

Nevertheless Faith

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Habakkuk 3

A friend recently sent me some actual airplane in-flight announcements. One attendant said, "Your seat cushions can be used for flotation; in the event of an emergency water landing, please paddle to shore and take them with our compliments." After a hard landing, the attendant said, "Ladies and gentlemen, please remain in your seats until Captain Crash and his Crew have brought the aircraft to a screeching halt against the gate. And once the tire smoke has cleared and the warning bells are silenced, we'll open the door and you can pick your way through the wreckage to the terminal."

And my favorite: After a very hard landing, the pilot was standing at the door while the passengers exited the aircraft. An elderly lady with a cane made her way up the aisle, stopped, and said, "Young man, do you mind if I ask you a question?" "No, ma'am," said the pilot, "what is it?" The lady said, "Did we land, or were we shot down?"

We've all wondered the same thing. Nevertheless, we fly anyway.

So much of life turns on the word, "nevertheless." People perish in car crashes in Dallas; nevertheless, I drive on our streets every day. Marriages often end in divorce in our culture; nevertheless, Janet and I got married. Children so often break their parents' hearts; nevertheless, we prayed for children and rejoiced when they were born.

The current economic climate is the worst we've seen since the Great Depression. Can you remember a time when the Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger was harder to emphasize? Churches are struggling with budget shortfalls. Members are worried about their jobs and retirement savings. Pastors are trying to minister to people caught in a financial crisis of historic proportions.

Nevertheless, God calls his people to give. When the global economy grows worse, the global need for help becomes greater. Our Father has entrusted us with resources which are critical to the wellbeing and even the survival of millions. How do we trust God in hard places? How do we give sacrificially in hard times?

Choose "nevertheless" faith

"Nevertheless" is a common word in the Bible. The frustrated and troubled Psalmist testified, "When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before you. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand" (Psalm 73:21-23, NASB).

A different Psalmist, looking back over the nation's history with God, stated: "Many times He would deliver them; they, however, were rebellious in their counsel, and so sank down in their iniquity. Nevertheless He looked upon their distress when he heard their cry, and He remembered His covenant for their sake" (Psalm 106:43-45, NASB). In the Garden of Gethsemane, our Lord prayed, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42, NKJV).

When we trust in God despite all circumstances and appearances, we find his joy. Unfortunately, many are not willing to take that step. A century ago, the average lifespan was 41 years; now it is 77. Plagues such as

polio, smallpox, and measles have been defeated. And yet "unipolar" depression, a condition in which a person always feels depressed, is ten times as prevalent today as it was half a century ago. We have shifted from material want to "meaning want," so that our lives lack purpose no matter our circumstances.

Like us, the prophet Habakkuk lived in a time of great stress and challenge. The Babylonian Empire dominated the world stage, and threatened the nation of Judah with enslavement and destruction. If the Hebrew people did not repent of their sins, they would face divine wrath and retribution. God's word to Habakkuk was a dire warning of imminent disaster.

Now the prophet had a decision to make. He could reject the One who was planning such a future for his people. Or he could choose to trust him anyway. He made the right decision: "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord" (Hab. 3:18). This is "nevertheless" faith. This is the kind of faith you need if you're facing an enemy you cannot defeat, carrying a burden too strong for your soul, worshiping God in a congregation struggling with financial hardships. This is the kind of faith God is calling us to choose as we give sacrificially in a time of economic challenge to a world desperate for the hope we have. How can this kind of faith be ours?

Remember what God has done

Habakkuk 3 begins with the prayer, "Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord" (Hab. 3:2a). God's "fame" refers to his works across the years and lands, deeds so remarkable that they came down to the prophet by reputation and recitation.

Habakkuk not only "heard" of God's power and character. He also testified, "I stand in awe of your deeds." The Hebrew word translated "awe" could be rendered "fear" or "alarm." Everyone in Israel knew of God's "fame," but not everyone stood in fear and reverence before their Lord. If they had joined Habakkuk in submission and worship, their judgment at the hands of Babylon would not have been necessary.

But before we convict the Jewish nation for their lack of reverence, we should compare ourselves to their example. In how many ways has God blessed our nation? Our denomination? Your church? Your family? Do you always stop to worship him in grateful reverence? Or do you sometimes take for granted his goodness and provision? I confess that I need to repeat Habakkuk's vow of worship more than I do. Perhaps you need to join me.

