

# To Honor God

*by: Ronald L. Dart*

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Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a people who had returned to their homeland after generations in exile. They had been tasked by God with repairing the temple and restoring worship. It wasn't that God dwelt in houses made with hands, that issue had been settled long before. The temple was symbolic. It was a center of worship, a reminder of who God is, really, and what is really important about life.

Life wasn't working very well for them. They were in the middle of an economic collapse, a position not unlike where we find ourselves today. They had been told by the prophets, from Isaiah to Jeremiah to Ezekiel, that they were going into exile before it actually happened and why it was going to happen. So, maybe this time they would listen to a prophet.

## **Give Careful Thought to Your Ways**

So God sent a prophet. His name was Haggai and he came to the people, and he said, in Haggai 1 verse 4, "Is it time for you, yourselves, to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" {5} Now this is what the Lord Almighty says, "Give careful thought to your ways. {6} You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a bag with holes in it." {7} This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. {8} Go up to the mountains, bring down timber and build the house, so I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. {9} "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house."

Now, do you suppose there's a lesson there that might speak to where we are today? That theme, "You earn wages only to put them in a bag with holes in it," sure sounds familiar to me. We have run smack up against economic failure, and we have no idea how bad it will be, or how long it will last, and if we think our government has a clue about what to do about it, we are dreaming.

Maybe we can learn from Haggai, the prophet, "to give careful thought to our ways."

There has been a systematic rejection of God in our land for a long time now, and God has looked on us and said as He said to the Jews by Haggai, "Prosperity isn't working very well. Let's try poverty."

When I think about what Haggai told these people, is different, but it resonates, is it time for you, yourselves, "to be living in your paneled houses while my house remains a ruin? Give careful thought to your ways." Okay. I did that and what it said to me is, that your people have been looking after their own wealth, building their own fine houses, and have utterly ignored what is really important. This is not to say, it's not just because we haven't built a church building, and I don't think we need to rush out and build a national temple, that's not the point.

By now everyone knows that millions of Americans have been living way beyond their means. They have bought houses they can't pay for, in the hope that the value of the house would increase enough so they could sell and make some money out of it. They were living in a fool's paradise. They had no idea of the financial chicanery going on with government guaranteed loans, no idea of the colossal size of the debt, they and others had all put together.

'Give careful thought to your ways.' What has been your god in these years that have brought us to this place? Your god is the one you pay the most attention to. It is the goals you sacrifice to achieve. People have talked a lot about the greed on Wall Street, but no politician has the nerve to talk about the greed of the buyers of overvalued real estate.

Years ago, I remember there was a bubble in real estate in California. At that time I was thinking about buying a house there. I wondered why people were buying these homes when they were going up 25% a year. That is enough to put the greed on you, isn't it? Didn't everyone know that couldn't go on? I asked a real estate agent a question, "Doesn't everybody know that this can't go on?" "Yes," she told me, "people know that, but they believe in the 'bigger fool' theory. I know I am a 'fool' to pay this much but a 'bigger' fool will come along and I will sell it to him and take my profit." This was, by the way, just months before that bubble burst.

### **Priorities**

Now I want to make something clear. I don't want to be taken wrong. This message is not about money or about buildings. It is about priorities, 'giving careful thought to our ways.' It seems plain that God, the real God, has not been very high on our list.

Maybe it would be a good thing for us to sit down and make a list, not what your priorities should be, but what they have been. What have you been putting first, second and third on the list of important things, and where has God been on your list?

Here's what God told Haggai and he told the people at that time. Haggai bless him, he wrote it down for us. Haggai 1 verse 9, "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why? Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house." Your priorities are all wrong, I would have taken care of you, but you have to put me first. It is for your own good, thus says God.

## **Honor God**

So what should we do? "Give careful thought to your ways, go up to the mountains, bring down timber and build the house so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored." Ah, there it is. It is the honor due to God that we need to be thinking about.

The temple, they would build it, but after Jesus came it would be destroyed one more time. If God is not honored there, He will not honor it. Our task is different from theirs. We have no temple to build, but the principle is the same.

Think about your life and about God, and re-order your life. Their task was to go get timber and build a house. You will have to decide what your task is? But it will have something to do, with honoring God.

Another prophet, called people on the carpet about this, his name is Malachi. In his very first chapter and verse 6, he said, "A son honors his father, a servant honors his master. If I'm a father, where's my honor? If I am a master, where is my respect?"

