

Sunday, March 21, 2021

Yet!

(Tears, Ashes, and Trumpets; Message 5)

(Lent, 2021)

Habakkuk 3:1-19

Scripture:

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth.

*² Lord, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord.*

*Repeat them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy.*

*³ God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth.*

*⁴ His splendor was like the sunrise;
rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden.*

*⁵ Plague went before him;
pestilence followed his steps.*

*⁶ He stood, and shook the earth;
he looked, and made the nations tremble.
The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed—
but he marches on forever.*

*⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan in distress,
the dwellings of Midian in anguish.*

*⁸ Were you angry with the rivers, Lord?
Was your wrath against the streams?
Did you rage against the sea when you rode your horses
and your chariots to victory?*

*⁹ You uncovered your bow,
you called for many arrows.
You split the earth with rivers;*

*¹⁰ the mountains saw you and writhed.
Torrents of water swept by;
the deep roared and lifted its waves on high.*

***11 Sun and moon stood still in the heavens
at the glint of your flying arrows,
at the lightning of your flashing spear.
12 In wrath you strode through the earth
and in anger you threshed the nations.
13 You came out to deliver your people,
to save your anointed one.
You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness,
you stripped him from head to foot.
14 With his own spear you pierced his head
when his warriors stormed out to scatter us,
gloating as though about to devour the wretched who were in hiding.
15 You trampled the sea with your horses,
churning the great waters.
16 I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.
17 Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
19 The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.
For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.***

Message:

There is an old story about a Rabbi; he was not the smartest rabbi, but he was a very righteous man and a man of much prayer.

One day on his way to pray he met a woman on the side of the road crying. He paused and gently asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

“Rabbi, the Torah says we are to entertain strangers during Passover, and my husband and I have no money. My husband is unable to work, and we are poor. Would you pray for a few shekels so we can entertain strangers?”

The Rabbi went to pray: “God, please give this woman some shekels. She is poor; she’s not asking to get rich, just to fulfill Torah.”

When the Rabbi returned, a man was talking with her. “Rabbi, while you were praying this man came asking for you and when I told him, he gave me this whole bag of shekels! God is so good!”

The man looked at the Rabbi: “Rabbi, do you remember me? Years ago, I asked you to pray for a wife for me. I have been happily married for five years! God is so good. Now I’ve come to ask you to pray my wife and I may have a son.”

The Rabbi looked to heaven, then back to the man: “By this time next year you will have a son.” The moment he was finished, a voice from heaven came: “Rabbi, it was not my plan to give this couple a son; but since you promised, I’ll do it. But you, have lost your place in heaven forever.” And the Rabbi began to dance and dance and dance.

“Rabbi!” the man said, “Why are you dancing? God just said you’ve lost your place in heaven forever!”

“Yes, I heard,” he said. “All my life I’ve loved and served God to secure my place in heaven. Now I can love God with all my heart, soul, and life just because he is God.”

This third chapter of Habakkuk begins, “*A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth.*” Most Bibles don’t translate this word – largely because no one knows exactly what it means. Some believe it is the tune to which this Psalm or Prayer is sung; others believe it refers to emotional distress and/or an impending crisis.

The last line - “*For the director of music. On my stringed instruments*” - would seem consistent with understanding *shigionoth* as a musical term; at the same time, the last verses that focus on God’s sovereignty would seem to foreshadow an impending crisis.

In between, there is an extensive description of how God comes, in great power, to save his people; it expresses the psalmist’s and prophet’s certainty that God will ultimately save his people.

In fact, this entire book may have been written primarily for use in worship. It is a hard book to read and reflect on; it is a litany of pain, lament, judgment, woes and few answers concluding with a prayer of thanksgiving and celebration of God’s mighty deeds. We have been through tears and ashes; we finally get to hear a few notes of a trumpet.

This is the same pattern followed in a number of Psalms - the Hebrew book of worship. In worship, as in life, our focus is to be on God, and God alone.

PRAYER

When an Israelite gave his testimony, (i.e., when they spoke about their God), they would recall the mighty deeds God had done for his people (3:2). They would talk primarily about his deliverance.

The Psalmists frequently wrote about the work of the Lord in delivering the people of Israel out of Egyptian bondage and into the Promised Land. This great deliverance story was a re-telling of God's covenant love for his people and his faithfulness to his promises and judgments.

When the people talked about God, it wasn't long before they also talked about his **righteous judgment**. They knew when people sinned – and when they sinned - God would punish them. Sometimes God would (even) punish people he had previously delivered, and sometimes he would deliver the people he had just punished.

Habakkuk is **reminding** Judah (and himself - because we all tend to forget too easily) that God still does mighty deeds (and still brings judgement). Habakkuk is now **praying** that what God did in the past for Israel (deliverance) he will now do again for Israel. Habakkuk knows that Judah's worst days are still ahead. Habakkuk is praying God will remain faithful to his covenant people during the impending crisis.

