



LifeLight

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 1:4

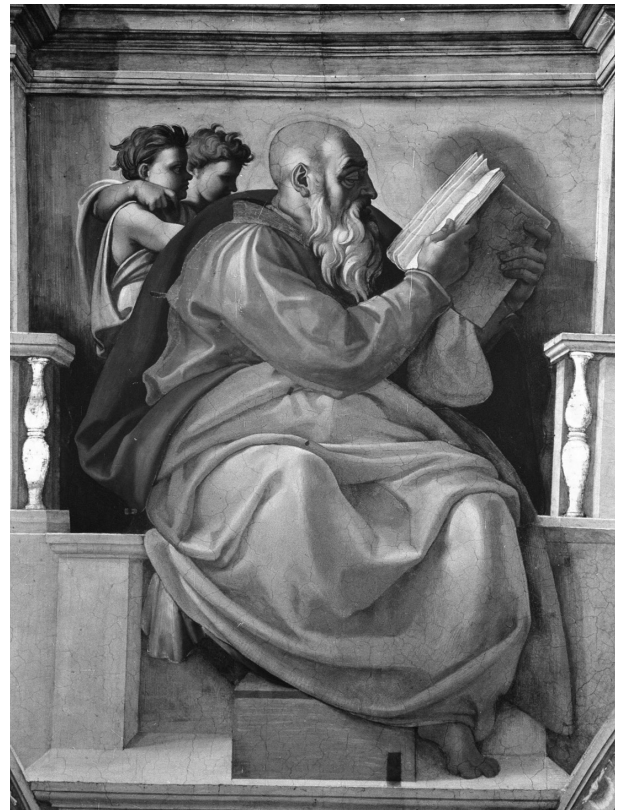
Haggai/Zechariah/Malachi

LEADERS GUIDE

“The prophet’s greatness was his ability to lead God’s people who were initially too busy with their own concerns to concentrate on rebuilding the temple. Zechariah enabled the faithful remnant to pick up the pieces of the exile and embrace God’s promises that would come to fruition in Christ Jesus.”

—From *“Who’s Who in the Book of Zechariah”* in the *enrichment magazine*.

This painting of the Prophet Zechariah is by Michelangelo Buonarroti. Found on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, it is believed to be a portrait of Pope Julius II.



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Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

In-depth means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership-team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;
- prepares worship activities (devotional thought,

- hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other, outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
 - encourages prayer at weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders meetings.

The Small-Group Coordinator (*optional; the director may fill this role*)

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership-team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

The Small-Group Discussion Leaders

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 57.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session;
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;

- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion-leaders training meetings.

Leadership Training

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

The LifeLight Weekly Schedule

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, which will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). Those congregations may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

Recommended Study Resources and Worship

The Lutheran Study Bible. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009. This resource contains more than 26,000 study and application notes, a most thorough reference guide (pp. lxx-cx), and over 90,000 cross-references, as well as a 31,000-entry concordance, maps, charts, and timelines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

The Concordia Organist is a 31-CD collection of pipe organ accompaniments for all the hymns and liturgical music in *Lutheran Service Book*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no.99-2264). Use these CDs for worship hymn accompaniment.

A New Start and a Coming Savior

Selected Passages

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

The last three books of the Old Testament reflect upon the final phase of God's holy nation prior to the arrival of Jesus Christ. Before we delve into the books themselves, we will review what was going on in Israel during and after the Babylonian exile. Then we will have a better context within which to hear the prophets' inspired messages for our day as well.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. identify where the exile fits into the history of the Old Testament;
2. recall the special role that the Lord gave to the prophets who spoke in His name; and
3. take note where the prophetic Scriptures reveal Christ's person and work.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 57.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on p. 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, open our minds and hearts by the power of Your Holy Spirit, so that we may read Your Word and believe in what You have done for us in Jesus Christ, Your dear Son. When You brought Your chosen people back from their time of exile, You renewed Your precious promises to them and pointed their faith toward the coming Savior of the world. Through that same Word of truth, purify Your Church on earth, distinguish it from the evils of this world, and let Your mercy shine upon us in forgiveness until we come to that eternal life that You have prepared for us in Christ, for it is in His name we pray. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

The Books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, found in the back of the Old Testament, were written after the people of Judah returned from the Babylonian captivity. Before we begin delving deeply into the riches contained in these three books of the prophets, let's spend some time in a broad overview of our topic. Today, we will review the history of the Babylonian captivity and the temple in Jerusalem. Then, we will briefly look at the prophets and their visions and prophecies. Finally, we will conclude with a short sketch of how salvation history continued from the close of the Book of Malachi to the opening of the Book of Matthew.

