

Learning to Be Content in Adversity

David Sunday November 17, 2019



Thank you, Jeff, for telling us more about the Acts 29 outreach ministry. Where we are in this process is that Jeff and Noel are here to evaluate me to see if they want me in this network, because they don't want our church if they don't want me. This whole thing could be moot by the end of today if they say no to David. But then, if they do welcome us in, our elders will decide whether or not we think this is the best path for us, then we'll bring it to you as a congregation probably in January and ask for your affirmation of our desire to network with Acts 29.

These three weeks before Thanksgiving we're on a treasure hunt. We're looking for something the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs called "a rare jewel." He described the rare jewel like this: "The sweet inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit which enables a person to freely submit to and delight in God's wise and fatherly ordering of our lives in every condition." That's contentment—the rare jewel. It's something we earnestly want.

Last week we looked at learning to be content in prosperity; this week we'll look for it in adversity when things aren't going our way, when our world is falling apart, when we're suffering. Our guide for today's treasure hunt is a little-known prophet in the Old Testament named Habakkuk, who was actually very loved by the New Testament apostles. Our text this morning will be Habakkuk 3:16-19. May the Lord cause the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts to be pleasing in His sight, as we open His Word. Hear the living Word of God.

¹⁶ 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 quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.

¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ 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 stringed instruments.

I think the key word in this text is the first word of verse 18: “...yet...” In spite of all these adverse circumstances, the prophet Habakkuk says, “*Yet I will rejoice...*” or as one version says, “*I will celebrate in the Lord. I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.*”

I remember very clearly what I was doing this precise week, the third week of November 2009, ten years ago. I was working very busily to hide a secret from my wife. Kate’s 40th birthday was on the horizon and we were trying very hard to plan a special surprise party for her. We had to make sure she wasn’t home at certain times, dealing with people who would shuffle her around and kind of deceive her in a friendly sort of way. It all worked. We had a wonderful celebration—complete with roses and chocolates—and it was really precious to us.

We did not realize at the time just how precious that party would prove to be to us. 2010 was just around the corner and we were looking forward to a new decade—the 40s for us and a new decade for everyone else. We had no idea at the time we were holding that 40th birthday party for Kate, that her body was filling with cancer or that two months later we would find out she was already at stage four with cancer. All our plans for 2010 were changed by things like chemo, the removal of a lung, radiation. It wasn’t what I would have drawn into the plan for 2010.

I wonder, if you could plan a life without adversity, a life without suffering, would you? I think we probably would. When we say “Happy New Year” to one another, we’re not thinking, “And I hope you have a little bit of stress. I hope your relationships are starting to really fall apart. I hope you have financial loss in 2020. I hope we have political chaos.” Well, we already have that. “I hope all these hard things happen in the New Year.”

We don’t think that way when we’re saying “Happy New Year,” do we? If we could write the plan for our lives, we’d say as young adults, “I want a career. I want friends to travel the world with. I want to fall in love, maybe start a family in the next ten years.”

Those of us who are in mid-life might say, “Well, I’m hoping to reach the pinnacle of success in my career, being at the prime of my life now. I’m really hoping my children, who are now adults, will be well-adjusted and have happy marriages. I’m hoping our finances will be secure.”

Then you get to your senior years and what are you hoping for in the next ten years? You’re hoping, I think, for a happy retirement with people you love and probably toward the top of that list is health, right? That’s what we hope for.

But what would we miss without adversity? What would not happen in our lives? The growth of character. The strengthening of our faith. So as we hope for all of these happy things in our lives, we need to ask: what would happen if God didn’t give us what we planned? What would happen if our dreams didn’t come true? Therein lies the source of so much of our discontentment.

We actually think contentment depends on a trouble-free life. Actually, we think we deserve such a life. Maybe not a totally trouble-free life, but a life free of great trouble, for sure. But when we read the Bible, we discover the wisdom of Augustine's observation: "God had one Son on earth, but never one without suffering." All of God's people suffer and the Bible teaches us on almost every page to be ready for adversity.

So how can we learn to be content when nothing is turning out the way we had hoped. Is it even possible? Yes, it is. The apostle Paul says, "I have learned the secret of being content—and it's desirable." That's where the prophet Habakkuk enters in today. Habakkuk sees what's on the horizon for himself, for his family, for his community and for his nation—and it's horrific. Habakkuk knows the Assyrians have already invaded the Northern Kingdom of Israel and carried them off into exile. That had happened about a hundred years prior to this passage.

