

JOY IN TRIBULATION
Habakkuk 3:3-19
January 25, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

How does the worldly person cope with fear? Some try to overcome their fears through grim resignation. They take a Stoic approach to the situation, *que sera, sera*, “whatever will be, will be.” Their attitude is such that it does not matter what they do or don’t do, there is nothing they can do about their plight. People get sick, people die, everyone suffers, so they just accept it and do nothing. They are indifferent to pain and sorrow and pleasure and joy as well.

Another worldly approach to fear is denial or detachment. These refuse to face reality and simply try to ignore it. They might immerse themselves in work or entertainment or anything else to take their minds off their present adversity. But the reality they refuse to face remains and no matter how much they try to suppress it, it still haunts the subconscious when they lay their head on their pillow at night and inevitably disturbs the things they use to escape them. I call this the Fred Sanford syndrome. When Fred, a poor junk dealer from the Watts area of Los Angeles, would check his mail, when he found a bill, he would simply put it back in the mailbox, hoping it would simply go away. That describes a person who tries to replace or somehow suppress adversity. The reality is it still remains. The bill is still due and the collector is coming.

And then there is what I call the Joel Osteen approach, “Smile and everything will be better. Don’t let your circumstances get you down or the future depress you. Get your chin up. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start over.” Or you might remember the title of the Bobby McFerrin hit, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” While I agree that we should not worry, this type of power of positive thinking does nothing for adversity.

Habakkuk had a different coping mechanism than any of these worldly approaches. The prayer we have before us in chapter 3 reveals how Habakkuk found peace and joy in the midst of the storm. And what worked for him will work for the Christian as well. In fact, it is the only thing that will work. What we see in Habakkuk is that *the Christian can have joy in tribulation when they remember His power and mercy and rest in His perfect providence and the joy of His salvation*. This and this alone will turn our mourning into dancing and our sorrow into joy (Ps. 30:11).

I. He Approached God Rightly (3:1-2)

We looked at these verses last time, but I wanted refresh our minds as we look at the rest of this prayer. Habakkuk was a different man when he utters this prayer than he was in the beginning. His response to the Lord’s reproof was far from what he intended when he spoke in 2:1, “I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved.” Now, having heard and considered the Lord’s report, we noted three things about the way Habakkuk approached God.

1. Humility

The Lord’s response concerning both the Babylonians and the people of God caused Habakkuk to reconsider his approach. He had been looking at the persecution of the Babylonians and the oppression of his people entirely from his own perspective, focusing on the dire circumstance rather than on the God of the circumstance. Once he learned that the Babylonians are nothing more than God’s vessels of judgment on the nation for their sinfulness,

Habakkuk's attitude changed. He was humbled when he began to understand things from God's perspective, seeing that not only was God near and had not forgotten them, but that they were right where He wanted them to be in order to drive them to repentance. And yes, the Babylonians would receive their just due. We find, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones noted, "a recognition that what God says He will do is perfectly right; that God is absolutely just, and that the punishment which is going to come upon Israel is well deserved—an attitude of complete submission to the will of God."¹

2. Worship

"LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear." "Fear" here does not mean that Habakkuk was afraid of the things that were going to happen as a result of the Lord's report. His "fear" was a reverent and awful fear because he was in the presence of a holy God and he is driven to worship Him. In the midst of his adversity he now saw the God of the adversity, and he worshipped. This does not mean that Habakkuk expected God to simply fix everything according to his own comforts. But he is satisfied with God's righteous judgment.

3. Petition

Having humbly approached God in praise and adoration, Habakkuk then petitions God on behalf of the people. He does not ask for the Babylonians to be destroyed or for either he or the nation to be delivered. His request was that in the midst of the adversity, in the midst of persecution and captivity, that the Lord would bring revival, give the nation understanding of why they were in this predicament and therefore repent, and that God would be merciful in his judgment upon them.

