yehud).” The Hebrew term is pahat, probably derived from a Persian or Akkadian word that referred to a “high government official.”

Zerubbabel’s name means “seed of Babylon,” suggesting that he was born while the nation of Judah was in Babylonian captivity. From the genealogies found in 1 Chronicles 3:19, he was the grandson of Jehoiachin, the last legitimate king of Judah before the exile (see Jeremiah 22:24, 28 for a less than complementary description of him).

Next to the governor was 2) the High Priest, a man named Joshua (or Yeshua), who, as it turns out, proved to be more significant in the leadership of the post-exile community of Jews than the royal line of David. High Priests, right down to the time of Jesus, held the highest authority within Judaism, to the degree that the ruling Gentiles allowed them. Working together, these two men, “the prince and the priest,” ruled the Israel during this period, under the authority of the Persian king. Haggai directs much of his prophecy to the leadership whose influence was crucial to move forward the current project of temple building. Clinton notes: “He came alongside of Zerubbabel and Joshua to provide catalytic prophetic input.”

Leaders who are willing to hear the Word of the Lord from God’s prophets are essential.

An Oracle of Rebutal and Exhortation (1:2-11)

A Powerful Name for God

The who addresses the first oracle to Judah through Haggai is called “the LORD Almighty” in our English Bibles, and in the Hebrew that translates from “Yahweh S’bā’āt” which means “Yahweh of hosts.” “Hosts” refers to large companies of angels who function as armies. In the short book of Haggai, the phrase appears fourteen times, and in the companion work of Zechariah that number jumps to fifty-three. In the last book of the prophets, Malachi, we find it twenty-four times. It’s no accident that the prophets of the post-exile should refer to God in this way, since mighty empires ruled the world where little Judah tries to rebuild its nation, and only the powerful armies of Yahweh are able to withstand the military might of such empires. Indeed, in a world where “might makes right,” God’s people look for a higher power. As the psalmist once wrote:

Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me. 2 Take up shield and buckler; arise and come to my aid. 3 Brandish spear and javelin against those who pursue me. Say to my soul, “I am your salvation.” 4 May those who seek my life be disgraced and put to shame; may those who plot my ruin be turned back in dismay. 5 May they be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them away; 6 may their path be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them (Psalm 35:1-6).

In a deeply moving scene from 2 Kings 6, Israel faces the formidable force of the king of Aram:

14 Then he [Aram] sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city. 15 When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked. 16 "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." 17 And Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:14-17).

Elisha shows his servant “Yahweh of Hosts”! From Haggai, the Jews need to hear God’s name in this form. They need to know that the God of armies has authority far greater than those of the Persian king.

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Analyzing the Human Situation (1:2-6)

What does the Word of Yahweh announce when Haggai first hears it? It reports the true situation of Judah, and, in so doing, offers a concise analysis of Israel’s true human condition. “This people say…” Whenever the prophets refer to the Jews as “this people,” they mean those who live in Jerusalem. The force of the word “this” was usually negative: reproach or rejection (Isaiah 6:9, 10; Hosea 1:9). Why does Haggai speak with sarcasm?

It is because of what the people say — it’s all on their lips: “the time has not yet come; the time of the house of Yahweh to be built.” Psychologically, the returned exiles now seek to take charge of their time, since in their exile, their captors controlled their time. Freed at last from Babylon, the Jews want to have the time back on their own terms, and this makes them resistant to giving away that time to a project that does not serve their immediate self-interests. Ironically it was the failure to honor God with their time that sent them off into exile in the first place. Notice how the Chronicler describes this:

20 He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. 21 The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah (2 Chronicles 36:20-21).

Seventy years of exile are 10 x 7, or ten times a Sabbath of years. Failure to allow God to have His time led to Israel’s loss of their time. What the Word tells Haggai is that the people are once more grasping time for themselves by denying it to God’s building project.

From the Psalms we learn: “But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’ 15 My times are in your hands” (Psalm 31:14-15). Though we call them “my times” yet we confess, as an act of trust in God, that they are in the hands of God, and not in our own. We also hear from the prophet Isaiah:

5 The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness. 6 He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure (Isaiah 33:5-6)

With respect the world rulers, Nebuchadnezzar admits to Daniel (2:21): “He [Yahweh] changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.” When Jesus was asked about the time of his second coming, he replied to the disciples (and to us!): "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.”

