



Learning to Rejoice in God

SERIES: *Can You Hear Me Now?*

Let me start this morning by asking you a question: What's the thing you fear the most? What's the one thing that you might have to go through some day that you're just not sure you could endure?

- Is it the death of a spouse, or a child, or a parent?
- Is it an act of violence committed against you?
- Is it a dreaded illness?
- Is it financial ruin; the inability to provide for your family?
- Is it being ignored, rejected, or betrayed by someone you love?

Take any one of those things and think about how you would feel if it happened. What would you do? I want you to especially think about how that might impact your relationship with God? How would it effect your prayer life?

When I perform a wedding, I like to use the traditional vows that have been around for centuries. Sometimes I like to talk about each line because each is so meaningful and important. I think especially of what the vows say about the possibility of difficulty and loss. We say, "For better or for worse. For richer or for poorer. In sickness and in health." Those aren't things we like to talk about at a wedding, but we do that because we know this is the reality of what we so often have to face. But the very next line says, "To love and to cherish." So the promise is to love and cherish that person in the midst of and in spite of and perhaps even because of all of those things.

But when we become a follower of Jesus, when we commit ourselves to God, do we make the same promise? Can we love and cherish and even rejoice in God when the worst things happen? It's easy to say Yes to that, but like a couple about to embark on their honeymoon, do we really have any idea how that promise will be tested?

We've been looking at the Old Testament book called Habakkuk. Habakkuk was a prophet whose relationship with God was being tested. He served in Judah in a dark time. He started out complaining to God about all the violence and injustice he saw around him in God's people. God seemed to do nothing about it despite the fact that he had been praying for him to step in for some time. Then we saw how God finally responded to him and said he was going to raise up the Babylonians to invade Judah and take them captive. This isn't what Habakkuk had in mind! How could God use a people as degraded and godless and fierce as the Babylonians to judge his own people? It didn't seem fair! But then God assured him this wouldn't be the end of the story. God gave Habakkuk a vision of how he would judge all of those who are proud and who oppose him but bring life and salvation to those who humbly trust him. It was a vision he would have to wait for; it would

come only at the appointed time. It was a vision not just about the Babylonians and Habakkuk and his people but about the whole earth. In this vision God said, "**The whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord**" (2:14).

This brings us to chapter 3. Chapter 3 is another one of Habakkuk's prayers. As a matter of fact it starts out in v.1, "**A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet.**" But instead of starting at the beginning of the prayer I want to start at the end. Like a lot of prayers he kind of ends with a bang. It's like he comes to this point of surrender and he makes a bold affirmation of faith.

I. Habakkuk confesses his faith.

Look at what he says in vv. 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,
 Yet I will exult in the LORD,
 I will rejoice in the God of my salvation."**

He basically makes two affirmations here. First, he says, "I may lose everything." Remember, he lives in an agrarian society. The fig trees and vines takes years and years to grow; they speak of patient labor. It's like he's saying, "I may lose all the things I've worked for." In 1 Kings 4:25 we read, "**Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine, every man under his fig tree.**" This is a picture of peace and prosperity. The vines produce grapes for wine, a symbol of joy. He's saying "I may lose all of that." The fig tree also produced medicine. They'd take a poultice of figs and boil them and put it on whatever was needed. So he's saying, "I may even lose my health!" And then there's the olive tree. Olive oil was used for any number of things: salt and soap and light. These were basic necessities. He's saying, "I may lose all these things." And then the biggie: the fields may not produce food. "Well, what will we eat then? I know, we'll eat lamb and beef." But no, he says he may lose that too. If the flock is cut off from the fold and the cattle aren't in the stalls they don't even have any meat, much less clothing and warmth.

Each of us needs to ask ourselves what we would put on this list. For you it may be the possibility of losing a job or your home. It may be losing your retirement. It may be losing your health. It may be the failure of your marriage. It may one of your kids not making it spiritually. For many of us that's the worst possible eventuality.

