

Praise in Dark Times

DAVE BAST

Habakkuk has had quite a go of it. His little book is just three chapters long, but there are plenty of ups and downs along the way; but when we come to the book's closing verses, we arrive at one of the loveliest poems in the whole Bible. Habakkuk seems to be saying that although life may have beaten you up or knocked you down, it is still possible for you not just to get up but to sing. It is one thing to praise God when His blessings are flowing into your life; but if yours is the kind of faith that also can praise Him when things are bad, well then, that is the genuine article. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So, we have come to the last of five programs on the little book of Habakkuk, just three chapters long, but what a ride it has been. Habakkuk opens with sort of a complaint and a questioning of God about what is going on around him. He sees all kinds of corruption in his own society and wonders why God does not act. Have you ever asked the question of God: God, why don't you act more God? If You are powerful, if You are great, why do You let this go on? And God says: Well, I am not going to let it go on. I am going to send the Babylonians and they are going to judge My own people; and Habakkuk says: Whaaat??? How can You do that? They are worse...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's not what I was looking for.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and then we come to... and that is just Chapter 1.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's right. Chapter 2 then goes on to explain more why God is going to do this; so, right, Habakkuk says: Why don't You intervene? God says: I will. The Babylonians are going to destroy you. Habakkuk says: That was not the answer I was looking for. Why? And God says: Well... and then there is Chapter 2 that we have looked at in previous programs: a long series of woes against Israel, woes against God's people for their misdeeds, for failing to live up to God's vision of flourishing and shalom and justice, as He had laid out for the people of Israel in His Law. So, there is the explanation why. Now, in Chapter 3, as we also saw in the last program, we have a psalm. It is a song. There are some musical cues, which we don't really understand anymore, but this maybe was set to a popular tune – a well-known tune. So, Habakkuk closes with a song, the first part of which we looked at in the last program, sketches a very powerful God who is fierce and awesome and enough to make you shake in your boots if you could really see God in all of His majesty, but then Habakkuk is going to bring it around in the end to something more pastoral and lyric as he sings to this God from the midst of great suffering and impending calamity.

DAVE BAST

Right; and Chapter 3 opens with a title and a kind of a direction very much like the book of Psalms – some of the psalms do the same thing. So, the title is: A Prayer of Habakkuk, the Prophet, and then the phrase: on Shigionoth, which is not translated because nobody knows what it means. Scholars, again, think that may have been a musical term of some kind or maybe even the name of a tune. So, we don't know what that means. We cannot really sing along, but we can maybe hum along and listen to what Habakkuk says. So, he begins his prayer:

²Lord, 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. And we looked at that last week: I stand in awe of Your deeds; a phrase we can all, I think, repeat and identify with; and then there is a lot of what the Germans would call *sturm und drang* – a lot of chaos – and he goes on to say this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁶I 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. ¹⁷And though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines; although the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food; although there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls-- ¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my savior. ¹⁹The sovereign Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer. He enables me to tread on the heights.

DAVE BAST

Beautiful, beautiful words; and just step back before we look at them more closely. Remember Habakkuk's situation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

You know, he has had all these questions. He has really received a word from the Lord. He has seen a vision. He has, in one sense, gotten answer intellectually to his questions, but they are not very welcome or very happy answers because God says: I am going to destroy My people. I am going to destroy the city of Jerusalem. We know from other prophecies and from the Old Testament history, this happened in fact; there was a series of invasions by the Babylonians; and Habakkuk is still a resident of the city. I mean, he is in the middle of it; and so his first reaction to this news from God is fear. You know, he himself trembles.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And rightly so; and indeed, as we know from later, subsequent history, Dave, as you just alluded to. In some ways, things were even worse than even Habakkuk sketches it. It was an utter calamity for Israel. The Temple was destroyed; the palace was destroyed; Jerusalem was utterly laid waste; and worse yet, the people were taken hostage. They were led into Babylon for seventy years of captivity away from their homeland, away from the promised land of God. When the disaster actually came, it was even worse than Habakkuk said. So, indeed, there he is nestled in the midst of great fear; and maybe he knows more than the people do because he believes God's testimony that this is coming. Maybe a lot of the people are still living in denial, but not Habakkuk. He is a realist, and yet he sings this beautiful song of faith.

