

The Books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Consider Your Ways: Build the Lord's House

Haggai 1:1-15

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this opening lesson establishes the priority of God in the lives of His covenant people, and it does so through the picture of a temple left in ruins while the people finished their own homes. The temple mattered because it was where God dwelt among His people and where they came to worship Him. The point is not that Christians must rebuild a literal temple. Under the New Covenant, God's house is His people, the church, the spiritual temple in which He dwells by His Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5). So teach the timeless principle that Haggai presses: God will not accept second place, and a life that pushes Him to the margins will find that nothing else holds together. This is the same truth Jesus stated positively when He said to seek first the kingdom of God.

Guard against two errors as you teach. First, do not turn this into a guilt-driven appeal for more church activity or a fund drive; Haggai's aim is the reordering of the heart, not merely busier hands. Second, do not read the rebuilt temple as a prophecy of some future literal temple; it was a real building in Haggai's day, and its enduring meaning points forward to Christ and His church, not to a restored earthly temple program. Keep the weight on devotion, priorities, and the God who deserves to be first.

This passage was never meant only to diagnose; it was meant to move people to act. A student who really hears Haggai will stop, examine where his time and money actually go, and take a concrete step to put God first. So aim at both targets. Send students home understanding why God refuses second place, and send them home ready to "consider their ways" and to begin, trusting the promise that the God who calls them to the work goes with them into it.

Question 1

Student Question:

The word of the Lord comes through Haggai to Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest (1:1). What does it tell us about God that He does not abandon His discouraged people to their stalled obedience, but sends His word to stir them back to the work? What does this reveal about how God deals with His people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the setting, because it preaches. The word comes "in the second year of Darius the king," to a small, struggling community that had returned from exile with great hopes that had since faded. God does not write off these discouraged people. He sends a prophet with His

word, and He addresses it specifically to the civil leader, Zerubbabel, and the spiritual leader, Joshua. God works through His word and through appointed leaders to call His people back to obedience.

Notice God's patience and initiative. The people had stalled for years, yet the Lord does not abandon them to their apathy. He takes the first step. This is how God consistently deals with His own: He pursues, He warns, He stirs, He calls back. The very existence of the book of Haggai is an act of mercy, a refusal to let the people drift into ruin alongside their ruined temple.

Help students see that God's word still functions this way. He has not left us to guess at our priorities. Through Scripture He speaks into our stalled obedience and tired excuses, naming what we would rather not name. The faithful response is not to resent the word but to receive it, the way these leaders eventually did.

Draw the line to leadership and accountability. God addressed the leaders first. Those who guide a home, a class, or a congregation carry a particular responsibility to hear God's word and lead the way in obedience. Revival in Haggai's day began at the top and spread to all the people.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God reveals His will through His word, and that word carries authority over His people's choices and priorities.
- God's patient initiative in pursuing a drifting people, refusing to abandon them to their apathy.
- God works through appointed leaders (civil and spiritual) to call His people to obedience.
- The mercy of correction: a rebuke from God is evidence of His covenant love, not its absence (Hebrews 12:5-6).
- Leaders bear a heightened responsibility to hear and obey God first, leading others by example.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it merciful, not harsh, for God to send a word that disturbs our comfortable drift?
- Where have you sensed God's word recently naming something in your life you would rather avoid?
- How should those who lead (in a home, class, or congregation) model the obedience they call others to?

Question 2

Student Question:

The people had time, energy, and money for their own paneled houses, but not for the house of God (1:4). If someone studied your calendar and your spending for the last month, what would

they conclude that you have actually put first? Where is the gap between what you say matters most and where your time and resources actually go?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and the goal is honest clarity, not shame. God's complaint in verse 4 is pointed: the people lived in "paneled houses," finished and comfortable, while His house lay in ruins. Paneling was a mark of care and even luxury; they had spared no effort for their own comfort and no effort for God. The contrast exposes where their treasure really was.

