

INTRODUCTION

A man was walking along a bridge and he saw a man standing on the railing of the bridge about to jump off and end his life. He ran up and said, "Wait! Stop! What are you doing?" The man on the railing said, "So many bad things are happening that life just isn't worth living anymore." The first man said, "I'll make a deal with you. I'll give you five minutes to tell my why life ISN'T worth living. Then you give me five minutes to tell you why life IS worth living." And according to the story ten minutes later both of them jumped off the bridge!

As you look at the moral and spiritual condition of our nation, you may feel like those two men. But not me. I'm trusting God for a spiritual awakening. But if we don't repent and turn back to God, we do face a scary future.

Are you scared about the future? We're edging toward a fiscal cliff, but I also think we're teetering on the edge of a moral and spiritual cliff as well. What's going to happen? There are plenty of people who seemed to be fearful and worried about the future of our nation.

I'm certainly not a prophet, but what if I told you that early next year we would see an economic implosion and the Dow would drop overnight to from 12,000 to 100. With our economy in ruins, that would be followed by a massive cyber-attack that would completely cripple the Internet including our military defense system. A day later there would be a coordinated attack across our nation from radical Muslims who have infiltrated our neighborhoods over the past 10 years. At midnight of that same day, Iran would launch a coordinated nuclear attack against Israel and the U.S. destroying our military command and control centers. That would be followed by a massive invasion of the infantry of the Federated Islamic countries who would take control of our crippled nation. Americans who weren't killed would be deported to Muslim countries to become servants and slaves. How would you react to a prediction like that?

You are probably saying, "Pastor don't even TALK that way!" Or, "I don't believe that could ever happen!" Well now you know why most of the prophets were hated. Habakkuk prophesied about 20 years before this very thing happened to God's chosen people. A powerful nation called Babylon invaded Judah.

Babylon was located exactly where Iraq/Iran are today. Other prophets warned that it was going to happen, but from Habakkuk's perspective, God's judgment was inevitable. There was no way the Israelites could be spared. His prophecy is different from every other, because he doesn't preach to people. This book is a dialogue between Habakkuk and God. He speaks to God and God speaks back to him.

Habakkuk begins his conversation by asking God a series of questions.

Habakkuk 1:1-6. "The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received. How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is

paralyzed and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous so that justice is perverted.”

Here is God's first reply:

“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own.”

God told Habakkuk that something was going to happen that would be so unexpected that he wouldn't believe it even if he were told. God was going to raise up a pagan, godless nation and they would be the instrument of His judgment against the Israelites.

Today, the nation of Israel is tiny, but strong. It is about the size of New Jersey, and it is surrounded by enemy nations. But if we could rewind the clock 3,000 years you would see that Israel was a leading world power with extensive borders. Under Solomon, the size and wealth of the nation was at its peak. The Queen of Sheba (Egypt) visited Solomon and was so overwhelmed with the wealth and power of the nation that she said, “I was not told the half of the greatness of this nation.”

After several generations, however, the nation became weakened as their moral and spiritual foundation eroded. In 587 B.C. we know the Babylonians completely captured Judah, including Jerusalem. They destroyed the temple Solomon built and carried off the temple treasury. They deported some of the best young men like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

So if something like that could happen to God's chosen people because they turned from Him, why should we expect God to treat America any differently? Our nation was founded on a solid foundation of faith and trust in God, but our moral and spiritual foundations are crumbling under our feet.

Alexis de Tocqueville was a French historian who visited America in the 1800s. He made an academic study of American democracy. His massive work is entitled *Democracy in America*. Here is one of de Tocqueville's observations about America: “I sought for the greatness of America in her harbors and rivers and fertile fields, and her mines and commerce. It was not there. Not until I went into the churches and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the greatness of her power. America is great because she is good; and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”

Let's turn back to Habakkuk to discover what God is saying to us as Americans and to us as followers of Jesus.

I. GOD CAN HANDLE YOUR TOUGH QUESTIONS; BUT YOU MAY NOT LIKE THE ANSWERS

Habakkuk asked God a series of questions. "He asked, "Why aren't you listening to my prayers, God?" "How long will the wicked prosper?" Habakkuk's name means, "to wrestle." And Habakkuk wrestled with God regarding his tough questions.

