Obey the Lord

Read Haggai 1:1-11

Key verses: “Then the word of the Lord came through Haggai the prophet: Is it time for you to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins?” (Haggai 1:3-4).

Several years ago, an American scientist discovered the likely cause of the great composer Beethoven’s death. By studying strands of Beethoven’s hair, Dr. William Walsh determined that the musician’s death at age 57 was caused by lead poisoning.

Walsh found 100 times the normal amount of lead. The lead poisoning, which caused Beethoven years of suffering, probably resulted from his drinking from and swimming in mineral spas. At the time, the composer would not have known that he was slowly poisoning himself to death.

Physically and spiritually as well, people often do not know what is harming and ultimately destroying them.

For the Hebrew people living in Jerusalem in the fifth century B.C., it took a prophetic word from God to help them see what was harming them and their relationship with God. And God used a prophet named Haggai to bring His word to them.

In 538 B.C., Cyrus of Persia had issued a decree allowing the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Led by Zerubbabel, some 50,000 Jews returned and began work on the temple. They completed its foundation in 522. But then they began to face opposition from their non-Jewish neighbors, and work on the temple stopped.

God then raised up Haggai the prophet, whose preaching encouraged the returned exiles to complete work on the temple. Haggai showed them that they had been suffering from an unknown “poisoning.” Their material poverty, Haggai proclaimed, was God’s way of showing them that their priorities were wrong:

“Is it time for you to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins?....You expect a surplus, but look how it shrinks. You bring it home, and
I blow it away, says the Lord of heavenly forces, because my house lies in ruins. But all of you hurry to your own houses” (Haggai 1:4,9).

Haggai revealed the source of the returned exiles’ material poverty: They had forgotten God and were failing to give priority to God and to God’s business. Instead, their priorities were their own selfish ends.

Sometimes, when we banish God from our life’s priorities, God allows us to experience material success while our spiritual lives are busy dying: “They soon forgot His works; they waited not for His counsel, but lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. And He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul” (Psalm 106:13-15, KJV).

Materially wealthy but spiritually impoverished—these words describe the condition of many in our own time. Jean Elshtain wrote: “Who, then, are we, we prideful creatures? Lord knows, we no longer think of ourselves as belonging to anyone or anything. We do not belong—we own; we possess. And that, to say the least, is not the same thing.

“We plunge into self-aggrandizement, convinced that the dazzling success of our projects will prove definitely who we are. But this fails to satisfy. Our triumphs ring hollow. Our victories so often turn to ashes in our mouths. But never mind. Tomorrow we will run faster, climb higher....Who are we? We are creatures who have forgotten what it means to be faithful to something other than ourselves” (from Elshtain’s book, Who Are We?).

Haggai’s message to the returned exiles? Your spiritual and material poverty is the result of your misplaced priorities. You think only of yourselves and forget God and God’s priorities. Change your priorities (in this case, finish God’s temple) and you will be blessed both spiritually and materially.

Jesus said it this way: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.”

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