Help students apply this without flinching. Our calendars and our bank statements are remarkably honest witnesses. We can say God is first, but the way we spend our hours and our dollars tells the truer story. Encourage students to actually look, not in a spirit of guilt, but in a spirit of honest accounting before a God who already knows.

Be careful to keep the issue at the level of the heart, not mere external religion. The problem was not that they had homes; it was that their own comfort had quietly become the thing they served first, and God had become an item they would get to later. The same drift can happen to any of us without a single dramatic decision.

Move toward something concrete. It is one thing to admit the gap between our words and our lives; it is another to close it. Press gently toward a specific reordering: an hour, a habit, a portion of income, a relationship, something that can move from second place back to first this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The heart's true priorities are revealed by where our time, energy, and money actually go (Matthew 6:21).
- The subtlety of misplaced priorities: drift happens gradually, without a dramatic decision to abandon God.
- Comfort and possessions are not evil, but they become idols when they take first place.
- Self-examination is a healthy and biblical discipline for the believer (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Discussion Prompts

- If a stranger studied your calendar and spending, what would they conclude you put first?
- What is one "paneled house" comfort that quietly competes with God for first place in your life?
- What is one concrete adjustment that would move God from second place back to first this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Three times in this chapter God says, “Consider your ways” (1:5, 7) and points to harvests that disappoint, food that does not satisfy, and wages that leak away (1:6). What is God teaching about the futility that follows when His people push Him to the margins? How is this frustration an act of His mercy rather than mere punishment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The refrain “Consider your ways” (literally, set your heart on your ways) frames the whole section. God invites the people to trace the strange dissatisfaction of their lives back to its cause. They sow much and harvest little; they eat but are not filled; they earn wages only to watch them vanish, as if poured into a bag with holes. Every reader knows this feeling of effort that does not add up.

Teach that this futility is not random. God connects it directly to their misplaced priorities. When His people displaced Him, He let them feel the hollowness of a life built around lesser things. This is a recurring biblical pattern: sin and self-rule do not deliver what they promise. The fields of self-centered living yield a disappointing harvest.

Crucially, present this as mercy, not mere punishment. God could have left them comfortable and lost. Instead He let the emptiness surface so they would wake up and turn back. The ache that something is wrong is a gift; it is God’s kindness refusing to let them be satisfied apart from Him. As Augustine put it, our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

Bring it home. Many people today live with the same low-grade frustration, working hard and feeling strangely empty, and never trace it to its root. Help students see that the answer is not to work harder at the same misordered life, but to put God back in His place. Then even ordinary work begins to satisfy again.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin and self-rule cannot deliver lasting satisfaction; a life that displaces God yields a disappointing harvest.
- God’s providential discipline: He may allow emptiness and frustration to draw His people back to Himself.
- The mercy hidden in dissatisfaction: restlessness apart from God is a gift meant to lead to repentance.
- True and lasting satisfaction is found only in a right relationship with God (Psalm 16:11; Jeremiah 2:13).

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you see “wages in a bag with holes” in modern life, effort that never quite satisfies?

- How can a season of frustration actually be evidence of God's mercy at work?
- Why does working harder at a misordered life never fix the emptiness?

Question 4

Student Question:

Haggai names the quiet drift honestly: "each of you busies himself with his own house" (1:9). What is the "own house" that most easily absorbs your attention and energy right now, the thing you build first and protect most? Be honest about what it is.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 9 sharpens the diagnosis: "each of you busies himself with his own house." The problem was not laziness; the people were busy. It was misdirected busyness, energy poured into self while God's work waited. This is a more dangerous condition than open rebellion, because it feels productive and responsible.

Lead students to name their own "house." For one person it is a career; for another, a home or a hobby; for another, a relationship, a screen, a reputation, or simply the endless management of personal comfort. None of these is necessarily sinful in itself. The question is whether it has become the first thing, the thing built and guarded before God gets any real share of the day.

Help them feel the subtlety. No one in Haggai's day stood up and announced, "I am abandoning God." They simply got busy with good and ordinary things, and God slipped to the edges by neglect rather than by decision. Most spiritual drift happens exactly this way, not by a dramatic turning away but by a thousand small preferences for self.

