

Experiencing God in Troubled Times

The Problem of Pride

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This morning we continue our series of messages from the book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament. Habakkuk lived around 600 BC in a time of trouble for his nation. Injustice and evil were rampant. Trouble was all around. The book is a dialog between the prophet and God. Habakkuk complains about all the trouble. God reveals to Habakkuk how to face times of trouble. These principles can help us deal with trouble in our lives individually and as a society.

We are in the midst of troubled times in our nation. How long will it last? Will the trouble end in a couple of years? Or are we entering a longer period of trouble? Who knows? God knows. And God knows how to get us through troubled times—individually and as a nation—no matter how long the troubles last. If you have missed the first couple of messages, I encourage you to listen to them on our web site or get a CD at our tape ministry center.

When Habakkuk complains about all the trouble in Israel, God says get ready, the Babylonians are coming. Your troubles will increase. They will conquer you and carry you into exile. God sees beyond the coming of the Babylonians. In time, the Babylonians will have trouble. God reveals what will happen to the Babylonians and why.

Habakkuk 2:9-14

"Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain
to set his nest on high,
to escape the clutches of ruin!

10You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.

11The stones of the wall will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.

12"Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed
and establishes a town by crime!

13Has not the LORD Almighty determined
that the people's labor is only fuel for the fire,
that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?

14For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,
as the waters cover the sea.

One of the questions we wrestle with in times of trouble is, "How did things get this way? What is the source of this trouble?" What we really mean is, "Who can we pin

the blame on for all these problems?” How did we get into the economic mess we are in? The editorials in the New York Times blame greedy business capitalists for the trouble. They suggest that what we need to prevent these problems in the future is more government regulation of business affairs. The editorials in the Wall Street Journal blame ill conceived government intervention as the cause of the crisis. They suggest that to prevent future crises, we need to let the free market function without government interference. The current administration blames the previous administration for the trouble.

I think the Bible offers us an explanation for the source of the trouble that is not as simplistic as any of those. The Bible helps us to get to the real core of the problem.

God reveals that even though Babylon will have a period of great success in conquering the world, trouble is coming to the Babylonians. The signs of impending trouble for Babylon are evident. They are ruthless, violent and they exploit the poor. There are two verses in Habakkuk chapter two that identify the core of the problem—the true source of trouble in any nation and within any individual.

Habakkuk 2:5

He is arrogant and never at rest.
Because he is as greedy as the grave
and like death is never satisfied,
he gathers to himself all the nations
and takes captive all the peoples.

The root problem is pride. Because of pride the Babylonians are empty and insatiable: “never satisfied.” They conquer all the nations and take all the peoples captive, but they still are empty. Two celebrities talked to interviewers about why they sought fame. Madonna (actress and singer) said: “When I achieve a new level of fame, I feel special for a brief period of time. Then it goes away and I have to reach a higher level to feel special again.” Empty and never satisfied. Chris Evert, world champion

tennis player, said, "I have always been driven to be the best. Winning makes me feel pretty."

Pride drives us to relentlessly pursue ways to feel good about ourselves. But whether we are seeking to feel good about ourselves by conquering nations, or filling concert halls or winning tennis matches or preaching or going over our sales quota or being the most popular kid in school, we are all looking for the same thing. We want to feel beautiful or loved or successful or powerful. We work so hard to fill the emptiness inside us. We reach one level, and it is never enough. We have to do and have more. The source of our trouble is pride.

Pride is our refusal to let God be God. Pride is the fantasy that we can make it as the master of our own lives. We act as if we know what will bring fulfillment to our lives. We even enlist God to help us get what we want. "God, help me get this new job or this promotion or this raise. If you will just help me get what I want, then I will feel good about myself. All our escalating efforts to find fulfillment out there leave us empty inside. That emptiness leaves us vulnerable to attacks by the demons of fear and anxiety. We desperately search for people who will prop up our shaky self image. We ask of every person we meet, "How can this person help me feel better about myself?"

This is not just true of the Babylonians and movie stars or sports celebrities. It is true of all of us. We are all frantically looking for enough affirmation, applause, recognition to finally fill the hole in our soul. The pride of thinking that I can fill the emptiness by my own efforts is the primary source of trouble in the world. Emptiness is a sign of trouble and pride is at the core.

We find another sign of trouble in Babylon in Habakkuk 2:18,19

Habakkuk 2:18-19

"Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?"

Or an image that teaches lies?
For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.

¹⁹Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!'
Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!'
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it.

Worshipping idols is a sign of trouble. Any individual life or society that is not based on the Creator God is based upon an idol. Idols are good things that we raise to a level of ultimate things in our lives. For example, winning tennis matches is a good thing. But if we make that the source of our worth—of how we feel good about ourselves--then we have made it an ultimate thing, an idol. Vince Lombardi told his players on his first day as coach of the Green Bay Packers: "Winning isn't everything. It is the only thing." When winning is the only thing, we have elevated it to ultimate status. We might not worship an idol of stone or wood, but we can certainly worship at the idol of winning—getting our worth from defeating others.

