

Experiencing God in Troubled Times

Choosing Joy

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This morning we conclude our series of messages based upon the book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament. Habakkuk was a prophet who lived around 600 BC. He lived during a time of trouble for his nation of Judah. Injustice and evil abounded. Corruption filled the government and the religious community. Habakkuk cried out to God: "Why are you allowing this trouble?" God responds: "Things are going to get worse. The Babylonians are coming. They will conquer you, ravage the land and carry everyone into exile." The entire book is a dialog between God and Habakkuk which reveals to us how we can experience God in the midst of trouble.

We are living in troubled times. We are experiencing a severe economic crisis. There are mixed signals about how much longer it will last. Proposals for health care reform and the potential tax liability create anger spewing out at town hall meetings. Corruption and greed fill the government, big corporations and even the religious community. Habakkuk helps us experience God in the midst of troubled times not only for our nation but when we personally experience trouble. We may experience personal financial struggles, health problems, family problems. We can experience God in the midst of those. This is the fifth message. It would take too long to review them all. I hope if you missed some of the message you will go to our web site where you can read, watch or listen to the messages. Also you can purchase the entire set on CD at tape ministry center.

Today Habakkuk will help us see how to choose joy in the midst of trouble.

Habakkuk 3:16-19

I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.

17 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.

God painted a bleak picture for the future of Judah. Trouble will increase exponentially when the Babylonians arrive. There will be total social and economic collapse. "No figs; no grapes; no olives." In an agricultural economy that meant the stock market had collapsed. The Dow Jones plummeted to zero. The nation was in trouble. Sometimes in our individual lives we experience trouble and things keep getting worse. We experience health problems. We cry out to God, yet the pain increases. We experience financial difficulties. We cry out to God, yet things get worse. The Babylonians are coming!!

Habakkuk learns that we can choose joy even in worst possible situations. In 1851, an English missionary named Alan Gardner was shipwrecked along with other passengers on a remote uninhabited island off the coast of South America. Eventually they began dying from starvation. The missionary was the last one to die. Several years later a ship landed and discovered all the remains along with a journal that Alan Gardner had written describing their experiences each day. His last journal entry recorded the words of Psalm 34:10, "The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing." Then he wrote these words, the last recorded before he died: "Today I am overwhelmed with the goodness of God." How could he be overwhelmed with the goodness of God? He was totally alone, starving to death, weak. Yet he says: "God's goodness is overwhelming."

When do we say God is good? When things are going great for us. When the fig tree is blossoming. When we have plenty of money, our health is good,

everybody in the family is getting along. Then God is good. We say: “I am so blessed.” “God’s favor is upon me.” We infer the goodness of God from the good things that happen in our lives. How can a guy who is experiencing the total collapse of his life say that God’s goodness is overwhelming? He came into direct contact with the goodness of God through his circumstances.

Habakkuk learned to rejoice in his suffering—not for his suffering—but in his suffering. Habakkuk reveals to us how to choose joy. First let’s look at what it means to rejoice in the midst of suffering. Listen to words of Habakkuk 3:19:

“The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.”

He makes our feet like a deer enabling us to go on the heights. In the midst of trouble, God makes us as sure footed as a deer. Have you ever watched deer climb the side of a cliff? They are amazing how swiftly they can climb without slipping. The presence of God in the midst of trouble gives us sure feet to navigate through the trouble. He takes us to the heights. When trouble comes, it pushes us in to a higher place—into a deeper experience of God. Now this is not automatic, it is a choice. Some people who suffer get hard, cynical, resentful and arrogant—“my suffering is greater than anyone else’s!” Others who suffer become more caring, open and humble. Suffering will make us far better or far worse. The choice is ours. If we stay engaged with God and work through our troubles with him, he will raise us up. We will experience closeness to him in the midst of trouble. Even though we loose everything, we will have the greatest

thing. We will have God himself. In the midst of trouble we can say “I am overwhelmed by the goodness of God.” What is joy? It is a choice.

When does joy happen? It happens concurrently with trouble and sorrow. It does not happen after trouble has left. It happens in the midst of it. In

Habakkuk 3:16 he says:

I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.

This is how Habakkuk responds when he hears that the Babylonians are coming and will cause the total collapse of his nation and great suffering for all of Judah. His heart pounds; his lips quiver; his legs buckle. Now the Babylonians have not even arrived yet, and he is having a melt down. Isn't that how it happens to us? The doctor says, “You have a terminal illness.” You have a melt down and have not yet experienced any great pain or suffering. You get a pink slip from work. You have some money saved up. You are not going to be broke overnight. Right now you are OK, but the fear of what might happen causes you to have a melt down. The anticipation of trouble can be as overwhelming as the trouble itself. Habakkuk hears that total collapse is coming and he melts down. He makes a choice, even if he loses everything (and he will) he is going to rejoice in God: “Yet I will rejoice in the Lord.” He is crying and rejoicing at the same time. And, notice, he makes the decision in advance: “I will rejoice.” That does not make sense to us. For us it is either/or: either you rejoice or you cry. You can't do both at the same time. But the Bible says we can rejoice in our sorrow. The joy of the

Lord happens concurrently with the trouble. Rejoicing does not mean constantly smiling and gliding above our trouble. Rejoicing does not mean denying our feelings of loss and grief. Some people think that Christians should not cry when they lose a loved one. They should only rejoice that their loved one has gone to heaven. They believe that to be sad and cry demonstrates a lack of faith in God and the resurrection. When I was in high school in Dallas, the son of one of the sponsors of my church youth group was killed in an auto racing accident. He was 18 years old. His mother thought she had to set an example for all of us in the youth group about how to handle death. She never cried. She constantly told us: "I am just rejoicing that he is in heaven." I remember going by to see her about four years later. She was severely depressed. She had not touched his room. It was like a shrine. I wondered if she would have been a better example to us, if she had taught us that you can grieve and rejoice at the same time? Grief and sorrow actually enhance the joy. Grief and sorrow drive us to the source of joy—to God himself. And in the security of his arms, we are able to feel the fullness of our grief. When we know that God is with us, we can allow ourselves to feel our sadness. Many people don't want to start crying when they lose someone. They are afraid that if they start, they will never stop crying. So the fear of being unable to handle the depth of their grief prevents them from grieving at all. When we choose to let our troubles drive into the arms of God, then we are free to grieve deeply without fear of it overwhelming us. God is with us and will see us through.

When Jesus was with Mary and Martha who were grieving the death of their brother Lazarus, the scripture says: "Jesus wept." Now, Jesus knew that in

a few moments he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Why then did he weep? He was perfect. He showed us perfectly how to handle loss. Weep--but with the assurance of the resurrection. The joy happens concurrently with sorrow. Joy does not replace the sorrow. Joy does not come after the sorrow. It comes in the midst of the trouble.

How do we choose joy in the midst of trouble? Listen again to Habakkuk 3:18, “yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” This is typical of many passages in the Bible that repeat the same thought with slightly different words. Throughout the Bible the same themes are repeated over and over again. Mark Martin has been a member of this church from year one. Every Sunday in his Bible, he records my scripture passage for the sermon. Occasionally after church, he informs me “You’ve preached on that same text 12 times.” Sometimes I respond to Mark: “I’m going to keep preaching on that passage until you finally get it!” I am just following the Biblical model of repetition. I will preach frequently on the biblical themes of grace, forgiveness, pride, worshipping idols and giving—because those themes recur over and over in the Bible. Why does the Bible say the same thing multiple times? It helps us to finally get it. If you hear someone mention eating at a new restaurant, you may or may not be interested in eating there. But in the course of a day you hear two or three more people mention eating at that restaurant, you get it. You say, “I’m going there for dinner tonight.” Every time we here something repeated it goes a little deeper into us. Every time we hear God’s word repeated it goes a little deeper. People who think they know the Bible if they have read it through one

time and kidding themselves. The Bible is inspired by the infinite mind of God. Not even Albert Einstein can comprehend it on multiple readings. It is inexhaustible. The more we hear it and read it, the deeper it goes inside of us. The deeper it goes in us the more it transforms us. "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior." How do you choose joy in the midst of trouble? Saturate yourself in God's word. Over and over it will proclaim this truth: You can rejoice in the midst of trouble.

Let me give you a sample:

John 16:22

Jesus said: "Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."

Romans 5:3

We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

Philip. 4:4

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

1 Peter 1:6

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

Rejoicing in the midst of our troubles is a choice. We rejoice inside our troubles and by allowing our troubles to drive us deeper into the Word and the arms of God. Are you in trouble today? Will you choose to experience the joy of the Lord?