Habakkuk 3:16 – I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise *who* will invade us.

So how did Habakkuk come to the point of satisfaction, of having joy in the midst of tribulation?

II. He Remembered God's Past Acts (3:3-12)

While these verses are a bit difficult to understand, not written in a typical historical narrative style, they do shed some light on Habakkuk's purpose. This is a recount of God's deliverance of His chosen people from bondage and slavery in Egypt and continued protection in Canaan.

3:3 – God comes from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His splendor covers the heavens, and the earth is full of His praise. Teman and Paran were mountain ranges in Israel bordering Sinai. So Habakkuk is saying that God came out of Sinai, the place where he had met with Moses and given instructions after their deliverance.

3:4 – His radiance is like the sunlight; He has rays *flashing* from His hand, and there is the hiding of His power. This could be a reference to the shekinah glory, the cloud by which God manifested Himself to the people. That cloud stood between the nation of Israel and Egypt as God rolled the waters of the Red Sea back. It was also this presence that guided the people in their wanderings towards Canaan.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith*, 58-59.

3:5 – Before Him goes pestilence, and plague comes after Him. Habakkuk is speaking of the plagues that Pharaoh and Egypt encountered in the deliverance narrative.

3:6 – He stood and surveyed the earth; He looked and startled the nations. Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered, the ancient hills collapsed. His ways are everlasting. This is a reference to the natural cataclysmic events at Sinai and the giving of the Law.

Exodus 19:16-19 – ¹⁶ So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who *were* in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai *was* all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. ¹⁹ When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder.

3:7 – I saw the tents of Cushan under distress, the tent curtains of the land of Midian were trembling. Cushan and Midian were peoples in the south of Israel who would have been some of the first to perceive God’s workings in the nation of Israel.

3:8 – Did the LORD rage against the rivers, or *was* Your anger against the rivers, or *was* Your wrath against the sea, that You rode on Your horses, on Your chariots of salvation? Obvious reference to the parting of the Red Sea and later the Jordan River.

3:11-12 – ¹¹ Sun *and* moon stood in their places; they went away at the light of Your arrows, at the radiance of Your gleaming spear. ¹² In indignation You marched through the earth; in anger You trampled the nations. This reference is to the incident related in Joshua 10. The Jewish armies had fallen on the forces of the Amorite kings before the walls of Gibeon and had routed them. As the Amorites fled, the Lord struck many of the soldiers with large hailstones, and when Joshua prayed for the sun and moon to stand still while he and the army pursued and completely destroyed the Amorite armies, the Lord obliged by answering Joshua’s prayer. “Surely,” Joshua said, “the LORD fought for Israel” (Josh. 10:14).

The importance of reflecting on salvation history can not be overstated. Time and time again, whenever the people of God faced a new challenge or needed to be encouraged in the midst of adversity, they always rehearsed this account of God’s deliverance from bondage in Egypt. Often as the psalmist praises the person of God he bursts forth in praise for His mighty works among the people.

Do you see what had happened with Habakkuk? He had moved from wondering where God was at work in chapters 1 and 2 to seeing him everywhere at work for his people in his prayer. God’s history of redemption is a series of His mighty acts of deliverance and protection of His people. Habakkuk began to see this in a clearer way, and as he began to mediate on these mighty acts, his fear left him and he trusted God.

III. He Remembered God’s Covenant Purposes (3:13-15)

Verse 13 is quite possibly the most important in Habakkuk’s prayer, “**You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for the salvation of Your anointed.**” These verses stand in the same historical genre that precedes, but here Habakkuk considers God’s *purposes* in delivering a people out of Egypt and rolling the seas back and trampling the nations, etc. It was for “**the salvation of Your people.**” Habakkuk recalls the covenant relationship that God had

established with them and the redemptive picture in salvation. **“The salvation of Your anointed”** serves as both a historical and a prophetic reminder. Historically, this probably refers to David’s victory over Goliath. It is prophetic in two ways. It looked forward to what God would accomplish through Cyrus in delivering His people from the Babylonians.

