

August 9, 2009

Finding New Life

HABAKKUK 3:16-19

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Today as we come to the end of Habakkuk, we have seen this prophet go through a lot. Even though this Book is only a few pages, a great deal has happened. We have seen him go through a whole range of emotions: He has been bewildered by the evil around him. He has been angry at God for allowing it. He has been impatient with the waiting. He has been joyful at God's promise of Life. He has been encouraged by God's coming justice. And he has been overwhelmed by a vision of the Greatness of God.

If you have been reading along, you've realized that Habakkuk is not a Book we can just rush through. And as we read, we see that all these different emotions come out in so many different ways – so many different literary forms. In this short Book, we have seen: prayers and promises; laments and complaints; oracles and visions; psalms and songs; pausing and waiting; and so on. ...That is a *lot* to happen in just four pages!

Through all these emotions – through all of these ups and downs in life – we can feel the relationship between Habakkuk and God; we can sense the bond; we remember the covenant. And all of these different forms show us how real our journey with God is. God works in the real events of our lives, and so it makes sense that this final song is so personal and autobiographical. For when we travel with God in this life, we go through a lot. And through it all, we grow.

This growth can be found and made manifest in our lives whatever our current circumstances may be. How we respond to God in our different experiences in life is what discipleship is all about. And it says not so much about what we think about ourselves, but what we believe about God.

How we live in the circumstances of life reveals who we think is really in control – who really is the Lord of – our lives. Sometimes we can try so hard to grip our lives that when we finally admit that our actions are useless, we will try to have control some other way. We seek control through information and tell ourselves knowledge is power. You can see this in our world around us, just as now people are feeling better and having more control as they watch the signs of the economy. As if we have that knowledge of where the future is going. The people on the news are saying, "Well, things are turning around now. The recession seems to be slowing down now; the worst is past us."

But our time on earth is not to be endured; it is to be fully lived. If we don't grow through the experiences of life, then when the next trouble comes, we could be in the exact same place.

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In Habakkuk's journey, he has come to a fascinating place. Our reading today told us that this Book ends on a triumphant note. This song of praise ends with joy: "I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior." And not only does he have joy, but this prophet has grown through the experience, he has become closer to God. He has now taken a few spiritual steps deeper into life in God when we read that wonderfully beautiful image, "He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to go on the heights."

So often in life we celebrate at the completion of something; when the goal has been reached. We celebrate when we our efforts to climb up the ladder at work finally pays off as we

get that promotion. We celebrate that we have made it through school and we receive a diploma. Or when we make it through a season of work and we finally get to go on vacation.

Habakkuk, though, is full of joy, and is going on to new heights in God – but what is finished? The book may be over, but clearly the story of Habakkuk’s life is ongoing. That tsunami of evil, the Babylonians – have just started to come at the close of the Book. And did you realize that our reading said that starvation is right around the corner? 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.”* The farms and the flocks are gone, so there is nothing to eat. And yet Habakkuk says, “even though I starve, yet I will have joy in God.”

How is that possible? How could he rejoice now? Habakkuk has been too real with his emotions, so we know he’s not putting up a façade. And he’s been too aware of problems, so we know he’s not pretending like they don’t exist. Shouldn’t he be rejoicing *after* the Babylonians are punished? The reason why Habakkuk cried out to God in the first place – those internal problems of Israel – are still there. And then things got worse as he learned the evil Babylonians are coming. And now the Book ends with their *arrival*? Without that problem resolved? History tells us that the Babylonians did come, and Israel was hauled away from their land in an event known as the Exile, or Captivity. ...So how does a life rest in God in times like *that*?

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There once was a German Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Babylon of his day was Nazi Germany, and like Habakkuk, Bonhoeffer cried out to God. He resisted the Nazis and was put in prison for being involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. In his prison cell, Bonhoeffer said, “By good powers wonderfully hidden, we await cheerfully, come what may.” He knew he was facing death. And yet he said *that*?

