

Hinds' Feet On High Places

Habakkuk 3:1-19

In our Christian lives, sometimes we talk about mountain top experiences--those great experiences of spiritual excitement and joy that stand out above all others. And then we talk about the valleys, the times of spiritual discouragement when our spirits are down.

There's a danger in that, in emphasizing those mountain tops and valleys too much, for in a sense, a real sign of Christian maturity is the stability and confidence to respond to all live circumstances with a steady faith. Indeed, the lives of those who speak often of mountain-tops and valleys are often dominated by emotions, and emotions are particularly vulnerable to such peaks and valleys. And emotions, because they are so changing, are an unreliable basis upon which to live your Christian life.

But, Scripture does still speak of mountain-top experiences, referring to the gloriously intense awareness of the majesty of God's presence that goes beyond our normal life experiences. Such mountain-top experiences are called in Scripture "walking on the heights", and they are far more than simply emotion. In fact, in my own experience, as with some of you, I'm sure, those experiences of spiritual heights may well come in the midst of great physical and emotional struggle. The times of greatest emotional struggle may be the occasion for walking on the heights, spiritually.

Such is the case for Habakkuk. He experiences a great mountain-top experience, expressed in,

v.18-19

And he experiences that in a time of desperate struggle. He

has heard God's judgment. He has heard of the coming of the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people. He has heard of the destruction of the nation of Judah. He has heard the five woes upon Babylon.

And he is in turmoil as he prays. Actually, this is a psalm, a prayer to be sung, and appropriately it is to be sung to a wild rhythm.

v.1

What is the shigionoth? According to the most often quoted Hebrew dictionary, the definition begins "a doubtful word." According to an NIV footnote, the interpreters say, "probably a literary or musical term." That's safe to say, for the same word is used in the Psalms, where the context indicates it is some sort of musical description. To the best that researches can discern, the word refers to some sort of highly emotional poetic form, a wildly passionate song with rapid changes in rhythm.

Habakkuk is deeply moved as he sings and prays this psalm, and you must recognize that to get the full impact of this chapter. The prophet has heard from God, and,

I. CONFRONTED WITH THE CERTAINTY OF GOD'S JUDGMENT, THE PROPHET PRAYS FOR PROTECTION.

Remember the emphasis on certainty.

Hab. 2:2 "Then the Lord answered me and said: "Write the vision And make it plain on tablets, That he may run who reads it. 3 For the vision is yet for an appointed time; But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; Because it will surely come, It will not tarry."

Habakkuk understood, so he prays for protection.

v.2

There is really two requests in that verse, the first is,

A. A prayer for God’s deliverance from days of trouble.

Habakkuk reacts rightly to God’s prophecy of trouble upon

Judah.

v.2a He should fear!

It will be a terrible destruction, first upon Judah at the hands of the Babylonian army, then upon Babylon, who would fade away and lose their power just as quickly as they rose to power.

And the prophet says “revive your work in the midst of the years.” Revive your work, words which in other places mean put an end to the trouble Israel is experiencing. Habakkuk is saying to God, “revive that work,” that work of deliverance.

The same prayer is in,

Ps. 138:7 “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me. 8 The LORD will fulfill [his purpose] for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever-- do not abandon the works of your hands.”

And closely associated with that request is,

B. A prayer for God’s mercy in the days of wrath.

v.2b

That’s a tremendously significant request. God’s wrath was just. In fact, it was what Habakkuk had wanted to see all along. Remember his first complaint,

Hab. 1:2 “O Lord, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, “Violence!” And You will not save. 3 Why do You show me iniquity, And cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; There is strife, and contention arises.”

He’s asking for justice, but when that justice is described to him, he recognizes it’s terror, and so he prays, “In wrath, remember mercy.”

We have already seen that Habakkuk correctly understood the nature of God. He understood God’s holiness and God’s justice. He understood that God could not look upon wickedness. And he understands that God’s nature includes both wrath and mercy. He understands that those two attributes don’t contradict each other one bit. Those twin attributes are identified by God himself in his self-revelation to Moses,

Exod. 34:6 “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

It is those two attributes of God, wrath and mercy, which made the cross of Jesus Christ absolutely essential. If God was a god of wrath alone, without mercy, the cross would have been entirely unnecessary. God, in his wrath, simply would have condemned every single person to hell for his sin. He would have been fair and just, for that is exactly what every single one of us deserves.

If God were a god of mercy alone, without wrath, he could

have simply excused the sinfulness of man without demanding that a price be paid to atone for the sin. Then, also, the cross would have been unnecessary, and God would have excused sin without exacting any penalty for it.

