

Do you remember the pet food recall in 2007? Pets were poisoned and died of kidney failure. The ensuing investigation discovered that thousands of pets went into kidney failure after eating contaminated food from China. Wet pet foods were being thickened with wheat gluten which contained melamine, a poisonous plastic product used in things like flooring and ceiling tiles. This poisoned pet food was exported by China around the world. Because of a host of government agencies, you seldom hear of poison being exported from the United States, at least not in food products.

But we do export poison and we are one of the greatest exporters of poison, *theological poison*. American Christianity is the greatest exporter of Prosperity Theology to some of the most impoverished people groups in the 3rd World: Africa, Asia, Central and South America. We're selling spiritual poison to the poorest of the poor. "Believe this message and your pigs won't die, your wife won't have miscarriages and you'll have rings on your fingers and coats on your back." That's coming out of America! It's preaching, "Give \$10 and receive \$1,000; give \$1,000 and receive \$100,000." Please hear what I'm going to say: *The biggest problem with prosperity theology is not that it promises too much, but that it promises far too little.* The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers salvation from sin, not a promise of earthly prosperity. It offers eternal life, not temporal wealth and comfort. Prosperity Theology elevates the *gifts* of God above the *Giver*. That's idolatry. God owes you nothing! God owes me nothing!

Oprah Winfrey has a wonderful reputation for generosity. In 2004 in perhaps one of the greatest publicity stunts of all time, she kicked off her 19th season by giving away brand-new cars to her audience. The 276 Pontiac G6s were worth \$28,400 each. But can you imagine if one of those audience members had said, "Oprah, the Pontiac is nice but I'm a Ford man, so can I have a Ford instead?"

My son, Aaron, has three more years of college. Can you picture me, grabbing Aaron this week and heading down to a taping of her show in Chicago? We get on the show and I say, "Oprah, you've given to all these people. I'm a preacher...why not me? You owe me for all the good that I've done!" Other than making a total fool out of myself and getting kicked off the show, do you think that I'd get a dime?

If you're here this morning and you're an unbeliever, you're probably not going to understand this passage because you likely believe in Karma, and what Habakkuk teaches here is **UnProsperity Theology**. He goes nose to nose with a "God owes me" mentality. God does not owe you a healthy body or a happy marriage or good children or a house or clothes or even food. He doesn't owe you a free country or a happy childhood. And that's just the beginning, because as believers God has already given us more than we deserve. He's given us grace and mercy. He gave His Son and through His Cross forgives us of an unpayable debt of sin. He gives us eternal life and heaven. You deserve Hell. I deserve Hell. That would be justice. The Bible teaches **UnProsperity Theology**. Turn for the last time to Habakkuk, 3:16-19 (p. 664).

What we have here is spiritual TNT! This is how you can walk out of a divorce court, this is how you can stand by the grave of your little child, this is how you can walk out of the doctor's office after being told you have terminal cancer, this is how you can watch your business sink because of an oil spill and you can say: *"Through the deepest possible pain – God is enough! God is enough! He is good. He will take care of us. He will satisfy us. He will get us through this. He is our treasure. Whom have I in heaven but You? And on earth there is nothing that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail but You are the strength of my heart and my portion forever."* Though I lose everything God is still good and merciful and gracious – and God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him in the midst of loss, not prosperity.

If you're a God-follower for what you can get out of it, you've gotten on the wrong bus. That's not Christianity. The whole idea of God being a giver of things has nothing to do with either God or the Gospel. And that's what Habakkuk teaches us. What he writes helps us fight the heresy of "God owes me" theology. This goes nose to nose with a martyr's complex. And if you're a believer and don't understand this, you don't really understand God's grace and have not fully comprehended redemption.

Habakkuk was spiritually prepared for the calamitous changes he knew were coming his way. He models for us how to be healthy believers in the midst of tragedy. A healthy Christian life is not about faithfulness in the midst of good times, it's about faith when you've lost everything and all Hell has broken loose. I don't know about you but I don't want a fair weathered Christianity or a good times God. I want a faith that holds me up when the hurricanes of life are pounding my skiff. I want a God I can trust in as I walk through the darkest valley – and that's Habakkuk's God.

