

Trusting God No Matter What

Habakkuk 3:17-18

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Rev. Brian Bill

- *Why does God seem so far away?*
- *When will this shelter-in-place end?*
- *Why did I lose my job?*
- *Why did He take away my loved one?*
- *Why doesn't God stop this virus?*
- *Why do I worry so much when I know I should be worshipping?*

Please turn to the Book of Habakkuk. The best way to find this peculiar prophet with a hard-to-pronounce name is to locate Matthew and go left five books. Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah and he ministered in a culturally and politically turbulent time, right before Babylon took Judah into exile.

The reason I want us to look at this book is because Habakkuk, whose name means “wrestling,” had a number of questions for God. Habakkuk is unique among the prophets because he didn't speak *for* God to the people, but rather spoke *to* God about his questions. The book is actually an intense dialog between the prophet and God, with Habakkuk arguing that God's ways are unfathomable and even unjust. He no doubt gives voice to some of our concerns and questions as we worry about the coronavirus.

Some time ago, Shane Hipps wrote an intriguing article called, “Praise That's Premature.” He suggests when worship is just celebration it becomes a kind of pep rally to inspire excitement about who God is. Because grief is an unpleasant emotion, we tend to deny our suffering in favor of celebration: *“Authenticity and integrity in worship means expressing both lament and praise. Each element completes the other. Without lament, praise is little more than shallow sentimentality and a denial of life's struggles and sin. Without praise, lament is a denial of hope and grace, both of which are central to our life of faith...”*

A lament is a prayer of pain that leads to praise. Over 1/3 of the Psalms are laments and the Book of Lamentations is filled with lament as is Habakkuk. Hipps points out these Scriptures employ *“a narrative arc, a movement from grief and lamentation to celebration and joy.”* Let's take a look at this narrative arc where Chapters 1-2 contain prayers of pain and chapter 3 is filled with praise.

Here's the main idea today: *Prayers of lament can lead us to praise the Lord.*
Let's learn how to do that.

When Pain Keeps You from Praising

1. Declare your questions. Habakkuk is in a quagmire of questions as we see in 1:2-3: ***“How long, O Lord, shall I call for help, and you will not hear? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you look idly at wrong?”*** He's basically charging the Lord with loafing on the job, being indifferent, and inactive. Do you ever feel that way? You cry out to God and all you hear are crickets.

When tragedy leaves you teetering, it's not unspiritual to declare your questions to God. He's big enough to handle your cries and your concerns, your fears and frustrations.

What do you do when you're faced with an avalanche of agony and you feel like God is playing “hide and seek” with you? Perhaps you think Christians shouldn't question God, and so you keep your concerns bottled up. Listen. It's much better to ask God where He's been than it is to wear your spiritual smiles and act like everything's going well when you know it isn't. It's better to express it to the Almighty than it is to suppress it and live in agony.

The root word of question is the word “quest.” If you're on a quest to understand, and serious about seeking answers, then don't hesitate to declare your doubts. If you don't ask, you might miss out on some surprising answers and ultimately short-circuit some growth God wants to accomplish in your life.

2. Describe your complaints. His main beef is he doesn't think it's fair for God to use wicked people like the Babylonians to punish God's people. Habakkuk spells it out in 1:13: ***“You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?”***

3. Deepen your commitment to God. Now Habakkuk is in position to move to the next step in the praise process. We see this in 2:1: ***“I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what He will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.”***

Habakkuk is now ready to hear God's answer even though he's not going to like what He has to say. We can learn from this same process. If you have questions and complaints, don't stop there. Express them and then turn again to the Lord.

God answers Habakkuk but never really answers his "how long" or his "why" questions. Instead, the Lord has him focus on one thing – living by faith in 2:4: **"...But the righteous shall live by his faith."** This verse is quoted in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38 to show God justifies sinners through faith alone, not through works. It's always faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone, because of the Scriptures alone, for the glory of God alone. God is saying, *"Hold on to me Habakkuk, because I know what I'm doing."*

I love what Ruth Bell Graham often said: *"I lay my 'whys' before your cross in worship kneeling, my mind too numb for thought, my heart beyond all feeling. And in worshipping, realize that in knowing you, I don't need a 'why.'"*

Moving from Pain to Praise

Prayers of lament can lead us to praise the Lord.

