

Through Devastation to Hope
Habakkuk Series

Woody Allen, the American film director and screenwriter, said, *“More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness; the other to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”* Hopelessness!

Novelist Ayn Rand had mesmerized a student audience at Yale University with her lecture. Afterwards, a reporter from *Time* magazine asked her, “Miss Rand, what's wrong with the modern world?” Without hesitation she replied, “Never before has the world been so frantically committed to the idea that no answers are possible.” “To paraphrase the bible,” she continued, “The modern attitude is, ‘father, forgive us, for we know not what we are doing – but please don't tell us!’” Hopelessness!

So what do you do when your situation seems hopeless? When there are no good choices or outcomes? That’s the case with Habakkuk. Habakkuk is one of the shortest books in the Bible and is one of the shortest of the Minor Prophets, surpassed in brevity only by Obadiah, Nahum and Haggai.

Over the past few weeks we discovered: chapter 1, that Habakkuk was troubled by God’s apparent inactivity in human history. Later, he’s even more perplexed by the moral dimensions of God’s solution, in that God was going to use a vile, violent nation – Babylon – to take Habakkuk’s people, the nation of Judah to the woodshed. God revealed what was going to happen. It’s a done deal. Habakkuk is a prophet. He knows when God says something is going to happen, it’s going to happen. He’s faced with a hopeless situation. His nation is going to be conquered, destroyed, deported and spread to the far ends of the earth. They are dead meat. It was going to mean personal suffering for him, potentially death. It’s a hopeless situation.

Last Wednesday I had lunch with my friend, Pastor Bob Page. A little over a year ago, Bob lost his wife to cancer. He shared with me that he and his wife, Linda, were going out to lunch with friends after their Sunday worship service. They’re on their way to the restaurant when Linda received a phone call on her cell phone from her oncologist. They’d just left the worship service and are on their way to lunch and her oncologist shares that the cancer is in her vital organs, she’s terminal. In three months she was gone. I’ve been ministering to another lady who also is battling cancer. This week the report came back that the cancer is now in her liver and she too is terminal. So how do you face those situations...when there is no hope, when the situation is hopeless?

Habakkuk too is facing a hopeless situation. His people are going to be conquered, many will die. He himself may be killed...yet he models for us how to deal with the inevitable hopeless predicaments of life. He demonstrates that we can move **Through Devastation to Hope**. How? Turn, for nearly the last time to Habakkuk, chapter 3:3-15 (p. 664).

The only way to move **Through Devastation to Hope** is to turn our focus from our problems and circumstances to God, instead of being *anthropocentric*, we must be *theocentric*. Yet, too many of us have a real barrier here. Our God is a pygmy. We can't turn to God when all hell breaks loose because our God is not big enough to handle our issues. Our idea of God is far too small and has nothing to do with the real God or the God of the Bible.

Many refer to verses 1-15 as Habakkuk's prayer. I don't think so. Last Sunday we considered Habakkuk's prayer in verses 1-2. Today we're focusing on verses 3-15. This is not a *prayer*, this is *pondering*. The awesomeness of God is expressed through different manifestations of His character. Habakkuk has hope in the face of a calamitous future because he takes the time to **ponder** who God is. In this passage we find a familiar word which most of us don't realize is also a very unusual word in the Bible. It's the word "*selah*." Notice that this word "*selah*" is found three times in these 13 verses. In fact, it's the only time *selah* is used in all of the Bible, except for the book of Psalms where it's found 71 times.

The Psalms were worship songs. This is a worship song. The word *Selah* is a musical notation. We're not totally sure what it means. Most scholars believe that it called for a pause in the singing of the music, maybe a pause in the singing of the lyrics while the music built to a higher level, making the thrust of the music create more tension, expectation and excitement.

Selah is a pause, a time to stop and think, a time to **ponder**, to contemplate what has just been said. It takes time to meditate. It takes quietness of soul to ponder, to really see God. You have to pause, shut out the hustle and bustle of life, the screeching distractions to really see God.