1 Exile and Return (2 Chronicles 36:15–23; Leviticus 26:27–45; Jeremiah 25:1–14)

Unlike the captivity in Egypt that God's people went through before the exodus, this was a forced expulsion from the Promised Land—a direct consequence of idolatry on the part of God's people. It wasn't that God was especially touchy about this one particular commandment over all the others. He alone could see that the hearts of His chosen ones were stone-cold toward Him. They rejected His grace and refused to believe His promises. They even laughed at His threats of punishment. Spiritually, their faith was choked by the weeds of man-made gods they had allowed to spring up around them.

Therefore, after generations of warnings issued through prophet after prophet, the Lord finally called upon foreign conquerors to overthrow His divided people.

The Northern Kingdom, which retained the name Israel, was composed of ten tribes that had separated from the other two in the south, namely Judah and Benjamin (1 Kings 12), and established a rival capital in the city of Samaria, less than fifty miles north of Jerusalem. For their entire history as a separate nation, they declared themselves independent from the true worship of God. Because of this hardened and determined rejection of Him, the Lord raised up the kingdom of Assyria to swoop in, destroy Samaria and the surrounding cities, and force all the inhabitants away like scattered sheep. Some foreigners were brought in to resettle the area surrounding the destroyed city, mixing their pagan religions with the worship of the one true God. This gave rise to a despised culture of people who would later be called the Samaritans.

The Southern Kingdom, called Judah, merely delayed the inevitable. About 130 years after Samaria fell to the Assyrians, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem and eventually destroyed the Holy City, including the precious temple building that Solomon had dedicated to the name of the Lord. By the end of the siege and the fall of Jerusalem, most of the people had been taken into exile, and all the wealth of the land had been either destroyed or plundered. Jeremiah was in the middle of the whole ordeal, and he is likely the mournful author of Lamentations. Just as God had threatened, the Judahites, who later came to be known as “Jews,” would be banished from the Promised Land for seventy years. Most would never return to their homeland.

Then, as God Himself directed the events of history, Persia rose to dominate the Middle Eastern world, and King Cyrus came to power over the lands once dominated by Assyria and Babylonia. It was Cyrus who issued the surprising and earth-shattering decree that allowed the worshipers of the Lord to rebuild His temple in Jerusalem. Thousands had been shipped out, but only hundreds returned to settle in the lands of their fathers. Things were not going to be the same as they had been for their ancestors. The temple would have none of the magnificent splendor that Solomon had given it. The people were often discouraged, because it was a difficult task to reinstitute the Lord’s form of worship and government among themselves. The priests were not moving back in sufficient numbers to do their specific jobs. The temple building project was delayed, at times

almost sabotaged. People were more concerned with building their own houses. Some men divorced their legitimate wives and married foreign women who refused to give up their pagan religions. There were no more kings sitting on the throne to rule in this brave, renewed world. Everything seemed to be starting over from scratch.

As the returned exiles faced these new challenges and frustrations, they needed a new generation of prophets to call them to repentance and spur them on to the Lord’s plan for His people. The last three of the Minor Prophets, namely Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, were the men whom God called to speak that encouraging Word. The exile was over, but the Lord was not done with His saving work. These three prophets would preach God’s answer to the question “We’re back . . . so what now?”

2 Oracles and Burdens (Ezekiel 33:7–9)

The Book of Hebrews begins, (1:1) “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.” For centuries, divine words were spoken through human mouths. Prophets were usually not the public worship leaders of God’s people, as Samuel had been. A few of them were women, such as Huldah (2 Kings 22). Some saw visions (Isaiah), some sang divinely inspired songs (Jeremiah, Miriam, David), while others just repeated what they were told. Some were occasionally required to act out the message that God had given them (Hosea and Ezekiel, for instance). Not all of them were commanded to produce books of prophecy. Some would write, others would just speak, and still others would run away (like Jonah)!