But God is both a god of justice and a god of mercy. And that leaves him with only one possible option. He would have to send a sinless substitute to endure his wrath in place of those to whom he would show mercy.

Let me explain that idea much more accurately, using the words of the Apostle Paul,

Rom.3:21 “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- 26 he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

God is just--pouring out his wrath against sin as the required curse of the covenant upon covenant breakers.

And God is the justifier--the one who declares men to be not guilty, the one who imputes to their account the righteousness of his own son, so that he can accept them as righteous in his sight.

That’s the gospel! Habakkuk is praying “the sinners prayer,” to use a rather trite expression of our day. “In wrath, remember

mercy.”

Habakkuk was confronted the absolute certainty of God’s judgment, and he is compelled to pray for deliverance and mercy. Then,

II. CONFRONTED WITH THE CERTAINTY OF GOD’S JUDGMENT, THE PROPHET RECEIVES A VISION OF GOD’S GLORY.

That vision is the bulk of this chapter, the bulk of this prayer. It begins in,
v.3

Verses 3-7 are a glowing description of,

A. God’s glory, which fills the earth. v.3-7

Teman, verse 3, is a description of the land and people of Esau, for Teman was Esau’s grandson and the name of one of Edom’s chief cities. They were Israel’s enemies, tracing that enmity back to the twins Jacob and Esau themselves.

Paran is a mountain right near Mt. Sinai, where the Lord had established his covenant with Israel. And so, from both Jacob and Esau, the Lord would come to reveal his glory.
v.3b

How can we even imagine such glory, the fullness of which won’t be realized until Jesus returns in final judgment at the last day, ushering in the New Jerusalem in the New Heavens and the new earth.

Rev. 21:21 “The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure

gold, like transparent glass. 22 I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. 25 On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. 26 The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. 27 Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.”

This glorious vision of God continues with words that are inadequate, but a faithful attempt to express the splendor of God's glory.

v.4

We could do an in-depth study of each of those phrases, with plenty of biblical cross-references. This is just magnificent poetry! The glory of his splendor includes the power to inflict judgment, judgment expressed so clearly in the plagues upon Egypt, among others.

v.5

And his ultimate, absolute, sovereign authority is so clearly expressed,

v.6

Such power and glory overwhelms all his enemies.

v.7

Cushan is a reference to Cush, or Ethiopia, one of the nations, the Gentile nations separated from God. Midian was an ancient enemy of Israel, and the two together represent all the enemies of God's people, enemies brought into anguish by God's splendor.

Reading through that description of God, it is obvious that our thoughts are too small and our ideas too mundane. This is a vision of God! And we spend much too much time meditating on ideas infinitely less significant.

Likewise, our prayers are entirely too shallow, for we fail to come close to this sort of comprehension of God. We are far too man-centered in our thinking, and our praying!

Habakkuk's prayer is a refreshing antidote to the multitude of trivial subjects that occupy our minds. And this vision of God's glory goes further, teaching us not only about God's character, but also about God's ultimate purpose. And,

B. God's purpose is two-fold--salvation and judgment.

That theme has been repeated so often through these minor prophets. On the one hand, we see God's mercy and his salvation. On the other hand, as the opposite side of that same coin, we see God's wrath and his judgment.

First, his judgment.

v.8,15

God's wrath is poured out universally, cosmically. Even upon the rivers, the streams and the seas. Of course, God did use the sea, particularly the Red Sea, as the instrument of his salvation for his people and of judgment upon their enemies.

His wrath is expressed by the bow, and the arrows used to inflict death among human combatants. There is obvious symbolism in all of this, symbolism demonstration God purpose of inflicting judgment.

v.9

And, v.10

Then, v.11

You recall, of course, when God did just that, holding the sun still for a day while Joshua finished the conquest of Gibeon recorded in Joshua 10.

And as a culmination of his judgment,

v.12

Threshing is an obvious symbol of God's perfect justice and judgment. We read of such judgment in,

Rev. 14:14 "I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one "like a son of man" with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15 Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." 16 So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested. 17 Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe." 19 The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. 20 They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia."

But, God has come not only for judgment. In the midst of that judgment, there is salvation. Or, we might say, in the midst of his salvation, there is judgment. The two are inseparably connected.

v.8

Even clearer, note the contrast between,
v.12-13

The ultimate fulfillment of verse 13 is also the cross of Jesus Christ, for God's ultimate purpose is, indeed, to save and exalt his anointed one, his Messiah. And the exaltation of the Messiah involves the destruction of the evil one, described in verse 13 as the "leader of the land of wickedness," whom God "stripped from head to foot."

