

*A Path to Joy*

**Habakkuk**

John Breon

Habakkuk 3:17-19 is a song of praise and joy. Listen to some other promises of joy and exhortations to rejoice, to give thanks and praise.

Jesus says, "...and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy" (John 16:22).

Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

The Psalms are full of calls to praise and worship God with joy.

But how can we? How can we have that kind of joy in a world like this? Life makes it tough for many people to give thanks.

We live in a world of *crushed dreams*. A little girl and her mother were walking down the street. The girl noticed a puddle with some oil on it. As the sun shone on it, it reflected many colors. The girl said, "Look, mother! A rainbow gone to smash." When I heard that story, I wasn't familiar with the phrase "gone to smash," but I get what it's saying. We don't have to look very far around us to find rainbows that have been smashed—hopes and dreams that have fallen apart.

We experience pain, loss, grief, and disappointment that make rejoicing and giving thanks hard to do. There's also frustration, fear, war, terrorism, economic trouble, sickness, and brokenness in relationships. There's a lot of confusion in the world today—and in the church. About the time we think we have things figured out, they change. What's really solid and dependable? What can we count on? Are there days when it seems like it'd be easier to give in and walk away?

In view of all that, how can we come to that place of praise, that affirmation of trust and faith? Let's see how Habakkuk got there and maybe we can go there with him.

**1:2** "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?"

The path to joy and thankfulness takes us through *prayer*. Habakkuk sees violence, injustice, and wrongdoing all around him and he prays about it. But God seems not to hear because God seems to do nothing about it. Judah, the nation, has gone away from the Lord, but they're going unpunished. Why doesn't God hear the cries of the righteous and bring judgment on the evil-doers?

We know about unanswered prayer, don't we? We pray for good and evil continues. We pray for peace and war goes on. We pray for justice and people still mistreat others and oppress them. We pray for healing and someone still dies. We pray for God to meet some need of ours yet we still struggle with that area of life.

Where is God? Does he not hear? And if he hears, does he not care?

We want to hold to faith in God, to believe that God is good, that God cares and that God is able to answer prayer and meet our needs. But that doesn't mean we can't ask tough questions about God and faith and prayer. God's not intimidated by our questions, not even our doubts. God can handle it.

I once heard another pastor telling about when his daughter was sick and the doctors said she was going to die. His other daughter, hearing this report about her sister, went to the hospital chapel. She stood there for some time, yelling and even cursing at the crucifix. After a while, a nun the girl had not seen sitting in one of the pews came up, put her arm around the girl and said, "A lot of the Psalms sound like that, don't they?"

The Book of Psalms includes more psalms of *lament* than any other kind. A lament expresses sorrow, fear, questions. We can tell God our doubts, our arguments, our anger. At least we're still talking with God; we're still "on the dance floor" with the Lord. Michael Card wrote a book titled *A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Language of Lament*. He says that lament is supposed to be part of worship. We can join David, Job, Jeremiah, Habakkuk—and Jesus—in lamenting sin, sorrow, frustration, confusion. Worship means to declare worth. Lament says that God is the One worthy to bring our sorrows to.

Lament is the path that takes us to the place where we discover that there is no complete answer to pain and suffering, only Presence. The language of lament gives a meaningful form to our grief by providing a vocabulary for our suffering and then offering it to God as worship. Our questions and complaints will never find individual answers (even as Job's questions were never fully answered). The only Answer is the dangerous, disturbing, comforting Presence, which is the true answer to all our questions and hopes. (Card 129)

God can handle our anger and our questions. Sometimes God may turn some of our questions back on us or give us answers we may not have expected. But there really are no unanswered prayers.

I think each of our kids at some time asked about God hearing prayer. I remember one night when Eli was young—I was praying with him at bedtime and he asked, "Does God hear everything we say and do it?" I said that God does hear everything we say; God hears every prayer. But I also tried to explain that sometimes we don't ask for what we really need and that God may not give us everything we ask for.