In 3:3-7, Habakkuk recalls God's activities surrounding Mount Sinai (3:3-7). Habakkuk begins by recalling God's glory and power at Sinai (Exodus 19:16-19).

Teman and Mount Paran (3:3) are on the route between Mount Sinai and Israel.

Selah is a musical term (unfortunately, foot-noted in 3:3; also missing in 3:9, 3:13). *Selah* denotes a pause. In worship, it is perhaps a pause to regain control of one's emotions. Here it appears to be a call to pause to remember and to reflect.

Cushan and Midian (3:7) form the geographical bookends to the Red Sea, making them metaphorical "**witnesses**" to God's deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians.

Creation is pictured here as trembling in response to God's sovereignty and works. The original readers would recall God's Sinai covenant, which in his sovereignty and with his mighty deeds, he faithfully keeps regardless of circumstances.

In 3:8-16, Habakkuk approaches God with a prayer celebrating Israel's Exodus. Since God's power and presence are most clearly seen in hindsight, he looks **back** to the mightiest deed God had done for Israel to offer hope as Israel looks **ahead**.

Note the repeated references to water - rivers, streams, sea - in **3:8-10, 15**. Throughout the Exodus experience God showed his power over the water - the Red Sea, water from a rock, bitter water to sweet, the Jordan River. Water restores, refreshes, renews; water cleanses, nourishes, makes us like new.

In **3:13**; Habakkuk talks about Moses facing the Egyptians as Israel prepares to face off against the Babylonians as we might face our enemies... In **3:16**, Habakkuk confesses his **fear** and his **confidence** that God will eventually punish his enemies; he trusts God will continue to be faithful.

PERSISTENCE

So now we are almost at the end of Habakkuk. The entire book has come down to these **final words**. Will we get an answer to our questions?

Habakkuk knows things are going to get worse soon, but he says he's ready to weather the unimaginable impending crisis. Many struggle to turn to the Lord when life is going well; others struggle to trust God in the difficult circumstances.

Trusting God is always essential. Habakkuk suggests we trust God now - in the **good times** - so when the **devastation** comes (and it always seems to) we can turn to a God we (already) trust.

In **3:17** - Habakkuk talks about complete crop failure and the loss of all livestock. He might be thinking of a draught or a plague of locusts like in Egypt; but he's probably talking about the invading armies living off their land, taking everything in sight for themselves, and leaving the inhabitants to starve.

Habakkuk is talking about literal starvation as he covers the agricultural spectrum thoroughly - figs, grapes, olives, small grain, sheep, goats and cattle. But he is also alluding to spiritual starvation.

So far God still hasn't provided any real logical (sensible) answers to Habakkuk's questions and complaints. Habakkuk knows finding strength for today would bring hope for tomorrow; but he has struggled to find strength. Habakkuk knows the current circumstances are not going well and the future seems dismal; but Habakkuk knows, and reminds us, that as long as our God is still on the throne, there is still **hope**.

Then he writes in 3:18: "Even if I starve to death, I will rejoice in the Lord."

Excuse Me?! What? Yes, even if God does nothing to help me “*I will dance and dance and dance*”. That is a haunting **worldview**.

Even in the most devastating circumstances (literally, losing everything), Habakkuk--without any (apparently) **good reason**--rejoices in God (in **3:19**, he compares himself to a deer equipped for agility on the most rugged of terrains).

Only when Habakkuk has been **stripped** of every competing comfort can he **fully embrace** the joy of the Lord (“*Rejoice in the Lord always...*” **Phil. 4:4**). Who can say this and really mean it? The answer: the righteous. The righteous are not righteous for what is in it for them; they are righteous simply because they love God!

Truth is, we can't really understand **Habakkuk 2:4** (“*The righteous shall live by faith*”) until we understand **Habakkuk 3:17-18**.

- Remember faithfulness means knowing and trusting God **no matter what** happens; that is, whether we will be rewarded or not, whether God saves us or not.
- Remember faithfulness means knowing and trusting God with all our heart, following him in obedience - not by stoically gritting our teeth - but **eagerly** and **joyfully** (i.e., dancing).
- Remember faithfulness means keeping our eyes focused on God as he shares (imputes) his faithfulness with us, providing us the **only reason** we need to rejoice and be glad.

These words challenge us to embrace God so deeply and **thoroughly** that nothing can ever happen - starvation or losing my salvation - to **decrease** my **joy** of knowing him. Think about that for a moment.

Would you still love God even if he didn't provide personally benefit? If you didn't get to go to heaven? That's a hard challenge to live up to; but the righteous do and are and have.

