



Sermon Transcript

July 28, 2019

A “Though” Kind of Faith

Habakkuk 3:1-19

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July, 28, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Habakkuk 3:1-19

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.

² O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy. ³ God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. *Selah*

His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. ⁴ His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power. ⁵ Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels. ⁶ He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways. ⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; ⁸ the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. ⁸ Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD? Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation? ⁹ You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows. *Selah*

You split the earth with rivers. ¹⁰ The mountains saw you and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice; it lifted its hands on high. ¹¹ The sun and moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear. ¹² You marched through the earth in fury; you threshed the nations in anger. ¹³ You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. *Selah*

¹⁴ You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret. ¹⁵ You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters. ¹⁶ I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.

¹⁷ Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.

Introduction

Do you have an “if” kind of faith or a “though” kind of faith? George Everett Ross was in ministry for over 30 years. He made this observation about faith after these many years of ministry. He wrote, “I have come to understand that there are two kinds of faith. One says “if” and the other says “though.”

Ross differentiates between an “if” kind of faith and a “though” kind of faith this way. One says “**If** everything goes well, **if** my life is prosperous, **if** I’m happy, **if** no one I love dies, **if** I’m successful, then I will believe God and say my prayers and go to church and give what I can afford.” On the other hand, the other kind of faith says “though.” “**Though** the cause of evil prosper, **though** like Jesus I sweat in Gethsemane, **though** I must drink my cup of suffering at Calvary—nevertheless, precisely then, I will trust the Lord who made me.” Is your faith anchored by an “if” or a “**though**”?

This morning we are going to look at an Old Testament prophet by the name of Habakkuk. In these three short chapters, he goes from being discontent about his circumstances to being content in spite of his circumstances. So please note, his circumstances at the end of this book are no different than his circumstances at the beginning of the book. The end of Habakkuk does not read like the fairy tales we love so much . . . “and they lived happily ever after.” He still finds himself, at the end of this book, living in the difficult circumstances that troubled him at the beginning of the book. Nothing about his circumstances has changed in his life from chapter 1 to chapter 3. But he has changed. His faith has changed. Within the span of three chapters his faith went from being an “if” kind of faith to a “though” kind of faith.

I think this is what Paul was getting at when he said in Philippians 4, “*I have LEARNED in whatever situation I am to be content.*” This kind of faith is a faith that is learned. Paul learned it. Habakkuk learned it. We need to learn it. Where do you learn such a lesson? I’m almost afraid to ask the question, because I can’t think of any other place to learn this kind of lesson than in the ups and downs of life. Times of plenty and times of want form the very classroom where we learn what it is like to move from an “if” kind of faith to a “though” kind of faith.

This morning, I want to begin by looking at what a “though” kind of faith actually looks like. But then, I want to consider how we get there. How do we move from an “if” kind of faith to a “though” kind of faith, especially when our circumstances stay the same?

A “Thought” Kind of Faith

At the beginning of this book, we find Habakkuk issuing a complaint. “O LORD, *how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear?*” Habakkuk is doing what 67 psalms do: he is lamenting. He is complaining about something. He is telling God how he feels. There is nothing wrong with crying out to God and telling God how you feel. D. A. Carson says, “There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God’s people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but to a faith so robust it wrestles with God.” The prophet is wrestling with God. He is crying out to God about something and God doesn’t seem to be doing anything about it.

The issue that is causing Habakkuk to cry out to God is the violence and the injustice in the land and it seems to go unchecked. He complains in Habakkuk 1:4, “*the wicked surround the righteous.*” He accuses God of turning a blind eye to all the violence and all the injustice that is happening around him. This does seem to be the issue that trips up a lot of people when it comes to God. How can a good God allow good people to suffer? And furthermore, if he is powerful enough to do something about it and he doesn’t, well how then can you call him good? That is an “if” kind of faith. He asks in verse 2, “*Why do you idly look at wrong?*” He is asking God why he tolerates evil. This is the question that tends to surface in our hearts when we are wrestling with God. We want to know “why?” We want God to explain himself to us. Habakkuk cries out, “*Why do you make me see iniquity and why do you idly look at wrong?*” When we are in these moments of crisis, Philip Yancey says, “we want clarity.” We want an answer to the “why question.” But it is not a question that God answers for us.