Do you know it's possible to praise even when you're in pain? You can love God when you experience loss. In fact, the most authentic times of adoration are often when we feel the most awful. As we come to chapter 3, let's learn from Habakkuk as he followed a process that moved him from pain to praise.

Habakkuk 3:1 tells us this chapter contains the prophet's prayer: **"A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth."** This hard-to-pronounce word means, *"to stagger to and fro."* Habakkuk is all over the place as his thoughts move rapidly like a rhythmic rhapsody. Do you feel like that today?

Because we're all struggling, let's follow the prophet's process and learn that *prayers of lament can lead us to praise the Lord.* Here's what we need to do...

1. Revere (2-4). Notice how Habakkuk reveres God in verse 2: **"O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy."**

When filled with grief, gaze on the glory of God and learn He is majestic *and* merciful, powerful *and* personal. Often God doesn't answer the "when" and

“why” questions because the answer is really *who* – God Himself. God sees what I’m going through and because He is King, He can choose to do something about it, if it’s in accordance with His sweet plan and purposes for my life.

Prayers of lament can lead us to praise the Lord. The first step is to revere the God who is near to you.

2. Review (5-15). Next Habakkuk reviews God’s redemptive work in history in verses 5-15. It’s always a good idea to go back and remember what God has done in your life and in the lives of His children in the past. When we review, we discover God is doing much more than we thought. Psalm 103:2: ***“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.”***

What God has done in the past, He will do in the present, and He will be faithful in the future. Verse 6 says His ways are eternal, which means He hasn’t changed, nor will He change. He is always involved; even when He seems inactive.

When you’re not sure you can worship because of the pain, strive to revere God and then review what He has done.

3. Rest (16-17). The third step is to wait patiently. Verse 16: ***“I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.”*** He’s not trembling from lack of faith but is trembling from weakness in his faith. I’m reminded of the father who wanted his son healed when he said to Jesus in Mark 9:24: ***“I believe; help my unbelief.”***

Habakkuk decided to rest in God’s timing, even though he didn’t like what was happening. The phrase ***“wait quietly”*** means to rest patiently and silently. When you don’t understand what God is doing, wait on Him. Rest in Him instead of rebelling. Margaret Thatcher was spot on when she said, *“I am extraordinarily patient, provided I get my own way in the end.”*

If we want to move from worry to worship, we must wait. Psalm 130:5: ***“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I put my hope.”***

Prayers of lament can lead us to praise the Lord.

4. Reflect. It’s important to spend time reflecting because God often uses painful events like pandemics to get our attention. C.S. Lewis said, *“God whispers to us*

in our pleasures; speaks in our conscience; but shouts in our pain. It's His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Habakkuk imagines the horror of having no fruit or meat and an economy in free fall. These are the worst possible things he can imagine. What would he do if everything normal and predictable suddenly collapsed?

Look at verse 17: ***"Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls."*** The word **"though"** can mean, **"when."** Figs were prized food and **"fruit"** represented their possessions while **"olives"** were the source of prosperity. Everything grown in the fields died. On top of that, their sheep and goats were far away and cut off and their cattle were no longer in their stalls.

The word **"fails"** means to be disappointed. My wife Beth said we're all living with layers of disappointment right now.

5. Rejoice (18). Disappointment does not have to lead to despair. I love the small word **"yet"** in verse 18: ***"Yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation."*** Even though there was no food and no flocks, Habakkuk determined to rejoice in the God who saved him. This can be translated: ***"I will jump for joy in the Lord. I will spin around for delight in God!"*** His crisis of **"though"** was followed by a crescendo of **"yet."** I'm reminded of what Job said in Job 13:15: ***"Though He slay me, I will hope in Him."***

We may not always know what God is doing; but we can trust Him to do what is right. You might not feel like it, but your doubts can be transformed into shouts of joy.