Move toward honest confession and a single step. The goal is not to despise legitimate responsibilities but to dethrone the one that has quietly taken God's place. Invite each student to identify one specific "own house" and one way to put God before it this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual drift usually comes through misdirected busyness, not open rebellion.
- Good things (work, home, relationships) become spiritual dangers when they take first place.
- The deceptiveness of busyness: it can feel responsible while crowding God out.
- Repentance involves naming the specific idol and deliberately dethroning it.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the "own house" that most absorbs your attention and energy right now?
- Why is misdirected busyness more deceptive than open rebellion?
- What is one way you could deliberately put God before that thing this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

God says the heavens withheld their dew and the earth its produce, and that He had “called for a drought” (1:10–11). What does this teach about God’s active hand in the circumstances of His people, and about His willingness to let us feel the emptiness of misplaced priorities so that we will turn back to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 10 and 11 make a striking claim: the withheld dew, the failed crops, the drought on grain and wine and oil, all of it, God says, “I called for.” This is not a distant deity watching from afar. The Lord is actively involved in the circumstances of His people, and here He uses even the weather to get their attention.

Handle this carefully and biblically. We must not flatten every hardship in our own lives into a one-to-one divine message; Scripture warns against assuming that all suffering is direct punishment (John 9:1–3; Luke 13:1–5). Yet we also must not deny God’s sovereign hand in the affairs of the world and the discipline of His people. In Haggai’s case God told them plainly what He was doing and why, so there is no guesswork.

Draw out the purpose. God’s aim in the drought was not destruction but restoration. He let the people feel the consequences of their priorities so they would turn back to Him. This is the heart of fatherly discipline described in Hebrews 12: the Lord disciplines those He loves, not to crush them but to bring them to repentance and life.

Apply with pastoral care. Encourage students to ask, humbly and without morbid self-accusation, whether God may be using a current emptiness or frustration to call them back to first things. The right response to discipline is not despair but return.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s sovereignty over creation and circumstances, including the affairs of His people.
- Divine discipline aims at restoration, not destruction (Hebrews 12:5–11).
- Caution against assuming every hardship is a direct punishment for specific sin (John 9:1–3; Luke 13:1–5).
- God’s love is active and pursuing; He will let us feel emptiness rather than lose us to comfort.

Discussion Prompts

- How do we hold together God’s sovereignty over circumstances without assuming every hardship is punishment?

- What is the difference between God's discipline and mere bad luck, and how should each be received?
- How can a believer respond to God's discipline with return rather than despair?

Question 6

Student Question:

When the people finally obeyed, they did not wait to feel inspired; they simply got up and went to work on the house (1:12, 14). Where in your walk with God are you waiting to feel ready before you obey? What would it look like to start obeying this week before the feelings arrive?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 12 records the turning point: the leaders and "all the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord." Verse 14 shows them simply getting to work. There is no record that they first felt inspired or emotionally ready. They heard, they feared the Lord, and they acted. Obedience came first, and the heart followed the hands.

This is a crucial lesson for spiritual formation. We often wait to feel ready before we obey, and the feeling never comes. Haggai's people remind us that obedience is frequently a matter of the will before it is a matter of the emotions. We do the next right thing, and God meets us in the doing.

Connect this to the ordinary Christian life. Prayer, worship, generosity, service, reconciliation: in each, we usually must act before we feel like it. Waiting for motivation is often a polite form of disobedience. The mature believer learns to move on God's word, trusting that the affections will be trained by faithful action.

Press toward one concrete starting point. Ask students to name an area where they have been waiting to feel ready, and to identify the first small act of obedience they could take this week, before the feelings arrive, trusting God to meet them there.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Obedience is fundamentally a matter of the will, not merely the emotions.
- Right action often precedes and then shapes right feeling (we obey our way into deeper faith).
- Waiting for motivation before obeying can be a disguised form of disobedience.
- God meets and strengthens His people in the act of obedience, not only before it.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you waiting to feel ready before you obey God?
- Why does obedience so often have to precede the feelings rather than follow them?
- What is one act of obedience you could begin this week before the motivation arrives?