The book of Habakkuk begins in the pits of despair yet ends on the mountaintop, **but** things have gotten worse, not better. In order to feel the weight of the world in which Habakkuk lived, just imagine this scenario. You've just had a conversation with God and He told you in no uncertain terms that America's days were numbered. Then, God proceeded to tell you how the collapse of our nation would take place. Our economy would sink, with the Dow Jones plunging from almost 10,000 to 100. Money becomes worthless. No one has a job. Government begins to collapse, food is scarce. Then, at our most vulnerable time, systematically planned terrorist attacks would commence, followed by a full-scale attack by China. Using nuclear warheads to vaporize major cities millions would die. Those who don't die will be deported to China to work in its economy. By 2020 America as we know it ceases to exist. How would you react if you knew that was going to happen? That's what Habakkuk was facing. How do you face those situations when there is no hope, when the situation is hopeless?

While Habakkuk's situation has not changed but only gotten worse, one thing has drastically changed – Habakkuk. Too often we want our circumstances to change yet God wants us to change. Habakkuk faces a hopeless situation with patience, faith, joy and victory.

I want that, don't you? I want the kind of faith; I want that kind of relationship with God – that when my world caves in, I'm still victorious! That's Habakkuk. It's a choice though and one too few make. These four verses are one of the greatest expressions of hope in the whole Bible. Habakkuk models that horrible pain is not incompatible with trust in God. He models what a healthy Christian life looks like. If you're taking notes...

1. The healthy Christian life means that I trust even when I'm hurting. In verse 16 Habakkuk says, *"I heard..."* He uses the same word as in 3:2, *"LORD, I have heard of your fame..."* What had he heard? He'd heard how God was going to judge his people. He'd heard how awesome and powerful God was. And it left him physically and emotionally drained. It terrified him. An impending disaster was coming on his country that was so horrible that he couldn't even imagine it, so he teaches us that...

a. Trusting God when you're hurting means living with pain, *"I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled"* (vs. 16a). Have you ever been so frightened that you can hear your own heart pounding, you can't stop shaking, you can hardly keep yourself under control? Habakkuk no longer has any theological or philosophical problems as he did earlier. He sees everything with perfect clarity and has surrendered to God's plan. He's trusting God but even so, he's still very afraid about the impending Babylonian invasion which God had told him was coming. Please notice the many anatomical terms he uses to describe his fear. They indicate he was shaking with anxiety throughout his whole being.

"Now, wait a second!" you say, "I thought you just said that Habakkuk had finally come to a mature faith. What is all this fear business then? Surely a person of true faith doesn't have fear like that? Or does he?"

It's a fallacy that true faith is never accompanied by feelings of fear, that the concepts of faith and fear are incompatible. We see in this verse nothing could be further from the truth. Habakkuk though a great man of faith, trembled like a leaf in the face of threatening circumstances.

Those of deep faith have often been those who at their most intense times of testing found themselves racked with fear. Abraham, the father of the faithful, knew time and time again what it meant to be fearful when he faced the uncertainty of his future. King David admitted that at times his heart was failing him in spite of his faith. The prophet Jeremiah felt at times that he just could not face the trials that were before him. John the Baptist, while languishing in prison, found himself struggling with fear at what was lying ahead. Even the mighty Apostle Paul gives us a telling glimpse into his inner life. In 2 Corinthians 7:5 he wrote, *"For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, **fears within.**"* It's hard to imagine Paul frightened, but he was. Have you ever thought that Paul could really be fearful? How's that possible? This man who expressed in such glowing terms what it means to have faith in God, this man who has told us how Christ is sufficient for us in all things, and how God will always supply all our needs in Christ

Jesus? Paul fearful? Yes, just like other great men and women of faith, and just like Jesus Christ who in the Garden of Gethsemane struggled with His fears before the Father. Trembling is also a normal response to an encounter with God.

I remember when the jets struck the twin towers. My brother, Mark, works near there. I felt nauseous. I couldn't sleep. I had a pit in my stomach. I was a bundle of nerves until I knew that he was safe.

Contrary to what many Christians think, faith usually becomes harder—and not easier—as you mature spiritually! Many Christians believe that Romans 8:28 is telling us what we should see or feel, it's not. It tells us what we should know. In spite of feeling terrified and in physical pain because he's so emotionally distraught, Habakkuk said, "I will rest in God. I will trust Him even if I feel miserable."

God's mature children are not immune from having bewildering times of fear. True faith is compatible with feelings of fear! Christian friend, please stop coming down on yourself—or others—simply because you feel fearful or are wrestling with your fears. Stop equating spirituality with those who have an absence of fears and struggles. For those who are not in touch with their fears are often the least, not the most, spiritual. In Habakkuk's weakened state, however, his confidence and hope were renewed. He found a new sense of peace and purpose in his prophetic ministry. ***Trusting God when you're hurting means living with pain.***

b. Trusting God when you're hurting means being patient, "Yet I will wait patiently..." (vs. 16b). Wow! Habakkuk has come a long way! Remember that his very first words were, "How long, O LORD" (1:2). He's grown and is willing to wait on God's timing. The word for "wait" in Hebrew means "to weave." Waiting doesn't mean that we're passive when we wait. Waiting is full of anticipation. God is weaving everything together. Learn to let God take all those circumstances that you can't begin to understand. He'll weave them together into a design you'd have never believed was possible. Part of waiting is anticipation of what God is doing.