Last week many were rattled with the news of Al and Tipper Gore splitting up after forty years of marriage. Unlike other celebrity couples, there seem to be no other factors other than they just grew apart. I don't know what led to the Gore's marital issues. I do know though that a healthy marriage takes focus. You must **ponder**, you must focus on your spouse to have a healthy marriage. When a couple first falls in love, all they can think about is each other. As years pass, their focus often moves elsewhere.

Some reports suggested that's what happened to the Gores. But this is certain, if you do not focus on God, if you don't take the time to **ponder** and contemplate the awesomeness of God – when inevitable trials hit, when hopeless situations drop on your life like a bomb, you'll find your heart "divorcing" the God you once loved. God doesn't change. He's immutable. What's changed is that you've forgotten Who He is. Your love, your faith has dimmed and you become a sitting duck for hopelessness.

Habakkuk could face horrible calamities because he took the time to pause, to **ponder** His awesome God. The key to victory in your future is to ponder what God has already done in your past. That's what Habakkuk does. Walter Kaiser

observes, *“When God becomes the all-consuming reality, our problems begin to take their proper perspective in relation to His greatness and ability to handle them.”*

My friend, there is a world of difference between knowing the Word of God and knowing the God of the Word. It's as we **ponder** that we really get to know God. Too many Christians know the Word, yet really don't know who God is. It's only as we ponder Who God is that we will have hope in the midst of hopelessness. Habakkuk teaches us that...

1. Hope comes from knowing that God has been here in the past. Every neighborhood has a bully and mine had one. His name was Kit Sparrows. He had a mean streak a mile wide. Kit had two big white huskies that he'd sic on other kids' dogs. While most of the other kids were in grade school, he was in high school. Kit would pick on all the other kids in the neighborhood...except my brother, Mark. Mark was a champion wrestler who had taken 3rd place in State. One day Kit picked on the wrong person, Mark let him have it, and Kit's bullying days were over. It makes a lot of difference who you have on your team. That was Habakkuk's point. God was on his team. Much of this passage is what is known as a *theophany*: a vision of God acting on earth on behalf of His people.

Verse 3 says, *“God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran.”* These are geographical locations, near the Sinai Peninsula. If you looked at a map, you'd see that this was the area whereby God delivered the Israelites out of the land of Egypt. So what's God revealing to Habakkuk here? God is showing him a map – and He shows, stepping onto the map – Himself, God Almighty, the Holy One. Habakkuk, at this moment, is seeing God in all His glory, in all His power, being manifested to the nation of Israel who were delivered from Egypt, and who received the Law at Mount Sinai. God is reminding Habakkuk that He delivered His people out of slavery and Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, making a covenant with them on Sinai. **God had been there for His people in the past and He would be there for them in the future.** Because we have a big God, let me use some big terms. Habakkuk feeds his disconcerted heart on hope by remembering that...

a. God is transcendent, *“His glory covered the heavens and His praise filled the earth”* (vs. 3b). Those two lines acknowledge the absolute majesty of God. Habakkuk extols the **transcendence** of God. That means that God is above, other than and distinct from His creation. He is “wholly other.” God is not like us. He's not like any other part of His creation. He is infinite, we are finite. We sometimes forget that God made us in His image and we try to make Him in ours.

God Himself declares His transcendence, *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts’*” (Is. 55:8-9). It's impossible to define God. He is in all things, but not equated with all that is. He can never be fully grasped with our finite minds and experiences. Isaiah speaks of this when he writes, *“Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed Him as His counselor? To whom, then, will you compare God? What image*

will you compare Him to?" (Is. 40:13, 18). God is a spirit; He is not composed of matter and does not possess a physical nature. Therefore, He is **transcendent** of man and all of His creation. God is also...

b. God is immanent, *"His praise filled the earth."* This term denotes the fact that God is always present and working in His creation. He's the sustainer and maintainer of the entire universe: *"Am I only a God nearby,' declares the LORD, 'and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the LORD"* (Jer. 23:23-24).