This sounds trite, but I still think it's true: God answers prayer in at least four ways: 1) No. 2) Not yet. 3) Yes, I thought you'd never ask. 4) Yes, and here's more.

God knows what's ultimately best for us. God knows what will be best for fulfilling his purposes. And God answers prayer in light of that.

God answers prayer not just by giving things, but by giving himself. God may withhold some things because they're not best for our growth and God's glory. God's timing is better than ours. He may be getting us ready to receive what he wants to do in our lives.

On a Pacific island during W.W. II, a group of soldiers got separated from the rest of their unit. Then a thick fog settled in and they couldn't see anything. They didn't know where their unit was or where the enemy was. The chaplain was with them and he prayed that God would lift the fog so they could see to find their way back. The fog didn't lift. But before long they heard voices nearby. They were voices of the enemy. The soldiers listened and moved around those voices until they could make their way

back to where they belonged. If their prayer had been answered the way they wanted, the enemy would have found them. But the fog hid them and enabled them to escape (Bob Stamps told this story sometime years ago).

God wants to teach us to pray. Prayer is not to change God's mind, but to discover it and to learn to pray according to God's will. Sometimes in the Bible, people's prayers influence how God interacts with us. Still, it seems best to say that praying in relationship with God we learn to desire what God desires and to pray for what God wants to give.

God answered Habakkuk's prayer, although the answer was both comforting and confounding. "You're not going to believe this." God *would* judge and punish sinful Judah. But God would use the even more wicked Babylonians as his instrument of punishment.

Our path leads to *the realization that God is working*, no matter what the circumstances, however much evil seems to be winning. God is present and God is active.

Though the cause of evil prosper,  
Yet 'tis truth alone is strong;  
Though her portion be the scaffold,  
And upon the throne be wrong.  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
And behind the dim unknown  
Standeth God within the shadow  
Keeping watch above his own.

(James Russell Lowell, "Once to Every Man and Nation,"  
*The Book of Hymns* 1966 #242)

God's way of working may seem strange indeed. Habakkuk couldn't believe that God would use the wicked and violent Babylonians to punish Judah. We're not that bad! "Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" (**1:13**). It'd be kind of like us hearing that God would use ISIS as his instrument of judgment on us. (That's just an illustration to help us understand what Habakkuk felt!)

God's work does include judgment. That may involve allowing evil to run its course, handing people over to the sins they've chosen (see Romans 1:15-32), using unexpected means.

Yet God always has a greater purpose, a higher goal. God is pressing on toward his kingdom. The way God moves toward that goal may be as astounding as a nation's destruction or as astonishing as a man bleeding and dying on a cross.

**Chapter 2** *Habakkuk now waits for God.* Our journey toward joy has some places to rest and get perspective. Take time to wait for God's answers, to listen for God's voice, to dwell in God's presence.

The Lord replied to Habakkuk and gave him a *revelation*. That can carry us a long way down the road to joyous praise and thanksgiving.

God spoke of an appointed time that's certain. *The time will come* when God will judge *all* the wicked, including Babylon, and will fulfill all of God's promises.

Now Habakkuk learns how to live between the times: Between God's promise and its fulfillment, between what God has done and what God waits to do.

First, there's a contrast. The Babylonians are "puffed up" in self-reliance and pride in their power. Their "own strength is their god" (1:11). But that kind of self-reliance means they—and any like them—are not "upright." They're crooked, distorted, not what God intends (2:4).

On the other hand, the "righteous"—those living in right relationship with God and following God's covenant—"live"—both abundantly now and eternally, real life—by "faith" or "faithfulness." That can mean the people's trust in God, dependence on God, clinging to God. Or it could mean God's faithfulness. It's likely talking about interaction: we trust in God's faithfulness and God enables us to be faithful. Faith is not a one-time act, but life-long, consistent faithfulness. Faith is how we live between the times of God's promise and its fulfillment. We trust what we've seen of God's faithfulness and that God will always be faithful.