And yet, God does respond to the complaint of Habakkuk. He reassures Habakkuk that he sees everything Habakkuk sees. Hebrews 4:13 says, “*No creature is hidden from God’s sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*” God is not blind to the things that Habakkuk sees. In fact, God sees even more than Habakkuk sees. When Noah is introduced in Genesis 6, it says of God, “*Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth . . . and it grieved God.*” And so, God reassures Habakkuk that he is not turning a blind eye to all the violence and injustice that Habakkuk sees. He is doing something about it. He says in Habakkuk 1:6 that he is raising up the *Chaldeans*—that is the Babylonians—that “*bitter and hasty nation . . . dreaded and fearsome*” and they will be God’s arm of judgment against the people of Judah. In other words, God is going to use the Babylonians to bring his judgment against God’s people, the people of Judah.

This was not the response Habakkuk anticipated nor did it sit well with him. Sure, Judah had their problems, but as far as he was concerned, they were not anywhere near as bad as the Babylonians. He says so in Habakkuk 1:13, “*why do you look idly at traitors and are silent when the wicked swallow up the man more righteous than he?*” And now here is God saying that the Babylonians are going to be his arm of judgement against the people of Judah. Again, Habakkuk complains and asks “*why?*” Why them?

Put this in the context of our own country. We can look around at our country and issue the same initial complaint that Habakkuk issued. “*O Lord, how long? . . . Why do you make me see iniquity and why do you idly look at wrong?*” It was exactly 400 years ago this year that the first black slave was brought to America. Jim Wallis calls slavery and the enduring racism of our culture “America’s Original Sin.” In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln saw the Civil War with its 700,000 casualties as God’s divine judgment on our country for the evil of slavery. He said in his speech, that God may allow the war to endure “until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid with another drawn by the sword.” And yet, to this day, we are still divided by race and a systemic racialization continues to exist in our country. As a majority white culture, we can be blind to it. But there are many who cry out, “*O Lord, how long?*” And what if God’s answer for 400 years of racism was to bring in a coalition of countries like Russia, Iran and China to execute his judgment for our national sin of racism? Might we respond with the same complaint that Habakkuk offered regarding the Babylonians? How can they be God’s arm of judgment against us?

And so at the beginning of Habakkuk 2, Habakkuk folds his arms and waits for God to respond to his second complaint. He says, “*I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.*” (I’m afraid that Habakkuk is about to give God a piece of his mind that he can ill afford to lose.) God indeed comes to him a second time, and in chapter 2 he basically reassures Habakkuk that he is just and in his own timing he will bring judgment on the nation of Babylon as well. But in the midst of his pronouncement of judgment on Babylon, there is quite a profound statement made that is essential for forming a “though” kind of faith. In Habakkuk 2:4-6, God acknowledges that while Babylon is far from righteous, he can still use them for his good purposes. And right in the middle of that thought he says, “*but the righteous shall live by faith.*”

In essence, God is saying to Habakkuk, “It is not for you to know the answer to the “why” question. Rather, it is simply enough for you to trust God and live by faith in the midst of the unanswered questions of life.” I like the way Yancey puts it. He says, “The

Bible supplies no systematic answers to the “Why?” questions and often avoids them entirely.” Then he warns, “We dare not tread into areas God has sealed off as his domain. Divine providence is a mystery that only God understands and belongs in what I have called “The Encyclopedia of Theological Ignorance” for a simple reason: no time bound human, living on a rebellious planet, blind to the realities of the unseen world, has the ability to comprehend such answers.” Or to put it simply, we cannot understand the mysteries of God and the ways of God. Or as Paul puts it at the end of Romans 11, “*Oh the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his paths are beyond tracing out [inscrutable]. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from him to him and through him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*” Ours is simply to “*live by faith.*”

So Habakkuk is reduced down to the point where we all need to be. We need to live by faith. When you come to the end of the book of Habakkuk you find one of the greatest statements of faith ever written. His circumstances didn’t change. The land was still filled with violence and the Babylonians were still set to come. And yet, listen to how his tune changed. “*Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.*”

Do you see the first word in verse 17? It is “*though.*” “*Though the fig tree should not blossom . . . I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.*” He went from an “if” kind of faith to a “though” kind of faith. He went from asking the “why question” to asking the “who question.” He was able to trust and rest and rejoice in God even though his circumstances remained difficult. That is the essence of a “though” kind of faith. How did he make that move? How did he get there? How do we get there?

