

*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:*

<sup>2</sup> *This is what the LORD Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come for the LORD’s house to be built.’ ”*

<sup>3</sup> *Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: <sup>4</sup> “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”*

<sup>5</sup> *Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. <sup>6</sup> 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.”*

<sup>7</sup> *This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> “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. <sup>10</sup> Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. <sup>11</sup> 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)*

### **Giving to God Doesn’t Make a Bit of Sense!**

“I just don’t understand.” A woman said that to me once. She was talking about the sinful choices her sister’s husband had made and the price their family had to pay. And all her frustration and hurt came down to, “I just don’t understand.” She’s not the only person I’ve heard say that. When life hurts, we sometimes say or think that – as if understanding it would make it better. Would it really? If a child understood why one of his parents committed adultery and then why they got divorced, would that make it any easier to live through that life-shattering experience? Would it make it hurt any less? If a parent understands why their child has contracted cancer, would that make watching that child go through chemo any easier? No, not really. But we often think it will. Whether or not it does, the sad truth is, we often will not and cannot understand why things like divorce or cancer or tragedy happen. If the things of this life don’t make sense, how can we possibly wrap our heads around God? What God does sometimes just doesn’t make sense to us. In part, that’s true because we live in a sinful world and for now, God hides himself. He says that faith is being sure of what we can’t see, so he lets the world look godless. He lets it look like things all run on their own without any intervention from him. If you don’t look at the world with eyes of faith, that’s exactly what you think. And even we believers can get sucked into thinking that way. No where is that more true than when it comes to our financial well-being. From a hard-nosed, hard-headed, logical point of view, **giving to God just doesn’t make sense.**

God doesn’t limit himself to working only in the ways this world works. He can and does do surprising things, even miraculous things. Our Old Testament lesson this morning is all about trusting that God works in ways that don’t make sense to our human reason. Haggai and his people lived through God working in ways that were hard to understand. The oldest people who heard him preach had lived through the destruction of Jerusalem and then were dragged off into exile. As children, they had visited the great temple of Solomon – they were the last generation to see that temple in all its glory. But the armies of Babylon had taken the city and burned it. They stripped that temple of everything of value and left it a smoldering ruin. They left bodies in the streets and dragged most of the survivors off to Babylon where they stayed for seventy years.

There was no mystery about why God did all that. His people had left him. They wanted gods that made more sense to them. God had warned his people for hundreds of years that if they didn’t repent, this was what would happen. But many of those who went into exile were actually the people who remained faithful. It must have been hard to see your home destroyed and your life changed forever because other people refused to listen. It must have been hard to understand what God was doing. But God had promised to bring the faithful remnant home. He did that during the lifetime of Haggai. What did they find when they got back to Jerusalem? Ruins. The city gates and walls were broken and destroyed. The buildings were burned out and unlivable.

That great temple of Solomon was a heap of rubble. People like Haggai who were born in exile had probably heard stories about Jerusalem all their lives and they were so excited when the king let them come home. But when they saw where they would now be living, it had to challenge to their faith.

But give them credit. They rolled their sleeves and got to work. They rebuilt the city walls. They rededicated an altar on the site of the temple and laid the foundations for a new temple. They made a good beginning. But you know how people are. They began to pay more attention to their own personal needs. They prioritized building their own houses. We can understand the need to provide shelter for your family. But once they started working on their own homes, all work on the temple stopped for fifteen years. During that time, they went way past just providing shelter for their families. They made their new homes comfortable and inviting. They indulged in a kind of thinking that is easy to understand: sure, we'd like to see that temple finished, but you know what they say: happy wife, happy life. You can't expect me to give time and money to that building project when there's still so much to do at home. Sound familiar?