Habakkuk knows God is going to judge the Babylonians but it wasn't going to happen right away, probably not in his lifetime. Many of us are like Margaret Thatcher who said "I am extraordinarily patient provided I get my own way in the end." Habakkuk teaches us that faith means that we not only trust that God knows best, we trust that His timing is best too.

So what's going on in your life right now? Wait on Him. Just wait. When He is ready, He'll bring it about. He'll make it happen when it's the right time. ***Trusting God when you're hurting means being patient.***

c. Trusting God when you're hurting means being confident in God's ultimate justice. What's Habakkuk waiting for? "For the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us." We hate injustice, yet we live in a world where it often seems like people with the money to hire the fat cat attorneys are more likely to go free than those who

must be represented by assigned public defenders. We become cynical about justice because neither guilt nor innocence seems to be a factor in the outcome.

God can't be outmaneuvered or bought off. Someday all the Babylons will be held accountable for their crimes and sins. God rained down His justice on Babylon in 539 BC, when the Medes and Persians took her out. It takes faith and patience to wait for something without a precise date. That was Habakkuk's situation and that's ours.

So how can God's justice make a difference in my life? First of all, every time injustice takes place, people grieve. Humans long for "justice." When it's denied, it can bring great unrest to an individual or a nation. Habakkuk reminds us God is just. That brings a great sense of relief as we follow Him. Sometimes, it appears on this earth that people get away with horrible evil, yet God will bring absolute justice to every single situation, and God's justice extends beyond the grave. Our hearts long for such justice. Each of us has the responsibility to live each day in light of that justice. It's easy for us to think about how others will have to give an account to God, but it's not so easy to see our own responsibility and how that applies to us.

No action takes place in private and there's no word that goes unrecorded. There's no thought that escapes His awareness. At some point, we all will have to give an account of everything, and God will deal with everyone according to His perfect standard of justice (Hebrews 4:12-14).

Habakkuk was comforted in knowing that there is a God's Who enacts justice. That truth can bring peace to our hearts and purity to our actions. We need to pray that God will help us to trust in His justice and that He will help us to live our lives in light of that justice. ***Trusting God when you're hurting means being confident in God's ultimate justice.***

2. The healthy Christian life means that my satisfaction is in the eternal, not the temporal, *"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, **yet** I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior"* (vss. 17-18). Do you want a God Who gets you through the worst times? That's the kind of God Habakkuk had. That's the God he trusted.

Often we talk about the faith of Job because of his perseverance in the midst of horrible suffering. I want to suggest that while Job demonstrates a college level faith; Habakkuk is grad school – and he's where we all want and need to be. You see, Job trusted God after terrible suffering lands on him but he didn't know that it was coming. Habakkuk, even though he knows terrible, calamitous suffering is coming – still trusts God.

Let me encourage you to do something vital for your Christian walk, memorize these four verses. Do it this week. Let God's Spirit write them on your heart. You're going to

need them. Tough times are coming. I don't know how or when. Some of you are in the middle of them now.

Habakkuk teaches us that the believer can have more than just endurance but he can have joy in the midst of sorrow. If there was ever a man who had cause for sorrow, it's Habakkuk. Habakkuk spread out before God his sorrow over the wickedness of his nation of Judah. He cried out, "How long, O Lord will you allow this wickedness to go unpunished? How long will you tolerate it?" When God responded, Habakkuk's sorrow was multiplied because God revealed that He was going to use the wicked nation of Babylon to inflict punishment on Judah. Habakkuk cried out again, but still God did not modify His plan just to ease the pain of this noble prophet. Instead, He spoke once more and revealed the outcome of the whole scenario. He revealed how He would indeed judge Judah with Babylon, and then He'd turn and judge Babylon for her wickedness. Then, He revealed Himself to Habakkuk...and Habakkuk gets it!

Of all of the wonderful passages in Scripture, this climax of Habakkuk's prophecy is one of the great affirmations of the faith. Let me repeat this because it is so important: Habakkuk's circumstances have not changed, they've gotten worse. What has changed is Habakkuk!