Some people think it is blasphemy to question God. They are afraid to ask, "God what in the world are you doing? Why are all these bad things happening?" Those people think that God will thunder back from heaven, "Don't you ask me questions like that! Who are you to question my authority?"

But there's nothing wrong with asking God the tough questions. He can handle it. But don't expect Him to give you the kind of answer you're searching for.

Job questioned God when he was suffering. He didn't get the answers he was looking for. Instead, God started asking Job a lot of questions. Finally Job had to simply say, "I don't have the answers, but even if God kills me, yet will I hope in Him."

Maybe you have some questions for God, but you're afraid to ask Him. "God, why did my loved one die?" "God, why does a madman kill little children?" "God, why can't we have children?" "God, why do I have to put up with all this pain?" "God, why do little babies die and get sick?" "Why do innocent people get killed by drunk drivers?" "Why is there cancer and heart disease?" "Why are there earthquakes and tornados?"

God isn't insulted by your questions. Our word "question" comes from the word "quest." We're all on a quest to try to understand life and understand God. So, go ahead, ask Him your questions.

In one of the dirt-floored PCM classrooms in Uganda, I saw a handwritten motto on the wall that said, "When I ask I become a fool for a minute but when I don't ask I become a fool forever."

This dialogue can summarize the book of Habakkuk: Habakkuk says, "God, why don't you DO something!" God replies, "I AM doing something." To which Habakkuk responds, "But that's not FAIR! I don't like what you're doing!" And God says, "Too bad. I'm God and you're not."

Let's learn a couple of truths about questioning God.

A. We ask, "Why?" God often answers, "Watch."

Habakkuk asked God why there was injustice and sinners weren't being punished. And God simply said, "Just watch what I'm about to do, Habakkuk. I have a plan and when you see it; your questions will be answered."

We know it's okay to question God, because there is a perfect example of this in the life of Jesus. John the Baptist had been the forerunner of Jesus and had announced His coming. He pointed at Jesus and with no doubt said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

But in Luke 7:20 we read that John later had doubts and questions. After he had been thrown in prison John sent a messenger to Jesus to ask Him, "Are you really the One, or is there another who is coming?" In other words, "Are you really the Messiah?" Jesus didn't criticize John for his doubts and questions. He didn't give him a simple, "Yes." Instead, Jesus said, "You tell John what you have seen. The blind are seeing, the deaf are hearing, the lame are walking, the lepers are cleansed, and the dead are being raised! Just tell him what you see God doing!"

So when you are at a confusing place in your life and you want to ask God WHY things are happening. Just start looking around to see the activity of God. We want to ask, "Why?" And a better question would be, "God WHAT are you trying to show me?"

I love the attitude of Ruth Bell Graham who wrote: "I lay my 'whys' before Your cross in worship kneeling; my mind too numb for thought, my heart beyond all feeling. And worshipping, I realize that in knowing You I don't need a 'why.'"

B. We live by God's promises, not His explanations

God is under no obligation to explain to us why He does things or doesn't do things. His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. As far as the heavens are above the earth so high are his thoughts above ours.

It's okay to question God, but when your questions aren't answered, just trust Him. On the cross Jesus asked God a question. He asked, "My God, my God, WHY have you forsaken me?" Have you ever felt that way? But once you see what God is doing, your why's can be transformed into the statement Jesus made just before He died. He said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

In the final part of their dialogue Habakkuk came to a place where he didn't seek answers, instead He just stood in awe of the majesty of God.

He said, "Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy." (Habakkuk 3:2) That verse is the basis of the great song that our choir often sings entitled, "Lord have mercy." And that should be our prayer for our nation during these days.

But the second great powerful lesson from Habakkuk is this:

II. BY FAITH YOU CAN MOVE FROM WORRY TO WORSHIP

Habakkuk introduced the great theme that is repeated three times in the New Testament. He said, "The righteous will live by his faith." (Habakkuk 2:4)

When your world is falling apart and a foreign country is threatening to conquer your country, it would be easy to live by fear. But Habakkuk shows us that there is another way; we can live by faith. His prophecy begins with an "Oh, no! Things are awful!" And he ends with "Oh, yeah! God's in control!"