In fact, as he was led out of his prison cell for the last time on route to his execution, he said to a friend, “This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life.” ...New life. ...“My feet are like the feet of a deer.” How did these two men go on two new heights in circumstances so dire?

Both Bonhoeffer and Habakkuk knew that they did not have control of their lives. They could not control their political situation, they could not control the culture around them, and they couldn’t even control their own spiritual lives. And yet both of them received new life from God. Amidst impending destruction, they embraced their limits – their human limitations. And in the joy of their own limits and as they saw themselves for the created beings that they were, which in turn freed them to see who God really is. And so they rejoiced.

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At the beginning of this Book, for the very first time in the Bible, the author identifies himself as a prophet. This prophet cries out to God on behalf of the people, and through all these experiences with God in this Book, even the prophet himself is changed. He goes from angry confusion to being led to higher places in joy. The prophet himself is a sign that divine grace was already working. The prophet has changed. God’s grace is sufficient amidst it all.

As we are trying to understand Habakkuk’s joy amidst it all, maybe we should try asking, “How could he die?” God gives life through faith. We are connected to God through faith, not by our own actions, not by our money, not even by the beating of our hearts. Life is found in God, not these mortal bodies. This is easier to say than it is to truly believe.

I was poignantly reminded of this last Wednesday. I was on the third floor of Beaufort County Hospital, and there I saw two members of our community. One was a baby. She was only about an hour and half old. And just down the hall on the very same floor, was another dear soul nearing the end of this life and preparing for the next stage of her journey. Whether we are at the beginning or the end, our lives are found in God. And every gift that has come from God will one day return to Him.

Our days on this earth are numbered. It is all a part of God's mysterious plan. Life is not found in the beating of the heart – of blood pumping through the body – but in true and everlasting life that surpasses all. It is Resurrection Life, as we die to sin and are raised to new life in God. So may we know, like Habakkuk – and Bonhoeffer – that death was not the end. How can you die if you are connected to God, when God is eternal?

The irony is, that after Habakkuk had been through so much, after all he has said, after all the waiting, after all the anguish, after all the calamities, after all the worst of what the enemies will do... at the end of all of this – he finds ...life. Life is found in the promise of God; no one can take that away.

So when we read, "The righteous shall live by trust," I believe we are seeing an expression of resurrection faith. In fact, here we have one of the biggest and darkest moments in the Bible, the Babylonian Captivity, when Israel was captured and lead off to a foreign land. Yet, just as God promised in Habakkuk, Babylon was eventually punished and Israel was restored. Even in the Babylonia Captivity, we can see a "death and resurrection of Israel."

Habakkuk grew through his relationship with God that we have read about in this Book. His life changed. And in order to find new life, the old life had to first be taken away through unwanted change. It wasn't what he expected. He did not know the circumstances of his life would change the way they did. It was not easy. But through the challenge of life he grew, and he went to new heights. He found new life.

Jesus came so that we may have the fullness of life. He never said it would be easy; He said we'd be changed. He didn't say we'd be happy every minute; He said we would be led to a cross. He didn't say we would be immune to the problems of the world; He said we would be redeemed. He said that we would have life, and that we would have it to the full.

Life is not about exerting control. Habakkuk knew the Babylonians were evil. Bonhoeffer knew the Nazis were evil. They were not trying to control the evil times they lived, for they knew on their own strength they couldn't do it. They also knew that their God could – and would – set everything right. This left them open to simply receive grace. Their goal was not power, but to receive God's gifts. And this is what always leads to gratitude.

Gratitude even in the face of starvation. Gratitude even in the face of execution. That is an entire reorientation to life. Habakkuk could see and welcome Resurrection from afar, even if he didn't know how God would accomplish it through Jesus. Even in the face of unwanted change, he could fine new life in God. The unwanted change is an opportunity to see God's grace. The change is an opportunity to be transformed; to find new life. So that we may say, "He makes my feet like the feet of the deer; He enables me to go on to the heights." Amen.

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