DAVE BAST

Yes, faith; that is the theme, in a way, of the whole book. Faith instead of fear, even in the midst of disaster – even when your world is falling to pieces – even when it seems like God is against you. All of those things are true as far as Habakkuk's message is concerned, but he has this ringing statement in Chapter 2, just about at the midpoint of the book: The righteous will live by faith; the statement that we have repeatedly said Paul picks up on and quotes in the New Testament. He makes that the center, really, of what salvation is all about;

that we go on trusting God, and that faith gives us a kind of righteousness that enables us to live even through the judgments of God; but the fact is, faith is not some kind of magic potion; and what we have to fight against – and again, the Bible can correct us on this – is the idea that, well, as long as you have faith, you know, all these things will pass you by. You are living in the eye of the storm. Nothing can touch you. Not a hair on your head despite... And Habakkuk gives no assurance of that whatsoever.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, quite the opposite.

DAVE BAST

He is filled with fear because the storm is going to overtake him too. The problem is, he is still part of a sinful people, and even though he himself has a right relationship with God, and he himself has assurance of where God is leading ultimately in the future, that does not take him out of the context upon which judgment will be poured out; and he is going to taste some of that. I mean, it is not personal. God might say to him: Nothing personal, you know. Nothing against you, Habakkuk; but this is still what is going to happen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And given, Dave, everything that we have seen in this book and throughout the first four episodes of this series here on Groundwork... given everything we have seen: The *sturm und drang*, as you said: The doom and the gloom; the terror; the wildness of some of this; all of the woes and the judgments. Of all of the books of the Bible, this is the last book in the world you would expect to end in song, but it clearly does. There are musical cues here, as we noted. Habakkuk ends up singing, and we may not know the tune, but maybe even in our lives today, we can sing along somehow, and we will think about how we can do that next.

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are wrapping up a series on the prophecy of Habakkuk, and we have come to the closing song, really, of Chapter 3:16-19, this beautiful expression of faith, even in the midst of impending disaster. So, we have just pointed out that Habakkuk's situation has not changed. He has had this encounter with God. He has heard a word from God. He has put his faith in God. He is trusting in God, but he is still terrified because disaster is about to descend; and quite frankly, we do not know what happened to Habakkuk personally. There is no mention of him outside of this little prophecy, so we don't know if he survived the fall of Jerusalem, which took place just a few years after Habakkuk wrote – if he was carried away into exile in Babylon; if he remained somehow in the land – we just don't know; but nevertheless, what we do have is his let's call it a confession of faith in song here at the end of Chapter 3.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed, Dave, it is very important to notice that the good news, if there is any good news in Habakkuk, the good news is not God saying: Oh, I changed My mind. Never mind. It is not like, you know, it was when the golden calf incident happened in Exodus and God said: I am going to destroy the people; and Moses said: Please don't. Remember Your promises; and God said: Okay, I won't. That does not happen here. God does not say: Well, Habakkuk, you are such a good guy and you have been faithful to Me, so that thing about the Babylonians, forget about it. We are not going to do it; no, that is still going to come and it is still going to crash. So, the hope that emerges from Habakkuk is not that destruction has been headed off, but that there is somehow reason to have faith in God and joy and hope in the midst of peril.

DAVE BAST

I would like to say a couple of things real briefly, if I can, to qualify this. For believers, for individuals like Habakkuk who have put their trust in God, who are living by faith and living faithfully and who are therefore righteous in God's sight, God does not punish those who are His own. There is no wrath for us. He might discipline us. We might experience some adverse circumstances in our lives, but there is no judgment in them. I think we said in an earlier program that Christ has borne all the wrath of God. Christ has exhausted the judgment of God. There is nothing left over for us. We don't have anything to pay for anymore; it has all

been done for us. So, that is wonderful, good news. So when God is dealing with us, He is not angry with us individually; but the other thing is, we may be caught up in the sins of a culture or in the situation of a society where God *is* acting in judgment, and then, you know, we are going to suffer along with everybody else; so we are not exempt from that in that way; but...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The judgment is action of consequences. God is not always going to intervene to override our human, foolish choices. It is just not going to happen; but hard times still come. Even though those last verses of Habakkuk 3 are so lyric, and they are poetic; and they have been set to more contemporary music – we have new tunes that we have set this to – we don't know what the original tune was...