The words "*heaven*" and "*earth*" form what is called a "*merism*" – which is simply, two opposites that are all-inclusive. It indicates that **all** existence is under the sovereignty of God and His providential care.

Two of the attributes that exemplify God's immanence are His omnipotence and omnipresence. In other words, God has an all-pervading presence and power within the world. There are some important implications of God's immanence. He can, for instance, work indirectly to accomplish His purposes. The medical field illustrates this in instances in which a doctor or a medication is God's channel for His activity of healing. Another important implication of His immanence, especially seen in His omnipotence and omnipresence, is that God is infinite. He's not limited to a certain spot within nature, He is beyond nature. There is nowhere that God cannot be found. He is infinite in relation to time, for He is timeless. God does not develop or grow. His understanding and wisdom are immeasurable. His power is unlimited and He is completely free of external influences. God is unlimited and unlimitable. He is unlike anything we know or experience. Thus, we see God's transcendence even within His immanence.

What does God's immanence mean to us? It simply means that God is here and everywhere else. Wherever we are, God is here. There is no place and can be no place where God is not. Try to wrap your brain around this. There are over six billion people on this earth standing at as many points in space and separated by incomprehensible distances, and each one of them can say with equal truth, *"God is here."* No point is nearer to God than any other point. It is exactly as near to God from any place as it is from any other place. No one is in mere distance any further from or any nearer to God than any other person.

The definition of immanence then is the pervading presence of God in His creation, and the definition of the transcendence of God is to be above and independent of the physical universe. These two attributes of God are opposite yet complimentary. They must be kept in the proper balance to understand God. He is both superior to, and absent from, His creation and yet very present and active within the universe. It's enough to make your head spin. Then...

c. God is glorious, *"His glory covered the heavens...His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from His hand."* God is glorious (Ex. 15:11). The sun is a night lamp compared to the glory of God. His glory consists in the overwhelming and overflowing

beauty which stems from the sum total of all His attributes working together in perfect harmony. The word *glory* means *radiance*. When we read of the glory of God, it's talking about the shining forth of His character. God is light and is said to dwell in light. Light is a visible illustration of the radiance of His character. God is always associated with light.

As God led His people out of Egypt through the wilderness, He led them with a pillar of fire by night. It came to be known as the *Shekinah*, the manifest glory of God. When He met with Moses on Sinai, there was a great light display. It was so great, that when Moses descended the mountain, his face was shining after communing face to face with God.

The word translated "*sunrise*" is difficult to translate and may be referring to lightning: His splendor was like the lightning; rays flashed from His hand. The point is that His character was made known and the visible illustration was the light associated with Him.

One day all of us will stand face to face with God. Too often we're flippant and casual in the way we approach our relationship to Jesus Christ. We act as if one day we're going to step into heaven, walk up, pat Jesus on the back, and say, "How you doin' buddy?" We forget God is glorious!

The Bible records for us appearances of the glorified Christ. While the Apostle John was on the Isle of Patmos, he heard a voice and he turned to see Who was speaking. Listen to what he wrote in Revelation 1:12-17, "*I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to His feet and with a golden sash around His chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead.*" **God is glorious** and has revealed Himself in history in all of His awe and all of His wonder. Habakkuk tells us that God is both glorious in His coming and is glorious in His character. Habakkuk then points out that...

d. God is powerful, "*Plague went before Him; pestilence followed His steps. He stood, and shook the earth; He looked, and made the nations tremble. The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed. His ways are eternal. I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish*"(vss. 5-7). What scares you? What causes you to fear? We are afraid of that which is powerful, that we feel powerless before.

Before Habakkuk had been frightened of the powerful Babylonians, now as he sees God, he realizes that the Babylonians are 99 lbs. weaklings compared to God. Plagues and pestilence are references to the plagues that God brought upon Egypt to force Pharaoh to let His people go. The Babylonians couldn't send out plagues or pestilence.