All of which goes to show why Judah needs the Word of Yahweh to counter their reticence to build Yahweh’s house. Haggai knows that the clock wass ticking on the completion of this project, since the seventy-year period for the exile was fast expiring for Judah (see Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10). What the people wanted was self-rule, independent of the exile crisis that was now behind them. But Haggai makes clear there can be no Jewish statehood unless God’s temple stands in Jerusalem. No, the Judeans have it backward. The time has come, and they need to feel the urgency and do the work. We hear echoes of the early ministry of John and Jesus: “The time is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News” (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15).

It is not for us to set the times, but we are responsible to read the signs of the times to determine what kind of work we need to do, and when we should do it (Matthew 16:3).

Within a wider context, God unfolds His times: “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isaiah 46:10). Our perspective of the “right time” lacks the big picture “from ancient times.” We manage the immediate and want to arrange the world that is at our feet and in front of our face — the world we intend to control by setting the dates and drawing the timelines. But God will not have it so. His Word comes to the prophet at specific times of His choosing: in this case, the second year of king Darius on the first day of the sixth month. God does not ask the Judeans if they have a conflict in their datebook, and will He have to make adjustment? No, the Word

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of God comes and keeps on coming on a schedule known only to Him, and the people living in Jerusalem must not tell God, “The time has not yet come…” The timing of God’s Word trumps our plans every time.

A “lively dispute”⁶ erupts in 1:4 where God is not reluctant to confront the blatant selfishness exhibited by a people who, not long ago, lived at the mercy of their Babylonian captors, but now accessorize homes while the house of God lies in ruins. The phrase “paneled houses” has two possible meanings in Hebrew: 1) a simple roofed structure in contrast to the bare ruins of the temple, open to the sky. Or, 2) a term of ornamentation (as in 1 Kings 7:3; Jeremiah 22:14). It is likely that Haggai reaches for a contrast that places private residences “under roof” while leaving God’s house “without covering.” The temple was a public building whose services and celebrations were often national festivals shared by all the people — the sign that Israel was under the covering of God’s presence. Yet the temple had no covering, while private homes did. Even if the word “paneled” means only the simple roof, still the marked difference is notable, and the effect on Israel’s spiritual life is numbing.

The returned exiles had a window of opportunity, starting in 538 B.C.E. until 520 to accomplish something important: to build the temple. Faced with local opposition and warnings from the empire, they stopped working until the time of Haggai. But they were not idle during that time, and proceeded to devote themselves to another project — the furnishing of their own homes. They failed to remember the angst of King David, centuries before, when he said:

After David was settled in his palace, he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of the covenant of the LORD is under a tent." ² Nathan replied to David, "Whatever you have in mind, do it, for God is with you" (1 Chronicles 17:1-2).

After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ² he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent." ³ Nathan replied to the king, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you" (2 Samuel 7:1-3).

By using the phrase “settled in his palace,” the biblical text provides a comparison to our Haggai passage. David knew that he was settled, even before Nathan the prophet spoke with him. David knew that his private settled condition stood in stark contrast to the tent-like existence of Yahweh. God knew his heart, even though He would challenge David’s way of resolving his anxiety.

With respect to the exiles freshly returned from exile, the situation was different. They seemed not to care about the temple, so long as they had a roof over their heads. That is why the force of 1:5 “give careful thought to your ways” is so significant, as we noted in our introduction. God is saying through these words, not, “Start paying attention,” but rather, “Don’t your see how things are turning out for you because you pay more attention to your own things than to God’s?”” Then God gives a bill of particulars showing the impact of their privatized economies on the province of Judah as a whole (1:6):

- Planted much, 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.

We might say about the profile here, “It’s the economy, stupid!” Haggai uses poetic artistry when he pens these lines. In the Hebrew language there is a “triplet of seven-syllable bicola, each divided 2 + 5.”⁷ That would be like a traditional poet writing in perfect iambic pentameter. Using elevated language was a way to draw attention to the passage, maybe similar to taunting the audience in a sing-song fashion.

