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A Portrait of Trust

Toward the end of Christ's first year of ministry, a centurion approached Christ and asked Him to heal his servant just by speaking a word. Christ, marveling, said, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel" (Matthew 8:10).

I don't know about you, but passages like this and the longing rises within that I want to be a man of faith. I want to rely upon God confidently in the hardest and most difficult situations-never doubting, questioning, or wondering. And yet, I am embarrassed to confess that it doesn't take too much to make me doubt! In fact, when I think of my walk with Christ and my little faith, I find myself mouthing the words of Paul, "...the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish" (Romans 7:19).

And yet, I am not discouraged for when I read of the disciples asking Christ to "increase our

faith” (Luke 17:5) or Christ praying for Peter’s faith to “not fail” (Luke 22:32) and Paul sending Timothy to the Thessalonians for the purpose of strengthening and encouraging them in the faith (1 Thessalonians 3:2) I see that faith truly is like a muscle, it can be strengthened and grow.

And that is why Habakkuk 3 is so important to us. It has been described as one of the most profound examples of faith in the Bible. It contains the confession of the prophet Habakkuk, a man faced with unthinkable difficulties. And we are going to examine this text with the hopes that Christ will use it to strengthen our faith.

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.”

This is an amazing statement which is made more incredible by understanding its background. The year was around 610 B.C. and God’s people were in poor shape. They were trampling underfoot a very important element of the covenant, taking care of the poor and needy.

One of the themes of redemption is that through His grace, God has created a covenant people, a family. Consequently, a measurement of one’s commitment to God and His Covenant has always been one’s treatment of the poor, the weak, and the outcast.

Habakkuk daily saw the poor being neglected. The weak were crushed. The needy were preyed upon. Everywhere Habakkuk looked, he saw violence and oppression!

And yet, this was but half of it. The people of God also had rejected God; His worship, ordinances, and commandments. Idolatry was rampant, and this just led to more excesses and abuses. In essence, the context of this prophecy could be described as a time when the “hearts of God’s people had grown cold” (Matthew 24:12).

Now in this context, there walked a man of God who truly loved the Lord and the things of the Lord. His name was Habakkuk. As he looked around himself and saw the horrible condition of God’s people and the Divine worship, he lamented and grieved. And soon, his lamentation resulted in prayer.

Habakkuk 1:2-4, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, ‘Violence!’ Yet Thou dost not save. Why dost Thou make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises. Therefore, the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted.”

Now God answered this prophet with this amazing statement.

Habakkuk 1:5-6a, “Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I

am doing something in your days- you would not believe if you were told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people...”

In essence, God’s answer to Habakkuk was the raising up of a pagan, foreign people, many times as bad as Israel, who would be used by God to discipline Judah. Habakkuk responds to this incredible and shocking news essentially with this statement: God, I know that you are an awesome God who can do anything you want, but You also are a holy God. How can you use an evil people to punish Judah? Judah isn’t that bad!

Habakkuk 1:12-13, “Art Thou not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. Thou, O Lord, hast appointed them to judge; and Thou, O Rock, hast established them to correct. Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor. Why dost Thou look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?”

Habakkuk prays for God to do something about the state of Israel, and God answers his prayer with the Chaldeans. In response, Habakkuk essentially says, “God I wanted you to do something about Your people, but not that! How could use the sinful Chaldeans?”

God’s answer to Habakkuk’s question spans chapter 2 and 3 in which He essentially says, you are looking at life from your perspective. Truly, the distance that separates the sinner from Me is so great that whatever differences there may be between the believer and unbeliever and the pagan and the rebellious child of God is nothing (cf. 3:2ff)! Consequently, there is nothing unjust in using a sinful being to chasten a sinful being.

However, the Chaldeans will not go unpunished either (cf. 1:11 and chapter 2). Yet as for you, Habakkuk, don’t ever forget, “...The righteous will live by his faith” (2:4b). To this, rebellion turned into reliance on the part of Habakkuk as God’s ensuing wrath is graphically depicted in Habakkuk 3:1-15. Now Habakkuk 3:16-19 is Habakkuk’s response to all of this in which he climaxes in our passage, Habakkuk 3:16.