But one thing that all the prophets shared was that they were specifically sent by the Lord to deliver a certain message from Him. Whatever their particular prophetic mandate was, they were granted unique authority to speak as though God Himself were doing the talking. In the Hebrew language, someone who was entrusted with giving a message or completing a transaction on behalf of another was called a *shaliach* (shah-LEE-ock), or “someone sent.” Today, we would see that kind of authority vested in an ambassador, one who speaks or acts on behalf of his or her country’s government. A *shaliach* was not given a blank check, as it were, as though he could claim that *everything* from his mouth was God’s Word. Instead, hearers were required to honor a prophet’s authority only when he passed on the Lord’s own words. Not all the prophets actually received the

honor that was due to a *shaliach*—for instance, Jeremiah was cast into an empty cistern because of an unpopular message—yet the Lord still brought about what He had instructed the prophet to say in His name.

In order to make the message absolutely clear to their hearers, prophets often adopted certain phrases that emphasized that what they were saying or writing down was in fact God’s Word. Sometimes the oracle, or divine saying, was prefaced with the formula “Thus says the LORD.” This attached the holy name of God, “Yahweh,” to His Word that had established a covenant with His people. Many times, the prophecy concluded with the words “declares the LORD,” a phrase that confessed the same truth. Occasionally when some prophets faced opposition because they were bearers of bad news, their announcement of forthcoming punishment was referred to as the “burden of the LORD.” Faithful prophets cannot do anything other than pass along God’s Word for the benefit of His people. Paul echoes this in the New Testament when he writes, (1 Corinthians 9:16) “For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”

Faithful hearers also had a duty to listen and even judge the words that a prophet spoke to them. Moses gave the children of Israel certain criteria to follow as they evaluated a prophetic message. The simple rule was this: (Deuteronomy 18:22) “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.” While it is true that most of what the prophets had to say was about some event in the future, they also called for faith to flourish in the hearts of their hearers from that point onward. It wouldn’t have made sense for a prophet to predict the coming of a great event of salvation or destruction, and then say, “But you can do whatever you want until then!” Repentance and faithfulness to the Lord were always the goal and common themes of the prophets who truly spoke in God’s name, since their overall role was to point to Jesus.

3 Focus on the Temple (1 Kings 8:22–30)

The Old Testament temple was the place where God dwelt on earth among His people and for the benefit of His people. The temple was the gathering point for them to receive His grace during the prescribed festivals and ritual sacrifices. It was the focal point of Old Testament worship. However, it had been destroyed by the Babylo-

nians. Following the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites knew that their first major task would be to rebuild the temple. We can briefly recall what the Scriptures tell us about both the temple that had been destroyed and the tabernacle that preceded it.

The Lord’s first house of worship was a tent pitched out in the Sinai wilderness. It was designed according to His own detailed specifications, which He handed down to Moses after the Israelites were liberated from Egypt. Whenever this massive, moving nation vacated a site, the priests and their assistants, the Levites, had to work carefully to disassemble and transport the tabernacle and its precious contents. The pillar of cloud and fire that led them during their times of journey remained stationary over the tabernacle during the times they were told to stay put. Even after Joshua led the people across the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the tabernacle continued as the place where God met with man.

The idea for a permanent temple seems to have come from King David. In 2 Samuel 7 (repeated in 1 Chronicles 17), David had just brought in the ark to Jerusalem, his new capital city. When the humble-looking tent was pitched near the magnificent royal palace, the king couldn’t avoid the thought that the Lord needed to be treated with greater honor than that. Even though God was greatly pleased with David, and He promised that the future Messiah would come from his kingly line, He nevertheless gave the privilege to Solomon instead to build a replacement for the tabernacle.

And build it he did! Solomon spent seven years constructing a crown jewel on the top of Mount Moriah, assembling cedar, stone, and mind-boggling amounts of gold to serve as the Lord’s glorious house of worship. Solomon’s prayer sounds humble: (1 Kings 8:27) “Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You; how much less this house that I have built!” Yet it was never God’s objective merely to be contained in a place on earth, but rather He desired to allow His name, that is, His mighty power of salvation for His people, to become graciously and permanently accessible. The temple would bear witness to the Lord’s promise to hear His peoples’ prayers and one day send His Son in the flesh to make the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. To the Hebrew worshipers climbing up the hill, preparing to celebrate a festival unto the Lord, the temple was an object of pride and devotion.

All attention was given to the temple not only when it was built and dedicated, but also approximately 370 years later when it was destroyed. The Babylonians left

nothing of the former edifice, and God's people began to question whether He would ever again have mercy on them. Will He ever hear our prayers? Daniel seemed to hold out hope for a rebuilt temple—for even while living in the land of exile, even at the risk of the lions' den, he prayed at his window that looked out toward Jerusalem. Perhaps there were many other Israelites who shared that same hope.