It's easy for us to rationalize putting God's work in second or third or fourth place in our lives. We can tell ourselves that we need to get established. Once we get our career or our business going, there'll be a lot more money to give to God. And so and so on and so on. Well, God didn't buy that excuse from his Old Testament people. He waited a decade and a half for them to renew their commitment to his project. Then he intervened. God told them, **"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin? Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Give careful thought to your ways. 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.'"**

God's point is really quite simple: you call it practicality, I call it greed and idolatry. Charles Schwab tells us, "Pay yourself first." That's the key to financial success. But God says, "Pay me first." God calls us to trust him and give him the firstfruits of all we receive. He promises that he will bless us beyond our ability to even imagine the results. And God illustrates to us that he has the power to undo all the things that we think will work in this life. When the people of Israel paid themselves first, they planted much but harvested little, they ate but were never satisfied, they drank but never had their fill, they put on clothes, but were never warm, they earned wages but put them in purses with holes in them. That's not what should've happened. They knew how to farm and make clothes and purses. But God would not let their efforts succeed. Why not? Because they loved their comfort more than they loved him.

That's just sin. That's the point for us. Now, maybe God will do something similar to us, and maybe he won't. He waited fifteen years before he upped the ante like this with Israel. But God calls us to love him more than we love anything in this life. God calls us to give him the firstfruits of our wealth here. Do we do that? Or are we like Israel, full of excuses and rationalizations for doing what we want to do? Or is the real problem that we just don't think about it? Did you know that the unemployment rate in America is the lowest it's been since 1969? We don't live in a time when people just can't find work. Yet, here at Peace, we are more than six months behind on our pension payments. We have come to expect a full-service congregation, with church, school and preschool. But can we really expect them to function when the paneling in our houses comes first? Did you know that in the first six months of last year, spending on video games was up 40% – nineteen and one half *billion* dollars, but offerings to churches in America were flat? I don't know if that ratio is true here at Peace. But I would ask you to think about it. I would ask you to spend at least a few minutes this week actually looking at what you spend money on. Look at your credit card statement or your bank statement. What comes first in your spending? What does that tell you about your priorities?

Giving to God just doesn't make sense. Pay yourself first – that's the way to wealth. And that usually does work in this life. But God says that he is the true source of all our wealth. He blesses our efforts or he doesn't. If he has blessed our efforts, then how do we respond? And if we have not responded in faith, if we have put God in second or third or fourth place, how do we go forward?

In repentance and faith. That's the approach God took with Israel and it worked. The people recognized their sin and they returned to him in faith and then they built that temple. And that is the path for us here at Peace. Is there anyone here who can honestly say that we have no room to repent in this area? Our sinful hearts are greedy by nature and greed is sin. But Jesus died to take away all sin. Now that we have entered the Advent season, we are once again considering how God spent thousands of years planning and preparing to

send that Savior for us. Haggai and his people and the temple they did rebuild are steps to the coming of that baby in Bethlehem and that Savior who died on Calvary. Jesus was perfect in his dedication to his Father. He always gave God the first and the best of all he had. He did that for us. He counts for you and me. Jesus died and he paid for the greed in our hearts that will not let go of the money in our wallets. He died and paid for all our excuses and rationalizations. He died and paid for our unwillingness to even consider the true source of our wealth and what God calls us to do with it. He washed all that sin away in his blood. He rose to tell us it is paid for and we are free.

That's who then promises that he will do more than we can possibly ask or imagine when we are generous with him. God promises to do miracles for us. If we give to him first, we're not going to lose anything because he will always give us more than we can possibly give to him. How do you know that's true? Because of what he has already given for us. Jesus didn't just give us a portion of his income. He gave his life for us. He didn't give 10% of who and what he was. He gave all of himself for us. He came down, and entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born in that stable. He gave up heaven so that he could live in what we would consider to be a third world country and a poverty stricken existence. He did all that for no other reason than the fact that he loved us. God promised for thousands of years that he would send his Son to do all that. When the time was right, God kept that promise. The same God promises that if we are generous with him, he will be even more generous with us. Giving to God doesn't make sense. But that's because God is greater than our hearts and our ability to understand what will really work in life.

So it all comes down to this: we don't have to understand how God will work. We only need to hear his promise that he will. We only need to trust what he has done and what he says he will do. Then, humbly and confidently, we put him first in our lives. God will never punish us for that. He will do the impossible and take care of us. Amen.