Question 7

Student Question:

The text says Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all the remnant “obeyed the voice of the Lord” and “the people feared the Lord” (1:12). How are reverent fear of God and glad obedience related here? Why does a low view of God so often show up as a casual approach to His commands?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 12 links two things tightly: the people “obeyed the voice of the Lord,” and “the people feared the Lord.” The reverent fear of God and glad obedience belong together. Where there is a high and worthy view of God, obedience follows naturally; where God is treated casually, His commands are treated casually too.

Define the fear of the Lord rightly. This is not cringing terror but reverent awe, a settled recognition of who God is, the holy and sovereign Lord, and who we are before Him. Scripture calls this the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). It is the proper posture of a creature before the Creator, and of a redeemed people before their Redeemer.

Show how a shrunken view of God produces a casual faith. When God becomes small in our thinking, a manageable helper rather than the Lord of heaven, then His claims feel optional and His worship feels negotiable. Much half-hearted Christianity traces back to a God who has been quietly downsized in the imagination.

Lead students to recover awe. Encourage them to dwell on God’s greatness, holiness, and majesty, not as an abstract exercise but as the fuel for wholehearted obedience. A right fear of the Lord does not paralyze; it frees us to take Him seriously and to build His house with reverence and joy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fear of the Lord is reverent awe, not cringing terror, and is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7).
- Reverence for God and obedience to God are inseparable.
- A diminished view of God produces a casual, negotiable approach to His commands.
- Recovering awe of God’s holiness and majesty fuels wholehearted devotion.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between cringing terror and the healthy fear of the Lord?
- How does a “downsized” view of God show up in casual obedience?
- What helps you recover a sense of awe before God’s holiness and greatness?

Question 8

Student Question:

Haggai's central appeal is, in effect, the same as Jesus' call to "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33). What is one concrete area where seeking God first would reorder your priorities, your money, or your week, and what is the first step you could take?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Haggai's whole appeal can be summed up in the words Jesus would later speak: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). The people had reversed the order, seeking their own houses first and assuming God's house could wait. Jesus promises that when God is genuinely first, the rest of life finds its proper place, and our Father can be trusted with the rest.

Help students feel the promise inside the command. Seeking first the kingdom is not a grim demand that strips life of everything else; it is an invitation to put the one rightful King on the throne and to let everything else be ordered under Him. Far from emptying life, it fills it with meaning and frees us from the anxious striving that comes from trying to be our own god.

Make it concrete in the categories Jesus names: what we worry about, what we chase, what we trust for security. Seeking God first reorders our priorities (what comes before what), our money (where it goes and why), and our weeks (what gets the prime hours). Press students to choose one of these and name a specific change.

Tie it back to Haggai. The people did not merely agree with a principle; they went up the hill, gathered wood, and built. Seeking first the kingdom always takes concrete form. Invite each student to identify the first step that would put God genuinely first in one real area this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Seeking first the kingdom of God is the positive form of Haggai's call (Matthew 6:33).
- Putting God first orders, rather than empties, the rest of life.
- God can be trusted to provide when His people prioritize Him (Matthew 6:31-33).
- Genuine priority for God always takes concrete, practical form.

Discussion Prompts

- In which area, priorities, money, or time, do you most need to seek God first?
- Why does putting God first actually order the rest of life rather than diminish it?
- What specific first step would put God genuinely first in that area this week?

Question 9**Student Question:**

Into a discouraged, half-hearted people God speaks the great promise, "I am with you, declares the Lord" (1:13), and then "stirred up the spirit" of the leaders and the people to work (1:14). What does it mean that the same God who calls us to the work also empowers and accompanies us in it? How does God's presence change the nature of obedience from grim duty into glad partnership, and how does this guard us against thinking we build His house in our own strength?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest and most encouraging block of the lesson, and it deserves the most time. Into a discouraged, half-hearted people, God speaks four of the most precious words in Scripture: "I am with you, declares the Lord" (1:13). Then verse 14 tells us that "the Lord stirred up the spirit" of Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all the remnant, and they came and worked. The same God who commanded the work also supplied the will and the strength to do it.