Three Truths About God

Let me tell you what is vital to having a “though” kind of faith. It is a proper view of God. You need to see God. You need to know God. Quite a few years ago *Encyclopedia Britannica* published a set of fifty-four volumes that brought together the writings from some of the most prominent thinkers in the Western world. The subjects addressed covered law, science, philosophy, history and theology. The longest essay of all in this fifty-four volume set was on the subject of God. Mortimer Adler was a co-editor for this

publication and he was asked why the entry on “God” was the longest entry. His response was as follows, “More consequences for thought and action follow from the affirmation or denial of God than from answering any other question. “ In other words, what you believe about God impacts every other area of life. How you view God and how you relate to God will make all the difference in the world in how you go through the difficult circumstances of life. A “though” kind of faith is not the result of stoic confidence. Rather, it is the result of knowing God.

In Habakkuk 3, Habakkuk shares three things you need to know about God if you want to have a “though” kind of faith. The righteous who live by faith are people who know these three things about God.

God’s will is good—I can trust: The prayer of a “though” kind of faith is a prayer we pray in the Lord’s Prayer—“*thy will be done.*” That is Habakkuk’s greatest desire at the beginning of Habakkuk 3. Through his encounter with God, his ultimate desire is that God’s will be accomplished and he can trust God to work out his good will.

Habakkuk begins the third chapter by saying, “*O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work O LORD do I fear.*” Literally what he is saying here is that he has heard of God’s words and as a result he stands in awe of God. I think of Job’s interaction with God. He too wanted God to explain himself. And so God shows up in Job 38 and says, “*Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding?*” You can almost feel the lump form in Job’s throat. He has to stand there and take it from God for four chapters before he can confess, “*I know you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted . . . I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know . . . I repent in dust and ashes.*”

And so notice what Habakkuk now prays as a result of seeing that God’s will is good. At the end of verse 2 he says, “*In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.*” The NLT puts it this way, “*In this time of our deep need, help us again as you did in years gone by. And in your anger, remember your mercy.*” He is praying that God would fulfill his word. Do in our day what you said what you will do. Accomplish your will. Now don’t forget what he is praying for here. In praying for the will of God to be accomplished, he knows that it will bring pain for his people. And so he prays, “*And in your anger, remember your mercy.*” That is quite profound. God brings good out of pain. *Your will be done!*

This was the prayer of Jesus at Gethsemane, “*not my will, but your will be done.*” This was the prayer of Paul when he asked that the “thorn in the flesh be removed.” But God chose not to remove it and so Paul said that God’s grace would carry him. It is what we confess in the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism when we ask, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” In the middle of the answer, we say with confidence, “He preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.” See, the wisdom of God is taking all things and working them out for my good. I can trust God.

Hebrews 11 is known as the “Hall of Faith.” It lists all these great Old Testament saints who walked by faith. Did you ever notice how hard that walk was? At the end of the chapter, in summary fashion we read of these great men and women of faith, “*Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned and were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountain, and in dens and caves of the earth.*” These men and women of faith were commended for their faith—their trust in a God who would *provide something better*. And so in Hebrews 12:1, we are told that since there is such a great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us, let us run the race with similar endurance and faith.

When we go through difficulty, all we tend to see is how “our” world is disturbed. But behind the scenes, God is doing something with our life and he is accomplishing his purposes. Someday we will see how it all comes together. And we will stand and marvel at the wonder of the God who weaved it all together into one story. And we will say, “to God be the glory!” In the meantime, we trust God and we live by faith.

God is for us—I can rest: The second thing that you need to know about God is that God is for his people. If you belong to Christ, God is for you and so you can rest.

At the heart of Habakkuk 3 is a picture of future redemption told from the perspective of the past. In other words, the God who delivered them in the past will deliver them in the future. For example, in verse 5 he refers to the plagues in Egypt when God delivered his people from slavery. In verse 6 he speaks of the nations trembling like they did when they heard of what God did for Israel in Egypt. In verse 8 there is an allusion to God’s arm of deliverance through parting the Red Sea. And so what Habakkuk is affirming is that just as God committed himself to his people in the past, he will commit to his people in the future. In fact he says in verse 13 that all this activity among the nations is

leading to the salvation of his people—those he has made promise to. And then I love the confidence and quiet rest that comes upon him in verse 16, *“I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me.”* (He anticipates the sad day when the Babylonians come and bring the judgment of God.) But then he says, *“Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.”* He will wait for God to deliver his people.