For the people of God in the Old Testament, a strong link existed between spiritual health and material well-being. It was not an absolute link (see the story of Job!), but one based on the regular observation of cause and

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⁶ Wolff, 41.
⁷ Meyers, 25.
effect (see the book of Proverbs). The link had its roots in the curses and blessings of Torah, especially in texts like Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 where poor harvests, insufficient food, and inadequate clothes were consequences of bad covenant-keeping. Keeping to themselves, with a roof over their heads, and neglecting the worship of Yahweh led to “the ways” — “your ways” — that Haggai intends in 1:5 and 1:7. An economy that plays tight to the chest and fails to trade and does not share becomes a failed economy. Scholars disagree on the precise conditions that led to the poetic description above. Was it inflation? Some think so. Still, inflation would seem to be the result of, rather than the cause of, the conditions mentioned. Meyers points out:

It is difficult to determine what sort of economic conditions would have had such an effect. Inflation is a possibility, with wages not keeping up with costs. A more specific form of inflation might appear as temporary shortages of basic products, so that the prices are drive way up and the worker must spend far more than he is accustomed to in order to feed and clothe his family. The image does not suggest an inadequate income so much as an extraordinary drain on existing income. The general implication, that there is a disequilibrium between wages and prices, seems clear even if the specific conditions causing that discrepancy cannot be enumerated.8

Hans Walter Wolff puts this in context with the timing of Haggai’s prophecies, according to the precise timeline of the book:

It will not be by chance that Haggai begins with the seedtime which has produced so little (cf. 1:9; 2:16). A great drought (1:10f) with succeeding periods of hunger and thirst, and also lack of clothing, will have been the decisive common experience. All the wage earners will have suffered especially from the resulting high prices. They had to live from wages paid by the day. It is as if the “bag” they carried on their belts as “purse” (Gen. 42:35; Prov. 7:20 …) were full of holes, “perforated” … The money they have saved disappears because its purchasing power falls as prices soar (cf. also Mal. 3:5). Working for wages therefore shows itself to be just as futile as sowing, eating, drinking, and clothing oneself.9

When the prophet challenges the people to “focus your heart on your ways,” he is, then, not asking for introspection, as if the people were hiding some deep secret from God or each other. Instead, the Hebrew leads in a different direction: “Look at the results (i.e. the ways) of your actions.” See how things have turned out for you because of the way you have chosen to live. What Haggai gives his fellow Jews is a situation analysis that lays bare the wrongness of their actions, more concerned about their own lives than God’s house.

Call to New Action (1:7-8)

It’s never too late to re-start our timeline. God is never too early, nor too late. He is from all “eternity” (Psalm 93:2; Proverbs 8:23), and He has generously placed His “eternity in our hearts,” and as a result God “makes everything beautiful in its time” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Israel’s time can be situated within God’s eternity, but they must respond to God’s invitation in Haggai 1:5, 7, first, by accepting God’s analysis of their dreadful situation and then (1:8-11) taking concrete steps which show their willingness to build the temple. What are those steps?

- Go up into the hills
- Bring down timber
- Build the house

What’s dumbfounding about the instructions is their basic quality. There’s nothing profound here. Nothing out of the ordinary. The “hills” refer to the local hillsides surrounding Jerusalem which were “thickly wooded” and were no doubt part of what Nehemiah calls “the king’s forests” (Nehemiah 2:8; 8:15f). These are not the cedars of Lebanon that David contracted from Hiram, the king of Tyre (1 Kings 9:11; 2 Chronicles 2:3), to supply Solomon’s temple. God does not ask Judah to use the wood supplied by the Empire, but only what is locally grown. Here is the simultaneous concern for both economy and ecology! Scholars of the near east who are familiar with the specifics of the region around Jerusalem suggest a mix of firs, palm trees, oaks, poplars, cypresses, sycamores, and olive trees.10

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8 Meyers, 27.
9 Wolff, 44.
10 See K. Galling’s helpful article in Biblisches Reallexikon, 356-358.
Three tiers of foundation stones, gathered from the rubble around the old temple, were topped by layers of beams taken from these various species and served to stabilize the structure. Costlier beams for the roof and internal paneling came from the more noble trees. What should fascinate the reader are the different kinds of wood required and the opportunity for everybody to get involved gathering it. There’s nothing like full employment to jump-start the economy, and nothing better for the environment than to harvest renewable resources. Besides building the temple for the glory of God, the returned exiles enriched each other, and not just themselves, through shared work.

God reinforces their efforts by making a double promise to them.

