

Singing through Suffering

I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will wait quietly for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

To the choirmaster: with my stringed instruments.

- Habakkuk 3.16-19

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

- Romans 8.18

Why do the righteous suffer? This is a classic question that believers from all times and all places have asked. And you and I, we ask. God, why is this happening to me? But it's way more than that. Suffering in our lives indeed can be an individual experience. More than not, however, others are involved. God, why is this happening to my child? God why is this happening to my mother? God why is this happening to our church family? We only have to read one or two stories in the newspaper before we are wandering why God seems to allow so many injustices to take place in our country and around the world.

In his book, Waking with God through Pain and Suffering, Pastor Tim Keller says that as he grew in his understanding of the Bible – he came to see that the reality of suffering was a major theme. Only three chapters into the Bible, we read of how sin, evil and death became apart of our world. The rest of Genesis is full of stories of how sin had affected humanity and the suffering that was caused by evil deeds done by men. In Exodus you can read about a time span of forty years where God's people wandered in the wilderness and endured intense trials and testing. The psalms too contain many complaints and cries to the Lord to do something about the pain and suffering that is present. Of the many passages that we could look at this morning as we think about the presence of suffering in our lives, I chose this lesser-known prophet, Habakkuk, to give us some fresh insight in response to our question, "why do the righteous suffer?" because he too asks God this question.

- Habakkuk's Complaint

Unlike the other prophetic books in the Old Testament, Habakkuk doesn't address God's people directly, but rather simply dialogues with God. When we read Habakkuk, we are reading his journal! And many of you know, when you journal to God or address the dear diary, you don't hold anything back! It's a place of penning your real questions and real thoughts out. It is a therapeutic practice. It is amazing to look back at journal entries and see how prayers have been answered and see the ways in which God has moved.

Well, in the first lines of his journal, Habakkuk asks, "Oh LORD, how long shall I cry out for

help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. It seems as if the law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.”

How’s that for a journal entry? Habakkuk wrote this in response to some crazy political unrest that God’s people were in the middle of. They had been ruled by a string of corrupt kings – kings who instituted Baal worship, who ordered child sacrifice, and forced labor upon people without paying them fair wages. Moves that caused a lot of hurt and pain and suffering in the lives of God’s people. Habakkuk complains to the Lord and begs him to take notice!

Our world today too is full of similar unrest. It shows up in different forms but is the same nonetheless. In our day and age where people feel free to give their lives to worship whatever and whomever they wish – our day and age where abortion has gained ground and is becoming more public and normalized – our day and age where people are cheated and treated unfairly – there is a lot of pain and suffering and injustice. We ask, along with Habakkuk, “How long, O Lord, will you allow this?”

And as he sometimes does, God responds to Habakkuk in an unexpected way. “Look around you at the nations and see; wonder and be amazed. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation to march through and seize dwellings not their own... they come for violence, they gather captives like sand.” Things are going to get seemingly worse.

This leads him to ask another question: Why do the wicked seem to prosper? Why do bad things happen to good people and why do good things happen to bad people?

God answers again, telling Habakkuk that he will just have to wait and see – this will all come to pass. “The wicked will get their due punishment but the righteous shall live by faith.” He reminds Habakkuk of his sovereignty and plan. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. He also reminds Habakkuk, as he does with Job – “the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.”

It is then in this final chapter of Habakkuk’s journal – the last page - the text which Jess read for us this morning that we see Habakkuk’s conclusion, his *resolve*, his faith – in the midst of suffering and unrest.

- Habakkuk’s Resolve

Well it’s first worth noting that Habakkuk is obviously scared... and rightly so! He nearly faints just thinking about the vision he had been given – to wait for the appointed time, when the Lord will come up and bring about justice.