Habakkuk 3:16, “I heard and my inward parts trembled [lit. “they pounded”], at the sound my lips quivered [in other words, no longer was he asking for an explanation as in 2:1. Here he is left speechless]. Decay enters my bones [Do you remember when Herod was eaten by worms? Emotionally Habakkuk experienced the same decay!], and in my place I tremble [lit., “I trembled under me”- which means his feet no longer could support him]. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us.”

In essence, V. 16 is a statement of a man accepting the reality of an upcoming calamity; a calamity that would completely alter life as he knew it!¹ And Habakkuk is not bashful in showing how difficult this news was for him, he could hardly take it! And yet, all of this lead us to Habakkuk’s expression of trust.

Habakkuk 3:17-18, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation."

Once again we see an incredible verse. In essence, Habakkuk is saying, "No matter how bad it may get, nevertheless I will continue to trust my God!" Notice the text.

Habakkuk 3:17a, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food..."

This speaks of nothing less than famine and drought. Now, what is it that could stop...

- The fig tree from blossoming?
- The vines from producing fruit?
- The olives from producing yield?
- The fields from producing any food?

Such a cataclysmic failure could only be produced by a severe drought such that there would be NO FOOD! That this would be a serious thing is seen when you understand that all of these represent the essence of Israel's agriculture. Without these crops, mass starvation would ensue. And yet, he is not finished.

Habakkuk 3:17b, "Though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls."

What is it that could cut off flocks and cattle? Certainly the drought and famine mentioned above, and yet this also could be in reference to the sufferings that would arise on account of the strife and warfare prophesied in this book.

As a whole, v. 17 paints an awful picture of doom and gloom! Yet, Habakkuk is not discouraged. Notice his trust.

Habakkuk 3:18, "Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation."

"Exulting" and "rejoicing" essentially are one and the same. Both speak of an expressed joy. Joy speaks not of an emotion but the conviction that...

- God is reconciled.
- The warfare between us and God is over.
- God looks upon us with delight.

Truly, joy is the deep seeded conviction that it is well with my soul!”

Rejoicing is an “expressed joy.” It is nothing less than saying, “Thank you, Lord, for your grace.” It is living in light of the truth of God’s forgiveness. It is being steadfast and immovable in the conviction that God approves of you even though everything may argue the opposite. This is why we read of Christ:

Hebrews 12:2, “...who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Don’t misunderstand. The thought of the cross didn’t make Christ happy! However, the knowledge of God’s acceptance and approval of His divine cross work did. It was through the cross work of Christ that God and man would be reconciled. It was this that produced in Christ the conviction that all was well!

And that was the conviction of Habakkuk. In the face of impending suffering and affliction, Habakkuk expresses his trust, though the world as we know it may fall apart, even if

- We may starve to death on account of drought.
- We may be the victim of war and its ruins.
- And though all of this is so great we can hardly bear it (recall v. 16).

Yet, the basis of my well-being is not the food I eat or the country in which I live, but the LORD who has loved me! Consequently, I will continue to praise and glorify God!

Now brothers and sisters, this raises a very important question: How is it that Habakkuk had so much confidence in his God? Recall, that upon hearing of God’s plan in chapter 1, Habakkuk struggled. Yet here, all is peace and rest. What was the basis for this rest, this trust?

The basis of Habakkuk’s trust is found in v. 19.

Habakkuk 3:19, “The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds’ feet, and makes me walk on my high places.”

From this verse we see two elements that resulted in Habakkuk’s statement of trust. First God was his strength; “the Lord God is my strength.” Truly, God was that which strengthened this prophet. But how did God do it? Did God infuse him with grace? Did Habakkuk pray a special prayer? What does Habakkuk mean here when he says that “the Lord God was his strength?”

The answer to these questions is found in this very verse. Notice the names Habakkuk references for God: “Adonai” & “Yahweh.” *Adonai* is the sovereign one who reigns over all. *Yahweh* is the name of God which references His being, and thus His character. In other words, the basis for this prophet’s trust was his knowledge of the character of God!

Proverbs 18:10, "The name [the character] of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe."