Now I said, this is not about money, it's not about buildings, but that is not to say that things like that don't enter the equation. For example, Proverbs 3 verse nine, "Honor the LORD with your substance, with the first fruits of your increase, {10} So shall your barns be filled with plenty, and your presses shall burst out with new wine." Giving to God has nothing to do with any need He has, in fact, He has no needs that a man can fill. What it has to do with, is honor!

A great psalm puts it to us this way, "Hear, O people, and I will speak." This is the 50th. Psalm verse 7, "I will testify against you; I am God, your God. {8} I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings, which are always before me." It's not about that. {9} "I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, {10} for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a 1000 hills. {11} I know every bird in the mountains, the creatures of the field are mine, they belong to me. {12} If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it." Now, do we have that straight? I think it is clear. It is not God who has the need, it is us.

Verse 13, "Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" God says, "No!" But still, {14} "Sacrifice thank offerings to God, keep your promises to the Most High, {15} Call on me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you, and you will honor me." Okay, giving is a duty we have, but it is for us, not for God. We have a need to give, no matter how poor we think we are.

## **Many Do Not Honor God**

Continuing in Psalm 50, "To the wicked," God says" "What business do you have reciting my laws and taking my covenant on your lips? {17} You hate instruction, you throw my

words over your shoulder. {18} When you see a thief, you join with him, you throw your lot in with adulterers, {19} You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit, {20} You speak continually against your brother, your own mother's son." You did all this. {21} "I didn't say anything, and you thought I was exactly like you, but I will rebuke you and I will accuse you to your face." {22} "Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces with no one to rescue. {23} He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God."

Giving to God prepares the way so that God can show man salvation.

### **Jacob is to be a Blessing to All People**

I want to tell you about a man who became a major figure in Biblical history. His name, Jacob, was changed to Israel and that is how you know him by that name. Back when his name was Jacob, he got crossways with his brother over the family birthright and his mother sent him away because she feared his brother would kill him.

As he went along the way toward his relatives off in the north country, Jacob came to night fall and made himself a bed. He laid down, this is Genesis chapter 28 to find the story, and "he took a stone, put it under his head and laid down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven and the angels of God were going up and down the stairway constantly. There above it, {13} stood the LORD, and He said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham, the God of Isaac: I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. {14} Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, you will spread out to the west, to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. {15} I am with you, I will watch over you wherever you go, I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you."

It's a stunning promise, one of responsibility and Jacob goes right along with it. Did you catch that statement about his descendants being a blessing to all people on earth? And what was Jacob's response? Well, he woke up from his sleep and thought, {16} "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was unaware of it. {17} He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is nothing other than the house of God." They afterward, by the way, named this place Bethel, which means house of God. "This is the gate of heaven." {18} Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head. He put up a pillar and poured oil on top of it. {19} And he called the name of the place, Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. {20} Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear, {21} so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God, {22} and this stone that I have set up for a pillar will be God's house and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

## Tithing

Jacob said, "All that God gives me, I will give Him a tenth" (Genesis 28:22).

This is the tithe, often spoken of. Where did he get this idea? Well, he got it from his grandfather Abraham, who paid tithes. The story is told earlier in Genesis where Abraham paid tithes to one called Melchizedek, a priest of God. We are not told anywhere in the account how Jacob paid his tithes, but you can be sure that he did.

Now before you tune me out with the old objection that preachers always get around to preaching about money sooner or later, I want to make something clear. This is not about me. It isn't even about money. It is rather about the failure of a whole nation to honor God. Some of us do, and we should be very grateful that they do, because if it weren't for them, God would have probably walked away from us a long time ago.

All of those churches that fed and sheltered the refugees from hurricane Katrina, when the government let them down, where do you think they got the money? Where did it come from? They didn't have a printing press in the basement. They got the money from their members, many of whom paid tithes and who made the same promise to God that Jacob made. "Of all that You give me, I will surely give you the tenth."

Maybe we should grow up and remember that no one is trying to take something from us, all the preacher can do is remind you of your own need to give to honor God. Notice I didn't say your obligation to give, I said your need to give, because the truth is, we do need to learn to give. Your wealth is in your own hands to do with as you choose.

Now I mentioned Malachi earlier, Malachi also addressed tithing. He said in chapter 3 verse 8, "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'What, how do we rob you?' The answer, "In tithes and offerings. {9} You are under a curse: the whole nation of you because you're robbing me."