Isaiah 45:1-6 – ¹ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, whom I have taken by the right hand, to subdue nations before him and to loose the loins of kings; to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: ² “I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. ³ I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden wealth of secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. ⁴ For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen *one*, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me. ⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; ⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.

Isaiah described in detail exactly what happened years later as God’s people are delivered at the hand of a most unlikely ruler, Cyrus of Persia. We see in Isaiah covenantal language of God being what He needed to be for His people.

But there is an even greater prophetic understanding that we have in the salvation of a people and the Lord’s anointed, and that is our salvation in Christ. All of this remembrance is in the context of Habakkuk’s prayer of faith to God in the midst of persecution. He remembered God’s redemptive history and His covenant promises, and these provided him the assurance he needed that whatever befell them, it was for good and would serve God’s purpose for them.

James Montgomery Boice gives keen insight for us as we consider these things today. He wrote:

God’s mighty past acts in history amply demonstrate that he is *able* to save those who look to him in faith. But he also *promised* to save his people and therefore *will* save them. The God who makes promises stands by his promises. The God who makes oaths keeps them.²

Boice goes on to remind us of the promises that Jesus Christ Himself has given for living in hard times:

Matthew 6:25-33 – ²⁵ “For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, *as to* what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, *as to* what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and *yet* your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? ²⁷ And who of you by being worried can add a *single* hour to his life? ²⁸ And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, ²⁹ yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is *alive* today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, *will He* not much more *clothe* you? You of little faith! ³¹ Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ ³² For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 2, 431-432.

knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

John 14:1-3 – ¹ “Do not let your heart be troubled; ¹ believe in God, believe also in Me. ² “In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. ³ If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also.”

John 14:25-27 – ²⁵ “These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.”

Matthew 28:18-20 – ²⁸ “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

IV. He Rested in God’s Perfect Providence (3:16-19)

In these closing verses, we see a man whose faith had been strengthened. Habakkuk’s faith is demonstrated by two firm statements of resolve. First he said, “**I must wait quietly,**” (v. 16). Do you remember Habakkuk’s first words to God in this book, “How long, O LORD?” (1:2). Then after he approaches God a second time, God responds, “For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, **wait for it**; for it will certainly come, it will not delay” (2:3). Now we see him, after all his agonizing and praying, transformed from an impatient prophet into a calm and expectant servant of God.³

Jeremiah 29:10-14 – ¹⁰ For thus says the LORD, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ 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. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek Me and find *Me* when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.’

Habakkuk’s second resolve was, “**I will rejoice**” (v. 18). This comes after stating the facts of what potentially might occur in v. 17. But now his resolve was in the sure providence of God, “**The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds’ feet, and makes me walk on my high places.**”

Psalms 33:18-22 – ¹⁸ Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope for His lovingkindness, ¹⁹ to deliver their soul from death and to keep them alive in famine. ²⁰ Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield. ²¹ For our heart rejoices in Him, because we trust in His holy name. ²² Let Your lovingkindness, O LORD, be upon us, according as we have hoped in You.

³ David Prior, *BST: The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*, 274.

Conclusion

If God destroyed a wicked world in Noah's day, if he eradicated Sodom and Gomorrah, if Jehovah sent his special people into exile and reproach among the nations, will he spare modern western nations, once 'Christian', who repeat the same sins? Here is a prayer to keep in the pocket of your memory for those dark hours of judgment. Acquaint yourself with mercy in Christ, and be certain that you enter the upheavals of war, conquest and oppression as a person of steadfast faith. Men and women of faith shine as jewels of mercy amidst the deepest gloom of sin and unbelief. Because they are products of divine mercy, God is greatly glorified in them and by them, even as other types of triumph do not appear.⁴

⁴ Walter J. Chantry, *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, Issue 529, October 2007, 32.