DAVE BAST

Shigionoth...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we don't know what the original was, but we have set this to music; but it is still kind of a bleak picture. I mean, he is really saying he is going to sing to God, although... and then following the though are all kinds of sort of bad news items.

DAVE BAST

Well, here they are: ¹⁷The 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... So, yes, it is a whole story of poverty, of scarcity, of dearth, of lack – I mean, if we were to put that in modern terms we would say: Though the cupboard is bare; though our checking account is empty; though the doctor comes in and says: I am sorry, there is nothing more I can do for you; though your wife or your husband says: Hey, I am leaving. I found somebody else.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is a picture of the great depression of the 1930s, or you think of the desolate portraits that a novelist like John Steinbeck sketched in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where everything is dust in the dust bowl, or the great economic fall of 2008, more recently, where people lost their homes – literally they were foreclosed on – they were evicted – they had nowhere to go; they lost their jobs. All the money they had on paper in their investment portfolio and retirement portfolio went *poof*; it was gone. So, this is a picture of bleakness – of emptiness. There is nothing hopeful that you can see with your eyes in what Habakkuk is sketching here.

DAVE BAST

Yes, dashed hopes, that is the phrase that came to my mind just now.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yet, he says, and then this is the 18th verse...

DAVE BAST

Yes; here is the question. The big question is, what do you say if that is your situation – if that is your circ... If your earthly hopes have been dashed; if your...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they are sometimes.

DAVE BAST

If your security has been taken from you; if God somehow has not provided, even though it seems like He promised He would, what do you say? A lot of people walk away from God. I mean, that is what happens. The biggest single loss of people's faith, I think, is when they experience setbacks and reversals and losses of various kinds, and even tragedies in their life, and they are heart wrenching and heartbreaking, and at that

moment people say: Ah, it is not real.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Habakkuk is living in a time when, all things being equal with everything you could hear with your ears and see with your eyes, that would be a perfectly legitimate response – nihilism – just forget about; you know, take care of number one; do what you can, because there is no God; but the 18th verse again:

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will be joyful in God my savior. Habakkuk does not even just say: I will be okay; or: I will grin and bear it; or: I will just sort of, you know, hope for the best here, God. No, he says: I am going to be joyful. So, rejoice – joyful. He piles up the *joy* words here. How is that possible when there is nothing around you to be encouraging at all?

DAVE BAST

Well, that is *the* question; it is the question of faith and the nature of faith, which we want to explore more deeply; but first, let's listen to this information about a free devotional resource for you from ReFrame Media.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are rounding out, in this final segment of this final program on the prophetic book of Habakkuk, we are rounding out our look at the song; and we were saying, Dave, that the remarkable thing about the end of Habakkuk, not only is it remarkable that he is singing a beautiful song – you would not expect that after a book that was so dark and gloomy – but he is singing of a profound faith that manages to have joy, that manages to rejoice even though there is nothing of the comforts of life, right? There is no food, there are no cattle; everything is going to be gone, Habakkuk says; and yet, it is going to be our job as people of faith – the righteous will live by their faith, Habakkuk 2:4 – we are going to still find reasons to take joy in God. Many of our listeners, almost all of us actually, have experienced times in our lives when the bottom dropped out and we were faced with a choice: Are we going to stick with God and seek joy in Him, nevertheless, or are we just going to walk away and never pray to God or worship God or sing to God again? Habakkuk's choice is: I will choose joy in the Lord despite earthly devastation.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the wonderful thing about this song at the end of Habakkuk 3 is just those two little introductory words: Though and yet.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, nice.

