

LIVING ON THE EDGE OF ESPERATE

Week Five Notes

Habakkuk: Desperate for Hope

The small three-chapter book of Habakkuk is categorized as a minor prophet, not because of lack in importance, but simply because of the length of the book. Habakkuk lived and wrote during the same time as the prophet Jeremiah. Habakkuk experienced the reforms implemented by young King Josiah (2 Kings 22-23), but he also saw those reforms fade under the reign of King Jehoiakim, the last major king of Judah. Habakkuk writes his brief book only a few years before the Babylonians invade Judah in three brutal waves, utterly destroying Jerusalem, leaving the entire country a wasteland, and deporting the population of Judah into exile.

The book of Habakkuk is not specifically addressed to Judah, instead it is a conversation with God. Habakkuk has a complaint and God has a reply. While God does not answer Habakkuk's questions, He gives the prophet a better understanding of God.

1. What is hope?

Habakkuk begins by asking the age-old question, "Where is God when bad things happen, and why is He not doing anything about it?" In the midst of bad circumstances that are about to get worse, Habakkuk is desperate for hope, at least a fresh perspective of hope. So, let's get a better understanding of Biblical hope.

Hebrews 6:19 says, "This hope we have is an anchor for the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast..." In Christ we have hope, but our English word for hope sometimes confuses us when we speak of Biblical hope. So, what is hope NOT? 1. Hope is not wishful thinking. 2. Hope is not positive thinking. 3. Hope is not our perception of how things should be or the way we want them to be. 4. Hope is not based on our feelings.

The New Testament word for hope is *elpis*. The same word is used in secular Greek and means the *desire for something good* (the same as the English definition). But Scripture gives this common word a much fuller meaning. Biblical hope is *the desire for something good and the confident expectation of receiving it based on the Word of God and the character of God*. In other words, whatever God has promised, God will do! This is our hope. He is our faithful God who cannot lie and therefore will do all He has promised. All He has promised His children in His Word is ours because of Christ. Every spiritual blessing is ours because we have Christ (Ephesians 1:3). Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of our hope. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 1:1, Christ Jesus, who is our hope..." Hope is always forward thinking. We may not have yet experienced the promises in their entirety, but because God has promised, He will do.

Hebrews 6 tells us our hope anchors our soul. Our soul is the sum total of all that we are...our mind, emotions, will, desires, all wrapped in human flesh. We do not simply have a soul; we ARE a soul. We are anchored, even in difficult circumstances because we have hope made available to us in Christ. Remember, hope does not exempt us from difficulty, rather it anchors us in the midst of difficulties.

Hope is linked to faith. It is an ingredient in faith. We have hope but we must exercise our hope in faith. Faith is always an action word. *Trusting God enough to obey Him* is a good working definition of faith. Faith is not just believing (James 2:19), neither is it a leap into the dark. Faith is an obedient step into truth. Living by faith is not just for the super-Christian. It is for all of us...trusting God enough to obey Him is the life of faith.

Let me give you an example of how hope and faith work together. 1 John 1:9 is a familiar verse. "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" This verse is part of our hope—a promise from God that if we confess our sin He will forgive and cleanse us. BUT we can believe that verse and never act on it in faith. It remains our hope, but we must trust God enough to obey it! We must actually confess our sins and receive the forgiveness He offers and then allow Him to clean out all the rot within us. We have hope, but we must trust God enough to respond in faith.

Habakkuk looks around and see great injustice in Judah. He wants God to step in and fix it all. Yet God seems to be silent, and His silence challenges Habakkuk's view of God. Habakkuk, like Job, needs fresh perspective.

2. Where do I go when I feel hopeless?

Read Habakkuk 1:1-4. Habakkuk is speaking, rather complaining to God. (The entire book is easier to understand if you will mark when Habakkuk is speaking and when God is speaking). When Jehoiakim became king, he began paying heavy taxes to Egypt in exchange for their military protection. The taxes became burdensome to the people of Judah. Meanwhile,

the wealthy began stealing land from the poor, the widows, and the orphans. (land was a God-given inheritance to families). Those taken advantage of had no legal recourse since the wealthy paid bribes for the courts to rule in their favor. Habakkuk sees the injustice between his own countrymen and cries out to God to intervene. The prophet is questioning God's concern His own people.

