

Experiencing God in Troubled Times

Look Out for Number One

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This morning we continue with our series of messages on the Book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament. Habakkuk was a prophet who lived around 600 BC in a time when Judah was experiencing trouble. The government officials and religious leaders were corrupt. Many people were experiencing injustices. Habakkuk cried out to God asking why he was allowing all this trouble. God responded: “You think it is bad now. The Babylonians are coming and will conquer Judah and send you into exile. Things are going to get worse.” Habakkuk expresses his frustration to God about the prediction of additional troubles. He struggles to understand how a loving God can allow all this trouble. The book of Habakkuk records the dialog between God and the prophet. He provides a model for how we can honestly engage God while experiencing trouble. There are times when nations experience trouble. We cry out to God and things get worse. There are times in our personal lives when we are experiencing trouble. We cry out to God and things get worse. Habakkuk helps us to discover how to experience God in the midst of trouble. This week and next week we are going to look at some of the insights Habakkuk receives from God about how to live through times of trouble.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

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,
18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
19 The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.

Is it possible to experience sustained joy in the midst of trouble? Even when it looks like things are going to get worse—the Babylonians are coming! In verse 17, Habakkuk describes a total economic collapse. There are no figs, olives, grapes, grain, sheep or cattle. For Habakkuk’s day that was the equivalent of the Dow Jones and the Standard and Poor’s averages going to zero. In the ancient world a person’s financial statement did not contain savings accounts,

stocks or bonds. The things in your portfolio in the ancient world were crops, livestock and land. That is how your wealth was measured. The more land and crops and herds you had, the wealthier you were. Habakkuk describes a nation experiencing a total financial collapse. How do you handle it when you have lost everything?

Understanding that in ancient times a person's livelihood came from the land helps us to understand the significance of an offering in the Old Testament known as "first fruits." (Deuteronomy 26) At the beginning of the harvest, the farmer was to take the first fruits, place them in a basket and present them to God. All of the income of a farmer comes in during the harvest. He did not know how much he would make for the entire year until the harvest was completed. This is generally true for farmers today; except they have to wait and see what the market will pay for their crops. Even if they have a bumper crop, the market price will affect how much they make.

There are others who never know until the end of the year how much they are going to make. Some people depend upon their investments for income. They don't know until the end of the year what their income will be. Some salesmen depend on bonuses. They don't know until the end of the year what their income will be. It seems reasonable that most people would wait until the end of the year and see how much income they have made and then determine how much they can afford to give to God.

That sounds reasonable to us, but God has a different plan. God says, don't wait until the harvest is over (the end of the year) to determine what you can give. Give to God the "first fruits" of your harvest. Give something to God before you know how much you are going to make. When the farmer gave his

first fruit offering to God, he did not know if this might be all that he would harvest. He was taking a risk to give to God first. A storm might come and wipe out the rest of his crop. Locusts might sweep in from the desert and devour his crop in a matter of days. He expressed great trust in God to give to him the first fruits. Whatever happened, he believed God would take care of him.

If you wait until everything is in—then you wind up giving to God out of your surplus. You determine what you can give without it cutting into your lifestyle. You make your plans about what you want to buy, where you want to go and what you want to do this year. Then you give to God from the surplus. The first fruits offering was God's way of saying: "Don't give me the leftovers. Give me the first fruits of you labor." Give to God first, even if you are not sure you can do everything you want to do with what's left. The adjustment in our budget does not come out of God's share. The adjustment comes out of our share.

The principle of the first fruits offering is extremely relevant to the times of economic trouble we are experiencing. In the good times we make enough that we can give to God out of our surplus and still enjoy the lifestyle we want to live. In troubled times we can't do that. To maintain our style of living we cut back in our giving. If you give out of the surplus, then when troubled times come you may not give anything. Giving of the first fruits means you give to God first and figure out how to live on what's left. The first fruit offering is a way of determining who is number one in our lives. If God is really first in my life, then I will give to him first. If I am first in my life, then I will withhold my giving if it is going to affect my lifestyle. Now aren't you glad you came to church this morning?

Well, it's going to get tougher—the Babylonians are coming! But please keep your seat! Are you ready? The first fruits offering was over and above the

tithe. Every believer was expected to also give 10% of the entire harvest after it was all in. The first fruits offering was given before the tithe as a way of acknowledging God's Lordship—that he really is number one.