1. Yahweh promises to recognize their efforts. Our English translations have “take pleasure in it,” based on the Hebrew ירות-בּ. The root of the verb means “to accept” and commonly appears in settings where God accepts the sacrifices in the sense that He recognizes the legitimacy of them (Leviticus 7:18; 19:7; 22:23; Hosea 8:13; Amos 5:22; Micah 6:7). God promises to joyfully accept the temple not yet begun, but real nonetheless by His Word spoken through Haggai. These are, to borrow language from Paul, words spoken by “the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were” (Romans 4:17).

2. Then Yahweh promises that He will be honored by their efforts. Again, the Hebrew has a slightly more subtle nuance and better translated as “I will show myself in my glory,”11 and found elsewhere in the Old Testament (Exodus 14:4, 17f; Leviticus 10:3). Jews who ready themselves to build the temple will “see God” in His presence, power, and compassion. Such Jews exchange their self-seeking “burdens” for God-seeking glory. In Hebrew, the idea of glory in its concrete form means “heavy.” That’s why Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4:17 can speak about “…this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure…” where the apostle seems to be unpacking the idea of “weight” from that of “glory” found in the Hebrew. God’s glory, magnified by temple-building, brings the blessings of God into the lives of His people.

Reprising God’s Analysis of the Human Situation in Judah (1:9-11)

What follows in 1:9-11 forms an inclusion with 1:6 by magnifying the dire straits of Judah’s economy. At the same time, this section is also a sharp contrast with the “glory” that Yahweh wants to show His people. The details in this section are chilling and remind the audience how thoroughly God shapes the natural order in mercy and in judgment.

1. “You expected much, but there is little.” Literally, “You have turned,” from pānāh which can mean to turn for the purpose of “looking.” Thus, the Jews turn expecting to see one thing — “much” — but when they turn, they see another thing — “little.” They appear to be taking a harvest survey in which the farmer pulls back the covering from the heads of wheat or inspects the grapes and finds disappointing results — not unlike the severe droughts we have experienced this year. Haggai’s first oracle is in the sixth month (1:1) which is the time of the vintage — after all the harvests were complete. By then the results were in, and the market situation quite clear. Bad results meant the previous year’s rains were scarce or absent. In point of fact, there are drought cycles in the near east “with a deviation of 50 percent coming as often as once every nine or ten years.”12 Had Israel been a fully functioning state, the old traditional strategies for handling drought would have been in place, including artificial irrigation techniques, and storehouse planning. But for returnees from exile, drought was a disaster, because such technology and foresight had not been in place for almost seventy years! Israel underestimated the true impact of exile on the economy. Agriculture doesn’t easily bend to instant gratification.

2. “What you brought [the harvest] home, I blew away.” The results were already meager, yet the Jews dutifully carried the diminished harvest home, only to have God disperse it. Meyers thinks Haggai means the Jews brought their harvests as sacrifices to the free-standing altar, and Yahweh rejected them because

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12 Meyers, 39.
the temple lay in ruins. Echoes of the wind’s power to scatter appear elsewhere (Psalm 1:4b; 35:5; Job 21:18; Isaiah 17:13). Perhaps the wind’s ability to fan the flames of Yahweh’s wrath is also in view (Isaiah 54:16; Ezekiel 22:20f). Such devastating judgment on Israel’s agriculture provokes the rhetorical question that follows in 1:9b.

3. “Why?” What led to these consequences? The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible carried on a lively debate about the relationship between deeds and outcomes. Proverbs makes the connection between them a tight one based on careful observation of many cases where action A led to consequence B. From this regular cause and effect, the wisdom writers developed general principles that expressed the hidden purposes of God in the natural world. The Jewish sages had the gift for this kind of induction, prompted by God’s revelation in the order of creation. However, books like Job challenged the unconditional acceptance of these so-called wisdom principles, allowing for exceptions. Job was a good man, yet his life lay in shambles throughout most of the book that bears his name. Why? Why, indeed, and the narrative poetry of Job seeks to unpack the mysterious ways of God through the dialog of Job’s three friends and the later words of Elihu the stranger who appears near the end. Haggai, on the other hand, has no such reticence, but follows the logic of Proverbs. Israel’s harvests failed because Israel failed to build the temple in a timely fashion while devoting resources to their own homes.