While there are issues with his complaint, Habakkuk shows us that we take our questions, our fears, and our concerns to the Lord. For Habakkuk, it feels hopeless when evil is winning. It does for us too! **Read Hebrews 4:15-16.** When we are overwhelmed, uncertain, beaten down, and feeling hopeless, we are encouraged, yes beckoned, to come to the throne of grace and seek help in a time of need. We have a faithful high priest, interceding for us. One who knows our weaknesses. The Lord Jesus is our advocate. And even when we cannot even form the words to pray, Romans 8:26 reminds us the Holy Spirit is transposing our brokenness into prayers before the throne of grace.

Dear one, when you feel hopeless run to Jesus. He is big enough for our questions, our tears, and our wrestling. He is the anchor who holds us in the storm. Based on the Biblical definition of Hope, can we lose our hope? NO! Our hope is not based on us, rather it is based on Jesus Christ. **We can lose the feeling of hope, but we can never lose hope.** Jesus is not playing with our emotions. He does not come and go in our lives. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). Our salvation is an irrevocable transaction, sealed with God's Holy Spirit. Our hope is secure, sure, and steadfast... never waxing and waning. Feelings? Yes, they come and go. But not our hope.

Listen carefully. While we can never lose our hope, we can choose not to live in it. Living in the hope that is ours, the promises that belong to us because we belong to Christ, is always a matter of choice. We can believe every promise in the Bible, but until we choose to live it, to exercise faith, we will never know the joy of walking in hope. Certainly, we can lose sight of hope. Like a fog or cloud that obstructs our view, circumstances can obstruct our view of hope and the truth of who Christ is. But ladies, hope remains regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the clouds, storms, fog, or haze that settles into our lives.

3. Where is hope when I don't understand what God is doing?

Read Habakkuk 1: 5-11. God is answering Habakkuk's complaint. God will not give Habakkuk an explanation, but God will stretch Habakkuk's faith far more than the prophet expected or probably even wanted. The answer God gives Habakkuk is shocking and appalling to the prophet. God is at work. He is raising up the Babylonians (the Chaldeans) to invade and overthrow Judah. God is using the Babylonians as a tool to severely discipline His own people.

The Babylonians are a fierce, cruel people. At the time of Habakkuk's writing, the nation of Babylon is on the cusp of world power. Their military might is unparalleled. Their goal is to overtake every nation around them...and they do! Nebuchadnezzar is their king, never defeated in battle, and still known today for his military prowess and architectural genius.

Read Habakkuk's response to God, 1:12-17. The prophet is confused and dumbfounded. His perception of God conflicts with the actions of God. Don't be too hard on him. We do the same thing when we ponder how a loving God could do _____ (fill in your own blank.) Habakkuk is recounting what he knows is true, that God is Yahweh, the covenant-keeping God, that He is the Rock, and that He is holy. How can a holy God even look upon evil never mind raise it up and use it against Judah?

Often there is a tension between what we know and understand about God, and what we see Him doing or not doing. Yet rarely, if ever, does God offer explanations. He does however ask us to trust Him with our limited view. Elizabeth Elliot said, "If God is small enough for us to understand, He is not big enough to worship." In this case, God is using a godless nation to severely discipline His people.

As always, God is serious about sin in the lives of His children. **Hebrews 12:6-13**, tells us God will discipline those He loves, as a loving father disciplines his children. A person who is not disciplined is not a child of God, because God will correct those whom He loves. Notice in **Hebrews 12:11-13**, that discipline is not a vengeful act of punishment, although it is unpleasant, rather the goal is correction and healing. God's heart towards us is always a heart of love. He hates sin because it harms and cripples us. There is always a hook in sin, and God loves us enough to deal with the sin in our lives. Our responsibility is to cooperate with Him!

Listen carefully. We, as Christians, will never experience the wrath of God or His judgement against sin. Jesus did that for us. **Romans 3:23-26** teaches we are all sinners, but Christ satisfied the wrath of God toward sin by paying the full price of death, the shedding of His blood for our transgressions. In doing so, we are declared righteous. When God views us, He sees the righteousness of Christ. We are just before Him. *Just* means, *just if I'd never sinned*. The entire book of Romans (and Galatians) reiterates that the just/righteous shall live by faith.

God's desired outcome for Judah is relationship with Him. His actions are rooted in love whether they (or we) understand it. The heart of God will never change toward us, no matter how far we wander. But in His love, He is willing to discipline us even at the risk of us not understanding what He is doing.

Read Jeremiah 29:10-14, and Jeremiah 30:22. God allows the Babylonians to take Judah captive for 70 years. But at the end of 70 years, He will bring them back to their own land. His severe discipline will serve a greater purpose than Habakkuk ever imagined.

