

HABAKKUK 3:17-18 4-18-10

Fighting For Joy

(Habakkuk, Scr sheet and outline) Habakkuk 3:**16-19** *I heard and my inward parts trembled, At the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, And in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, For the people to arise who will invade us. 17 Though the fig tree should not blossom And there be no fruit on the vines, Though the yield of the olive should fail And the fields produce no food, Though the flock should be cut off from the fold And there be no cattle in the stalls, 18 Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. 19 The Lord GOD is my strength, And He has made my feet like hinds' feet, And makes me walk on my high places.* Our focus will be on verses 17 and 18 of this text, but first we need to acquaint you a bit with the prophet Habakkuk and his little book. And you had better pay attention here because I just may call on someone at random in a few minutes to recall what I am teaching here. I do this to try to get your mind right here where your body is. That is important to me because when I was in school, my body was normally at a desk but my mind was on the football field. And most of my teachers let me get away with that. You know what I mean? So listen. Habakkuk is known only by the book he wrote. He is a pre-exilic prophet in Judah, meaning that he spoke the word of the Lord to the southern kingdom, before the invasion by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Our best guess is that his ministry pre-dated the exile by around two decades. But it was just this invasion by the Babylonians, also known as Chaldeans, nowadays known as Iraqis that is at the center of this prophecy. Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet, Habakkuk could be dubbed the complaining prophet. Now, hey, there is a Bible hero you can relate to, eh? He does a bunch of complaining and that is how his book starts off. In fact, Habakkuk comes off a bit like a whiny child. Habakkuk 1:**2-3b** *How long, O LORD, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save. 3 Why do You make me see iniquity, And cause me to look on wickedness?* What he is complaining about is explained from verses 5-11 where Habakkuk relates to us how God promises to bring judgment on faithless Judah by means of the wicked hordes of the Chaldean army. Now hey—it's bad enough to find out God is coming in judgment on your people, but then to learn that he is doing it by granting military victory to godless pagans?! Habakkuk was outraged! He even accuses God of injustice. He does it with some praise, but he does it. **13** *Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You can not look on wickedness with favor. Why do You look with favor On those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?* Habakkuk doesn't really hold back. He rather let's God have it. And

God is a big boy. He can take it. In chapter 2 you get his answer to Habakkuk. There he explains that although He is using the Chaldeans to spank His children, the foreign invaders will not escape His justice. And chapter two ends with a reminder, a stark reminder of just who is Boss in the Universe. **2:20** *But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him.*

For Habakkuk, the answer of the Lord is sufficient. His God will not wink at injustice. His God is too great to be challenged by mortals. His God is still on His throne and Habakkuk comes back in chapter 3 and this time he is prayerful and his prayer is God-centered. Habakkuk turns his attention away from his own offended sense of justice, and reminds himself who God is. That is how he can finish his prophecy as he does with this incredible word **17-18** *Though the fig tree should not blossom And there be no fruit on the vines, Though the yield of the olive should fail And the fields produce no food, Though the flock should be cut off from the fold And there be no cattle in the stalls, 18 Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.*

(quiz time?) Now let's get to the heart of our meditations for today. We see in our text a rather amazing testimony about joy in the midst of trial. Three points to consider, the time of joy, the sphere of joy and the duty of joy. Of course, what makes the joy extraordinary is the timing of it. Most every man who has ever lived has known moments of cheerfulness and gaiety, in times of plenty and well-being, but the idea of rejoicing when your world is falling apart is a concept we find difficult to fathom. But right there is the test of faith isn't it? Remember in the book of Job how the devil goes to God and says, "Sure, Job is your faithful servant, but you have made everything cushy for him. Beat up on him and watch what happens. He won't worship you then." We get that. No one would think ill of Habakkuk if he found himself down and depressed and joyless. Look at what God told him was coming! You and I cannot imagine this. We have no real fear of being invaded. But what Habakkuk saw was awful violence, awful destruction. He saw terror! Can you grasp how soul-wrenching it is to fall under the power of people who hate you, or people who could care less if you lived or died? When I was a young boy, I had a brother seven years my senior and for sport he used to pin me down and tickle me, or breathe on me with his horrific bad breath. And what could I do? I was tiny next to him, but the powerlessness I felt in his grip was traumatizing for me. Some of you have had your homes burglarized haven't you? And how did you feel after that? You feel violated, vulnerable. It's a terrible feeling. You remember during the life of David how God became upset with his servant for taking that census and gave David three options for his punishment. He said, "David, your punishment can be famine, or pestilence or military defeat." And David said, "I'll choose anything over falling into the hands of