But look at the second thing he says, "**YET I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.**"

What an amazing affirmation of faith! Notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say he would lash out at God in anger. He doesn't say, "God, you have no right to take those things away from me!" He doesn't pretend that the evil won't happen, either. He doesn't withdraw into a fantasy world, saying, "That's too terrible to think about. I'll think of something else. I'll sit in front of the TV and get distracted." He doesn't even say, "Despite all this, I'll endure! I'll keep a stiff upper lip and stick it out!" Habakkuk isn't the Little Train That Could, puffing up the side of the mountain saying, "I think I can, I think I can." No, he not only foresees the possibility that he could lose everything; he foresees the certainty that life as he knows it—everything and everyone he loves—will be destroyed. And yet he still says, "I will REJOICE in God."

We look at this guy and say, "Wow! That's the real deal. This guy must be some kind of saint!" I'd like to be able to say this, but I'm not sure I really can. But each of must learn to pray this prayer. It's interesting that this was more than Habakkuk's own personal prayer. It was intended as a song to be used in worship. When it says in v.1 that this prayer is "according to Shigionoth" it means that the prayer is to be used to musical accompaniment in the corporate worship of God's people. This is confirmed by the very last phrase of the book, "To the choirmaster, on my stringed instruments." It's like this is supposed to be part of the song book for the church. He wants us to be able to sing this prayer with him. It's not here to just tell us about Habakkuk's faith, but to show us how all of us should face all of the terrible possibilities before us, including the possibility that God would judge our own land.

So I ask you, how can we join him in this song? How can we sing this prayer from the heart? The answer comes in the rest of the prayer.

II. Habakkuk teaches us how to rejoice in spite of our circumstances.

A. We must relinquish control to God: First of all, look up at v.2.

"LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear

O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years,

In the midst of the years make it known;

In wrath remember mercy."

This is how he started his prayer. What I see here is he relinquishes control to God. Before he'd been protesting, now he humbles himself. "I have heard the report about you and I fear." There is no longer a request that God withdraw judgment or carry out his purpose in some other way. There is a recognition that God can do what he wants to do and he's absolutely in the right. Instead of praying selfishly, he prays, "Revive your work in the midst of the years. In the midst of the years make it known." He's talking about the time between when he prays this prayer and when God would finally judge the Babylonians. In the midst of those years Judah would go through terrible suffering. So he's saying, "Lord, let your judgment come quickly so that it might all the more quickly be replaced by your saving work in restoring us." The only thing he asks is

that "in wrath (God would) remember mercy." In other words, as we're being judged, don't forget your mercy. He doesn't say, "Listen, God, we're not that bad. We've done some good things too. So don't be too hard on us." No! He accepts that God is totally in the right in expressing his wrath, but he asks God to temper that wrath with mercy.

This submission to God's plan is also seen down in v.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."

Though Habakkuk has been undone by this vision of what God was going to do, he says, "I will wait quietly for the day of distress." He doesn't like it. He doesn't want it. But he accepts it. He no longer protests as he did in chapter 1. He surrenders to God's plan.

We have to come to this point of surrender to the purpose and the plan and the person of God. We have to recognize that he knows better than we do. The question isn't whether our plans and our desires have been fulfilled; it's has God's plan been furthered? This reminds me of what Jesus taught us to say when we begin to pray, "Our Father, who lives in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Notice where Jesus tells us to start in prayer: with God's person ("hallowed be your name") and with God's plan ("your kingdom come, your will be done").

Let me give you an example of this kind of thinking. Marshall Shelley is one of the senior editors of *Christianity Today* publications. Over the years, he and his wife Susan have had two children born with birth defects—Toby and Mandy. In 1991, Mandy was a year old but was oblivious to reality as we know it because of her birth defects and brain damage. Susan was pregnant with Toby, and from the beginning of the pregnancy they knew that Toby was even more severely damaged than Mandy. But they chose to trust God and see the pregnancy through. Let me read a portion of the letter that they wrote to friends at the end of that year:

This was not a gentle year for the Shelley's. It was one which we experienced God's Grace amid some painful circumstances. First the difficulties: Our daughter Mandy, age one, was hospitalized nine times this year—seizures, surgery to have a feeding tube implanted in her stomach, surgery for acute glaucoma. She remains completely dependent, unable to respond to us in any way, although we do think she knows when she is being held. In August, due to a still-unknown cause, Mandy went into a coma and almost died. Susan stayed all night at the hospital holding Mandy and praying. At 7 a.m. her vital signs normalized. The next day we brought her home. One of the nurses said later that she saw angels hovering over Mandy's bed.