Verses 17 and 18 are constructed as an *"if...then"* sentence. It's a conditional clause followed by a main clause. Verse 17 is the *conditional* clause and verse 18 is the *main* clause which sets out the consequences of those conditions being fulfilled. And this is powerful! This is real freedom!

a. Joy will never come from the material world, "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." These nouns describe the backbone of Judah's economy and are in ascending order of severity. It was an agricultural economy and this is a description of what happens when Babylon conquers Judah. There is a total collapse of their economic system. Every category is mentioned. There's no food. Sheep represents wool, so there are also no clothes. The invading army ravages the land. Grocery stores are all ransacked and closed. Farms and private homes pillaged and torched. This is the Sudan, North Korea and Rwanda rolled into one.

We have a hard time imagining a situation so desperate. Everything people trust in is suddenly swept away. They're left without hope, without help, without any prospect of happiness, as defined by our culture. Please understand that sooner or later, all that this world offers us—all in which people place their trust—will some day fail. It seems like people intuitively know that and so are gripped with fear from day to day. They compulsively watch the stock market and are paranoid about rising inflation rates. They fear thieves, looters and vandals. They even fear nature itself; because they know that in a moment, all that we have can be swept away.

In today's terms Habakkuk would be saying: "Though I lose my job, my health fails, I lose my spouse and kids, though I'm homeless, though I lose all of my friends...though I lose everything! I won't pull the plug on You Lord. I won't resent You. I won't stop trusting You. I may have questions, I'll have prayer requests but You are my God – no matter what!"

So what's in your blank space? What's the thing that you put in your blank space that you believe you must have to be happy? A happy marriage, a new house, car, job, retirement, health – whatever? If Jesus Christ is not more than enough for you now, then even if you had the whole world – it would still not be enough! If you're not satisfied first with the Giver, you'll never be satisfied with His gifts. Inner peace has nothing to do with outward prosperity.

b. Joy is found in the Person of God, "yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (v. 18). If you're not familiar with the story of Joni, please secure a copy of her biography to read this summer.

Joni Eareckson Tada was paralyzed in a swimming accident when she was a teenager and became a quadriplegic. She shares this story: "Honesty is always the best policy, but especially when you're surrounded by a crowd of women in a restroom during a break at a Christian women's conference. One woman, putting on lipstick, said, 'Oh, Joni, you always look so together, so happy in your wheelchair. I wish that I had your joy!' Several women around her nodded. 'How do you do it?' she asked as she capped her lipstick. 'I don't do it,' I said. 'In fact, may I tell you honestly how I woke up this morning?' 'This is an average day,' I breathed deeply. 'After my husband, Ken, leaves for work at 6:00 A.M., I'm alone until I hear the front door open at 7:00 A.M. That's when a friend arrives to get me up. While I listen to her make coffee, I pray, 'Oh, Lord, my friend will soon give me a bath, get me dressed, sit me up in my chair, brush my hair and teeth, and send me out the door. I don't have the strength to face this routine one more time. I have no resources. I don't have a smile to take into the day. But You do. May I have yours? God, I need you desperately.'" 'So, what happens when your friend comes through the bedroom door?' one of them asked. 'I turn my head toward her and give her a smile sent straight from heaven. It's not mine. It's God's. And so,' I said, gesturing to my paralyzed legs, 'whatever joy you see today was hard won this morning.'"

This is not "I'll just stoically endure," nor is Habakkuk an optimist. God is His source of joy. This is fullness of joy in God plus nothing.

Even in the Church, we've often bought into a falsehood – that if we feed people, educate them, build them houses, get them jobs, buy them cars – then we have met their needs. No, God is theirs and our greatest need! You can have everything else but if you do not have God, you have nothing. You can lose everything but if you have God, you have everything.

Habakkuk had learned life's most important lesson: Our satisfaction is not to be derived from the material world but from God Himself. Many rejoice in homes, or cars, their lifestyle or family. However, when they're all gone what is there to rejoice in? When all is gone, Habakkuk's God is not gone.

Most modern translations render this "*I will rejoice in the LORD.*" That's not strong enough. The verb signifies much more than rejoicing; it's a jubilant cry of victory. The screams of triumph after the Blackhawks won the Stanley Cup are a whisper compared to the victory Habakkuk has. Babylon will defeat them but Habakkuk literally writes, "*Yet I will triumph in Yahweh*" (or the LORD). Then, he says, "*I will be joyful in God my Savior.*" His joy is not in his situation but in God. That's how he has joy!