my enemies.” But that is exactly what Habakkuk was coping with. Invasion by the barbarians. 3:16 *I heard and my inward parts trembled, At the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, And in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, For the people to arise who will invade us.* I mean, this is serious woe, serious trouble he saw coming. His lips quivered, his innards trembled at the thought of it. And then he described the devastation that was coming in agricultural terms. For a people like us who have never really feared starvation either this may be hard to relate to. But he was talking about something fearful. To start with, no figs. This meant more than no figgy pudding at Christmas. Dried fruit saw them thru the winter, but Habakkuk sees no figs, no fruit at all. No oil from their olives, no wheat from their fields. No milk from their animals, no meat, nothing to eat, nothing to feed their children. It is a picture of earthly devastation. This is the dark background in which the light of verse 18 would shine so brightly. For after his three “thoughts” the prophet comes thru with a resounding “yet!” 18 *Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.* Even when things are bleakest.

Fast forward to the New Testament. In Acts 5 Peter and the boys were arrested, beaten and threatened not to preach but they went on their way rejoicing because they got to suffer shame for the name of Jesus. Acts 16:22 tells us that Paul and Silas were beaten up in Philippi, that they received many blows with rods and then were thrown in jail with their feet fastened to the stocks and what do they do? They sang hymns of praise to God. And that same Paul exhorts us in Philippians 4:4 to do what? 4a *Rejoice in the Lord always.* We are all good with that until we come to that last word. Always? How? How do you rejoice when there is war, and the economy is in recession and your business is stinky and your children are sick and your spouse doesn’t love you? How?! (pause) We see these trials as joy-busters. But the Scriptures call us to a joy that flows out of trust in an unchanging Lord and because of that Jesus could tell His disciples (in John 11:22) that “*no one takes your joy from you.*” Interesting, because we are always thinking that other people and other things rob us of our joy. The Lord says, “No.” No one, no thing can do that to us. Now, I think we admire folks who remain joyful in trials don’t we? We admire Paul and Peter and Habakkuk and Joni Eareckson Tada, but is joy in the midst of suffering an attainable ideal for spoiled Americans like us? (pause) With man, it is impossible, but with God?... with God you can rejoice when the fig tree does not blossom.

So, that’s the time of joy – in suffering or always- and our second point explains how that can be because we look at the sphere of joy, which is “in the Lord.” Habakkuk says, “I will exult in the Lord! I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.” He is rejoicing despite the suffering, through the

suffering, during the suffering, but His joy is in the Lord. ? To some that may not make any sense because you see God as a stern joy-killer, as the type of God who is always looking to see who is having too much fun so He can squish 'em. The State of Minnesota's gambling commission actually paid for an ad which, get this, described their lottery as, "More fun than your minister wants you to have." But, friend, don't you see how wrong that is? Our joy is in the Lord. He is the object of our rejoicing. And if I simply rejoiced in my health – it couldn't be always. If I rejoice in my kids – it couldn't be always. If I rejoice in the Florida Gators – it wouldn't be always. These things change, they fail, they let you down. But fix your joy on Christ and it will always be around.

Sometimes, you know, you ask a friend, "How you doing?" and they may say, "Well, okay, under the circumstances. Fine, under the circumstances." And that is where most of us live – under our circumstances. If circumstances be good, we be good. If not? We can live, like most do, under the circumstances or we can live in the Lord. Which is bigger? Which is greater? Your troubles or your God? I know your answer to that. God is. But here's the deal – my hand does not compare with the sun in size, but if I hold my hand close enough I can eliminate the sun from my vision. and we can hold our circumstances, our troubles, so close to our sight that we blot out the enormity of the majesty and love of Christ. In Romans 8 Paul said the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come. But if, in our sight, the glory to come is too far away, the sufferings will appear bigger, and will dominate our emotions.

The point here is simple. Hold the Lord close. Remember that His love is bigger and greater than anything that can happen to you today, and rejoice that He is faithful, that He is holy, that He is wise, that He is Shepherd, and most of all, that He is Savior. That's what Habakkuk mentions. *I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation*. What is greater, your sufferings or your salvation? Habakkuk was uptight and confused early on in his prophecy because God wasn't making any sense and He was wondering, "Why must we suffer?" That is a fair question, but the gospel points us to a different question, "Why must He suffer?" And the answer for that one is given. He loved us that much. He is that committed to our redemption. Praise God. Isn't that the truth that we want dominating our emotions? Even when the fig tree does not blossom?

