

Majoring on the Minors: The Prophet Habakkuk
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Last week we learned about the message of the prophet *Micah*. Today we are in the book of *Habakkuk*, and next week we will complete this mini-series majoring on the minor prophets in the final book of the Old Testament, the book of *Malachi*. I've heard many people say that they don't read the Bible because they can't understand it. This can be especially true if you're reading the prophets, from Isaiah all the way to Malachi – and that's 17 of the 39 books of the Old Testament. That's a lot not to understand! God is working on us, church. God is working with us, helping us understand our faith history because remember what is written in Romans 15:4, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope." We need hope. Hope is necessary for us, church. Hope is what keeps our faith strong, and it is what kept Habakkuk going when things looked very bleak.

Prayer: *Father God, giver of all things good and right and true, giver of hope – thank you for working on us, for never giving up on us. Show us, by your word today, how to never give up on you. May the words I speak now be your words, from your mouth to our ears. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*

We look at the world around us, we turn on the news for 15 minutes, and 90% of what we see is 'bad' news. Bad news. The brutal murder of 11 Jews in Pittsburgh for no reason other than the shooter hates Jews. "All Jews must die!" he shouted. On Tuesday evening the Congregation Sons of Israel in Chambersburg held a memorial service for the dead. I went early, knowing it would be heavily attended. I know many of the folks there and as I walked up the steps of the synagogue, the liturgist and organizer said, "Hi Meagan. Would you light a candle tonight for one of the victims?" "Of course. I would be honored." And then she handed me the slip of paper with the name Rose Mallinger on it, the 97 year old woman who survived the holocaust, but was gunned down in America in her place of worship. Why would God allow that to happen to this dear woman? Why is that the way she had to die after everything she had already endured in her life?

And then there's that brand new airplane that crashed into the sea only 15 minutes after take-off, killing all 189 people on board. Why would God allow this to happen? Brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, children – including a 15-month little girl? And why did Sony Setiawan, an official with the Indonesian finance ministry miss the flight, a flight he and his colleagues take regularly together? "I don't know why the traffic at the toll road was so bad. I usually arrive in Jakarta at 3 a.m. but this morning I arrived at the airport at 6:20 a.m. and I missed the flight." Why those 189 but not this 1?

And then there are the 3 children, siblings, who were hit and killed by a 24-year-old girl in a pick-up truck who obviously wasn't paying attention to her driving as they crossed the road to get on the school bus. How could God allow a mother and father to lose 3 children in one day?

And then there's that young California couple who died when they fell from a 3,500-foot overlook in Yosemite National Park while taking a selfie. Really, God? They just wanted to chronicle their adventure – and this is what happens?

The book of the prophet Habakkuk is different than many of the other prophetic books in that it isn't a prophet giving messages from God to a disobedient people, it is a personal back-and-forth between Habakkuk and God. Like Micah, Habakkuk was a prophet in the southern kingdom, Judah. The northern kingdom had already been conquered by the Assyrians and had been carted off into exile. Unfortunately, the people of Judah had not learned anything from watching what happened to their brothers and sisters in the north. They continued their rebellion against God by disobeying his laws and by worshipping idols.

The book starts like this: *“How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?”* Now, for Habakkuk, he was talking about the mess he saw in Judah. For us, it can be about an illness, a financial crisis, the dark pit of addiction, grief, a marriage in shambles, you name it. *“How long, Lord do I have to cry out before you finally hear me and do something about this mess I’m in?”* Can you identify, church? Habakkuk was talking about Judah. He said, *“Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.”* Why aren’t you doing something about all this wrong? God answers. Hey Habakkuk! *“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”* Well, okay then! That sounds great. What are you going to do? How are you going to make this all right again? And again, God answers, *“I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own.”*

What? I know we are bad, but they are worse! Why would you use the worst people to accomplish the desired purification of the nation? That doesn’t make any sense, or rather “I don’t like that plan. Do you have another?”

But Habakkuk, though he doesn’t like the way God says he’s going to bring his people through, he makes the choice to accept it. *“I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.”* You’ve heard those last words before, haven’t you? This is one of the most well-known verses from Habakkuk. In fact, those words are used three times in the New Testament! The righteous live by their faith. (Romans 1:16,17; Galatians 3:11-14; Hebrews 10:38.)

Faith in what? Faith that everything will turn out the way I want it to? Faith that I won’t have to live with this pain for the rest of my life? Faith that my life will be free from trouble if I believe in God? Faith in what? Faith that a perfectly merciful and perfectly just God will bring forth what is right as we keep trusting him. Listen faith is not something we have and use; it is not a tool in our hands to make things happen. True, living faith, which is a gift from God himself has us – because faith in God is not faith in faith or faith in ourselves. Faith in God is a resolute and grateful willingness to accept whatever God brings to our lives or allows in our lives every single day. Martin Luther said, *“Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his or her life on it.”* *“Faith is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God.”* It is a trust that God is at work even when things look awful around us. It is a firm belief that God knows, God sees, God hears – and there is arising something in the midst of all of it that God is doing that even if he told us, we would not believe it.