John Bunyan was put in Bedford jail; sentenced to death; God didn't intervene; he expressed his uncertainty about his salvation; but he remained faithful. He wrote: “*I am for going on whether I have comfort here or not. If God doesn't intervene, I'll leap - even blindfolded - into eternity, sink or swim, into heaven or hell. If you would catch me, Lord Jesus, do; if not, I will still love you.*”

Faithfulness means knowing and trusting God - no matter what; even if there is **no personal reward** or benefit, even if the result is eternity without God, because you simply love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

This faithfulness, Habakkuk promises, will bring increasing confidence that we can trust God. This confidence brings real joy; the kind that makes us “*more than conquerors.*”

This phrase from Paul in **Romans 8** can mean “*conquerors and even **more***” or “*not conquerors, but **something better.***” We’ve often landed on the former: “*the overwhelming victory is ours*” (NEB) (The Greek here seems to point us in that direction first...).

But our personal experience tends to compel us to at least consider the other understanding. It doesn't feel much like we're conquerors when physical tribulation – brain tumors and cancer, pain and distress continue to afflict us. And whether we pray or not, it often seems to get worse.

Paul, along with Habakkuk, seems to suggest we actually have something better: “*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our bodies*” (**2 Cor. 4:8-10**). **We have Jesus!**

This is not to ignore or overlook that the Bible **often promises** physical deliverance - from captivity, illness, persecution - and these verses should be taken seriously. Habakkuk's trust in these promises and his often-contrary experience led him to anguish over the suffering of the righteous.

It is only those who trust that God **can** physically deliver and doesn't seem to, that **lament** he hasn't. This is the question and answer that has led some to walk away from their faith while leading others to persevere and experience something “*even more...*”

POSTLUDE

Along with Paul, we have a better perspective on this than Habakkuk because we know about the cross. The Cross of Christ demonstrates that just because physical deliverance doesn't come, the promise of God to be with us has not been **abandoned** or eliminated.

God is with us in the midst of trouble, precisely when and where we need him most. He may not remove the trouble that plagues us - for reasons we don't understand. He may allow us to live through it – keeping his promise to be with us. Or, he may bring us home to be with him- the ultimate victory when the trumpet shall sound. Hymn writer pens, “*When through the deep waters I call you to go; the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow; for I will be with you, in trouble to bless; and sanctify to you your deepest distress.*” (cf. *How Firm a Foundation*).

Habakkuk's combining suffering and joy appears to be sheer nonsense. Apart from the Cross and the Gospel, it is impossible to understand.

The Gospel promises that with God there is a joy that transcends all other human experience: *"I have good news of great joy that will be for all people..."* (Luke 2:10).

The Gospel promises we can **experience** that joy here and **now**. Yet, here and now, it may not make our current suffering disappear or even seem less painful.

But we know Jesus himself experienced the depth of human agony on the cross - including separation from his Father as a condemned sinner (*"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me"*; **Matthew 27:46**) - and then God raised him up!

The author of Hebrews reminds us that Christ remained **faithful** (righteous) - even under the **worst** of circumstances - *"who for the joy set before him and endured the cross, scorning its shame."* (Hebrews 12:2)

In *Margaret*, James Ross tells of a 15-year-old who developed a rare form of cancer. Her family initially tried to protect her from the diagnosis, but it soon became impossible. Ross, an agnostic at the time, writes that within five minutes of being told, a spirit of peace and joy came over her and continued for the next few months until she died. (As a result of that 15-year-old's experience, Ross became a deeply committed follower of Jesus).

That scenario has been repeated over and over and over again in people's lives - examples of being *"more than conquerors"* and *"Yet I will rejoice"* in the midst of pain and **suffering...**

The Old Testament introduces vicarious suffering; Jesus provides it. In **Isaiah 53**, the suffering servant suffers precisely because he is **righteous** and in doing so takes the suffering of others - who deserve to suffer - upon **himself**.

This is how Judaism explains suffering to children: They say, "a few people are righteous, but these few can atone for the sins of the many; where none are righteous, the sufferings of children can atone for the sins of their elders."

Christ followers apply this concept to Christ who has suffered on the cross for the redemption of the world (all humanity). We commonly think of Christ suffering **for** the guilty, i.e., bearing their sins. We should also think of Christ suffering **with** the righteous, i.e., he is *with* us.

The punishment of the wicked described in human terms with glee by Habakkuk should not be understood as vengeance, or as a failure to recognize God's desire for our redemption, but as an acknowledgement that God needs

to do more than just suffer with us - or it's hard to believe he is really in charge. He did, Jesus died for us.

Throughout this series you have been looking at a “cross” formed in the destruction of the twin towers (in New York) that provided a sign of hope to those who grieved the loss of their loved ones. [\(PIC\)](#)

The picture is poignant. It says it all. Wherever people trust God with all their heart there will always be hope.

We never get an answer in Habakkuk; we may never get an answer in this life. We can't explain why we must endure all the suffering.

But we know we do not suffer or die **alone**; for **God** comes, as Habakkuk learned and, as the **cross** reveals, to be with us; and that makes us even more than **conquerors**.

In the midst of our sufferings and unanswered questions, **YET** we can rejoice in the God of our Salvation, and **dance** and dance and dance!

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