When the person brought his first fruits offering, this is what he said:

"God brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; ¹⁰and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me." Then he would place the basket before the LORD and bow down before him. Deut. 26:9-10

The first fruits offering was given out of gratitude and with joy acknowledging that God was the source of everything. Often we act as if we are the source of everything we have. "I work hard for my money." Really? Who gave you the ability to work? "The things that I have are mine." Really? What do you have that God has not given you? God gave us everything we have. When we connect the grace of God with our giving, we give with joy.

In Matthew 6 Jesus says: "Where your treasure is there will your heart be also." Whatever your heart most treasures, your money will follow freely and joyfully. Perhaps you don't like baseball. But your kid loves baseball. Guess what? You find yourself spending a lot of money on bats, balls, gloves and uniforms. You invest a lot of your time at the ball park sitting on uncomfortable bleachers in the hot sun. And yet you do it joyfully. Why? Not because you love baseball, but because you love you son or daughter. And they love baseball. Your heart is for your kid and so your treasure of time and money follow joyfully into baseball.

Sometimes people object to certain ways their money is used at church. They don't like this or that building project or a certain program or a certain cause that the church is supporting. But if your heart is for God, then your treasure will

follow joyfully for the things that God likes whether you like it or not. Some people don't like to give to missions or they don't like to help the poor. But guess what? God loves missions—he cares for all his children all over the world. God cares for the poor. So even if we don't like those things, we support them, because God loves them.

Do you give joyfully because you have a heart for God? If you give just out of duty or to try to earn God's approval, there is no joy. Your relationship with God is not what it could be. If you give out of the leftovers, your relationship with God is not what it could be.

If you have experienced how much God loves you, you will give joyfully and generously. If you have embraced the reality that everything you have and everything you are is a gift from God, you will give joyfully and generously. When your heart rests in God's grace you give generously and joyfully to express your gratitude. If you are not giving generously and joyfully it is a sign that something is missing in your relationship with God.

In our scripture reading this morning we see that Habakkuk found joy in the midst of economic collapse:

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,
¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior. Habakkuk 3:17-18

Habakkuk knew that when the Babylonians came, they would lose everything. After engaging with God, he knew that no matter what happened God was with him. He chose to be joyful in God. He did not rejoice in his

circumstances. He rejoiced in the presence of God—the relationship he had with God that was not dependent upon his circumstances. He knew that God loved him no matter what. He knew that God was with him in the good times as well as the bad times.

This sounds unrealistic. How can we rejoice when we have lost everything? Jesus' brother, James, put it this way: "Consider it joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds..." (James 1:2) James looked to Jesus as the one who could make this happen in our lives. Jesus had everything taken from him. "He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself." When he died, Jesus only owned the clothes on his back, and he was stripped of that. Jesus had no portfolio. He was buried in a borrowed tomb.

And he did it all for you and me, because he loved us. If we cannot find joy in the midst of trouble, we need to take a trip to the cross. We need to see how much Jesus loves us. He loves us so much that he gave his life for us. My selfishness; my need to put myself first nailed him to the cross. He took the consequence of death that my sin deserves. He sacrificed his life for me. I can't earn his love. I don't deserve his love. He freely offers it to me. All I can do is receive his love as a gift and know that I am forgiven and will live with him eternally because of what he did for me. When we know how much we are loved; when we see the cost of grace; we find a way to give.

Jesus observed a widow who had nothing. She only had two pennies to her name. She could have hung on to that so that at least she had something. She could have taken care of herself—number 1. But she went to the Temple and gave her two pennies—everything that she had. Why? Because she knew that God loved her whether she had anything or not. And because God loved

her, she loved God. When you love someone, you find a way to give. You don't give out of the surplus. You find a way to give. Giving reveals who is really first in our lives. Giving reveals how much of God's love we have experienced.

When Jesus is our treasure we don't ask: "How much do I have to give to satisfy God's requirements? What is the minimum I have to give and can still be accepted by God." When we know how much God loves us; when Jesus is our treasure; we look for ways to give as much as can—joyfully. What does your giving say about your relationship with God?