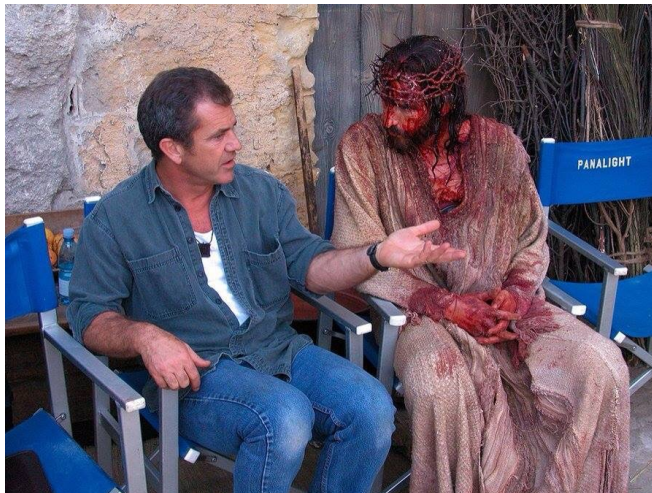
Gary and I were talking about this message on Thursday, and he pointed me to a couple who were worship pastors of a large megachurch and who eventually didn’t just walk away from the church, but walked away from their faith in God. Becoming athiests has ‘freed them,’ they say. Freed them from the box that they thought they had to live in for so many years.

Well, guess what I think about that? Either they were never true believers to start with, or they are going through a wilderness, dark pit “where are you God” experience that God will use for the building of their true faith in his way in his time.

It’s so hard to wait in the dark times, isn’t it? But is it so hard that you’re going to just give up on God? Walk away from the faith you claim in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit? Is that what you really want to do? Because the Provider, the Provision Distribution Warehouse, is not giving me what I want, when I want it, and how I want it! Do we see how self-serving, self-absorbed that is?

Listen, folks, this discipleship life is hard. It's like training for a marathon while you're in the middle of the marathon. It's an everyday, get-up-and-train mentality. It's a finish-line mentality. It's a belief that a perfectly just and perfectly merciful God will fulfill his promises to his people – and that 'people' includes me once I say YES to Jesus Christ as my Savior and my Lord. It's not just getting up in the morning and getting ready for your day at work, at school, in the household, in the church, wherever the day takes you and then giving no more than a fleeting thought to your faith training for the day.

Habakkuk had every reason to complain even more to God when he found out what the plan was for his beloved nation of Judah, but he didn't. He stood still and he listened to God's voice while God spoke out the ways that the wicked would eventually come to ruin. In chapter 2 we read, "Woe to this, woe to that." *"Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion! Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain! Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by injustice! Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk! Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!' Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it."* And then comes one of the other well-known verses from this book, *"The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."* As much as we want to (and do) complain to God from time to time, (see the picture below)



a person with true faith eventually comes to recognize who they're really complaining to, and that realization shuts them up. *"Let all the earth keep silent before him."*

Chapter 3 of this beautiful book of Habakkuk is a song from the prophet to God. He has complained, God has responded, and now Habakkuk responds in song. He responds with a song that recollects how God has acted in the past to rescue his people, focusing especially on God's saving acts when he brought Israel out of Egypt. But in the midst of it, 700-600 years before the coming of the anointed one, the promised one, the Deliverer, we find a Messianic prophecy – we find Jesus.

Habakkuk 3:10-13, *"The mountains saw you, and writhed; a torrent of water swept by; the deep gave forth its voice. The sun raised high its hands; the moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear. In fury you trod the earth, in anger you trampled nations. You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. You crushed the head of the wicked house, laying it bare from foundation to roof."* When we are looking for him, we find him. *"You crushed the head of the wicked house, laying it bare from foundation to roof."* From Genesis 3:15, *"He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."* The wicked will eventually be destroyed. Evil itself will finally be eliminated. Jesus will destroy Satan and all in his household, laying it bare from foundation to roof!

In fullness of faith then, Habakkuk ends his song to God, *“Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights.”* This is true faith. Though things aren’t going as I wanted them to go, though I am still in pain, though nothing seems to be changing in my marriage, though I’m still barely hanging on financially, though I feel alone, though my job environment is so oppressive and annoying, though my teenager is fighting with me all the time, though I can’t see any good ahead for me, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will praise the God of my salvation – because living by faith, ultimately means that I’m not perishing in my sin.

Habakkuk was confident that the LORD would help him, enable him, equip him to navigate difficult situations. *“He makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights.”* The heights? He will make me triumph over every threat that comes against my choice to live by faith. The Anointed One, Jesus Christ, will make us triumphant even over death – because God keeps his promises to save those who believe his promises.

That’s the kind of faith God wants for us – all of us. It’s not just for certain personality types, or for the super-spiritual among us. This is not one of those ‘fake it till you make it’ sort of things. Faith is a gift. Jesus is the author and the perfecter of it. Looking to him puts everything and everyone else in its proper perspective. Looking to him means we depend on him and trust in him as we are joined to him. He’s the one who gets our faith-life started when he covers us in his righteousness. And he is the one who is at work within us, perfecting our faith, as we face down our fears and remain standing with him.

Though our income dries up, and our body is tired,
though we face a difficult diagnosis and seem to lose our dignity in the process,
though our integrity is questioned and some even believe it,
though we are lied to by the ones we love,
and confusion and despair want to take control,
yet we will choose daily to walk the path of Christ
for none of these things is the source of our strength or security.

We will look with eagerness to the future
because in Christ we are provided for
and our souls are ultimately protected.
By grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone
our future is secure.

Amen.