Now he's down in the little Southern Kingdom of Judah, where the capital Jerusalem lies, and the Babylonians are starting to breathe down their necks. The Babylonians have already invaded nations to their south, nations to their east and nations to their north. It's only a matter of time before the Babylonians are going to put the little nation of Judah under siege, breaking through their walls. Next they're going to pillage their homes and businesses and ravage the land. They will bankrupt their economy, rape their women, kidnap their children, murder anyone who resists and carry the people of God into exile. Habakkuk knows this is on the horizon. He doesn't know when, but he knows it's soon. I want you to imagine praying with other believers, as we sometimes do, that God would rid our nation of some of its evils. There are things about America that we know are displeasing to God. Racial hatred—have you ever prayed God would deal with that in our country? The slaughter of the unborn—we pray for this. We pray for an end to gun violence and all kinds of ills in our nation. But what if God said, "Yes, I'm going to answer your prayers—and here's how I'm going to answer them. I'm going to send ISIS to invade your country. As they take over, there will be a humbling and a returning to Me." I think we'd say, "O God, they're worse than we are. Don't send ISIS. We at least are better than they are." That's exactly what Habakkuk is struggling with. He knows the Babylonians are coming. He knows Judah deserves God's discipline, but he doesn't think they deserve that much discipline. He doesn't think they deserve to have a nation more wicked than they are coming in and devouring them.

So Habakkuk starts pleading with God. He's not passive about this. He asks God hard questions. Habakkuk is the prophet of honest questions; he's a prophet who wrestles with God. He says things like this at the beginning, in Habakkuk 1:1-2: "*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?*" "God, You're just standing by when all this

destruction is happening to us.” Those are the kinds of questions he’s asking throughout this book; this is an honest dialogue between a prophet and his God. He’s not at rest at the beginning of this book, but at the end of the book, he is. He’s waiting; he’s rejoicing and he’s at peace. He’s content.

How did that happen? God has revealed truth to Habakkuk that has renewed his mind, truth that teaches him contentment, truth that turns him toward worship. One of the truths God has revealed is the key verse in the whole book, Habakkuk 2:4, where it says, *“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.”*

Where have we heard that? We’ve heard that through the Apostle Paul. At some of the most salient expositions of the gospel in the whole New Testament, Paul goes to the prophet Habakkuk and teaches the doctrine of how God justifies ungodly sinners and declares them righteous, not because of any works of their own, but solely through faith in Jesus. “The righteous shall live by faith” is like the seed of the whole gospel that’s going to flower in the New Testament and it keeps echoing down the hallways of history as one of the key verses in the whole Bible. “The righteous shall live by faith.” Habakkuk starts to understand what it is to trust in God.

Another thing God reveals to Habakkuk is where this story is leading. Look at Habakkuk 2:14. You know how sometimes you’re watching a movie and it’s full of intensity and suspense. Everything is going badly. But you just have this sense—maybe you already know—that the movie is going to end in a happy way. So in the middle of the suspense you’re still all wrapped up in it, thinking, “How in the world is this going to end well?” But you have the confidence that this isn’t going to end badly.

That’s what God gives Habakkuk in Habakkuk 2:14. He says, *“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”* That is one of my favorite verses in the Bible.

So in the worst times of history, we can still have confidence that there is going to be a happy, glorious ending, where heaven and earth are going to become one, the creation is going to be made new and God’s glory is going to cover everything. That’s what we’re looking forward to!

Then the third thing God reveals to Habakkuk is in Habakkuk 2:20. It’s the fact that God is reigning over all the calamities that take place in this world. He is sovereign. It says, *“But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.”* So even though Habakkuk begins with this crying out to God, this wrestling, these hard questions, as he hears about how God calls His righteous to live by faith, as he hears about how history is going to end with the earth being filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, and as he hears about how right now the Lord is in His holy temple reigning, Habakkuk is able to calm and quiet his restless soul and find contentment in God. In chapter three he shows us how we can do that too

Habakkuk 3 is like a liturgy for when we've lost our way. It's a liturgy that's teaching us how to worship when we don't feel worshipful. I'm sure all of you came this morning really feeling ready to worship, right? But let's just suppose maybe there is someone in this room who really didn't feel like worshipping today, but you're here in faith. How do we worship when we don't feel worshipful, when the darkness closes in. How do we do it?

