

Opening the Windows of Blessings

by Kay Arthur, Pete De Lacy, Bob Vereen

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Looking Forward to the Future

In all probability, you've heard that wonderful promise God gave to Israel and Judah in Jeremiah 29:11 and you've longed to embrace it as your own. " 'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.' "

Is it applicable to you?

Does God have a plan for your life?

Does God want the best for you?

Does God want you to have a future and a hope?

If so, what's your role in this promise, and how does it affect His ultimate desire for you?

Day One

Having a good grasp on the historical setting of the book of Haggai is critical to understanding the messages this spokesman for God delivered to the discouraged exiles of Judah. It will also help you in your study of Zechariah and Malachi. However, before you begin to establish the historical backdrop, read through this short book to get a sense of what it is all about.

Now, turn your attention to the first verse of chapter one. Using a green marker, underline the time phrase found at the beginning of this verse, including the year, day, and month. Then draw a clock like this in the margin next to verse 1.

Two questions to consider at this point are, Why do you suppose God reveals dates? And what is significant about the date given in verse 1? Does the RULERS AND PROPHETS OF HAGGAI'S TIME chart below give you a clue to the first question?

Let's see! Find "Darius I Hystaspes" on the RULERS AND PROPHETS OF HAGGAI'S TIME chart and record the dates he reigned:

Darius I Hystaspes reigned from _____ to _____ B.C.

Now look at the chart and record the dates of Haggai's ministry:

Haggai ministered from _____ to _____ B.C.

From this, what can you conclude about "the second year of Darius the king"? Is this the year Haggai began his ministry?

Why don't you write "520 B.C." in the margin of your Bible next to Haggai 1:1 and record "Haggai begins his ministry" in the appropriate box on the TIME LINE chart on pages 26-27? This chart will be used throughout the week to develop a chronology of events that will help you see the historical setting of the book of Haggai. (If you find this chart too small to record answers, you might want to make a larger one in your notebook.)

Day Two

Today we want to answer the second question. What is the significance of 520 B.C. to what God says to the exiles through Haggai?

To answer this question, read 2 Chronicles 36:9-23. In the *New Inductive Study Bible (NISB)*, 597 B.C. is written in the margin next to verses 9 and 11, 586 B.C. next to verse 18, and 538 B.C. next to verse 22. If you don't have this time-saving tool, write the dates in the margins of your Bible to show the chronology of the corresponding events.

As you read these verses, record the important facts you learn about kings Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, the people of God (Israel), and the temple (the house of the Lord) on the TIME LINE chart (pages 26-27) under the appropriate date.

Day Three

Now read Ezra 1:1-3 and notice how similar these verses are to 2 Chronicles 36:22,23.

Some historians believe that Cyrus conquered Babylon in October of 539 B.C. If this is true, "the first year of Cyrus the king of Persia" was from October 539 B.C. through September 538 B.C. These scholars also believe that Cyrus wrote his proclamation in the early months of 538 B.C. (the JEWISH CALENDAR below shows that the first month of the Hebrew calendar corresponds to our March-April). Accordingly, write 538 B.C. in the margin next to Ezra 1:1 to help you see the chronology.

Now record the additional information you find in Ezra 1:3 on the TIME LINE chart under the 538 B.C. column.

You probably noticed that in Ezra and 2 Chronicles, one of Jeremiah's prophecies is mentioned. What did he say?

Read Jeremiah 25:1-12. Keep in mind that the prophecy in Jeremiah 25 was given in 605 B.C.—prior to the reign of Jehoiachin and Zedekiah and just before Israel went into Babylonian captivity. Record what you learn in the appropriate column on the TIME LINE chart.

Now read Jeremiah 29:1-14. This prophecy was given after 586 B.C.—when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon repaying God for the Sabbaths they owed to the land. Record your insights on the TIME LINE chart under this date.

Day Four

Today, read Isaiah 44:28–45:7 and note what Isaiah the prophet said about a king named Cyrus at least 100 years before his birth.

Look at the RULERS AND PROPHETS OF HAGGAI'S TIME chart once again on page 18 to see when Cyrus and Darius the Mede conquered Babylon.

Now read Ezra 1 to learn what Cyrus did and to see how the people responded. Record the major truths from chapter 1 on your TIME LINE chart under 538 B.C.

Ezra 2 includes a roll call of the first group of people led by Zerubbabel and Joshua (Yeshua) “who came up out of the captivity of the exiles” (2:1) and returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Look on the RULERS AND PROPHETS OF HAGGAI'S TIME chart to discover the date they returned. Record this fact on the TIME LINE chart under this date.