Interest in the temple sprang to new life when Cyrus came to power and decreed that the Israelite exiles could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the house of the Lord. The man who would take up the project and inspire the once-exiled people of God was a royal descendant of David and Solomon named Zerubbabel. He was not a king, nor would he be made into a king. The Persian Empire allowed him to serve as governor of the province of Judea, and it provided him with the necessary resources to commence work on the temple. Thanks to the spiritual help of dedicated servants of the Lord such as Ezra, Joshua the high priest, Haggai, and Zechariah, the second temple was completed seventy years after the Babylonians destroyed the first one, just as Jeremiah had predicted.

The focus on the holiness of God's dwelling place would continue in succeeding centuries, because Zerubbabel's temple was small and plain in comparison with the one Solomon had built. The temple was no longer a beautiful trophy high on Jerusalem's skyline. Apathy was tearing many people away from their God. Yet the faithful layman Nehemiah knew that no matter what the building looked like, the Lord's name and promised blessing was still there. Finally, the prophet Malachi was the last in a line of faithful preachers to point forward to the coming Savior, the One who would "suddenly come to His temple" (3:1) and purify all who approach Him in faith. Until there came Jesus, however, this building would be the means by which man could access God's forgiveness. That is why the prophets paid such close attention to the temple.

4 Looking toward the End (Isaiah 65:17–25; Matthew 25:31–46)

As we will also see in some of the later sessions of our Bible study, the prophets were given visions of the end times. Even before the Babylonian exile, the Lord was revealing His plan to rescue all believers for all eternity. Isaiah wrote down his prophecies about a century before the temple was destroyed, but he was still inspired to include God's promise of new heavens and a new earth (ch. 65). Jeremiah was seeing the end as already inaugurated with the coming of the Christ when he re-

ported: (31:31, 34) "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant. . . . And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me." At the beginning of the exile, prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel were far away from home; nevertheless, they saw wonderful visions of God's glory and spoke of final spiritual battles and the Last Judgment.

After the Holy Land was resettled and the temple rebuilt, the faithful renewed their hope for the coming of the Messiah and the new, golden age of salvation that would come with Him. Patience proved to be difficult to maintain, however, because by the time Jesus did actually walk among His people, He had to inform them that (John 18:36) "My kingdom is not of this world." Even though He was rightfully called King of the Jews, believers still had to obey their secular leaders, who were appointed to be the Lord's servants. It is a similar idea as when someone receives the forgiveness of sins and is truly pure in God's sight, yet at the same time remains a sinner who struggles against the flesh until death and the advent of the New Creation. You are already a citizen of God's realm of heaven, while at the same time patiently waiting for Him to come and take you to Himself (see John 14:3).

In order to illustrate the hidden reality of this magnificent promise of eternal life and peace, the Lord chose to open the eyes of some prophets and uncover the deep truths of salvation. This special work of the Holy Spirit yields a special type of biblical literature known as the "apocalyptic" genre, from the Greek word for something "uncovered" or "revealed." The apocalyptic book that we typically think of when we hear that description is Revelation. God sees all things—past, present and future—as one and the same, so He is lending that unique perspective to human eyes when He reveals His wondrous plan in this unforgettable way. Symbols play a significant role in apocalyptic literature because they reveal further details of the inspired message. Often, they utilize images that related to the temple and the sacrificial system. Even though only Zechariah records instances of apocalyptic visions, all three of the prophets that we will study have at least something to tell us about the Lord's promises that will fully come true at the end of time.

5 The Time between the Testaments (Daniel 7:13–27; 8:19–26)

After Malachi abruptly ends his book of prophecy, there is a silence that is equally abrupt and that spans the

time between the Old and New Testaments, a period of about four hundred years. Once the biblical record resumes with the Gospels, we can wonder at all the changes that have taken place. So much is different! Persia is no longer the dominant power, prophets are no longer receiving visions, and even the temple has been changed. What has happened? Is God no longer at work among His people? This gap between the Old and New Testaments can make us wish that the Book of Malachi did not end so abruptly.