Well, there are practices we have to cultivate. We talk about how we "practice" faith or we "practice" religion. That's telling us it's not something automatic. We work this out in our lives through discipline, through ribbons of grace. It's like when I took piano lessons. My teacher had this little book in which she would write down all the things I needed to practice that week. I'd go over and over it. Or when you're learning a sport, you have to practice that sport.

In this passage, Habakkuk gives us five practices to cultivate contentment. Before I unfold those practices, let me just say that he intends us to be doing this together in community with one another. How do we know that? We know that from the first verse in Habakkuk 3 and the last sentence in that chapter. We see that this was a prayer written to a certain tune called "Shigiynah" that was meant to be sung by people together with a choir and stringed instruments. So the whole community was joining together in this and that's important.

One of the things suffering does is it isolates you. It causes you to pull back. Do you know what the wolves do? They wait until an animal has been separated from the herd, then the wolves surround, attack and kill. Don't let suffering isolate you from God's people. Join in the community of believers as we lift our prayers, as we lift our songs to the Lord, because God is going to use that in your adversity and suffering to sustain and strengthen you.

Practice #1 – Cry out. Lament is the pathway toward being content.

First, we must cry out to God. That's what Habakkuk is doing in Habakkuk 3:2. He says, "*O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear.*" In other words, "I've heard what You've done in the past and I've heard of Your work, Lord. I stand in awe of You." Then he cries out, "*In the midst of the years...*" Or, "Right now, Lord. In the midst of Your working, please revive it." "*In the midst of the years, make it known; in wrath remember mercy.*" He's crying out to God, to the God Who is disciplining His people, to the God Who is bringing judgment on His people. He's saying, "God, I believe that somehow Your wrath and Your mercy are not at odds with one another. I believe that somehow Your anger and Your love work together."

Friends, that's what God's wrath is. It's the love of God in action against sin. It's the love of God stepping in to destroy whatever would separate us from Him. We know that in wrath God does remember mercy, because we can look at the ultimate expression of the wrath of God, the

cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we look at how the wrath of God was poured out on His Son, what do we sing in response? We sing, “’Tis mercy all immense and free, for, O my God, it found out me” (from And Can It be That I Should Gain by Charles Wesley).

There is the mercy of God on display. So when you’re going through hardships and adversities, when you’re suffering, it doesn’t matter if it’s the result of other people’s sins or just life in a fallen world—or even if it’s a result of your own sin—you can cry out to God, saying, “O Lord, in wrath, remember mercy.” You can bring your complaint to Him. You can lament before Him.

Lament is the pathway toward being content. Lament is not an enemy of contentment; lament is a friend to contentment. Don’t say because you’re suffering, “I’m going to give God the silent treatment. I’m going to distance myself from God. I’m going to deal with this all inside me.” No. Take the grief, pain, confusion and anger you’re feeling, and pour it out to a God Who hears. Bring Him your complaint. Bring Him your cry.

Practice #2 – Remember. Seek God’s presence in places that seem deserted.

The second practice to cultivate contentment is to remember. Habakkuk is in a place right now that feels God-forsaken. It seems like everything is falling apart. It’s just like we would feel if ISIS took over our country. We can’t even imagine what this would be like. But in this God-forsaken place, he seeks God’s presence by remembering what God has done in the past.

We don’t have time to read all of Habakkuk 3:3-15. There’s a lot of phenomenological language—nature, thunder, lightning and more happening. We’re not sure exactly what Habakkuk is referring to in all these verses, but it’s very likely that he’s meditating on the works of God—how He brought His people out of Egypt, delivered them from Pharaoh, brought them through the Red Sea, led them through the wilderness and brought them into the Promised Land. He’s reviewing all the interventions of God on behalf of His people during that time, finding encouragement now by the way God has acted redemptively in the past.

There are two things I want to point out about verses 3:3-15 that teach us how God works. First, let me read verse four from the Christian Standard Bible: “*His brilliance is like light. Rays are flashing from his hand. This is where his power is hidden.*” An insight into how God works is that He is working even when we can’t see Him. The truth of the matter is that if God were to show His majesty and splendor without veiling Himself, we would be incinerated in the process. So when God shows His majesty, He veils it.

What do we sing about the Incarnation? “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.” He comes to us as a Baby, as one of us, so that we can relate to Him. God veils His power because He dwells in

unapproachable light. And when He's working, He often hides Himself—and that's for a good purpose. So just because you can't see God, don't think God is not at work.