Psalms 124:8, "Our help is in the name [the character] of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

Psalms 20:7, "Some boast in chariots, and some in horses; but we will boast in the name [the character] of the Lord, our God."

See, just as men of old sought shelter, comfort, and salvation TRUSTING in the character of God, so also was Habakkuk's refuge! Christian Scheidt put it this way in his 1747 hymn:

By grace! Be this in death my comfort; despite my fears, 'tis well with me. I know my sin in all its greatness, but also Him who sets me free. My heart to naught but joy gives place since I am saved by grace, by grace. (Commissions, 1990, p. Hymn 584)

Truly, it was the character of his God, Yahweh, that served as the basis for Habakkuk's great trust. And yet it just wasn't the character of God in general that strengthened Habakkuk. But it was the fact that Yahweh was his *personal* strength. Notice the text again:

Habakkuk 3:19, "...the Lord God is MY strength..."

In other words, the knowledge of God's character alone is NOT that which strengthened Habakkuk (demons believe and shudder). Rather, it was a personal interaction with this Great God!

Job after suffering the loss of so much that he eventually ended up sinning against God by demanding that God reveal Himself to him, we read what happened after God answered Job's prayer:

Job 42:5-6, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes."

In other words, Job says, heretofore I only have heard of God; His greatness was taken by faith, His goodness was based on a mere knowledge, BUT NOW THAT I HAVE SEEN HIM. It is this intimate, personal knowledge of the Lord that served as that which strengthened Habakkuk! In chapter 1, Habakkuk truly had heard of the Lord and knew the Lord. But by chapter 3, he had SEEN HIM! And that made all the difference. His knowledge of God became quite personal for he had "tasted" the "goodness of His God" (Psalms 34:8)- which brings us to the second basis for Habakkuk's trust; God was His fellowship.

Habakkuk 3:19, "and He has made my feet like hinds' feet."

“Hind’s feet” is a reference to the back legs or “hind” legs of a deer or a ram. It is these legs that enable an animal to climb. And where does he climb?

Habakkuk 3:19, “and makes be walk on my high places.”

At first glance it is easy to overlook the significance of this phrase. This clearly is a quote from 2 Samuel 22:34 and Psalms 18:33. In the ancient days, geographically “high places” were the best place to build a city. But Habakkuk, a prophet of the Lord Most High, had much more in mind when he wrote this than simply protection. In the Bible, “high places”/mountains were the special dwelling place of none other than God Himself!

- It was on a high place, on a mountain, that God called Moses (Exodus 3:5).
- It was on a high place that God gave the ten commandments (Exodus 19:20).
- It was on a high place, on a mountain, that Moses prayed to God and the people in the valley below prevailed in their war against the Amalekites (Exodus 17:9).
- It was on a high place, a hill which overlooked the Sea of Galilee, that Christ gave His sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1).
- It was on a high place that Christ prayed while His disciples were fighting the waves on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:23).
- And recall where the Psalmist lifted his eyes for help?

Psalms 121. “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from whence shall my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

To a person familiar with the Bible, a “high place” is a special dwelling place of God. And thus, it’s the place of intimate communion and fellowship with the Lord. So, when Habakkuk says that in and through all his anticipated suffering he nevertheless would rejoice in God, he does so because he knew that he was never so high, *near God*, as when he was so low on this earth. Habakkuk knew he would never be so close to God as when the comforts of this world were so far away. Truly, the “high places” of fellowshiping with God are the low places in the life of the child of God!

Psalms 23:4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me...”

Romans 5:3-5, “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

The ultimate end of tribulation and distress for the child of God is the “love of God” being “poured out into our hearts!” This is why Paul could say this:

2 Corinthians 12:10, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Psalms 84:5-6, "How blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee; in whose heart are the highways to Zion! Passing through the valley of Baca (weeping), they make it a spring..."

Psalms 73:28b, it is as Asaph said, "...the nearness of God is my good."

How is it that Habakkuk could have such a strong faith in the face of so horrible a future? Because he knew that what lied ahead, all the difficulty and trial, was nothing less than an opportunity to intimately commune with His God, and that was the bases for his strength! If we could just understand this, it would radically change the way we look at life.

