

EMPTY BARNs, JOYFUL HEARTS
Habakkuk 3:17-19

Intro: The words of my text give us a study in contrasts.

On the one hand we have a picture of crop failures and flocks and herds which no longer exist. On the other hand we have a prophet who is happy, tremendously happy. And these two verses give us the primary lesson that is to be learned from Habakkuk's prophecy. In fact, we can say that these last two verses are Habakkuk's own testimony. The I's and the my's of verses 18 and 19 belong to Habakkuk.

We know that he was a prophet in Judah, and that he must have lived shortly before the Babylonian captivity. It seems from the last line of the prophecy in 3:19 that he played a stringed instrument in the temple services. This would have made him a Levite like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. He may have even been a contemporary of Jeremiah. But this about exhausts what we know of Habakkuk as far as his place in the nation is concerned.

We can see from his prophecy that he was greatly burdened for the spiritual needs of his people. He was a man of prayer, and yet he struggled with the fact that God was not answering his prayers for the nation. He was baffled, like we often are, with the silence of God, or with what the Puritans called, the desertions of God. He could not understand why wrong was permitted to go on apparently unchecked, while those who sought to please God were mistreated, and their efforts seemed to produce no good at all.

At the same time Habakkuk was a man who knew his God. He has given us those grand words found in 1:12 and 13. He also was determined to be faithful to his ministry, and was greatly encouraged by the Lord to hold to the promises which God had given to the nation, the Lord assuring him that "though" the promise "tarry," he was to "wait for it, because it will surely come, it will not tarry" (2:3).

And, although he was certainly not the first to be taught that we need to be taught to walk by faith, yet he was the prophet who has given us those words which are quoted in Romans (1:17), Galatians (3:11), and Hebrews (10:38). And the writer of the book of Hebrews even related the words of Habakkuk to the second coming of our Lord. We know that in such times of testing many who profess the Lord's Name turn and walk no more with Him. Trials have a way of purifying the ranks of the people of God. Even those who truly belong to the Lord usually have a difficult time, but it is the Lord who strengthens us and who enables us to remain faithful when it seems like a foolish thing to do.

Those of you who are inclined to put the Lord's servants on a pedestal, thinking that they are not tested like you are, should notice very carefully all of this about Habakkuk. God was not only dealing with the nation of Judah, but He was dealing with His servants. If anything, the prophets of Israel and Judah probably suffered worse than the people did because circumstances often seemed to disprove what they were preaching.

This book of Habakkuk has been likened by Dr. Feinberg to the books of Job and Jonah in that it is something of a spiritual autobiography of Habakkuk at a most critical time in his life.

The three verses of my text come at the end of the Psalm which was composed by Habakkuk. The Psalm fills the whole third chapter. And like many of the Psalms, perhaps most of them, it is a prayer (as we learn from 3:1). So it was written to be sung in the temple, and it was to teach the important lesson which Habakkuk learned during this difficult time in his life.

You will notice in 3:1 that it is called, "A PRAYER of Habakkuk the prophet upon Shigionoth." The word "Shigionoth" describes the type of music that it is. It means that it is a song with a rapidly changing mood. That change takes place when we go from verse 17 to verse 18 in the chapter. Up through verse 16 Habakkuk was remembering the judgments of God which, as he said in verse 16, made him "trembled in" himself. But then in verse 17 we see:

I. THE EXTENT OF THE JUDGMENT OF GOD (Hab. 3:17).

(Read the verse.)

In order to get the full impact of the meaning of this verse, we need to turn to Deuteronomy 28 to see what God said would happen if His people did not hearken to His voice and do His will.

In the first part of this chapter the Lord was telling His people through Moses about the blessings that would come to them as long as they were obedient to His Word. But beginning with verse 15 He began to tell them about the curses that would come upon them if they did not do His will.

Read Deut. 28:16b, 17, 18b. Then read verses 31, 33, 38, 39, 40, 42.

This is what Habakkuk was speaking about in Hab. 3:17.

Now we need to remember that whenever God did judge His people in the ways described in Deut. 28, there were people in Israel, or Judah (as was the case here) who were not disobedient to the Lord. But they experienced the judgments of the Lord along with the rest. Perhaps they did not always experience them to the same extent, but they were in trouble, too. This is what Habakkuk was saying here. He loved the Lord, and he loved his people. He was praying for a revival. He wanted the people to return to the Lord. That was the purpose of a prophet's ministry. However, many of the calamities that touched their lives were affecting his life as well. How was he to handle this?

This brings us to consider:

II. THE PURPOSE OF GOD IN TRIALS (Hab. 3:18).

Habakkuk knew, from his understanding of the Word of God, that, if things were not this bad at the moment, yet they could quickly get this bad. What was this to mean to him?

It is here that we come to one of the greatest of all lessons that we as the Lord's people need to learn. Those who were disobedient needed to learn this, and those, like Habakkuk, who were seeking to obey and please the Lord, needed to learn this. This is the cure for our disobedience, and this is one purpose that God always has in the trials of His people.

Habakkuk said, in so many words, "If things get this bad, 'yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation'" (Hab. 3:18).

Does this remind you of what Paul told the Philippian church when he wrote to them? If it doesn't, it should!

In Phil. 3:1 we read this:

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.
To write the same things to you,
to me indeed is not grievous,
but for you it is safe.

And then in Phil. 4:4 he said this:

Rejoice in the Lord alway:
and again I say, Rejoice.

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he said, "Rejoice evermore" (1 Thess. 5:16). In Psalm 34, words written by David long before Habakkuk's day, we are told that David said,

I will bless the Lord at all times:
his praise shall continually be in my mouth...
O magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt his name together.