God causes mountains to crumble before Him. The Babylonians could only cause people to crumble before them. This is like the fear caused by the power of an earthquake. So, who is really powerful? Who really is formidable? God or the Babylonians. The answer is obvious.

Cushan and Midian were past enemies of Israel that God had conquered. As God powerfully conquered them, He'll prevail over future enemies.

God is transcendent. God is immanent. He is glorious and powerful. This is how we can be hopeful, not hopeless. As God has been there for His people in the past and He will be there for them in the future. The Apostle Paul told the Ephesian Christians to "*remember*" what they were like before conversion, how God marvelously took them out of the darkness into the light (Eph. 2:11-22). Christian friend, do you remember what it was like to be without hope and without God? We were Christless, lifeless, hopeless and godless, yet, God through His great mercy in Christ delivered us from our destitution, our judgment and corruption. When we see what God has already done for us in the past, it is far easier to trust Him and see His hand in the present. Remember God will never abandon His people!

2. Hope comes from knowing that God rules over nature. Aaron and David Kennedy were to return from Guatemala this past Thursday but God had other plans. First a volcano erupted, then Agatha hit, mudslides followed. A sinkhole opened up in Guatemala City and swallowed a city block. But God rules over volcanoes, hurricanes, mudslides and even sinkholes. We see the forces of nature all around us and yet often forget that it is God Who rules those forces. Habakkuk reminds us that...

a. God is in control of the waters, "*Were You angry with the rivers, O LORD? Was Your wrath against the streams? Did You rage against the sea when You rode with Your horses and Your victorious chariots? You uncovered Your bow, You called for many arrows. Selah. You split the earth with rivers; the mountains saw You and writhed. Torrents of water swept by; the deep roared and lifted its waves on high*"(vss. 8-10). These verses refer to some type of water seven times. When God delivered Israel from Egypt, He began by turning the Nile to blood. When they marched out of Egypt, He caused the waters of the Red Sea to roll back and pile up so they were like a wall on either side. That gap in the sea allowed two million Jews to walk through on dry land. When the Egyptian army followed, the waters came crashing back on them. Later, as they entered Canaan, they crossed the Jordan. As soon as the priests, who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant, touched the Jordan River, its waters backed up and allowed them to pass across again. God controls the waters.

Want to know how powerful water is? Think Tsunami. Think Hurricane Katrina...yet it is God Who controls the waters. Friend, do you feel like you're drowning? Remember who controls the waters.

b. God is in control of the skies, "*Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightning of your flashing spear*" (v. 11). The sun and moon

were deities of the ancient world and were worshipped by pagans. In reality, heavenly bodies are just physical objects that God created. They're at His beck and call. This verse indicates that they recognize the fearsome nature of God. So who is more formidable? Who is more powerful? The supposed gods of the Babylonians who were personified in nature or the One true God Who made and controls nature?

This reference to the sun and the moon standing still takes us back to God working in the time of Joshua. As General Joshua was routing God's enemies near Gilgal, nighttime was approaching. The rules of warfare in that day said that once the sun set, you couldn't pursue the battle. Joshua was so zealous to complete the victory that he cried out to God for more time and Scripture tells us that God reached down and performed a monumental miracle, causing the earth to stop rotating, giving Joshua time to complete the battle in the daylight (Joshua 10). Our God controls the forces of nature.

3. Hope comes from knowing that God is sovereign over the nations. God reigns, God is sovereign over the nations and this world. In verses 12-15, Habakkuk looks ahead to a time when God will come and pour out His justice upon the wicked. Most of the verbs of this passage are in the perfect conjugation. That simply means that the verbs signify completed action.