Years ago, a Jewish Christian shared his testimony of the extreme difficulties he underwent in a Nazi prison camp during WWII. He had been placed on the medical ward to be used for live experiments by German doctors under the supervision of Dr. Mengele. Unimaginable bizarre and cruel tortures he underwent at the hands of his tormentors. And yet this is what he said: The worst day of my life was the day the war ended for I knew then that I never again would be as close to my God as in that cell.

The lowest place for that Jewish Christian was a "high place" on this earth. In anticipation of such communion with God, Habakkuk could say "World, bring on the worst, for God ' has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on my high places.'" (Habakkuk 3:19a)

And in anticipation of such communion with God, we say let the trials come, let famine or warfare and drought come. But let these come with God! In the words of Samuel Rutherford:

...whether God come to His children with a rod or a crown, if He come Himself with it, it is well. Welcome, welcome, Jesus, what way soever Thou come, if we can get a sight of Thee! And sure I am, it is better to be sick, providing Christ come to the bedside and draw by the curtains, and say, 'Courage, I am Thy salvation,' then to enjoy health, being lusty and strong, and never to be visited of God. (Rutherford, 1973, pp. 52, Letter #11)

Let us pray to God that we might have such faith. And yet, each of us are familiar enough with the Bible to know that ultimately this passage is not about Habakkuk and his trusting God in such dire circumstances and us, doing the same. But it speaks of another Servant who

- "...was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin..." (Hebrews 4:15).
- "...endured the cross, despising the shame..." (Hebrews 12:2).

Once again in this passage we see the shadow of a Giant, the Lord Jesus Christ. He didn't just suffer a little famine and earthly warfare. Rather, He underwent the greatest and most profound suffering imaginable. He became a curse for us. He took upon Himself the wrath and curse of almighty God! O. Palmer Robertson put it this way:

At a later date, when the remnant of Israel was reduced to a single individual, a similar circumstance developed. Alone in the garden, peering now into the awesome abyss of hell, the Lord Jesus himself sweated great drops of blood (Lk. 22:44). Even though he was assured that the Lord would not leave his soul in hell..., yet the reality of the agonies that he had to endure before his deliverance overwhelmed him. His soul was exceedingly troubled..., and his body responded with awesome signs of sympathy. (Robertson, 1990, p. 244)

And yet through all of this, as we have seen, He counted it... joy! He rejoiced! Now how is that?

John 13:1, "Jesus [knew] that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father..."

Habakkuk is but a pale reflection of our Savior who suffered so much for us that we might:

- Know the Father.
- Be saved.
- Have the privilege to suffer for Him!

And why did He do it? Because, according to John 13, He knew that the cross was the path to the Father!

How do we respond to so great a passage? Rejoice in the Lord! In fact, don't miss a very important ending to this text:

Habakkuk 3:19b: "...For the choir director, on my stringed instruments."

Do you understand the significance of this? This passage is a hymn of praise to God. It ultimately was written NOT to teach us how to prepare for suffering- although it does a good job at that, BUT to lead us to praise and glorify our Suffering Savior! And thus, with William Cowper, the English poet, we end this great text on our knees:

Though vine nor fig tree neither, their wonted fruits should bear, though all the fields should wither, nor flocks nor herds be there; yet, God the same abiding, His praise shall tune my voice; for, while in him confiding, I cannot but rejoice. (Commissions, 1990, p. hymn 520)

References

- Commissions, G. (1990). *Trinity Hymnal*. Peach Tree: Great Commissions Publications .
- Robertson, O. P. (1990). *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Rutherford, S. (1973). *The Letters of Samuel Rutherford*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth.

End Notes

¹ And yet, praise God for the realization of the calamity. For with the realization comes with it an incredible trust! Calvin put it this way, "...there is no way of obtaining rest, except for a time we tremble within ourselves, that is, except God's judgment awakens us, yea, and reduces us almost to nothing. Whosoever therefore securely slumbers, will be confounded in the day of affliction; but he who in time anticipates the wrath of God, and is touched with fear, as soon as he hears that God the judge is at hand, provides for himself the most secure rest in the day of affliction... the rest of repentance." (Commentary on Habakkuk, pp. 171-172).