And according to,

v.14

Note the similarity of language in,

Col. 2:15 "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

Habakkuk has really received a glorious vision of God's splendor, one which reveals so clearly the person and the work of Jesus Christ. It is that vision that enabled him to be able to ride upon the heights in his spirit. It was that vision of God that gave him this mountain top experience.

There is nothing shallow in this experience at all, nothing confined to the shifting sand of human emotions. This is the fervent prayer of a man who had been confronted with God's glory. The glory of judgment and the glory of salvation. This vision can't be reduced to a slogan to be printed upon a bumper sticker or a t-shirt. This vision doesn't measure up to the slick market-sensitive advertising so common in our day.

Bottom line, this is a vision of God, one which forced the prophet to come to grips with the reality of God's judgment. That reality brought about a genuine dread, a fearful expectation of horrible things to come, but, as we see so marvelously in these last verses,

III. CONFRONTED WITH THE CERTAINTY OF GOD'S JUDGMENT, THE PROPHET'S DREAD TURNS TO JOY.

We ought to react first with dread, for judgment is a dreadful thing. That is why it is an offensive profanity to utter the name of hell unless you are speaking with appropriate gravity and realistic evaluation. Don't ever invoke the name of hell lightly, for it is the ultimate and eternal expression of all that we have studied tonight about God's judgment.

There should be dread, there should be a healthy fear of that judgment, causing us to cry out for protection. "In wrath, remember mercy."

But by knowing God, by really knowing God, that dread can be turned to incredible joy. Just as it was for Habakkuk.

How did that happen? What did Habakkuk express that enabled him to ride on the heights? Three things.

First,

A. Patient endurance.

v.16

Habakkuk knew judgment upon Judah was coming. He would wait patiently and endure.

Rev. 13:10 "If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he

will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints."

Rev. 14:12 "This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus."

Sometimes, in the shallowness of our own experiences, we are unwilling to endure very much at all. The comfortability of our lives has created almost total lack of willingness to endure difficulty. And the shallowness of such a faith will keep us off those heights that Habakkuk speaks of.

Habakkuk is deeply agitated. His innermost being was trembling with fear and foreboding. His lips quivered. His very bones seemed to have dissolved. His legs would no longer hold him up.

Doesn't sound much like riding on the heights, does it? Doesn't sound like much of a mountaintop experience. Oh, but it was. Because of his patient endurance. And because of his,

B. Blind trust.

Let me read words of incredible faith, incredible trust.

v.17-18

Let me ask you a very probing and personal question, one I challenge you to meditate upon in your own heart this evening. Can you say what Habakkuk says? Can you say honestly to God,

v.17-18

If you can't, then you won't be able to go on the heights of great spiritual joy, because if your joy is in any way attached to

the things of this world, if your joy in God is in any way attached to the material, financial, or physical prosperity you may enjoy, then that joy is subject to being lost.

There is only one true ground for real joy, and that is God's sufficiency. No matter how well supplied you may be externally, if God and God alone is not sufficient for your needs, then you will have no lasting spiritual joy.

And that's why the true spiritual heights often come during struggle, because it is through trouble and hardship that we learn to trust in God's sufficiency. It is when we realize our own insufficiencies, our own weaknesses, that we really learn to trust.

That's what Paul learned when he prayed to God to remove his thorn in the flesh. God didn't remove that thorn, but said to Paul instead,

2Cor. 12:9 "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul responded appropriately,

2Cor. 12:9 "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

I call that blind trust. I will trust God, no matter what the outward circumstances may be!

v.17-18

And how is such a thing possible? How is the prophet's dread of God's judgment turned to joy?

C. Supernatural strength.

v.19a

You can't climb up on the mountain in your own strength! You can't go upon the heights if you are depending upon your own strength. Because, according to God, only when you are weak are you strong.

Only when you depend upon supernatural strength.

And so, with patient endurance, blind trust, and supernatural strength, the prophet went up upon the heights.

v.19b

Deer's feet is translated in the King James, "hinds feet." A hind is a female deer. And deer have strong legs. With deeply spiritual symbolism, God gives us hinds feet to go on high places.

The high place is a place of great security and protection. It is a place of unparalleled joy. It is, ultimately, the place of God's presence.

These words describe the richest experience of God's blessing that we can possibly achieve, the closest we ever come to enjoying the blessings of our eternal home while still on this earth.

With patient endurance in all the circumstances of your life, with blind trust to rejoice in God no matter what the outward details in your life, and with supernatural strength, may the sovereign Lord make your feet like the feet of a deer, and enable you to go on the heights.

As we worship this sabbath day, and even as we think about

the Lord's Supper, let me end by reading about a promise God makes to take us upon these heights. It is a promise which has a very obvious condition attached.

Isa. 58:13 "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, 14 then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the LORD has spoken."