After Habakkuk has responded to God's revelation about the Babylonians, Habakkuk waits for God to speak...and God does in **Habakkuk 2:2-20**. First, God tells Habakkuk to do 4 things, each requiring an action of Habakkuk's part—acts of faith. 1. **Write** down the vision, the message (**Habakkuk 2:2**). Write it all, don't soften it up. Write it clearly so that everyone can understand what is about to happen. 2. **Wait** (**Habakkuk 2: 3**). The vision is coming but not today—Habakkuk will wait approximately two more years before the first invasion of Babylon. While waiting, Habakkuk must not run away or try to alter the situation. God has set the appointed time; God will keep His appointment as Habakkuk waits. 3. **Respond with faith** (**Habakkuk 2:4**). The proud are at odds with God. Pride is the opposite of faith. Faith trusts and obeys God. Pride says *my ways are better than God's ways*. Pride is the sin of Satan and it is at the heart of all sin. In contrast, the righteous/just shall live by faith, trusting and obeying God. 4. **Watch** (**Habakkuk 2:4-20**) Even though God is using the Babylonians to discipline Judah, God will also hold them responsible for their actions against Judah. Tough concept. God is completely sovereign. He uses anything He wants to use for His eternal purpose—He will even use evil. BUT humans have a free will—they choose—and God holds them responsible. These two truths, God's sovereignty and man's free will run side by side in Scripture, and God never explains the mystery of it all. Five times in Habakkuk 2:2-20 the phrase, *Woe to him...* is used. (verse 6, 9, 12, 15, 19) Each time, Gd is declaring judgment on the Babylonians for the brutality they inflict on Judah.

Habakkuk does not completely understand what God is doing but his hope must be in God alone, not the incomprehensible circumstances. Habakkuk must trust God enough to obey Him, living in faith as he waits.

4. Can I respond in faith, even when my knees are shaking?

All of chapter 3 is Habakkuk's response to the ways of God. It is formatted as a Psalm and used in worship through the years. Verse 2 acknowledges that God is doing a work, reviving His purpose for a Messiah through the nation of Judah. The request is for God to exercise mercy even as He disciplines. Three times in the psalm, Habakkuk uses the word *Selah*. It is musical terminology but with spiritual application. It means *rest*—stop and soak in the truth of the words. Verse 3-15, Habakkuk reviews the history of God's interaction with His people—His care and His power.

Habakkuk 3:16 is encouraging to me. Habakkuk is shaking. His knees are knocking. His insides are water. He is quivering while he writes, waits and watches. Yet he is responding in faith. So, many times we take a cavalier approach to faith—sort of a Pollyanna, *God's got this approach*. And yes, certainly God is holding us the storms, but not often am I swinging by the chandelier yelling “who-hoo!” Sometimes I am trusting God and shaking at the same time. While I may be giving an opinion here, I believe Habakkuk is trembling and trusting at the same time. And out of his trembling trust, he writes some of the most poignant verses in all of Scripture.

Read Habakkuk 3:17-19 with a still and quiet heart. Just you and the Lord. Read these verses out loud to God. Habakkuk is saying if everything in my life fails, I will still respond in faith. If it feels like hope has dissipated, I will still worship. Our hope is not in circumstances. Our hope is in Christ. If the world falls apart—if my world falls apart—I will hope, trust, and obey. Oh, and then comes verse 19. The Lord God, Yahweh, the covenant keeping, relational God is our strength! He has wrought a change in us by transforming our feet of clay to be like the feet of the deer—graceful and surefooted. In fact, He has purposefully designed us to walk on high rocky places.

Two closing observations. First, high places are not safe places. We often use the metaphor of being on the mountain top as a favorable place and being in the valley as an unfavorable place. But here in Habakkuk 3, while the mountain top is a favorable place, it is not a easy place. There are cliffs and rugged terrain, rocky paths and obstacles in the way. Yet He has designed us for this kind of living. He is our strength and in Christ we walk, we live, in the difficult places of life with sure-footed grace—like the deer.

The second observation is perhaps inconsequential but interesting to me as a woman. The ancient poetic language of this psalm uses the word *hind*—which is a female deer. (Most modern translations use the generic word, deer.) Why does Habakkuk liken us to the female deer and not the *hart* or stag (buck)? Deer hunters tell me, the doe (the hind) is timid, gentle, fearful, and yet affectionate. To me, the analogy is beautiful. Indeed, we do not have the strength and crown of the stag. Our strength is in Christ Jesus alone. I am much more like the hind... fearful, shaking at times, always ready to run away... and yet I love the Savior and I am equipped with *His strength* to walk with surefooted grace in the most difficult places—trusting Him and in faith doing whatever He asks.