DAVE BAST

Though this is my situation, though I have scarcity, though I am in pain and I am suffering and in want, yet I will sing; I will rejoice. It makes me think of Jesus' words to His disciples in John 6 – toward the end of John 6 – when a lot of the crowd began to drop away and fall away. They said, "This is a hard saying; who can bear it," when He talks about Himself; and Jesus turns to the disciples and said: Are you going to leave, too? And Peter replies: Where else could we go? You have the words of eternal life. So, real faith, I think, is the kind of relationship with God that allows us no alternative. It is not faith *because of*; it is not faith *because* He is doing these things for us or... "I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free," – you know, the Gospel song... Well, that is easy. Everybody can do that. It is easy to sing praises to God when things are going your way; when you are on easy street or when happiness is just rolling in all around you; but what

about when the reverse is true? Can you sing then? Can you sing not *because* of but *in spite* of? That is when you know your faith is genuine.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And sometimes we refer to this maybe as singing our faith in more of a minor key, right? We don't know what key the song of Habakkuk 3 was written in, but you kind of suspect it was perhaps in a minor key; and people who have experienced loss and devastation know that. There is still... I mean, it is sort of a little bit how you sing at a funeral, maybe. You still are singing to God, but there is a catch in your throat...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there are words you cannot sing. You still mean them, but boy, it can be pretty hard to get through By the Sea of Crystal at some funerals, right? But we are still singing. It is in a minor key. We are sad. Faith does not deny the harsh realities of life. This is not blinders or rose-colored glasses, but it is managing to see God through the fog, through the smoke, through the rubble, through the destruction that Habakkuk knows is going to come to his people, and that it metaphorically, or sometimes literally, comes to us yet today.

DAVE BAST

I love that image you just used, Scott, of singing at a funeral because it is a reminder, too, that this is not just an individualistic thing. Faith is really corporate, and sometimes if you cannot sing, maybe I can sing for you; or when I cannot sing, I can be part of the body and they will carry me along; you know, the congregational song will be there. We have probably all had those experiences when something really got to us or some moment in our life when we were in church with the people of God, and while we could not get the words out, those around us could; and there is a beauty in that, too, that we kind of carry each other along.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In one of his sermons, Tom Long told a similar story, Dave, about a pastor, actually, who was getting ready to celebrate Easter. It was Saturday, the day before Easter – Holy Saturday – and his wife grew suddenly ill in the morning; she was worse by noon, and she was gone by dinner, so they got a guest preacher to come in for Easter; and he still went to church the next day, but as he said: I could not sing the hymns because I did not believe in the resurrection – not that day. I could not sing, but the people sang for me, and they believed in Easter for me until I would be able to believe in it myself; and that is sort of that though/yet that you were pointing out that is so true of also Habakkuk here; and for most of us, I think a lot of life is lived between the though and the yet, and we all know people in the church who seem to suffer more than others, who have more losses than others, but at some time or another the disappointments come. We don't always know why. We wish God would head off that calamity or would have intervened to cure this cancer, but He didn't. Sometimes He seems to do it, other times not; and there we are, Sunday after Sunday, and in any given congregation, whether it is 25 people or 2,500, there are always people in the pews; and I think we preachers need to remember this in how we pray and how we preach because there are always people who are out there stuck between the though and the yet; and maybe they are a little closer to the though than the yet on a given Sunday, and that is sort of the crucible where faith gets lived out.

DAVE BAST

You know, biblical faith is a singing faith. I think there is something profound about that. It is not the same thing as resignation. I mean, resignation is sort of giving up, and it is what people do. It is sort of a stoical response: Well, this too shall pass; which actually was an ancient saying. You just sort of get through it. Okay, it is terrible now, but eventually the pain will dull down and I will go on. Life must go on; that is another sort of stoic thing; but that is not how faith is. Faith can sing because it believes that whatever pain we experience is temporary and that glory is forever. That is the thing that is real; so Habakkuk... You know, he has an incredible ending. We have not mentioned the last verse yet, verse 19, where he not only is saying, "I will go on trusting and singing to the Lord," but he says this:

The sovereign Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer. He enables me to go on to the heights. So, he is not just singing here, he is jumping – he thinks he is going to climb.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The last image of this, one of the darkest books of the whole Old Testament, Dave... The last image here is of Habakkuk skipping like a deer, right? As the picture... If this were a movie, as the picture fades to black, we see Habakkuk on some, you know, mountain meadow skipping in joy away from the camera, skipping and leaping like a deer, and then the picture fades to black and that is the end of the book. What an incredible statement of faith.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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