4. “Because of you, heaven … earth … withheld …” The prophet dares to link human action to natural disaster. Heaven withholds moisture and earth withholds harvests because of you, God tells His people. The combined terms “heaven … earth” are a literary form called merismus, the combination of parts of the whole to express totality. Compare Genesis 1:1, Psalm 121:2, etc. This is a variation of another form, synecdoche, where the part stands for the whole or the whole for the part. That is, the whole created order reacts to Israel’s negligence to build the temple of Yahweh. This is an audacious claim, worthy of a prophet who believes that creation reacts to human behavior. The word “withheld” suggests volition on the part of creation, and since Israel did not believe that created reality was divine (they were not pantheists), this act of withholding points beyond creation to God Himself.

5. “I called for a drought …” Heaven and earth did not withhold rain on its own initiative, but were doing the bidding of God. The One who brought His people back from exile and settled them back in their land now summons them before Him as their Judge before Whom they all stand accountable. There is a close association between the drought on the land and the ruins of the temple. When rain fails to quench the thirst of the ground, the land becomes a desert and parallels the deserted condition of the temple mount where God also lives in the middle of His ruins.

6. “Fields, mountains, grain, new wine, oil, agriculture, human, cattle, and the labor of your hands.” This impressive (and depressing!) list of economic realities climaxes with labor — human labor. Work is frustrated by the drought in much the same way that labor in Genesis 3 was cursed by the thorns and the thistles after the Fall. Without the gracious outpouring of God’s blessing, all human work is futile, and the blessing is withheld because God’s presence among His people, in His temple, is not properly celebrated. Creation itself appears in Genesis 1 as the great house of God, His temple, apportioned for His glory and His fullness. The Creation temple and the Jerusalem temple lead parallel lives. When the one lies in ruins, so does the other. Ironically, God’s temple lies in ruins, the Cosmos temple is in drought, yet each Jew is “busy with his own house.” What’s wrong with this picture?!

The triad of “grain, new wine, and oil” constitutes the primary commodities of Israel’s economy, which is to say that the land of Judah is in fundamental economic crisis. Haggai boldly declares the reasons as lying outside the normal processes of nature — though expressed through nature — and within the righteous judgments of Yahweh. God cannot allow nature to bless His people while His people fail to acknowledge Him.

13 Meyers, 29.
14 See John Walton’s excellent treatment of this theme in The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 78ff. Especially relevant is his Proposition 8: “Cosmos is a temple.”
This analysis recalls the warnings found in Deuteronomy:

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 trees throughout your country but you will not use the oil, because the olives will drop off (Deuteronomy 28:38-40).

And the later prophets re-affirm that message:

6 "I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD. 7 "I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up. 8 People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD. 9 "Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD. 10 "I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt. I killed your young men with the sword, along with your captured horses. I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD. 11 "I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD (Amos 4:6-11).

I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it” (Isaiah 5:6).

13 Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "My servants will eat, but you will go hungry; my servants will drink, but you will go thirsty; my servants will rejoice, but you will be put to shame … 21 They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. (Isaiah 65:13).

3 The nobles send their servants for water; they go to the cisterns but find no water. They return with their jars unfilled; dismayed and despairing, they cover their heads. 4 The ground is cracked because there is no rain in the land; the farmers are dismayed and cover their heads (Jeremiah 14:3-4).

7 “They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. The stalk has no head; it will produce no flour. Were it to yield grain, foreigners would swallow it up (Hosea 8:7).

15 You will plant but not harvest; you will press olives but not use the oil on yourselves, you will crush grapes but not drink the wine (Micah 6:15).

Yet, Haggai does not end the oracle of 1:1-11 with a word about any further judgment; because the judgment of nature’s drought is already evidence of God’s judicial decision in the matter. Nature has already expressed the will of Yahweh, and Israel already labors under the severe burden of failed harvests and an economy in crisis. Prophecy in this case is not a predictive Word but an interpretive Word! The prophet offers the perspective of God on the otherwise unexplained natural disasters. Nature utters the Word of God through the withholding of rain, and the natural course of agriculture tells the rest of the story. What Haggai shows the people of Judah is the cause behind the effect.