But how can they have taken place, when they are prophetic and haven't yet taken place? It's what is known as the "prophetic perfect." It expresses a vivid future action, which hasn't happened yet BUT is considered a certainty because God says it is going to happen. In other words, the actions that Habakkuk describes are so certain that he relates them as if they'd already been accomplished. God is coming in judgment and it's so certain that, though it is future, God describes it as past. As a result then...

a. He will defeat all of our enemies, *"In wrath You strode through the earth and in anger You threshed the nations. You came out to deliver Your people, to save Your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness, You stripped him from head to foot. Selah. With his own spear You pierced his head when his warriors stormed out to scatter us, gloating as though about to devour the wretched who were in hiding. You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters" (vss. 12-15).* Chaos was about to descend on God's people, but then God would turn the tables. The original listener would have heard this as a reference to several well-known historical events. With these biblical events in mind, Habakkuk's song turns toward the great cosmic battle against the persistence of evil in the world, which continually opposes God's rule.

The collage of these historical references is combined to express the collective memory of God's fighting and victory for His oppressed people. This combined memory of God's intervention against evil is the hope that upholds Habakkuk and his hearers in the face of an impending devastating defeat at the hands of Babylon. They believe God will eventually do this to Babylon as well. Until then, this worship song and the memories it elicits uphold them in faith and hope, as they trust in the Warrior-God of Israel. They'll

need it, for soon they will be under the heel of Babylon and will be, as Jeremiah described *“the wretched who are in hiding”* (Lam 4:18-19).

Habakkuk writes that Israel’s enemies will turn their weapons upon themselves. 2 Kings 7 records such an account where an enemy was confused by God and attacked each other, ultimately defeating themselves.

In chapter 1 God had described the cavalry of the Babylonians as fierce and relentless. They’re coming in power to destroy Judah. Yet, in verse 15, Habakkuk recognizes that God has a greater cavalry than the Babylonians – His cavalry comes marching on the sea! Babylon can’t match that!

It’s all reminiscent of a powerful scene from the life of Elisha. The King of Syria had sent his army in a futile attempt to capture the prophet Elisha. So Elisha is surrounded by a foreign army that intends to take him captive. Elisha’s servant goes out one morning, looks up and saw this horde of soldiers, with horses and chariots. He rightly surmised they weren’t paying a social call! So he ran back inside crying out to Elisha, “What are we going to do?” Can you imagine letting the dog out in morning only to confront an armed barbarian horde in the front yard waiting to do you great bodily harm? Most of us will never face that but we all know what it’s like to be suddenly confronted with life-threatening problems beyond our control, so we can all relate to this servant’s panic in the crisis.

What seems strange is Elisha’s calm response: *“Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them”* (6:16). Then he prays that his servant’s eyes would be opened and suddenly the servant saw the unseen spiritual world that Elisha already saw. The mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha! He strolled out to greet the enemy soldiers, calmly asked God to strike them blind, led them to the capital city 12 miles south, where they were then surrounded by Israel’s army, and then asked God to restore their sight. He then directed the Israelite king to feed them and send them back home. And, for a while, Syrians didn’t bother Israel. That’s the heavenly cavalry of God...so who has the more powerful army? Babylon or God?

b. He will always deliver His people, “You came out to deliver Your people, to save Your anointed one”(3:13a). The expression *“Anointed One”* is never applied to Israel as a nation but is always applied to the leader of the nation. The Hebrew word for *Anointed One* is Messiah. He’s saying, “You came out to save Your Messiah.” Earlier, Moses had been the *anointed one*, the leader of the nation of Israel. Later the lineage of the kings were called God’s *anointed ones*, and it was applied specifically to King David, who embodied the picture of Israel’s king.

This reference though is a foreshadowing of the coming Christ. God had promised, years ago, there would be a king who would come, an Anointed One, Who would sit on David’s throne. As God delivered the anointed one in Moses day, so He would do it in Habakkuk’s day. The line would be preserved. One day there would be an Anointed

One Who would sit upon David's throne. God was determined to keep His promises made to David.