But even though recorded prophetic activity came to a standstill during that time, the events through which God was preparing the world for the coming of the Savior were hurrying along at a feverish pace. Greece conquered the Persian Empire, thanks to key naval victories in the Mediterranean Sea and the widespread land domination of Alexander the Great. Because of him, the Greek language and culture made it possible for God's Word to expand well beyond Jerusalem. Successors to Alexander wrestled with one another for control of Judea and its surroundings. Then eventually the Roman Empire took over, and its extensive system of roads facilitated travel for apostles such as Paul, who started churches as they went on various missionary journeys.

No matter who was in power at the time, Jerusalem continuously remained a focus of political activity. Even though the Holy City was far removed from the nerve center of the various empires that controlled them, it still lay on an important trade route in the Middle East, and so it made sense to continue a strong presence in this city high up on a hill. Tensions rose when Greek regents started outlawing the Jewish religion and persecuting anyone who worshiped in the Jerusalem temple. The notorious ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes defiled Zerubbabel's temple in 167 BC when he ordered a pig to be sacrificed to Zeus on the holy altar, an action that gave rise to the Maccabean Revolt. Judas Maccabeus led troops to beat back their tormentors and retake the city of Jerusalem. The rededication of the temple was remembered as the Festival of Hanukkah, or "Feast of Dedication" as it is referred to in John 10.

When King Herod the Great was granted power over Judea by Caesar Augustus, he wanted to gain favor with the Jews with a single building project that was sure to do the trick. He financed a massive remodel of the Jerusalem temple that took more than forty-six years to complete (John 2:20). The huge stones and beautiful, vaulted buildings of the new complex were a welcome sight to Judeans whose great-grandfathers had groaned

at the puny, plain structure that had been built by Zerubbabel.

These four hundred years following Malachi may have been "silent" when it came to written biblical prophecy, but this was still quite an active period in Israel's history. All of a sudden, by the New Testament times, we have Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Samaritans, the Sanhedrin, and rabbis, all of whom would have an impact in some way or another on the coming era. Quite a lot was going on between Malachi and Matthew!

Conclusion

The Books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi have been grouped together at the end of the Minor Prophets because they all prophesied after God's people returned from exile. These men share in common with one another the task of addressing Israel in a rebuilding period, in which the faithful are found struggling to live according to their true identity. As you study these relatively short books, pay attention to two great themes: a fresh start and a coming Savior.

Concluding Activities

Conclude the session with an appropriate prayer and distribute the study leaflet for week 2.

New Temple, New Challenges

Haggai 1

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

The prophet Haggai centers in on the largest, most obvious visible indicator of Israel's post-exile spiritual slump: the temple lying in disrepair. Until the Lord's chosen dwelling place is back in operation, He will not act according to His desire or promise for His people. God's blessings and man's sinful, unbelieving rejection of those blessings quite simply cannot coexist.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. identify the chief spiritual problem that Haggai was called to address;
2. relate the prophet's words to our own distractions from God's highest blessings; and
3. draw encouragement from the Lord's grace shown to His ransomed people.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 61.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on p. 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Almighty God, who is greater than the highest heavens yet is still pleased to dwell with us on earth, forgive us when we take Your abundant mercy for granted. Impress upon us a renewed sense of Your grace to us in Christ, our Savior, so that we may always come before You with grateful hearts and consecrated minds. Let nothing distract us from true devotion to You, and lead us to receive all Your blessings with a proper perspective, knowing that our true home is being prepared for us with You in heaven. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

1 The Time Is Not Yet (Haggai 1:1-2)

Procrastination. Putting off until tomorrow what you can do today. It's the easiest thing to begin and the toughest thing to stop. And the Lord, the God of Israel, is not going to look the other way when His people procrastinate in spiritual matters. He who knows the thoughts of all men's hearts is fully aware that the effort to rebuild His holy house is unnecessarily delayed. The returned Israelite exiles could have creatively come up with a litany of reasons to keep themselves from getting started on their religious duty, now that they were residents once again in and around the city of Jerusalem. They resigned themselves, however, to justify their delay based on a reason that ran the risk of doing maximum damage to their personal faith and to the future of Israel's hope in the promised Savior and Messiah.

Their reason was simple: it was not yet the time to build. They felt they would be downright foolish to start ahead of time. Something else needed to happen first. What that was, I'm not sure even they knew. But the excuse was a convenient way to clear the conscience, and it's an all-too-easy way to ignore God's Word. Declaring that the time to build is not yet means that you are taking the place of God, that you are deciding His holy will for Him. The Lord can see the hearts of His people. He knows that they are making something else into their god. They are turning a blind eye to the first and greatest commandment, namely, (Exodus 20:3) "You shall have no other gods before Me."