**Conclusion**

Haggai actually has no thought that God will reward the Judeans with prosperity if they build him a temple — a sort of “you-be-nice-to-me and I-will-be-nice-to-you” religion. Human beings cannot buy the favor of the Lord of the universe. Rather, God yearns to return to this people and to dwell in their midst. The temple is symbolic of that dwelling; and if the Judeans rebuild the temple, their efforts will signal that once more they have turned toward God as he has now turned toward them. The temple will be sign and seal for their renewed devotion — the evidence that they have finally come to terms with reality.\(^{15}\)

The sacrament of communion reminds us, “The gifts of God for the people of God,” as we partake of bread and cup, the fruit of nature’s harvest. There can be no earned favor within the kingdom announced by the Gospel.

\(^{15}\) Achtemeier, 99.
The good news is that God freely gives out of His sovereign mercy and love. Yet to share in those gifts, God’s people require hearts turned toward Him.

When Jesus fed the 5,000, the crowds eagerly accepted the multiplied loaves and fish from the hand of one who took and blessed and broke and gave. Yet later in John 6, Jesus chided the crowd:

26 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. 27 Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval" (John 6:26-27).

The danger we face is taking from Jesus the bread, rather than receiving it, and then presuming there will always be bread so that we might have our fill. But, taking a page from the manna story in Exodus, Jesus warns about eating bread that spoils — bread that is taken and hoarded (see Exodus 16:11ff). God refuses to sit at the table where such bread is served and taken. At such a table, His temple lies in ruins, and creation must object and withhold the harvest.

By contrast, Jesus would later instruct, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). “These things” include all the gifts of nature’s harvests, and they must not be taken apart from the interests of God’s kingdom. When they are, and when our homes become the storehouses that hoard the gifts of nature while neglecting the kingdom of God, nature will withhold the rain, and the drought will come. As with the manna in Exodus 16, any form of greedy accumulation ends up as loss.

“Consider your ways” means that we should pay close attention to how our actions lead to consequences. In matters of the kingdom, we are encouraged to ask ourselves regularly, “How’s that working out for you?”

Glory to God! Amen.
Digger Deeper: Your Best Days: Consider Your Ways

(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of Your Best Days (Haggai): Consider Your Ways, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website at http://www.c1naz.org, click on Resources, click the tab Series, find and click on the series title, find and click on the date you want, and then click on the Background Notes link at the lower left. You can also pick up a copy of the Background Notes at the Information desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Our reading this week is from Haggai 1:1-11. After you prayerfully read this text, make a simple outline, noting the connections between the sections.

2. What information does the writer give in Haggai 1:1? Why is it important to give the reader such historical background? Who are the people mentioned, and how are they each involved in the life of the returned exiles? How necessary is it for Haggai to give their names?


4. How does the writer refer to God in 1:2. Skim the rest of Haggai and count the other occurrences of the same name for God. Why is this name especially important for the returned exiles living under the rule of the Persian Empire?

5. What attitude is conveyed by the returned exiles to Jerusalem by their words in 1:2? Discuss the significance of the word “time.” Compare with 2 Chronicles 36:20-21; Psalms 31:14-15; Isaiah 33:5-6; 46:10; Daniel 2:21; Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15

6. Explain God’s first response to the people in 1:4. Discuss the contrast Haggai sets up. What impact might his words have on the people?

7. Read 1:5-7 as a unit. Suggest some possible meanings for 1:5, paying careful attention to the supporting examples in 1:6. How do you understand the words “consider” and “ways” as they are used here? Show how a cause and effect is implied between Judah’s actions and what is happening to them.

8. God offers a remedy to Judah’s present crisis in 1:8 by issuing a command. Describe the command. What will happen if the people agree to follow God’s instructions? Be sure to define the meaning of “take pleasure” and “be honored” as God applies these phrases to Himself. What does this have to do with our actions and our obedience? What should be their primary goal?


10. Based on 1:9 discuss the cause of Judah’s failed expectations? In what ways do we set ourselves up for failure in living the Christian life? To what extent does selfishness contribute?

11. What kind of natural phenomenon does Haggai describe in 1:10, and how does it relate to Judah’s crisis? Why does the writer use the words “heaven” and “earth” together in this passage?

12. What role does God have in Judah’s natural disasters? How does Haggai describe His involvement? Does God do that sort of thing today? Discuss certain cases and your reaction to each one. What is significant about “grain, new wine, and oil” in the ancient economy of the near east, the context for Judah’s return to the land?

13. Why does Haggai end 1:11 with the phrase “the labor of your hands”? What is the connection between human labor and the purposes of God? What can frustrate human work, and in what sense is that a judgment of God?