Yet he listens to the Lord and in the end he responds in faith even when it seems hopeless. For Habakkuk this meant looking back – remembering the character of the very God to whom he was crying out to. “I will rejoice in the LORD. To the Jewish audience, they would have read the divine name and understood exactly Who Habakkuk was talking about. In our English bibles it appears as they name Lord in all caps! L-O-R-D. This refers to the Hebrew YahWeh – God reveals his name to Moses when he was at the burning bush. He says I AM – I am the God of your Fathers – Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. I led them thus far and I will deliver my people from Egypt. I AM – the God of steadfast love, covenant loyalty, the faithful God.

He trusts God to bring about salvation – to bring about restoration – he doesn’t see it at the time (and he may not ever see it in this life) but he waits and trusts in God’s character. He rejoices! He recognizes the Lord God as his strength, his rock. He anticipates the strength he will receive from God as he waits and endures the suffering in his life. He likens himself to a deer – fitted with solid hooves, great strength and agility, able to navigate to the heights through rough and rocky terrain. He rejoices. We also see this by the final words of his journal. Habakkuk ends with the lines, “to the choirmaster with my stringed instruments.” This is way more than resolved journal entry. Habakkuk is writing song lyrics that he will play on his guitar and sing along to!

- Rejoicing in the Lord

So how can we learn from Habakkuk? How can we rejoice in the Lord amidst suffering in our lives? One of the troubling things about suffering in our lives is that we never know just when or how it will show up. It can show up when we least expect it. And we can all expect it. When this will come about and in what capacity we will never know. Like Habakkuk, we simply have to wait. We now read the history and see that there was a span of about 40 years between when Jerusalem was captured by Babylon and when Babylon fell to Persia (when justice came upon their enemies) – a span that could have lasted for most of the prophet Habakkuk’s life! We don’t know when it will come or how long it will last.

And indeed in those times of suffering it can be extremely difficult to see anything other than the current circumstances. If we let it run wild, the things we are going through and what is right in front of us consumes us – they will take up most of our attention. We must actively set our sight onto something more tangible, more real and more significant than our present suffering.

We too are to rejoice in the Lord – like we read together in Psalm 77 this morning – we can ponder all his work and meditate on his mighty deeds – we can remember his faithfulness to his people and the way he delivered his people from slavery in Egypt – we can look back now and see how this word to Habakkuk came true – that Babylon was defeated and the exiled people of God were set free.

And we now, can remember another amazing deed of God that had not yet taken place during Habakkuk’s time. Our Lord Jesus Christ took on humanity, and suffered ultimately on the cross – he died for our sins. The question must change – it’s not why do the righteous suffer? But

rather why did he suffer?

Friends, don't believe the lie that your suffering is God punishing you for your sin – Jesus bore the punishment our sin deserves. Don't believe that your suffering indicates that God doesn't care or that he isn't aware – God loves you and sent his son to die for you – he wants you to be with him in his home in glory someday – this is a revelation that we are waiting for, something that even our present sufferings cannot compare to.

So let us look back and recount the good deeds of God – that he rescued his people from slavery in Egypt – he rescued his people who were exiles during the time of Habakkuk – and he has since rescued us from slavery to sin through Christ's blood shed on the cross.

In our suffering we can sing because of the suffering Christ went through.
One last story that I think shows us how this works:

Horatio Spafford was an American lawyer who invested a large amount of money in real estate in the expanding city of Chicago in 1871 – later that year it was all reduced to ashes in the great Chicago fire. Two years later, planning a family vacation to England, he sent his family – his wife and four daughters - ahead of him on a ship across the Atlantic as he had business to take care of. En route on the Atlantic their ship was struck by another ship and began to sink. As it sank, Anna his wife gathered their four daughters together and they prayed. The ship sank under water, they were all scattered and all four of his daughters drowned – his wife was found unconscious in the water by a rescue ship. She was taken to England where she cabled a message to her husband “saved alone.”

As Horatio sailed over to bring his wife home, he penned the words to a very famous hymn, one which we will now sing together – think about the words he uses and to what he focuses on in, even in the midst of such tragic loss.

lead into closing hymn #330 - *When Peace Like a River Attendeth*