The apostle Paul includes Habakkuk 2:4 as he states the theme of his letter to the Romans:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” (Rom 1:16-17)

In **Hab 2:5-20** there’s a series of woes on God’s enemies. Woe or sorrow to those who become wealthy by stealing, to those who build a realm by unjust gain, to one who builds a city with bloodshed, to those who force others to drink the cup of violence, to those who worship what is not God—the “no-gods” or idols. God will judge *all* the wicked, even those who unknowingly were used by God to accomplish his purpose.

In **ch. 3**, Habakkuk prays again. Recalling God’s past deeds, he stands in awe and asks God to renew his works and make them known in the present day. He asks God that in wrath God would remember mercy.

Our path brings us to *new prayer, new ways of praying*—calling on God to do what he promised.

Then Habakkuk has a vision of what God promised. God promises that he will win the victory over all the earth and establish his kingdom (**vv. 3-15**). God comes marching into the land and stands—“the one calm figure midst all the tumult of the nations” (Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi, Interpretation Commentary*). This vision includes the last great battle when God will conquer evil and chaos and bring salvation to all who trust him and are his people (**v. 13**)—to all those living in faithfulness.

In seeking joy we can receive a vision of God’s future victory. We can find who God really is. We can have the promise of how the end will be. That scaffold—the cross—really does sway the future. Truth and right do triumph. God achieves the victory.

**3:17-19** After all that, the outward circumstances are still the same. Habakkuk describes them. But he stops expressing doubts, questions, and anguish. In prayers of lament, there’s a turning point. We begin to turn from lament, complaint, sorrow to affirming trust and praising the Lord. Habakkuk now “knows who is working his purposes out, unseen, behind the

turmoil. And Habakkuk now knows what the end of it all will be. He therefore sings the magnificent song of trust..." (Achte-meier).

Our outward circumstances may remain the same, but we see them in a new light. We have a new faith that enables us to sing with Habakkuk:

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 tread on the heights.

We can sing with Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail. We can sing with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, awaiting execution in his Nazi prison cell: "By good powers wonderfully hidden, we await cheerfully, come what may." We can be encouraged by these words from C. H. Spurgeon in a sermon he preached on this passage in the 1800s:

...We have been assured by people who think they know a great deal about the future that awful times are coming. Be it so; it need not alarm us, for the Lord reigneth. Stay yourself on the Lord ... and you can rejoice in His name. If the worst comes to the worst, our refuge is in God; if the heavens shall fall the God of heaven will stand; when God cannot take care of His people under heaven He will take them above the heavens, and there they shall dwell with Him. Therefore, as far as you are concerned, rest; for you shall stand ... at the end of the days. ("The Middle Passage," 723, in Achte-meier, 60)

A young father and his daughter were on a cruise, a "get-away" cruise because his wife/her mother had recently died. Turning to one another to help relieve the pain, they huddled together on board ship. And on the deck of that ship the little girl asked her father: "Daddy, does God love us as much as Mommy did?"

At first, the father didn't know what to say. But he knew he couldn't side-step the question. Pointing out across the water to the most distant horizon, he said, "Honey, God's love reaches farther than you can see in that direction." Turning around he said, "And God's love reaches farther than you can see in that direction, too." And then the father looked up at the sky and said, "And God's love is higher than the sky, too." Finally he pointed down at the ocean and said, "And it's deeper than the ocean as well."

Then the little girl said, "Oh, just think, Daddy. We're right here in the middle of it all!" (Homiletics Online)

Habakkuk has brought us, really, God has led us on the path, to the place of joyous celebration and confidence right in the middle of God's loving plan and purpose. We can have the faith and proclaim the faith that knows how to live between the times. Whatever happens, we can rejoice because God is our salvation. God is our strength. God makes us sure-footed so we can go to the heights and we can walk the paths of life and joy, thankfulness and praise, service and love.

Hallelujah! Let's go!