Paul says it this way, *“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things.”* If God is for us, we can rest. You might be tempted to ask, “But if God is for us, what about all this junk in life? What about death? What about illness? What about tragedy? What about trials? Are these signs that God is not for us? Listen to what Paul says in that same context: *“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Not even these things can separate us from God. God is for us.

In Hebrews 10:38 we find Habakkuk 2:4 quoted, *“but my righteous one shall live by faith.”* In the context of Hebrews 10 he is talking about enduring trials because of their faith. He says, *“For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property.”* Why? He goes on to say, *“when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.”* In other words, we persevere by faith because we know God is for us. And so like Habakkuk, we *quietly wait* for God to fulfill his purposes in us and through us. Often times, that involves difficulty and hardship. But God is using that to shape us and to accomplish his purpose. And so we do not fret. Rather, we rest in God who showed us how much he is for us when Jesus died for us.

God saves us—I can rejoice: The final thing for you to see about God is that God saves us. It is worth reading again this great hymn of praise at the end of this book. *“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.”*

Basically, Habakkuk is saying that if the bottom drops out and he loses it all, he will still rejoice. This is not just a meme you post on Facebook or a cross stitch wall hanging.

This is substantive. He has learned how he can rejoice in God no matter the circumstance. How can he do that? He can do that because God is his Savior.

Everything we have in this life we can and will someday lose. All the possessions we own and all the pleasure we take in our work and all the things we have accumulated will someday be handed down to someone else or sold or thrown away. The clothes you have right now will in a few years be on the rack at Goodwill. And you'll ask, "did I really wear that?" Even our days are passing and are numbered. Everything we have can be lost in a moment. The only thing that lasts is our salvation—our souls—our relationship with God is eternal. So we can rejoice even in the hard things. In fact, as these things slip through our fingers, we are reminded that the only thing that we can be sure of is that God has saved us through faith in Jesus. That is how Paul uses this phrase *the just shall live by faith*. In Romans 1:17, he comes off of verse 16 where he says that he is not ashamed of the gospel. Do you know why? It is the power of God to save. It speaks of a righteousness that given to us by God's grace—not something we earn. And then he says, "*The righteous shall live by faith.*" This is the cause of our rejoicing!

Joni Eareckson Tada is one of my spiritual heroes. As a teenager, she dove into a shallow lake and has been confined to a wheelchair for fifty years. Recently, I saw an article by her that caught my attention. The title of the article was, "Why Joni Eareckson Tada Praises God for Not Healing Her." She sought healing. She went to several healing crusades and nothing happened. She was bitter. She expressed an "if" kind of faith when she fumed, "What kind of Savior, what kind of rescuer or healer, would refuse the prayer of a paralytic? Especially a paralytic who claims Christ as her Savior? I felt bewildered and utterly lost. One morning I awoke early, looked around my shadowy bedroom, and decided I didn't want to get up. If I can't be healed, I thought, then I'm just not going to do this. . . . I am not going to live this way! I stayed in bed that day. And the next. And the following week."

God directed her attention to the story of Jesus healing the paralytic. She noticed in that story that the great words of hope were not when Jesus said, "*Get up and walk!*" Rather, the great words of hope in that story were "*Friend, your sins are forgiven.*" Because Jesus was the Son of God, healing withered legs was no challenge for Jesus. He set the stars and moons in motion. But forgiving sin? That was no easy thing. It required the cross. It required the blood of Jesus. And so she writes, "I collapsed in tears when I began to glimpse how heinous my sin was. Physical healing paled in comparison to the unthinkable abuse my transgressions heaped on my Lord. So, for the last 50 years in my wheelchair, I've been daily dying to self and rising with Jesus, dying to self and rising

with Jesus, dying to self and rising with Jesus. My goal is to mortify my fleshly desires, so I might find myself in Christ. God has been answering my prayer, exposing dark things in my heart, things from which I need to be healed.”

So Habakkuk sings, *“I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.”*

Conclusion

Do you have an “if” kind of faith or a “though” kind of faith? We live by faith. But it is a faith that rests in God who is all wise and works for our good. We serve a God who is for us. We serve a God who has saved us. So with Habakkuk, no matter what circumstance we find ourselves in this morning—happy or sad—tender or scared—angry or excited—We can trust God. We can rest in God. We can rejoice in God. **“Though** the cause of evil prosper, **though** like Jesus I sweat in Gethsemane, **though** I must drink my cup of suffering at Calvary—nevertheless, precisely then, I will trust the Lord who made me.”