Our joy is in the Lord. This point tells us not only where we can find joy in suffering, but how. We go to God and we worship. We adore. We focus our sight on His beauty and worthiness. Chapter 3 of Habakkuk begins with the prophet coming before the Lord. That's the turning point in so much. Chapter 3 gives us a prayer that is God-centered. It's not focused on his pain. That pain is real and not to be ignored but his focus was on God's glory and plan. You think maybe that is how

Habakkuk gained perspective? When you are imploding inside – worship! (pause) Okay, how does singing some old dry songs, and saying a prayer, and listening to a sermon supposed to help? (pause) You got a point. Not just any old worship will do. It must be worship in spirit and in truth. Your soul has to be engaged. Your emotions must be involved. No other kind of worship will do you any good.

The most emotional season of my life by far was the fall of 2006, especially October, when I laid down my pastorate of 24 years. I was devastated and crushed. When I stood before our church on October 22 to announce my resignation, I wept my way thru my comments. And at the end, we sang and we worshipped God with the Matt Redman song which he takes from the story of Job that says, *Blessed be Your name when the sun's shining down on me When the world's all as it should be. Blessed be Your name. And blessed be Your name on the road marked with suffering. Though there's pain in the offering. Blessed be Your name. You give and take away. But blessed be your name!* For me, in the Fall of 06 and in the months that followed, my salvation emotionally was found in an upper room at my house where I grieved my loss and worshipped God...with passion. Two great hymns have been especially important to me. All the Way My Savior Leads Me. That was one. The other has been, *I Stand Amazed in the Presence of Jesus the Nazarene and wonder...?* Wonder what? Wonder how He could allow this to happen to me His faithful servant?!! No, no. *And wonder how He could love me, a sinner, condemned unclean. Oh, how marvelous, oh how wonderful and my song shall ever be, Oh how marvelous, oh how wonderful is my Savior's love for me.* In singing this I was seeking to hold my Savior's love close to my soul's vision. On my ipod I have a version of the hymn sung live at a concert and I love it. I love it! On the final stanza the singer begins, *when with the ransomed in glory, His face I at last shall see.* At this point in the concert the audience just bursts out in applause and rapturous praise. And I have listened to that over and again, thinking, the people at that concert got it. They were holding the love of Jesus so close that nothing else mattered, the future bliss of heaven was real to them, and in that there is reason for exultation and rejoicing even when the fig tree does not blossom. What is the sphere of holy joy? It is in the Lord, the God of our salvation, to whom we draw near in worship.

Okay, we need to move on to look finally at the duty of joy. The duty of joy? That sounds weird. And it is weird. Joy is our weird, wonderful, crazy, delightful, hedonistic duty. John Gerstner said that God promises terrible things to him who will not be happy. This kind of talk sounds strange to us because we tend to see joy as if it were the bluebird of happiness. It either lands on you or it doesn't and there isn't much you can do about it. God doesn't seem to see it that way. Habakkuk

certainly did not. Paul in Philippians did not. Consider Isaiah 65:18 *But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; For behold, I create Jerusalem for rejoicing And her people for gladness.* ® This is a command and a description of God's very purpose in our salvation. God is seeking His own joy in and thru our joy. I think that is cool! But what can be disturbing is to see that God is looking for joy from us even when His providence is brutal. It is precisely then that God may be most glorified in us. You may be familiar with John Piper's famous dictum that *God is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in Him.* And when we are healthy and wealthy and popular it is hard for us or anyone to know wherein we find our satisfaction. I think of lives I have seen... a couple of men I have known. One named Shawn, whom I mentioned a few Sundays back, still alive, afflicted for 30 years with muscular dystrophy, stuck in a wheelchair, declining in health every month, unable to marry, now unable to even talk, but he has been a picture of holy contentment, even joy and it is beautiful, beautiful. What a testament to the sufficiency of Christ my friend Shawn is because it is clear that his joy could come from no other fount, than Jesus.

So, Habakkuk, seeking that kind of glory for His God says to himself that even when times are most distressing, *I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation!* Notice this is future tense. We don't really know for sure how Habakkuk responded when his prophecy came true, but we know what he said of his intention. What is the prophet up to here? I would suggest that in saying what he does about his commitment to rejoice in suffering, he is preaching to himself. This is positive self-talk. Now listen, there are those who teach what is called positive confessionalism. They claim that by saying things we can change reality, we can change our circumstances. They suggest that if the doctor says you have a tumor you should say, "no, I am perfectly healthy." And keep saying that until it's true. Now, that is nonsense and contrary to Christianity. However, there is some truth to what they claim. We can alter our own attitudes by the messages we send ourselves. The military commander who wants his troops to be victorious doesn't get up in front of them and start talking bad about their chances. He doesn't get them ready to fight by making them scared of the enemy and by imposing doubt on them. No, he tells them they can do it. He tells them they will fight bravely. And he encourages that kind of resolve in his men. Because it does make a difference in their attitude.