It's reminiscent of Genesis 3:15 when God promised, *"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel."* This is often referred to as the *proto-evangelion* or "the first gospel." After the Fall God promises that His Messiah will come and crush the "head" of the serpent and his seed. The Messiah will emerge victorious, having only suffered a flesh wound, the striking of His heel. The promise of redemption and salvation for people of faith through Messiah is announced very early in God's Word. Habakkuk 3:13 confirms its truth once again.

God delivered His Son from the grave. As He delivered Jesus, He delivers us. We can be delivered from sin. We can be delivered from addiction. We can be delivered from whatever seems hopeless in our lives. We can be victorious over the power of sin because God rescued His anointed One.

God gives Habakkuk hope! Hope comes from knowing that God rules over nature, that He's in control of the water and the skies. Hope comes from knowing that God is sovereign over the nations, and will defeat all of our enemies and will always deliver His people. It doesn't matter what government we're under or how they persecute the people of God because God's people will ultimately be saved and all His enemies destroyed.

As God had dealt with Israel's enemies in the past, He would deal with them in the future. As He had rescued her in the past, so He would save her in the future. As Corrie ten Boom profoundly instructed, *"Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God."*

Conclusion: Charles Eliot was the president and then, in retirement, the president emeritus of Harvard University. During the summer of his 90th year, he made his way slowly down the road from his cottage in Northeast Harbor, Maine, to the cottage of his neighbors, the Peabodys. Mrs. Peabody greeted him warmly and invited him into the living room. After a brief conversation, Eliot asked if he might hold her new baby. Mystified, she lifted her infant son from his crib and laid him in the arms of Harvard's venerable president emeritus. Eliot held the baby quietly for a few minutes. Then, with a little gesture of thanks, he returned him to his mother, explaining, *"I have been looking at the end of life for so long that I wanted to look for a few moments at its beginning."*

From God's perspective, the Babylonian conquering and captivity of His people was not the end of Israel. In many ways it was just the beginning. God had it all under control. Habakkuk reminds us to have hope, not just in old age, but at all points in life. We cannot survive without hope. We need hope. But our hope is not in ourselves or in government or anything else. Our hope is in God Who has intervened for us in the past. We know that as He has provided for us in the past, we can trust Him with our future.

The recital of God's marvelous acts in history brings this section to a close. What God had done in history for His people, He is willing and able to do again. Is there any god like our God?

Habakkuk reminds us that we have no reason to fear men or anything else. He brings us face to face again with the truth that we serve the One Who actually delivered the Jewish people from Egypt. We serve the One Who actually did accomplish mighty miracles, the One Who poured out plagues upon the gods of Egypt to bludgeon a proud Pharaoh into submission. We serve the One Who divided the waters of the Red Sea and rolled back the waters of the Jordan River. We serve the One Who is able to reach down and stop this globe from spinning for a period of time.

Even more importantly, we serve the One Who sent His Son, Jesus Christ, the God-man, Who appeared in human history in human flesh and died in our place, and was raised by the power of God. These things are true. We serve a mighty God Who is faithful.

Pondering the awesomeness of our God, remembrance is a necessary habit for the people of God, particularly for those who are in or are facing times of distress and ready to succumb to despair. They need to encourage themselves by remembering God's faithful acts toward them in the past. Just as He has taken care of them in the past, He will take care of them in the future. One excellent way to do this is to recount these occurrences to God in prayer and to share them with others. It brings hope, renewed confidence and courage.

God will always take care of His people, and their salvation is what He has in mind as He sovereignly acts in the world. Though oppressors may rule for the moment like a Babylon, the truth is that God rules the oppressors and holds them accountable for afflicting His people.

Like Habakkuk, whatever we are facing, though it seems so hopeless, may we trust in His deliverance....may our faith give us hope! May we remember all that God has done for us in the past and be confident that He will do even greater things for us in the future!

So this coming week, when you face hopeless situations, what are you going to ponder? Your problems and predicaments, or like Habakkuk will you ponder Who God is, how He has taken care of you in the past and confident that you can trust Him with your future!