Teach the balance carefully here, because two errors lurk on either side. On one side is the error of thinking we build God's house in our own strength, by sheer willpower and human effort, which leads either to pride when we succeed or despair when we fail. On the other side is the error of passivity, waiting for God to do everything while we do nothing. Haggai holds both truths together: God stirred their spirits, and they came and worked. Grace did not replace their effort; grace empowered it. This is the same pattern Paul describes when he says to work out your salvation, "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13).

Dwell on the presence of God as the engine of all faithful obedience. "I am with you" changes the entire nature of the work. The task is no longer a lonely burden carried by anxious people; it is a partnership with the living God who has pledged Himself to His people. This is the thread that runs through all of Scripture, from God's promise to Moses, to Jesus' promise at the end of Matthew, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). The God who calls us never sends us alone.

Show how this guards against self-reliance and against discouragement at once. When we remember that God stirs the will and walks with us, we are kept humble, we cannot boast as though we built His house ourselves, and we are kept hopeful, we cannot quit as though everything depended on our own dwindling resources. The proper posture is glad, dependent partnership: we work because He works in us, and we work in the confidence that He is with us.

Bring it to the heart. Obedience grounded in God's presence is not grim duty but glad partnership. Help students see that the antidote to both pride and despair is the same: the God who says "consider your ways" also says "I am with you," and He is the one who stirs the spirit to begin.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God empowers the obedience He commands; He stirs the will and supplies the strength (Philippians 2:12–13).
- The promise of God's presence is the foundation of faithful service (Haggai 1:13; Matthew 28:20).
- Guard against self-reliance: we do not build God's house in our own strength, lest we boast or despair.
- Guard against passivity: grace empowers human effort rather than replacing it.
- Obedience flows from glad, dependent partnership with God, not from grim duty.
- God's accompanying presence keeps the believer both humble and hopeful.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the promise "I am with you" change the way you approach a hard act of obedience?
- What is the difference between working in our own strength and working as God stirs and strengthens us?
- How does remembering God's presence guard us from both pride and despair in serving Him?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter, from the people's excuse to their renewed work and God's promise to be with them. Name one specific way the Lord is calling you to "consider your ways" and put His house first this week, and how the promise "I am with you" gives you courage to begin.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to look back across the whole chapter and respond personally. Trace the movement once more with them: the people's excuse ("not yet"), God's searching call ("consider your ways"), the honest diagnosis of their frustration, their renewed obedience, the recovery of reverent fear, and the great promise that crowns it all, "I am with you."

Resist the urge to leave the lesson at the level of agreement. The whole point of Haggai is movement: from drift to devotion, from "later" to "now," from self first to God first. A student who closes this lesson with nothing more than a nod has missed it. The aim is a specific, namable step taken in response to God's word.

Help each person land on one concrete area. For some it will be a calendar adjustment; for others a financial decision, a renewed habit of worship, a reconciliation, or a long-delayed act of service. The "house" God is calling them to build first will look different for different people, but the call is the same: put Me first, and begin.

Close on the promise, not the demand. Remind students that the courage to begin does not come from gritted teeth but from the God who goes with them. Let them leave hearing both halves of Haggai's message: consider your ways, and I am with you.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine response to God's word always moves from agreement to concrete action.
- Spiritual formation happens through specific, namable steps of obedience, not vague intentions.
- Putting God first looks different in different lives, but the call to first place is universal.
- The courage to obey rests on God's promised presence, not on our own resolve (Haggai 1:13).

Discussion Prompts

- What one specific way is God calling you to "consider your ways" and put His house first this week?
- What has most often kept you at the level of agreement rather than action, and how can you move past it?
- How does the promise "I am with you" give you courage to take that first step?