Whatever our circumstances may be, and whatever may be the immediate cause of our circumstances, the Lord wants us to rejoice in Him, and to exult in Him.

The word "rejoice" which Habakkuk used carries with it the idea of a triumphant shout! It reflects the teaching of Rom. 8:37, "Nay in all these things...." Outwardly the circumstances mean a tragic defeat, the judgment of God, but if it makes this change in our hearts, it is all victory!

The word "joy" is a different word. This is a joy which is expressed outwardly. In OT times they leaped for joy.

Illus: What Allison did when we arrived at their home in Ventura.

And so Habakkuk was not speaking of a half-hearted, dutiful kind of joy, but an exuberant, an enthusiastic, an excited kind of a joy!

On the surface this sounds a little ridiculous, doesn't it? And it is if the Lord is not in the picture. If the Jewish farmer did not have any crops, nor any herds, he was out of business. But worse than that, it meant that he and his family might starve to death! Who can be happy about that?

But that is not the kind of joy that Habakkuk was talking about. He was saying that it is often when God cuts off the material blessings, then we learn how precious it is to have the Lord and all of the spiritual blessings that we have in Him, and in Christ. Habakkuk did not just say, "I will rejoice," but he said, "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

What does this mean?

It means that we can rejoice that He is still our God, that in spite of our circumstances He loves us, that He has a purpose in all that He does, and that He is going to take care of us. There is no problem that we can have that will prove to be too great for Him.

Earthly trials turn our thoughts heavenward to God and the things of God!

David said in Psa. 35:9 when his enemies were pursuing him,

And my soul shall be joyful in the Lord:
it shall rejoice in his salvation.

"Salvation" can mean a present deliverance, or it can point to God's work in the salvation of our souls. Probably both ideas are included here. We are frequently so occupied with earthly things that the things of God are neglected.

Cf. Col. 3:1-4.

But when we read something like this, we need to ask ourselves the question, "How can I do anything like this?" --especially if we have been neglecting the Word and prayer and personal obedience to the Lord.

The answer is given in verse 19.

III. THE ENABLEMENT (Hab. 3:19).

The provision for such joy is to be found in the Lord, and in what He will do for us. We could never do it by ourselves, but all things are possible with the Lord. In fact, Eph. 3:20 tells us that He "is able to do exceeding abundantly above...."

How did Habakkuk express it 2600 years ago?

He said, first of all, "The Lord God is my strength."

For the moment let us forget the disobedience and wickedness of Judah, and concentrate on Habakkuk. There surely were things even in Habakkuk's life that he knew needed to be changed. But, for the most part, he was seeking to please the Lord. However, even in his case the Lord had a purpose for these trials which had come upon the nation, and even Habakkuk could come out of them stronger in his faith, and stronger in his love for the Lord. Regardless of how much we may be trusting the Lord, we can always trust Him more than we do.

"The Lord God is my strength."

Here Habakkuk was speaking of Jehovah Adonai. That means that he was acknowledging His unchanging, covenant-keeping God, Whom he was acknowledging as His sovereign Lord.

You see, the first step back into fellowship with the Lord is personal surrender to Him, submission to Him and

to His will. And this is not as a means to getting what we want. Andrew Bonar said this in his diary about fellowship with the Lord:

I see plainly that fellowship with God is not means to an end, but is to be the end itself. I am not to use it as a preparation for study or for Sabbath labour; but as my chiefest end, the likeliest thing to heaven (p. 106).

What will the Lord do for us? Two things:

- 1) "He will make my feet like hinds' feet."
- 2) "He will make me to walk upon mine high places."

Here is some rich truth.

Psa. 18:34 says this:

He maketh my feet like hinds' feet,
and setteth me upon my high places.

A "hind" is either a female deer or a female goat. They are both known for their swiftness and agility. Also for their strength. The application for Habakkuk had to be with reference to his walk with the Lord. The application would have been the same for the people of Judah, and for us today!

Walking upon "my high places" would possibly mean two things:

- 1) Regaining ground that had been lost.
- 2) Attaining spiritual heights never known before.

Concl: As we have seen, the last statement of the Psalm and of the prophecy means that Habakkuk had written this to be sung by the people of Israel so that they would realize that, however severe the judgment of God might be upon them, past sins can, by the grace of God, if we are trusting Him, lead not only to getting back where we were before spiritually, but even higher and better.

During my lifetime I have learned many verses of Scripture, not as many as I wish I had, but many nevertheless. But I have never memorized three verses that were harder to learn than these three--especially verse 18. As I have reflected on that I have wondered if that were significant. I doubt if there are many of us who can really say this from our hearts. I am sure, too, that the Jews could sing it a lot easier than they could really mean it!

How is it with each one of us today--spiritually? Is the battle severe? Then rejoice in the Lord. Submit yourself to Him with greater abandonment to do His will. Draw your

strength from Him, and then watch to see the changes that He will make in you, and in the way you live. Perhaps our hymn should be,

I'm pressing on the upward way,
New heights I'm gaining ev'ry day;
Still praying as I'm onward bound,
"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."

My heart has no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;
Though some may dwell where these abound,
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.

I want to live above the world,
Though Satan's darts at me are hurled;
For faith has caught the joyful sound,
The song of saints on higher ground.

I want to scale the utmost height,
And catch a gleam of glory bright;
But still I'll pray till heaven I've found,
"Lord, lead me on to higher ground."

Refrain:

Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
By faith, on heaven's table-land,
A higher plane than I have found;
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

This is the way to revival. Habakkuk experienced it in his soul even though it may not have awakened many of his people from their spiritual deadness and sin. May the Lord touch our hearts with these wonderful truths that we may gain new heights of blessing and glory through the Lord God Who is also our strength.

Our barns may be empty, but nothing should ever keep us from rejoicing the Lord our God.