What did God do for his people? He "came from Teman" (v. 3), the land south of Judah, a reference to their Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. He also "came from Mount Paran," where "his glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth" at Mt. Sinai. He liberated them from Egyptian slavery through "plague" and "pestilence" (v. 5). At his deliverance, he "made the nations tremble" (v. 6). As they marched toward victory, the Israelites "saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish" (v. 7), descriptions of the nations they passed on their way to Canaan (cf. Exodus 15:14-16; Joshua 2:9-10).

God proved his power over the Red Sea and the elements of nature (vs. 8-11), so that "in wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations" (v. 12). All this "to deliver your people, to save your anointed one" (v. 13a). He crushed Pharaoh (v. 13b) and the mightiest army the world had ever seen (vs. 14-15). When the prophet considered all that God had done for his people, "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound" (v. 16).

Now his people needed another deliverance like the Exodus. Once again, God must redeem his people from an oppressive enemy and enslavement in a foreign land. But Habakkuk knew that what God had done in the past, he can do again in the present.

What has God done to lead you from Egyptian slavery to Holy Land salvation? Where has he shown himself faithful to you? Recall the ways God has proven his power and grace in your past, and trust him for your present. Jesus "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). The Lord "does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). God says of himself, "I the Lord do not change" (Malachi 3:6).

When has he met your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19)? When has he led you through uncertain times by his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2)? All he has done, he can still do. In difficult times, look to the One who knows tomorrow better than we know today. Remember his past, and you're looking at your future.

Trust God for what he will do

Habakkuk bore no illusions about the days ahead. In one of the most moving and picturesque poems in all of Scripture, he stated:

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 (vs. 17-18).

When Babylon comes against Israel, her crops will be ravaged so that the figs, grapes, and olive crops are stolen and destroyed. Their sheep and cattle will be taken as well. All this did in fact come to pass when the nation fell to Babylon, her people deported and her resources plundered. Every source of revenue and sustenance was taken, victim to the horrors of war.

But even when the worst comes to pass, Habakkuk will "rejoice in the Lord." Not "in" the times, but "in" his God. No matter where we are, we can make the same choice to "be joyful in God my Savior." "Joy" is not happiness, an emotion based on happenings. Joy transcends circumstance and can be ours wherever we find ourselves. As one of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23), joy is the product of the Spirit's unhindered work in our lives. Whenever we choose to trust God anyway, we experience the joy he gives to those who are his.

Habakkuk will have not only God's joy, but also his power:

The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on to the heights (v. 19).

In the hardest of times, with his nation's future in ruins, God "is" the strength of the prophet. Not "will be" when things get better, but "is" right now. Not "our" strength but "my" strength, personally. By such power Habakkuk is able to climb like a deer to "the heights" of spiritual victory. As deer could go places where people could not follow, so Habakkuk's spirit can go where the Babylonians cannot come.

It is the same for us. When we give our problems and pain to God with "nevertheless" faith, we experience his joy and power as a result. Not because we have earned his favor in a kind of works-righteousness. Rather, because we have positioned ourselves to receive what God's grace intends to give.

In such faith, trusting the provision of the God who loves us, we choose the kind of "nevertheless faith" which gives sacrificially and obediently to those in greater need than ourselves. Now your Father is calling you to trust his provision as you consider his call to sacrificial faithfulness.

The biblical injunctions to care for those in need are clear and compelling:

- "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry" (Exodus 22:22-23).
- "If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8).
- "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done" (Proverbs 19:17).
- The Lord said of King Josiah, "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" (Jeremiah 22:16).
- Jesus began his preaching ministry in Nazareth by quoting from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

How much should you give to "be kind to the poor"? How much will you sacrifice to "preach good news to the poor" in money and message? C. S. Lewis, when dealing with our question, advised, "I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare."ⁱ When we remember all God has done for us, we are encouraged to trust him with all he asks of us. Then he uses our sacrifice to reach and bless people we will may not know this side of heaven. It is impossible to measure the eternal significance of present faithfulness.

In the storms of life, God sometimes gives us less wind in our sails. But usually he gives us more sails for the wind.

Conclusion

In faith as in life, we usually get what we expect. A young pastor once complained to the great Charles Spurgeon that he was not seeing many conversions in his worship services. Spurgeon asked, "You don't expect someone to come to Christ every time you preach, do you?" The pastor quickly answered, "Oh, of course not." "That's why they don't," the wise preacher replied.

Is the God of Habakkuk your God? Did he meet your needs yesterday? Is he calling you to give sacrificially today to meet the needs of others tomorrow? "Nevertheless faith" positions us to experience all that the God of the universe intends to do with and for and through his people. Choose such faith today.

ⁱ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 86.