What is your idol? We all have one? What is a good thing that has become an ultimate thing in your life? What is it that you depend on to feel good about yourself? Is it your physical appearance, your grades, your achievements, the amount of wealth you accumulate or status of having the best of everything? For me it is the need to be successful so that I will be admired. If I'm admired for my accomplishments then I feel good about myself. This idol regularly rears its ugly head in my life, and I have to surrender it to God over and over. What is your idol? What is it that you go to in order to feel good about yourself?

Ultimately our idols not only disappoint us, they destroy us. That is why God warns us in the Bible so often about the dangers of idols. He does not want us to be destroyed. We become slaves to our idols and they drive us to the grave. We do things

that we thought we would never do in order to satisfy our idols. We do not possess our idols; they possess us. Idols destroy individuals and nations.

In the midst of trouble, we look for someone to blame. Whose fault is this? Who got us into this mess? We blame the greedy CEOs or the manipulative bureaucrats in Washington for our economic troubles. We need to quit looking for someone out there to blame: Republicans or Democrats; Big Corporations or Big Government. If we want to really find the source, it is pride. All of us have a problem with pride. It is the original sin—believing that we can be our own God. We are all the source of the problem.

If pride and idolatry are the problems, what do we do about them? Over and over again, the Bible teaches that the way out of trouble is through humility and repentance. I admit to God that I have lived as though I am the master of my own life. I have chosen something other than God that I believe will make me feel good about myself—idolatry. I humbly ask his forgiveness. I ask him to fill the emptiness inside of me with his presence. He will fill us with living water so that we will never thirst for approval, acceptance and love again. I ask him to take charge of my life. I let go of the controls.

We see a glimpse of how this works in chapter 2 of Habakkuk. In the midst of the all the darkness and trouble, listen to this ray of light:

But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him." ([Habakkuk 2:20](#))

“The Lord is in his holy temple” means that God is sovereign. He is in control. No matter how dark things seem to be, God is in control. The nation of Israel has turned her back on God and worshipped other gods—idols of wood and stone. Greed and injustice and trouble are rampant in the land. Things get worse when the Babylonians come and conquer southern Israel. The Jewish people are carried off into exile. Even in the midst of trouble, God is in control. God is powerful to use even evil for good. As a result of the

exile, the Jewish people are scattered all over the ancient world. In every city they build faith communities and invite people to worship the Creator God. And they spread the promise of a Messiah who will come and restore justice to the whole world. Because of the exile, many persons will find fulfillment in God.

This provides a good illustration of how the scripture balances the sovereignty of God with the free will of man. If God is sovereign and in control of everything, does that mean that we are just puppets and our ability to make decisions is just an illusion? Is God really controlling everything and pulling all the strings? If man has free will and can make decisions that have consequences, then can we mess up the plans of God? The Bible reveals that God is sovereign, and we have free will. We freely make decisions, and they have real consequences and impact the world. Our pride and our idols have brought a lot of trouble into our own lives and into our world. But God is sovereign. His power is great enough to weave the consequences of our decisions into his plan. He will use even the things we mess up to accomplish his purposes. In the end he will prevail. Ultimately his purposes will not fail, even though we mess them up in the mean time. Habakkuk reminds us that in the midst of trouble caused by our own choices, God is in control.

Another shining light in the darkness is found in chapter 2:14,

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” **Habakkuk 2:14**

“The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.” The reason we are empty; the reason we use people to prop up our self image; the reason we are driven to be successful or rich or admired or popular is because we hunger for glory. The only thing that can satisfy our quest for glory is the glory of God. What we really need is the affirmation of God. God gives us his glory—his presence—as a gift. It is not

something we can achieve or earn. Someday the whole earth will be filled with his glory. And it will happen one person at a time. As each of us lays down our pride and turns from our idols and allows God's love to fill us.

When we seek our own glory, we end up filled with shame. Jesus came and emptied himself of glory and took on our shame. He took our shame to the cross and died. He took the consequences of our pride and idolatry into himself and died in our place. He took the shame so that we could receive his glory.

What is the way out of trouble for us as individuals and as a nation? It is the way of humility and repentance. We quit looking for someone to blame. We accept responsibility for our part in the problem. We let go of our pride and our need to control. We receive the gift of God's approval, acceptance and love. We become filled with his glory—his presence. We get our ultimate worth from him alone. The emptiness is filled. We are set free to live and love and give. We have the joy of sharing with others where they can find the ultimate fulfillment they are looking for. In the midst of trouble are you looking for someone to blame? Are you trusting in your idol to help you feel good about yourself? Or are you trusting in God's unconditional love and acceptance?