Notice he rejoices **"in"** the Lord and he **"takes"** joy **"in"** the God of his salvation. ***When I can't rejoice in my situation, I can always rejoice in my salvation.***

Habakkuk has made the choice to rejoice no matter what happened. Revere God and review what He's done. Rest in Him, reflect on what's happening and then make the choice to rejoice in Him. If you find that difficult, like I do at times, pray this prayer from Psalm 85:6: ***"Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?"***

6. Rely (19). As our new normal changes and then changes again, it's OK to lament our losses, but it's not good to stay there. The final step is to rely on God for strength. Listen to verse 19: ***“GOD, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like the deer's; He makes me tread on my high places.”***

Habakkuk holds on to the fact God is sovereign, which refers to His unlimited power and absolute control. God's sovereignty should always have a strengthening impact on us. As one person put it: *“If the Sovereign Lord is your strength, then your strength is more than sufficient.”* God is not offering some vague sense of strength; instead He gives us the strength of Himself: ***“God the Lord, is my strength.”*** When we rely on God, we can go from grieving to believing.

R.C. Sproul writes, *“This is God's universe and He will do things His way. You may have a better way but you do not have a universe.”* When troubles come, and they will, we must submit to the sovereignty of God. The way to get out from under the load is to get under the Lord.

We're called to live by promises, not explanations. Or to say it another way: *He is God and we are not.*

A deer is swift and surefooted and can scamper up hills and mountains to find the “high places” of safety and freedom. When we rely on God for strength, He will make our feet like the surefooted deer's.

Hannah Hurnard wrote an allegory of the Christian life called, “Hinds Feet on High Places.” A “hind” is another name for a deer. It's the story of a young woman named “Much-Afraid,” and her journey away from her family named “Fearing” into the “High Places” of the Shepherd. She has two surprising companions that go with her – *“Sorrow”* and *“Suffering.”*

Have you made it to the high places? The only way to get there is to go with sorrow and suffering as your companions because *prayers of lament can lead us to praise the Lord.*

In chapter one Habakkuk was low. In chapter two he climbs up to the watchtower to wait for God's answer. And in chapter three he is walking on the heights. He has steadily progressed on an upward arc toward God, going from disappointment to doxology, from gloom to glory. Are you ready to move from pain to praise? Then get ready to revere, to review, to reflect, to rest, to rejoice and to rely.

Action Steps

Here are a couple implications from what we've learned today.

1. Don't waste your quarantine. Someone I talked to recently said the situation we're in is a "Defining moment in our lives and history." Use this time to know, to show and to share the love of God.

2. Make your praise personal. Verse 18 says, "***I will rejoice...I will take joy.***" Have you engaged your will to worship Him? Do you have a personal relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ? In order to handle your problems, you must first let Jesus handle you.

In a new poll commissioned by the Joshua Fund, nearly half of Americans (44%) say they believe the coronavirus and resulting economic meltdown is a "*wake-up call for us to turn to faith in God or a sign of coming judgment.*"

Maybe that's where you're at right now.

I've been doing Facebook Live videos every night at 7:00 and a couple nights ago I referenced the importance of being born again as I held up the book called, "Anchor for the Soul." A woman who doesn't go to Edgewood (yet) was watching and sent me this note:

"Hi Pastor! I'm so enjoying the videos. I saw that book. Is that something I could get and do you have anything I could use to figure out how to start to know Jesus the 'right way' and where to begin. I'm such a work in progress. I do believe but I WANT TO KNOW...if that makes sense...I'm eager to feed this hunger in my heart and soul."

We quickly got her a copy and we have more on our drive-up Resource Table, located under the canopy at Edgewood.

Invitation

If you're ready to know Jesus the right way, please close your eyes and pray this prayer with me.

God, I admit I'm a sinner and I'm ready to repent from how I've been living. Thank you for sending Your son Jesus to die on the cross as my Savior and my Substitute. I believe He paid the price for all my sins by shedding His blood and by rising from the dead on the third day. I want to be saved so now by faith I believe and as an act of my will I receive You into my life. I want to be born again and have all my sins forgiven. I surrender fully to You as my Savior and Lord, my forgiver and my leader. Grow within me a deep desire to know You and show You to others. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Closing Prayer

As we struggle with how to pray, let's allow the Scriptures to express our intercession by closing with a prayer directly from selected verses from the Book of Habakkuk. *This prayer of lament can lead us to praise the Lord.*

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of your glory as the waters cover the sea...Enable me to be one of the righteous who live by faith...O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known...Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in You, my LORD; I will take joy in You, the God of my salvation. GOD, you are the Lord, my strength; You make my feet like the deer's; You makes me tread on high places.”

May the Lord bless you until we meet again.