The wonderful Bible scholar John Walvoord has this to say about Habakkuk: "Habakkuk's book begins with an interrogation of God but ends as an intercession to God. Worry is transformed into worship. Fear turns to faith. Terror becomes trust. Hang-ups are resolved with hope. Anguish melts into adoration."

Let me ask you three very personal questions.

A. Are you fearful about these uncertain times?

When I think about the moral and spiritual direction of our nation I'm not happy, instead it breaks my heart.

While I was in Uganda this past week and we had over 300 pastors show up for the conference where I taught the ten principles of a Healthy Church. Some came from 10 hours away in Tanzania and Rwanda, others walked twenty miles one-way on muddy roads. During one of the breaks, a local television station in Mbarara interviewed me. I was surprised, because I expected them to ask me about the pastor's conference, but since I'm an American, they asked me what some consider a political question. The reporter said, "How do you feel about YOUR government threatening to cut off financial aid to our country unless we condone homosexual behavior?" I was caught off guard for a second, but I said most Christians in America do not agree with this position, but we are no longer a Christian nation. And for the first time in my life I found myself in a foreign country apologizing for the immoral position of our government.

So how do you feel about the future? Are you worried? Are you fearful? That's our natural reaction. And that was Habakkuk's first reaction to what he heard. He said, "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled." (Habakkuk 3:16) He correctly describes the physical symptoms of worry and fear. Worry and fear can make you physically ill.

That verse reminds me of the words of Thomas Jefferson inscribed in the Jefferson Memorial: "I tremble for my country when I think that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever."

And Habakkuk had every right to be worried and scared, but then he makes one of the most amazing statements in the entire Bible. As we examine his statement let me ask you this personal question:

B. Will you rejoice in the Lord even in bad times?

Habakkuk's world was crumbling, and his nation was facing annihilation. The normal reaction would be fear and worry, but Habakkuk makes one of the most powerful professions of faith in the Bible. He said, "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior." (Habakkuk 3:17-18) And the word that Habakkuk used for "Savior" was "Yeshua," which means "Jesus."

And the word for rejoice and be joyful means to spin around and dance for joy. That's faith! It takes no faith to sing and rejoice when everything is going great in your life. But when things are rotten, it requires faith to rejoice and dance a jig before God.

Here is my 21st century paraphrase of that verse: "Though I have more bills than money and my taxes keep going up, though my savings are depleted and my investments are shrinking, though my candidate didn't win and I'm scared about our future, though I got a bad report from the doctor and I hurt all over, though my friends have deserted me and I feel all alone, though life seems unfair and I feel mistreated, YET I will jump for joy in the Lord! I will spin around and sing for delight in my God who is Jesus!"

Notice Habakkuk wasn't rejoicing in his crop failure. He was rejoicing in the Lord. And he didn't just say he was rejoicing in THE Lord; he was rejoicing in MY GOD.

Martin Luther used to write that good theology is a matter of pronouns. It's one thing to say, "That's a cool car!" And it's another thing to say, "That's MY car!" It's one thing to say, "Jesus is the Lord." It's another thing to say, "Jesus is MY Lord!"

Sure, there are many things happening in life that would try to rob our joy and cause us to worry and fear. Life is full of anxiety. But the Bible says, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7)

My favorite story about worry is about Bob who was known as a consummate worrier. He worried about anything and everything. He not only worried about his problems he worried about problems of other people. He was always nervous and sad with slumped shoulders and a creased brow. He took worrying to an art form. But one day Bob showed up for work and he had a smile on his face, his shoulders were back, and he had a spring in his step. His coworkers soon noticed and one of them said, "Bob, what's wrong? You don't seem worried today? What happened?" Bob said, "The greatest thing happened. I hired a guy full-time to worry for me. I tell him what's wrong and he worries about it, so I don't have to!" His friend said, "That's a great idea! How much are you paying him?" Bob said, "I pay him \$100,000 a year." His friend said, "But, Bob, you don't make that much money in a year! How are you going to pay him?" Bob said, "I don't know, but that's HIS worry, not mine!"