In November, our son Toby was born four pounds, eight ounces, 19 inches long with severe birth defects—heart malformation, cleft lip, missing portions of the brain, spina bifida. It was a condition called trisomic thirteen. Two

minutes later he died. We got to hold him, and we saw him breathe a few times. But we never heard his voice or saw his eyes. We still grieve for not getting to know him.

After paying tribute to Toby with a service of remembrance and thanksgiving with 275 people at the funeral to honor him, we loaded his tiny casket into our van and drove to Kansas where we buried his body in the family cemetery. We knew that Toby was already in heaven enjoying eternal life free from his birth defects.

Again, we were left wondering what God was up to. Why create a child who would only live for two minutes? We still don't know what caused Toby's condition, or Mandy's. But we are convinced that they were created for a purpose.

If, as the Bible says, the last shall be first, we won't be surprised to find when we get to heaven that Toby and Mandy are playing key roles that we can't even imagine right now. Susan and I have often reminded each other that all our professional and church activity may wind up in eternity looking pretty insignificant. In God's kingdom we may find that our greatest contribution was giving birth to Toby and Mandy.

You see, I think Habakkuk would like this. I think this is the kind of thinking that Habakkuk had developed. It's kingdom thinking. It's thinking not so much about me and what I think is best, but about God. It's a recognition that God's plan may not be our plan, but it's a good plan; it's the best plan.

B. We must remember God's work: The first thing he did to come to this place of praise is relinquish control to God. The second thing is found in vv.3-15. As you can see this is the longest part of his prayer; it's also the most difficult to understand. In these verses Habakkuk describes God as a warrior on the move. He shows how in the past God has come to the aid of his people and saved them. He anticipates how God will come to their rescue again. He even looks to the end of time when God will save all those who belong to him and judge those who oppose him. Scholars call this a theophany, which is a physical manifestation of God's presence to humanity. So we see God using all the forces of nature as his weapons: storms, earthquakes, floods and plagues.

Let me just give you a taste of it.

**"God comes from Teman,
And the Holy One from Mount Paran Selah
His splendor covers the heavens,
And the earth is full of His praise.
His radiance is like the sunlight;
He has rays flashing from His hand,
And there is the hiding of His power.
Before Him goes pestilence,
And plague comes after Him.
He stood and surveyed the earth;
He looked and startled the nations
Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered,
The ancient hills collapsed
His ways are everlasting.
saw the tents of Cushan under distress,
The tent curtains of the land of Midian were
trembling"** (vv.3-7).

You might not see it on the surface but there are a lot of allusions here to the Exodus and to Mt. Sinai. God routed the Egyptians through pestilence and plagues. Teman and Mt. Paran are in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. Both Cushan and Midian tried to invade Israel during the days of the Judges but God delivered them. So this is looking back to the great saving acts of God in Israel's past.

How can this help us join Habakkuk in that song of praise? This teaches us to remember God's saving work in the past. We have to remember what an awesome, powerful God he is; how in this work of salvation all of nature is at his command. For us, as followers of Jesus it means remembering the key events of what we call the gospel. The greatest theophany ever was God becoming a man in the person of Jesus. Remember that! Remember how he was born of a virgin; how the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove and the voice of the Father roared like thunder, "This is my Son. Listen to him!" Remember how he stilled the waters, cast out demons, raised the dead, turned water into wine and made a blind man see. And then remember what happened when he died. The earth shook and the sun was darkened and the veil of the Temple split in two. Remember how death couldn't hold him in its grip; how he burst forth from the grave and appeared to hundreds and then they watched as he ascended in the clouds with the promise that he would one day return the same way.