Now you know, you can't possibly be robbing somebody else, when all you do is hang on to what belongs to you, can you? Then he says, {10} "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. {11} I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, the vines in your fields will cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty, {12} "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," thus says the LORD Almighty."

What is a tithe? Jacob said it, it is a tenth of all that God gives you. Who gets to decide how to calculate it? You do. This is interesting and it's important to understand when you're addressing this question, because as I said, some people do resent churches asking for money. There was no IRS there. It was up to you, and let me tell you this, if you grudge giving it, forget about it. You might as well keep it, for if you grudge giving it, there is no

blessing and it will do little good. A grudging gift does not honor God, and you see, honoring God is the whole point of the thing.

### **How Do You Tithe?**

Perhaps you wonder how should I start? How do you do the tithe? Well, the first thing you should do is talk to God about it, not to me or some preacher. The tithe is an act of worship between you and God. Take a look at your situation. Ask yourself, what has God given me, because in the end, that is the basis of worship between you and God. It is the basis for determining a tenth, if you don't know what God gave you, how can you know what a tenth of it is?

Next, you have to come to the conclusion that the tenth does not belong to you, it belongs to God. Otherwise, how could Malachi say, we have stolen by keeping what is ours?

I remember a cartoon someone sent me that was a little comic strip. A man and his minister were down in a river and the man was getting ready to be baptized. The preacher had his hand in the air, and says: "All that goes under the water belongs to God." In the next panel of the comic strip, it showed the man under the water with one arm sticking up and his wallet in his hand sticking out of the water, so he didn't bring his money as belonging to God. That's where the whole picture lies.

Now it's true that Jacob made a vow, that was a choice that he had, and that was his choice, that he had, not mine, I don't have to make that choice. Okay, that's fine.

You have entered into a covenant with God, when you go under the waters of baptism. You are in covenant with Jesus Christ, when you take the wine and the bread at Passover, or communion, as you may call it. Do you want to exclude your children from your covenant with God? If God is going to bless you, don't you want Him also to bless your children? Would you want to exclude your job or your career or your business from your relationship with God? Would you want to exclude your investments? Do you follow me on this? Why, entering into a covenant with God, would a man want to exclude anything in his life from God and from His blessing?

The next thing you have to determine is how you're going to give it to God? Don't ask someone how that should be done. I've been asked, for example, is it okay to give it to the poor? That's your call, not mine, but consider one thing, it is wrong to allow the person you are helping to think the money or the gift is coming from you! If you give your tithe to anyone, be sure it is done in Jesus' name. Those people in Baton Rouge who were sheltered in a Christian Church knew well enough that this came from Christ.

## Did Jesus Teach Tithing?

Did Jesus teach tithing? Of course He did! There's one short statement He made in Matthew 23 verse 23 which cannot be overlooked. He is talking to the scribes and Pharisees, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith." Now listen carefully to what He says, "These ought you to have done, and not to leave the other undone." You are suppose to tithe. Counting out the number of leaves on your mint tree, I guess, is one way of doing it, but you can't afford to omit law, justice, mercy, faith. These are very important parts of this. All right, we understand that, so Jesus did teach tithing.

Jesus said something else, on one occasion, which is kind of sobering. It is a parable you'll find in Luke chapter 12. He said in verse 16, "The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: {17} He thought within himself, saying, 'What am I going to do, I have no room to put all my fruits?' {18} Well, I know what I am going to do. I will pull down all of my barns and build bigger ones. And there I will bestow all my goods. {19} I will say to my soul, 'Soul, You have much goods laid up for many years. Take your ease, I am going to retire, eat, drink, and be merry.' {20} God said to him, "You fool, this night your soul shall be required of you, then whose shall these things be, which you have provided? {21} So is he that lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

It is kind of funny when you think about it, You have heard the old saying, "You can't take it with you!" That is all that God was saying to him. Okay, fine, you have filled up all your barns, but what are you going to do if you die tonight? Who is going to get it? Who is it going to belong to?

Tithing is a means of honoring God. It is an age old Christian practice. A lot of preachers don't mention tithing too much because, frankly, there are some people who have come to resent tithing and of it even being mentioned. You have to be careful about this. It is one thing to resent a church or a clergy that abuses the monies that are given to them, and abuses the doctrine of tithing. If that has happened then you are absolutely right to withhold your tithe from those who do this.

There is just one thing I will suggest to be careful about, be careful that it is not God that you resent, because after all, whether you give little or much, you give it to God. Whether you are generous or stingy, you are generous or stingy toward God.

I'll leave it to you to think that one through.

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