So, what are you planning today? What expectations have you set before your eyes? There is a once-popular Christian book entitled, "*Happiness is a Choice*" ® That sounds simple, but for the most part, it is quite true. Most people have never consciously and doggedly chosen happiness. In fact, I find that the greater part of humankind has opted for sadness. Don't you know folks whose

only real pleasure is complaining? Happiness would rob them of their whole purpose for being. But, I urge you my friend, choose joy! Choose joy in the Lord!

You and I sometimes hear or make comments like these: “If he does that again I’ll kill him.” Or “if she doesn’t stop that I’m gonna go nuts.” When my kids make comments like that, I will sometimes say, “Good plan!” And I know they aren’t planning that, but my suggestion there is that they really ought to be planning the opposite, that they plan to stay patient, and stay sane, and do the right thing when others are not. We all head into our days and weeks and months with some kind of plan. What I love in Habakkuk is that He is heading into hard times with a plan to exult in the Lord. He is not letting himself get pulled down, under the circumstances. I think, I think, he is fighting for joy. Now again, that is a peculiar concept to us, but it is a sub-title of a John Piper book. Fighting for joy. That doesn’t mean you don’t grieve when grief is appropriate. It doesn’t mean you don’t cry, but it does mean no moral paralysis or sullenness or withdrawal from God.

Most of you know the story of Joni Eareckson Tada who has lived as a quadriplegic now, for over 37 years. I know of no one whose life glorifies God more than hers. Listen to a brief description of a normal day for Joni. She says, “I wake up and wait for someone to give me a bed bath, someone to pour bran down my throat, someone to brush my hair and blow my nose. I am so tired of life as a quadriplegic. I don’t know if I can face another day. But then I look to the Lord Jesus who has the strength that I lack, and I ask Him, *Lord, may I borrow your smile today because I am lacking my own.* I remember the promise of Philippians 4:13 that I can do all things thru Christ who strengthens me and I am deeply grateful.” End quote. That is a woman who is fighting for joy today and plans to fight for it tomorrow.

Plans. You know the old maxim. If you fail to plan you?? Plan to fail. Let’s make a plan today. Maybe you have a plan for what to do if your church catches fire. Where to exit and so on. The odds of that happening are tiny but you have a plan. Do you have a suffering plan? Do you have a plan for when the enemy comes in, for when the fig tree won’t blossom? For when you lose your job, for when your health gives way, for when the storms arise? A plan for suffering won’t be wasted because it is surely coming. We would love to pretend it ain’t so, but this life is fraught with affliction. I think of that scene in the movie Princess Bride when the hero Wesley tells his beloved, “*Life is pain, your highness, and anyone who tells you different is trying to sell you something.*” I’m selling nothing because I am telling you life in a fallen world is pain. I urge you to plan now for how to preserve your joy and glorify God when that pain becomes intense. Determine now that the circumstances will not suck you under, but you will, by the grace and power of Jesus, rise up and

rejoice in the God of your salvation. At the bottom of your Scripture sheet you have a place to indicate your commitment today. Take a moment now and choose which reaction you intend to have when hard times come. Will you grumble and fuss? Will you grit your teeth and bear it? Or will you rejoice in the Lord?

Some of you need a plan for the day of suffering. Others of you are there right now. The word speaks to you as well. Some time back I ran across an article about a bird named Chippie who lived in a cage, owned by a woman who one day was too busy to change the papers in Chippie's cage, so she tried to clean the bird cage with the vacuum cleaner. As she was vacuuming the cage her phone rang. She turned to answer it when she heard the noise, "WHOOSH." She turned back to the cage and, you guessed it, no more Chippie. The bird was now in the bag. Quickly she hung up the phone, opened the bag and found Chippie - still alive but filthy. She went to the bathroom, turned up the water full force and stuck Chippie beneath it. Soon he was clean but wet, so she pulled out the hair dryer and within minutes Chippie was dry, warm and back in his cage. Everything seemed to be fine, but it wasn't. Days later someone asked, "How's Chippie?" The answer came back, "Well, he seems OK, except that he doesn't sing anymore. He just sits and stares out into the room." Does that story describe you, or someone you love? What is it that has robbed you of your song? That has sucked away all the joy and the life? I promise you, it is not beyond the power of God. He can turn your mourning into dancing. He can dry your tears and put a smile on your face and wind in your sails, and exultation in your heart as you worship Him and remember that nothing has happened or can happen that is bigger or greater or more lasting than the love of God in Christ.