If you have time to read the entire chapter, it would be a good idea to do so. If not, at least read Ezra 2:64, which gives a summary of the total number of returnees. Add up the total number of people who returned. Record this number on the chart.

How long did it take the first group of exiles to return to Jerusalem from Babylon? The Bible doesn't say. However, read Ezra 7:8,9 to see how long it took the second group of exiles under the leadership of Ezra to make this same journey. Do you think it would have taken Zerubbabel and Joshua approximately the same amount of time that it took Ezra? Record this also on the TIME LINE chart under 536 B.C.

Finally, read Ezra 3:1 and note where “the sons of Israel” went when they first arrived in the land and then where they later gathered in the seventh month. Now according to what you've already learned in Ezra 1, where were they supposed to go and what were they supposed to do? Did they immediately do it?

Day Five

Read Ezra 3:2-9 to discover what the exiles did once they gathered in Jerusalem. Record these insights in the 536 B.C. column on the TIME LINE chart.

Also, look at the RULERS AND PROPHETS OF HAGGAI'S TIME chart on page 18 to locate the year when the people "began the work" on the temple. You may want to record this date in the margin of your Bible next to verse 8.

Now read Ezra 3:10-13 and record your summary of these events on the TIME LINE chart.

Day Six

Read Ezra 4:1-5 and record what you learn on the TIME LINE chart.

Ezra 4:6-23 is parenthetical. These verses tell us how long "the people of the land" tried to discourage "the people of the exile." They tried during "all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia" (verse 5). Then they continued during "the reign of Ahasuerus" (verse 6) and "the days of Artaxerxes" (verses 7-23).

Now read Ezra 4:24. Before you record anything on the chart, look again at the RULERS AND PROPHETS OF HAGGAI'S TIME chart to see when the work on the temple stopped. Record this date on the chart in the margin of your Bible next to verse Ezra 24.

Now for your final assignment in Ezra—establishing the historical setting for your studies in Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Read Ezra 5:1,2. Record what you learn about the temple on your chart. Once again, look at the RULERS AND PROPHETS OF HAGGAI'S TIME chart to locate the date when the people "began to rebuild the house of God."

Great! You've finished a good work. Now you have a brief overview of the historical setting of God's people between 605 and 520 B.C. The temple had been lying desolate for some 14 years—from 534 to 520 B.C.—when God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to speak to His leaders and to His people. What did God say? We'll be looking at the messages delivered by these prophets in the weeks ahead.

Day Seven

Store in your heart: Jeremiah 29:11.

Read and discuss: Jeremiah 25:8-12; 29:5-11; Ezra 1:1-11; 3:1-4:5; 4:24; 5:1,2.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

- Using the TIME LINE chart as a guide, what were the major events of each date and in which passage were these truths discovered?
- Why did God punish the children of Israel? What did they do? What did their kings do?
- How long was their punishment? Did the captivity last as long as God said it would? Explain your answer.
- What did God do when the punishment ended? How far in advance did God make plans for ending the captivity?
- How many exiles returned? What did they bring with them when they returned? Where did the resources to pay for the rebuilding of the temple come from?
- When the exiles gathered in Jerusalem, what did they do? Why did they gather in Jerusalem in that specific month? What was celebrated?
- How did enemies in the land respond to their building the temple? What happened shortly after they began?
- What role did Haggai and Zechariah play in the building of the temple?
- What did you learn about God from your study this week? What insights, if any, did you gain into His character or ways?
- Did you gain any insights into the consequences of disobedience? The blessings of obedience?

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

God declared centuries in advance that He would raise up a king to conquer the nation of Israel, take them into captivity, and keep them there for a specific length of time. He also stated that a king would be born to free His chosen people and release them from captivity. God fulfilled His Word—both events are now recorded in His history book, the Bible.

God did what He said He would do. But His blessing was conditional—based upon the obedience of His people.

It's so easy to get discouraged, frightened, and frustrated. We can become sidetracked with personal projects, business ventures, relationships, finances, recreation, etc. It's easy to have our attention diverted to a thousand other things that have to be done. We often lose our focus and abandon the highest goal—knowing God and living accordingly.

His will and ways become clear to us when studying His Word becomes our first priority. Choosing to study the Bible is the very first act of obedience.

Congratulations! You've made that highest choice— one that pleases God and brings Him glory, for it gives a true estimate of who God is.

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