As we saw in last week's introduction, having the temple rebuilt was essential to a reestablished Israel and the prophetic expectation of the Messiah's coming. God Himself directed them to build it, and now was the time. Suppose that Moses, while God's people were still back in Egypt, had said, "Nah, I think I'll wait before I get this Passover meal going. Let's repeat a few of those other nine plagues before we move on to the angel of death." You don't suppose that the Lord would be pleased with that attitude, would He? It would be the same roughly nine hundred years later when the seventy-year Babylonian exile was complete and the nation of Israel had once again regained its freedom.

What's stopping you, folks? The Persian conqueror Cyrus had already pledged the help of his empire to get the Jerusalem temple rebuilt. Finances were also being provided through free-will offerings, as Ezra recorded in his book. The new foundation had been laid amid a mixed cry of celebration and lamentation (Ezra 3:12-13). Those outsiders, the Samaritans, wanted to sabotage the temple project by infiltrating the ranks and corrupting the worship to include their false ideas along with the true worship, but the leaders successfully fended them off. You see, the Lord had already provided an adequate answer to every legitimate excuse to delay building prior to Haggai's appearance to the scene. Now, in this post-exile time, God's people had resorted to saying simply, "The time is not yet," so the Lord sent His holy prophet Haggai to the Holy Land with the burden of a holy message.

Haggai was directed to deliver God's stern warning to all Israelites, but the first ones who needed to listen to it were the leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua. Zerubbabel was the governor, the one who led the province of Judah with the permission of the Persian ruler. In the Scripture books of this era in history, Zerubbabel is often paired with Joshua, the high priest, the one who would have been designated to direct the all-important sacrifices and other aspects of their worship life. These two leaders needed to be called to account, because in the fifteen years after the foundation was laid (from 535 to 520 BC), there was no further progress on the building project. Whether or not they were responsible for promoting this "not yet" excuse, God has now most certainly called upon these two men to overcome it.

2 Refusing to Receive (Haggai 1:3-6)

King David would have been mortified to see what became of this later generation of his kingdom! These people who had been dedicated to the name of the Lord finally returned from their exile in a faraway land and then, in utter selfishness, they built their own houses, paneled with exquisite cedar woodwork, and shamelessly left the temple in a complete shambles! How different it had been nearly five hundred years before with the shepherd boy who had been made ruler and successor to Saul. After David was given rest from all the battles he had fought to secure and extend the borders of Israel, he was troubled at the disparity that he clearly perceived between his luxurious living quarters and the tired old tent made of animal skins and cloth that had been used for centuries as the place to meet God. And until the Lord specifically revealed a plan for David that would far outshine a physical building, even Nathan the prophet was willing to give his blessing.

It was indeed quite a contrast. David wanted to build a more suitable house for the worship of the almighty God. However, God did not allow him to do so, as a sign of the greater One to come—Jesus. Upon the return of the Israelites from exile, God ordered them to rebuild His house as a witness of His presence and the persistence of His promise to send a Savior, but the people refused. Though it would seem on the surface that the Lord had changed His mind concerning the temple—at one time He refused to let it be built, and then at another time He ordered the people to build it—in fact, the common thread was that all attention had to remain on the promised coming of Christ. Whether they had the benefit of an impressive building adorned with awe-inspiring stones (Luke 21:5) or not, what really mattered was a faith in their heart that was properly centered on their one and only Redeemer.

In Haggai's day, that faith was faltering, and the indicators of this poor spiritual condition were everywhere: after all the effort that they had expended on their farms, the harvest remained puny; they ate, but were never satisfied; drank, but were not content; were clothed, but were never warm; saved up every penny, but the stash bag was full of holes! Was God punishing them by sending scarcity and want? Or was it rather that they had blinded themselves to the true blessings that their heavenly Father had in store for them? Had they really refused to receive God's blessing?

The words of Haggai urge repentance: “Consider your ways.” These words apply to us just as much as they did to the people of ancient Judah. Measure up what you’ve been doing lately in light of God’s commandments. Turn around while you still have the opportunity. God doesn’t want your meager works, and much less does He tolerate a feigned piety. What Israel’s God hungers for is a heart of faith and trust in Him for all things. The works are meant for your neighbor’s benefit, not God’s, and not your own. What Jesus did for you in His life, death, and resurrection was all-sufficient for your salvation. Yet, He has planted the Holy Spirit in you to create a new heart, complete with a sincere desire to love and serve the Lord in the very people whom He has placed in your path, so to speak. Where you have not measured up and your ways have stumbled over your own selfishness and sin, confess to Him, and be most assuredly forgiven. Even though His people neglect Him at times, our God is ever-near and ready to bestow His temporal and spiritual blessings in abundance!