C. We must rely on God's strength: If we're going to be able to sing Habakkuk's song of praise we'll have to remember his saving work. But there's one more thing. We'll also have to rely on his strength. You see, God isn't just someone who acted back then but he's someone who is with us now. And that makes all the difference in the world.

That's what Habakkuk says in the very last line of his prayer. Look at v.19.

**"The Lord GOD is my strength,
And He has made my feet like hinds' feet,
And makes me walk on my high places.
For the choir director, on my stringed instruments."**

Habakkuk never could have sung this song of praise unless the Lord was present with him to give him strength. He says, "The Lord God IS my strength." And he uses a beautiful image here to reinforce that: "He has made my feet like hinds feet." Have you ever seen the graceful way deer climb and run over rock fields as easily as you can run on the beach? Why are they able to do this? Because of their feet—their tough, cloven hooves. These hooves aren't hurt by sharp rocks, but are able to grip even small outcrops. God designed their feet for climbing. They don't slip. They don't fall. Habakkuk rejoices that his feet are made like deer's feet, designed to travel over the most difficult ground.

Notice he says that with these feet "he makes me to walk on my high places." When we hear that today we think of taking a nice hike with a beautiful view. Go out on a nice day, climb to the highest peak, experience a great view, exercise your body, get back to nature. But in Habakkuk's day, no one did that. In his culture "high places" meant a difficult, challenging place; a place one would not want to go unless it's absolutely necessary. You

might climb to a high place to gain defensible ground in a battle, but you only go there if you can't avoid it. When he says "He makes me walk on my high places" he means, "He makes me go to these high places even though I don't want to. He enables me to walk on places I could not go without his help." This isn't a pleasant afternoon of rock climbing. He dreads what God has in store for him; he knows the path is very dangerous. God is leading him to a place he doesn't feel equipped for. Yet God is his strength, and he's confident that God will enable him to do what he could never do on his own.

The last couple of weeks the Lord has brought me to some high places. In one weekend one of my cars basically blew up and is unrepairable. I had plans for that car. I was going to drive it for two more years and then send my son off to college with it. The next day my other car had a blow out on the freeway because I had put off getting new tires. So I had to buy four new tires. In the midst of all that I lost my iPhone. Now I like to be in control. I like to plan my big purchases. I like to keep track of my stuff. So all of this threw me for a loop. But as I studied this passage this week I realized, "God, you've given me hind's feet. I don't like these high places but you have given me all the strength I need to not just exist up here but to thrive." So I can pray like Habakkuk, "Lord, though all my cars break down, though I never find my iPhone, though I never get out of debt, I will praise you."

III. Habakkuk learned to rejoice in God, not his gifts.

What this is teaching me about prayer is that I have to learn to rejoice in God, not in his gifts. Certainly I should always be thankful for his gifts, but I'm so prone to put the gifts before the Giver. This gives me understanding into the mystery of unanswered prayer as well. How would I ever learn to sing this song with Habakkuk if I got everything I asked for? Unanswered prayer actually drives me closer to God; it brings me to the high places and makes me more dependent on him; and teaches me to rejoice in God alone.

Hannah Whitall Smith was a 19th century Quaker born and raised in the United States. She faced much suffering in her life. But she was an extraordinary woman of influence and prayer. She lost four of her seven children. Later, after moving to England, she had to raise two of her grandchildren as well. In her old age she was disabled with rheumatism and spent time in a wheelchair. Yet she relished life, enjoyed God, and loved the people around her. Her grandchildren in particular remembered her romping with them with unbridled enthusiasm. She shared her insights in a book called, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*. The unanswered prayers resulting in suffering didn't turn her away from prayer; it drove her deeper into prayer. She wrote, "It has been well said that 'earthly cares are a heavenly discipline,' but they are even something better than discipline—they are God's chariots, sent to take the soul to its high places of triumph. They do not look like chariots. They look instead like enemies, sufferings, trials, defeats, misunderstandings, disappointment and unkindness."

I wonder if this morning you might be willing to sing this song with Habakkuk and the Shelley's and Hannah Whitall Smith?