A despairing man confessed to his pastor, "My life is really in bad shape." "How bad?" the pastor inquired. Burying his head in his hands, he moaned, "I'll tell you how bad, all I've got left is God." And his pastor's face lit up. "I'm happy to assure you that a person with nothing left but God has more than enough for great victory!"

3. A healthy Christian life is not just surviving in the midst of devastation; it is thriving in the midst of it, "*The Sovereign LORD is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights*" (v. 19). Habakkuk lets everyone know the reason for his hopefulness in the midst of a bleak situation. He's crystal clear that it is God – the covenant making and the covenant keeping God of Israel, Who is the One who provides all the strength that he needs.

This last verse is borrowed from Psalm 18, a Davidic hymn of triumph. All might and confidence comes from God alone, who sustains the prophet by His power and upholds him when all Hell breaks loose. This isn't just coping. It's rising above your trials. It's climbing, not coasting. Habakkuk discovered the secret of turning his mountains into opportunities to discover more of God's strength in his inner man. He's expressing the truth Paul so classically stated: "*Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong*" (2 Cor. 12:10). God, by His indwelling Spirit, provides us with the strength to do what otherwise would be humanly impossible. Too many of us suffer from spiritual vertigo, faced with the prospect, let alone the presence of scaling spiritual heights. We grow queasy and do all we can to avoid such threatening situations. We try to play it safe but the Christian life is not about playing it safe.

Habakkuk paints a dangerous yet beautiful picture of a deer skipping over the mountain heights, picking its way among the stony crags to the very pinnacle, and walking along the ridge of the mountaintops. It's a picture of grace and confidence. It's a picture of an animal sure-footed and strong.

Habakkuk uses this imagery to teach us that it is only in the strength that God alone gives, that we can rise above the morass of sorrow and despair that we find in this world and then we leap among the mountain peaks. It's a picture of limitless spiritual energy that springs from confidence in God. That kind of strength comes from God alone. Our

Lord will give us grace in the most difficult days if we will just look to Him. Those who know God are not only able to survive but thrive in the most difficult places of life.

The word “*heights*” refers to a place of conquest and domain, to the high places of salvation that are climbed only by faith. It refers to the ultimate triumph of the people of God over all oppression and trials. Habakkuk has no future, but by God’s power he demonstrates the quality of faith that God honors and brings Him glory. So Habakkuk ends with a commission to advance; to take the battle to the enemy, to go for the high ground. It means feet like a deer and it involves spiritual warfare and victory.

Conclusion: After an extensive tour of the United States, the late, well-known German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke was asked what he saw as the greatest defect among American Christians. He replied, “*They have an inadequate view of suffering.*” Habakkuk didn’t totally understand why God was going to judge his people, but he submitted to God by faith. His faith expresses itself in this joyful song of praise that ends the book.

a. Faith is essential to a healthy relationship with God. “*The just shall live by his faith*” (2:4). This significant verse is quoted three times in the New Testament. It’s faith alone in Christ alone. We commence our Christian life by taking God at His Word concerning His Son, Jesus, that He died to pay the penalty of our sins. Then, we continue living by faith, basing our lives upon God’s Word. Faith trusts God when we don’t understand His ways. When evil things happen to us, we must trust that God is in control and we can rest in Him.

b. Faith does not necessarily eliminate intense emotions. Habakkuk heard what God had said. He’s trusting but he’s still terrified. He has trust and terror all mixed together. Though he’s trusting God, what’s about to happen still causes him to tremble with fear. Sometimes we too are terrified with where we are at or what we’re facing. We can be honest with God about what we’re feeling and yet at the same time must be submissive, trusting in His sovereign ways.

c. Faith evidences itself by joy in the Lord in spite of current devastating circumstances. Even when all Hell breaks loose, and he and the whole nation end up destitute, Habakkuk resolves that he will not just trust, he will triumph. It’s similar to Paul’s triumphant close in Romans 8 where he affirms that absolutely nothing, including evil powers or death itself, can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That’s why Paul could sing in jail and later write from a Roman prison cell, “*Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice*” (Phil. 4:4). The way to get out from under the load is to get right under the Lord.

So how does your faith match up with Habakkuk’s this morning? Have you put your full trust in God despite what you see happening around you, in spite of what you’re going through? Do you rejoice in Him regardless of your circumstances? That’s the kind of faith that God wants us to have...that’s the kind of faith that I want...don’t you? As T.R. Glover said, it must be with us as it was with those 1st century Christians, “*Jesus or*

nobody.” So as we close this morning, let me share this testimony by Zac Smith that powerfully illustrates the faith Habakkuk is talking about. <http://vimeo.com/9796056>.

“I 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. 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, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to go on the heights.”