3 Demanding Blessing Where It Is Not Given (Haggai 1:7–11)

A second time the Lord of Hosts declared His message to the people through the mouth of Haggai: “Consider your ways.” And a second time, this message applies to us just as much as to the people then. Repetition certainly emphasizes a point, and the Hebrew language is no exception to that rule, but besides that, the reappearance of this phrase in verse 7 highlights a further step in the process of repentance. Saying it the first time was meant to lay down the hammer of the divine Law in order to reveal the sin and its harmful effects. Then, once the believer acknowledges his or her sin and with a contrite heart confesses the transgression to the Lord, the proper fruits of repentance can be called forth from a purified heart.

In fact, the phrase translated “consider your ways” is literally “set your heart upon your paths (that you walk).” Only the noun “heart” is in the singular; the rest of the sentence is written in the plural. Now that sin had been pointed out and the mercy of the Lord had washed it away by the merits of the promised Christ, God called upon Haggai to guide the Israelite congregation as a unified whole, with one “heart” renewed by grace to do God’s will, to proceed in the path that had been illuminated for them in His Word. No longer was the Lord chastising or punishing; much less was He here laying out a method of atonement as if the people could pay the price for their own sin. Rather, He was granting the

guidance of the Holy Spirit and offering the promise of His good pleasure that He bestows on all who believe in Him.

The Lord was asking for repairs to the temple building, not because He wanted to keep up with the “Joneses” of some divine variety, but because He desired a stronger faith in His chosen people. He wanted to bind their faith to the specific location of His good pleasure. Faith is nothing if it does not hold on to God’s forgiveness given to us in Christ. Sure, Solomon ordered imported cedar from Lebanon and overlaid everything inside and out with gold. But an impressive edifice, by itself, does not make a temple. That’s why Haggai relayed the divine command simply to use local resources this time around: (v. 8) “Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified.” What mattered was a faithful response to the Lord’s rich grace, not a lavish display that only calls attention to man. This isn’t to say that a church building should not be made to look pleasant, but whatever form it takes ought to be a proper expression of faith and love toward God, as well as a fitting gratitude for His precious gifts.

As we have previously studied about the temple, however, there was something more going on with rebuilding this particular structure than simply showing thankfulness to God. At this critical juncture in the nation’s history following the exile, there was not merely a problem with Israel’s priorities. Every day that went by with the temple not up and running was a day without the Lord’s specifically chosen means of grace. It would be like a Christian congregation whose members had constant feasts that included all-you-could-eat bread and bottomless casks of wine, while at the same time claiming that there is no money in the budget to purchase the elements for Holy Communion! There was simply no excuse for the people to drag their feet and say that the time to build was not yet. They needed to be told that, in procrastinating the building of the temple, they were saying no to grace itself. And the Lord of hosts was warning them of that very thing. The people were looking for blessing, but not to God. They looked for much and—because they looked where God did not promise—it came to little, and when they brought it home, He blew it away. That was what would get their attention!

4 Presence and Repentance (Haggai 1:12–13)

The Israelite exiles, together with their leaders, listened to God's voice and heeded His Word. What the Lord desired first and most of all was faith in the hearts of His people, and the Word He spoke to them through His prophet accomplished that magnificent miracle. Certainly, they "obeyed" His command and got back to work on the temple rebuilding project, but since the problem was more than laziness or even selfishness, so also the solution required a renewal of the heart.

The apostle Paul wrote these well-known words: (Romans 10:17) "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." Haggai's record of the peoples' response documents this very truth. Sinners cannot ever act in obedience to the Lord who created them, unless they first hear the Word that forgives their sins. By means of that Word, believers receive the saving faith in their hearts that will then lead them to the actions that are the proper fruits of that faith. So before the prophet goes into detail on how the building project finally proceeded, he takes a moment to give credit to the Lord who got the ball rolling in the first place.