Wouldn't it be great if you had someone you could tell your problems to and then you wouldn't have to worry anymore? We have someone. His name is Jesus.

So go ahead and write your own beginning to Habakkuk 3:17. Make a list of all the things that are going wrong in your life, and then look to heaven and say, "YET I will rejoice in God MY Savior!"

C. Will you follow Jesus even in scary times?

The last two passages in Habakkuk are two of my favorite. Every year when we visit Israel we drive toward Masada with the Dead Sea on the left and the rugged Judean hills rising steeply on the right side. These crags and mountains have changed little since David played hide-and-seek

with Saul 3,000 years ago. They've changed little in the 2,000 years since Jesus spent forty days there praying and fasting.

As our bus ambled along, our tour guide, Reuven, promised a Coke to the first person on the bus who could spot a biblical animal called an ibex. The mountains are full of ibex, which are small deer with long thin horns. Some have said they give rise to the legend of a unicorn, because when you look from the side the horns are lined up, it can appear as a single horn.

This is the animal Habakkuk had in mind in his final verse. He wrote, "The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights."
(Habakkuk 3:19)

How do the ibex walk with confidence on the high, scary places? Why don't they slip and fall, particularly when they can't see their hind feet? Simple. Animals like this, including mountain goats, walk in an unusual way. They put their front feet on secure ground and through instinct or conditioning, their back feet always step in exactly the same spot where their front feet just stepped. That's what Habakkuk meant by making my feet like the feet of a deer. But what's the meaning? We don't have four feet; we have only two—and some of us have two left feet! And there are times in life when we find ourselves on the scary heights of a narrow mountain trail of trouble and adversity. How can you make sure you don't fall? Just step in the footprints of our Lord who is going before us. He never asks us to go anywhere that His feet have not already walked. Peter tells us that when Jesus faced hatred and persecution, He didn't strike back; He loved His enemies. Then Peter said, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." (1 Peter 2:21) So, as we face a scary future, don't worry and don't be afraid, just keep following the steps of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Have you moved from worry to worship? Have you changed from fear to faith? This past week as I got meet and know the believers in Uganda, I was impressed with two things. First, I was impressed by the expressions of joy on the faces of the Christians even though they have so little. Many of the pastors walked over 20 miles one way on muddy roads to attend the conference. Their hotel was a wooden dorm, and their cafeteria was an outdoor kitchen. Yet these pastors were some of the most joyous people I've met. They live in shacks, most of which have no electricity and no running water. But they have learned the true meaning of contentment. If they have some food to eat, any kind of roof over their heads, and any kind of clothing to cover their body, they are happy. That have all that and Jesus, too—what else do they need? And they have learned to trust God to meet their needs.

The second thing that amazed me was how their faith motivated their generosity. Even though they have so little, they practice true generosity. They have a practice in church that while someone is up front singing and leading worship, a church member will walk up and slip a coin or some money in their hand, or pocket. It's their way of saying; "You are blessing me; so I want to be a blessing to you."

During one of the breaks of the pastor's conference a pastor came up to me. I could tell by the way he was dressed that he was very poor. Through a translator he said I was such a blessing to him that he wanted to bless me, but he didn't have any money. So he wanted to give me his shoes. They were his only pair. Pastor Emmy told me I needed to accept his gift; otherwise he would be shamed. So I humbly accepted his gift. As he bent over to take off his shoes, I prayed for him and he increased his blessing—he took off his socks as well and stuffed them into his shoes. Then, with a smile he walked away barefooted to enjoy a simple lunch that Green Acres provided for the pastors. I took a picture of his gift and I'm going to keep this picture in my study to remind me of what true generosity is.

What did I do with the shoes? They weren't my size, but our driver, Emmy D, had worn-out shoes, so I was able to bless him with some newer shoes, and, as you can imagine, they fit perfectly!

That's what true generosity is, passing on the blessings that God gives to us. Have you been blessed by God? It's past time for you to pass on that blessing to someone else that needs to BE blessed.

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes