

Will We Trust God?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

May 9, 2010

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Habakkuk 3:17–19 (The Message)

[Habakkuk is writing in the final decades of Judah. It seems clear that the world is about to fall in on Jerusalem. These verses are the final ones in Habakkuk's writings, reflecting his confidence in God even when such trust seems foolish.]

Though the cherry trees don't blossom
and the strawberries don't ripen,
Though the apples are worm-eaten
and the wheat fields stunted,
Though the sheep pens are sheepless
and the cattle barns empty,
I'm singing joyful praise to God.
I'm turning cartwheels of joy to my Savior God.
Counting on God's Rule to prevail,
I take heart and gain strength.
I run like a deer.
I feel like I'm king of the mountain!

Jeremiah 32:9-15 (The Message)

[God tells Jeremiah to buy some land near Jerusalem at a time when it has become clear to all that the Babylonians would soon overrun the entire country.]

"So I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel. I paid him seventeen silver shekels. I followed all the proper procedures: In the presence of witnesses I wrote out the bill of sale, sealed it, and weighed out the money on the scales. Then I took the deed of purchase—the sealed copy that contained the contract and its conditions and also the open copy—and gave them to Baruch son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah. All this took place in the presence of my cousin Hanamel and the witnesses who had signed the deed, as the Jews who were at the jail that day looked on.

"Then, in front of all of them, I told Baruch, 'These are orders from GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel: Take these documents—both the sealed and the open deeds—and put them for safekeeping in a pottery jar. For GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel, says, "Life is going to return to normal. Homes and fields and vineyards are again going to be bought in this country."'

It's been said that all roads lead to Rome.

The truth is that all roads that really matter lead to questions of faith.

Will we have faith, will we trust God, even in the face of suffering and hardship?

Last week, we met a man, Jairus, and an unnamed woman who placed their unreserved faith in Jesus. And we learned that the best synonym for "faith" is "trust." Faith is not primarily our assent to core Christian doctrines, as important as those beliefs are. When we speak of faith in Jesus, we are speaking of our willingness to trust Jesus in all things and with all things. In good times and bad. When it is easy to trust and when it is hard.

Today, we come to two prophets who lived in very tough and uncertain times, far more difficult than anything we've lived through here in America since the end of the Civil War. The question for them is the same as the question before Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman from last week. Will these two men trust God with it all? And, hence, will we?

Facing “the end”

It is hard to say exactly when Habakkuk lived as there aren't many clues in the brief Old Testament book bearing his name. Nonetheless, he is usually dated to the waning decades of the 7th century BC. The northern kingdom of the Israelites, Israel, had been overrun by the Assyrians about a century before. And now, the ascending Babylonian empire threatened to fall in on the southern kingdom of the Israelites, Judah.

Living in the face of impending doom wasn't new to the Israelites. Surely, they had gotten used to it. I'm sure that many of them weren't counting on God to rescue them yet again. Had they really been doing a better job of being God's people? Even the return to God under the good king Josiah (640-609BC) had been short-lived.

All the apprehension about the future proved well-grounded, for in 587/86BC Jerusalem fell and was sacked by Babylonian invaders. The center of the Israelites' worship, glorious Solomon's Temple, was destroyed and the Ark of the Covenant taken.

So, how do you live with all that? Granted, our country has had a tough time for the past couple of years, but we certainly haven't been waiting for our cities to be invaded and burned, our churches to be destroyed, and for our families to be shipped off into exile. So again, how would you live with that? Would you live in despair and fear? Would it rob your life of all joy? Would it crush your faith in God? Wouldn't you at least have some hard questions for God? The prophet Habakkuk certainly did.

Habakkuk's response

The book of Habakkuk has no words from God for God's people. Instead, it is a dialogue between God and the prophet. At the beginning of the book, Habakkuk questions God's justice. How could a good God let all this happen? Many will suffer. Where is the justice in that? (Sound familiar). But, Habakkuk comes around. By the end of the book he is a changed man. Though everything looks dire, and it is, Habakkuk's joy is in God and he is confident that God's Rule will prevail. Habakkuk feels like he is king of the mountain, even though the invaders will soon be massing at the city gates.

Is he delusional, some might ask. No. To put it plainly, Habakkuk trusts God – in and with all things. He comes to believe with his whole heart what God tells him: “the righteous live by their faith”¹ (2:4). God has made promises and God will keep those promises. Perhaps not in the timeframe that Habakkuk might choose, but they *will* be kept. And after all, doesn't God know a bit more than Habakkuk.

Betting on a promise-keeping God

In Jeremiah, God has an action-oriented prophet. This man will be given some decisions to make when, literally this time, the Babylonians are poised to fall on Jerusalem. Jeremiah was called to his prophetic ministry in 627BC and lived through the fall of Jerusalem. He was exiled to Egypt where, presumably, he died.

We know Jeremiah better than we do any other of the Old Testament prophets. The other prophets' work consisted largely of bringing God's messages to the people. The prophets were speakers of God's words. But with Jeremiah, God went further. Jeremiah not only brought God's messages, he was told to enact God's messages in dramatic demonstrations. For example, God tells Jeremiah to stand in front of the temple and proclaim judgment upon the temple (chapter 7 of Jeremiah). Jeremiah is told to wear a loincloth and then bury it in some rocks, where it is ruined, symbolizing the

¹This verse from Habakkuk is quoted three times in the New Testament: Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38. Each use of the verse focuses on a different aspect of its meaning.

relationship between the people and God – a relationship once as close as how intimately we wear clothing, but now in ruins (chapter 13). Jeremiah is not to take a wife, for God has been cheated upon by his “wife,” his people (chapter 16). Jeremiah is sent to a potter’s house to see pottery destroyed (chapter. 18). He smashes an earthenware jug, just as Judah is about to be smashed (chapter 19) by the Babylonians.

After all this and more, we are relieved when we get to chapters 30-33, for these are often called Jeremiah’s little book of consolation. These four chapters express a message of hope and restoration. That after all the destruction and exile, God will restore the people to their own land and to freedom. God had made certain promises, beginning with one made to Abraham long before, and God would keep those promises no matter how much it looked like God had totally abandoned his people.²

In today’s passage from the midst of these consoling chapters, Jeremiah is given another symbolic action to accomplish.³ With the Babylonian army arrayed outside the walls of Jerusalem, God tells Jeremiah to go out and buy a plot of land in his hometown of Anathoth, about three miles northeast of Jerusalem.

Don’t you wonder what was going through Jeremiah’s mind? This must have seemed as idiotic to him as it would to anyone else. The death of Israel is at hand and Jeremiah is supposed to go make a land investment!?! Five times in this brief passage, Jeremiah makes it clear that this is God’s doing, proclaiming “Thus says the LORD.” Based on all the other stuff God had told him to do, Jeremiah probably figured that the land would be lost, just as the loincloth was ruined and the earthenware jug broken.

But instead, v. 15 makes clear that this time, the action is not an enactment of loss but of hope. God is having Jeremiah buy the land for the future, the day when the Israelites would return to Judah. Jeremiah was going to make a profit on this field of hope.

Thus, we read God’s words from Jeremiah 33 in a fresh light. Yes, God will one day restore his people, and through them restore the whole world. God keeps God’s promises, even if his people can’t imagine how.

How about us?

Hardship and suffering inevitably thrust us into the hard questions of faith. Where is God we ask? How could God love me and let me go through this? Who really is this God that I worship and claim to trust? Is God truly worthy of trusting? Those were certainly the questions on Habakkuk’s mind.

We know still that this is the nature of faith, the ups and downs. We struggle with doubts and disobedience. We question God, even shake our fist perhaps. Kent Hughes quotes a Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, on this: “Those who believe that they believe in God, but without passion in their hearts, without anguish in mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God idea, not God Himself.”

Yet, through it all, the cross of Christ calls us to trust. The cross reminds us that God is indeed righteous, that all the wrongs of this world have also fallen in on God’s own begotten Son. The cross calls us to trust in the righteousness of our promise-keeping God. Do you?

²It is promises such as these that create so much tension by Jesus’ day. For by then, the Jews, though back on the land, would have spent centuries trading one foreign oppressor after another. Thus, many first-century Jews asked when God would finally keep all these promises. When would the true exile end? For Christians, Jesus is the fulfillment of these promises and the bringer of the new covenant promised by God in Jeremiah 31:31-33. This is a covenant written on the heart, not on tablets of stone.

³Anthony Saldarini’s reflections on this passage are very helpful. His commentary is part of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, the twelve volume set that is part of the St. Andrew library.

“The Righteousness of God”

In his letters, Paul uses the phrase “the righteousness of God” eight times, of which seven are in Romans. What does Paul mean and what does it mean for us? Romans 3:21-22a are pivotal in this letter: “But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ¹ for all who believe.” “Righteousness” is a virtue, the quality of doing what is just and right. In both the Old and New Testaments, the “righteousness of God” carries two complementary meanings.

First, it refers to God’s covenant faithfulness. God is the great covenant-maker and covenant-keeper – *he keeps his promises*. Thus, Paul is saying that God has kept his promises to Israel, as revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ! Because God is the great covenant-keeper, we can rely on his promises.² The story of God’s relationship with his people will end well, because he has promised that it will (see Revelation 21!). Indeed, the truth is that God’s complete victory over sin and death has already been won, though not yet.³

Second, “the righteousness of God” refers to God being a fair and impartial judge. In ancient Israel, law courts worked differently than in our day. Rather than using public prosecutors and juries, there were three parties – a judge, the plaintiff and the defendant. A judge was a good judge (a righteous judge) if he tried the case according to the law, if he was impartial, if he punished sin, and if he protected the weak and defenseless. Thus, as the righteous judge, God has been true to his word and he has judged impartially, for Jew and Gentile alike. Through the faithfulness of Jesus, God has dealt with sin and vindicated the helpless. He has declared innocent (“justified”) those who have “have faith in Jesus Christ (v.26).

¹Though this phrase has traditionally been rendered as “faith in Jesus Christ,” the increasingly preferred translation is “the faith of Jesus Christ,” emphasizing the faithfulness of Jesus, just as chapter 4 emphasizes the faithfulness of Abraham.

²Be careful here. Too often, Christians find, in the Bible, promises from God that aren’t really there. God does promise us that the story for us and for all of creation will end well. He does not promise us a life free of pain, turmoil, trouble, or poverty.

³It is impossible to overstate the importance of this already/not yet perspective to a proper reading of the New Testament. The June 29, 2003, Weekly Bible Study gives an overview of this “between the times” perspective, with pictures. It can be downloaded at www.scottengle.com.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What sorts of risks do you think God asks us to take? What does it really mean to trust God in all things? Jeremiah’s choice to use his money to buy the plot of land was surely a smart one – he could trust God’s promises of restoration. But still, Jeremiah never reaped any financial gain from his investment. When exiles began returning to Jerusalem, they found it in the same shape as when they left, a ruined, burned out mess. It would take them many decades to scrape enough money together to being rebuilding the city walls and the temple. How do you think Jeremiah would have characterized his “investment?” Perhaps this is the question – is there gain in doing as God hopes we will do, even if we have difficulty seeing the payoff we expected?
2. Rev. Edlen Cowley wrote some helpful discussion questions for the Fellowship Groups that are meeting this spring:
 - The book Habakkuk documents a short conversation between Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk was not afraid to ask God serious questions about events he did not understand. Even though he had questions and did not comprehend Habakkuk in 3:17-19 proclaims his trust in God.
 - Do you pray to God about things you don’t understand or things that don’t make sense to you?
 - Read Isaiah 55:6-9. What do you think these verses means?
 - In the Roget’s Thesaurus “trust” is listed as a synonym for “faith.” How completely do you trust God?
 - How do you think you can grow in your trust of God?
 - Who would you list as your “role model” for trusting in God? Whose faith would you seek to emulate?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 12:3 & 17 God makes a promise to Abraham and then gives him a sign of the promise that God has made.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Ezekiel 36:22-37:14 God promises to restore his people, putting his Spirit in them and giving them new hearts.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Amos 9:13-15 Amos was the first of the “writing prophets.” Here is a brief portrait of God’s promise kept.</p>	<p>Thursday, Isaiah 55 An invitation to the full, with-God life.</p>
<p>Friday, Romans 1:16-17, 3:21-26 Yes! God is the great promise-keeper. Yes! God is righteous and faithful to his promises. How do we know? Because we have seen Jesus’ faithfulness all the way to the cross.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayers of Joy and Concern</p>