It seems that whenever a preacher has it in mind to call attention to the power of God's Word alone to accomplish His will, he runs the risk of being misunderstood and the hearers imagine that the preacher is out to magnify himself over against the congregation who is listening to him. It is feared that he is only saying, "This is the Word of the Lord," so that *whatever* he says is obeyed without question. Certainly, it takes a significant dose of humility at all times in order for clergy to alleviate this concern of the laity. Pastors can often feel the pressure to lead their flocks with tools that seem to be more effective than mere teaching and preaching God's Word. Yet the prophet's record of the Lord's mighty work of faith in the hearts of Israel's leaders and people helps us keep our priorities straight. Haggai was not given the role of vision casting or strategic planning. Israel already had leaders whom God Himself had designated for those tasks. Haggai spoke the Word faithfully, and that would be more than enough to equip God's people with faith working itself out in love.

There are three words that Haggai used in this brief passage that call attention not to himself but to the Lord who called him. The first is "prophet." This means that Haggai was designated to speak in a specific role and at the particular times when God would choose to reveal His Word. The second is "sent." This is a verb form of

shaliach, which we previously examined. Haggai was a kind of apostle, an ambassador who carried the same authority as the Lord whom he served, but that authority was limited to the specific mission and message that he was given. A mere man spoke the Gospel, but it was really the Lord Himself who was with the people, giving His blessing along with the promise of His presence.

The last of these three words is "messenger." Most of the time in the Bible, especially in books that are older than the Book of Haggai, the word for a messenger refers to an angel from heaven. This tells us that God's Word, the message, brings its own sanctity and heavenly nature as the messenger speaks it. The preacher does not add any self-made holiness to the Word, nor does he "dress it up" with personality. Of course, he ought not hinder the Word that he preaches with an unholy life or use the Word for His selfish advantage. Instead, as the messenger faithfully speaks the Gospel, by grace alone God grants him angelic praise, even for it to be said that his feet are beautiful (Romans 10:15)!

5 Back to Building (Haggai 1:14–15)

Here we see that Haggai continued to give all credit to the Lord for the temple project getting back on track. He "stirred up the spirit" of the two leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua, as well as all the faithful remnant of Israel. They finally realized that there was no reason to delay building. God Himself would remove every obstacle that they had feared. At least now they were no longer in the spiritual state of mind that had led them to say, "the time is not yet." Putting it off is not on the table anymore. The Lord had stirred up their spirits, so their former stubbornness and lack of faith would be unable to paralyze them this time.

Yet we should be careful not to attribute too much to this activity of stirring up spirits, either. Recall that Ezra had reported another instance when the Lord stirred up somebody's spirit where it didn't create or strengthen faith in that person's heart. The event, of course, is recorded in Ezra 1, and this time it was Cyrus who was the object of this interesting divine activity. Even though the Persian ruler "knew not" the Lord, as Isaiah had predicted of him (44:28–45:7), Cyrus was nevertheless assigned the role to allow the exiles to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding the temple. In the Old Testament, God stirred up believers and unbelievers alike, but whenever this action involved His own chosen people, like what we see here in Haggai 1, it helped bring about God's gifts to Israel in worship. This stirring up may not

be in itself a gift of faith that was being given, but the way was being paved for God's Word of peace to do His Work of salvation once the temple was finally complete.

The man named Darius we see here, as well as in verse 1, was in the second year of his reign as king over all Persia. He is not, however, the same Darius who was mentioned in the Book of Daniel, chapters 6, 9, and 11 (and is distinguished in that Book as "Darius the Mede"). Instead of falling for boyish appeals to vanity at the expense of throwing faithful prophets into a lions' den, this Darius actually turns out to be quite helpful to Israel. Ezra received an excellent assist from him when Israel's political enemies petitioned Darius for a stop order against them, but received from him instead a decree not to interfere with the temple *and* a demand to fully finance the project! I think Israelites and non-Israelites alike dropped their jaws when that announcement was read! Thanks in no small measure to the efforts of Darius I of Persia, the temple would finally be finished.

Conclusion

Haggai's first prophetic task was successful, by God's grace. He was called to urge the returned exiles and their leaders to repentance and get the temple rebuilding project started up again. His Law-and-Gospel message was not an example of high-flying rhetoric. He rather simply pointed out the problem, gave the people a clear-cut reason why the status quo could not continue, and laid out the concrete steps that the Lord wanted His people to follow. All the hard work, so to speak, belonged to God, because He is always the One responsible for the results.

Concluding Activities

Conclude the session with an appropriate prayer and distribute the study leaflet for week 3.