The second thing I want you to see is in verse 13, which explains the purpose of God in all His redemptive acts. It says, *"You come out to save your people, to save your anointed."* This is exactly what we saw in the book of Esther, that even when it seems like God is absent, He's working to preserve His Messiah, His anointed King, to make sure His plan of salvation is not thwarted or foiled. God will save His people. Habakkuk is saying the same thing here and taking hope from this.

Church, if you are looking for God in desolate places that seem God-forsaken, you will find it. If you are seeking His presence in those places, you will find it. You will find that He is actually at work. Where other people can't see any evidences of God's presence and power, you'll see He is working.

That's what Corrie ten Boom discovered in a Nazi concentration camp. I have her picture here—a beautiful woman with a beautiful, radiant smile. She was put into a concentration camp because her father was housing Jews in his home in the Netherlands. The Nazis found them and carried them away. Her sister Betsie was carried off with her into the same camp. Betsie was in her 50s at this time and had suffered from a very pernicious form of anemia prior to this. So here she is in this concentration camp, very sickly, and Corrie ten Boom was at times almost offended by the strength of Betsie's faith.

There was a time in the barracks when it became infested with fleas and Corrie heard Betsie thanking God for the fleas. She said, "I've had enough of this piety. I've had enough. How can you do that? I trust God, but I can't thank Him for fleas. You're going too far." But it turned out that the guards agreed with Corrie about the fleas. They hated the fleas too. As a result, they stopped checking that barracks. So it was that Betsie and Corrie were able to keep their Bibles in the barracks. They weren't discovered. They were also able to be together as sisters, plus pray with others, teaching and encouraging them. Betsie was content with the fleas, because she could see how God was working in everything. Even in stuff that seems to be a total nuisance, God is working for good. Isn't that something?

We can see the same thing in our lives. That's what Habakkuk is doing. He's remembering God is at work.

Practice #3 – Wait. In quietness and trust will be your strength.

Wait is not my favorite word in the world. Habakkuk has wrestled and in verse 16 he tells us the results of his experience of the majesty of God. The first thing he tells us is, "I am shaking

and trembling with awe and fear. Rottenness has entered my bones.” He can hardly stand up, he’s so awestruck by the majesty of God.

But then, in the middle of verse 16, he shares how this encounter with God has impacted him. It has changed his perspective. *“Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.”* In other words, “Lord, eventually You’re going to judge the Babylonians and save Your people. Your glory is going to cover the earth and I will wait for You.”

I want you to notice that Habakkuk’s circumstances have not changed. But he’s been gazing at God, so now he’s able to glance at his circumstances. He’s able to look at the troubles he’s in through a God-entranced vision. I don’t know if Habakkuk ever saw the result of what he was waiting for in his lifetime. I doubt it. I believe he died in faith, along with all the other heroes of faith, waiting for a salvation that’s only going to be revealed when all the people of God are finally rescued together at the return of Christ. But he says, “I’ll wait, Lord.”

Someone said this: “It requires strength to wait quietly for something for which we have God’s promise, but no date.” God has promised us wonderful things, but He hasn’t given us the date of His timeline when He will fulfill those promises. It requires strength to wait quietly for something God has promised but hasn’t given us that date. Habakkuk says, “I’m willing to do that. I’m willing to wait for You.”

Practice #4 – Rejoice. In the midst of nothing, you have Him Who is everything.

That brings him to the point where he can do the fourth practice, which is rejoice. He actually rejoices. Nothing has changed in the circumstances that cause him such agony. The adversity is still there. But look at what he says in verse 17: “Okay, let’s face the facts. Let’s just get it out there. Let’s think: where is this leading? What’s the worst that can happen?”

Habakkuk lived in an agricultural economy and this describes total disaster.

He describes it like this: *“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.”* In other words, the end of everything that can keep body and soul together. There’s nothing to eat, nothing to drink, nothing to wear—plus ISIS is pounding on your door. “If all that happens, God—if everything is taken from us and if we live in hell on earth—I will still rejoice in You.” In the midst of nothing, God’s people have Him Who is everything

This is where contentment takes root. It’s when we realize it’s not the quantity of my blessings nor the quality of my circumstances that gives me peace, but it is God Himself. Isn’t that what we sang this morning? “For God alone, my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from Him.” God Himself is the One Who gives us joy. Habakkuk has tasted and seen that the Lord is good,

then he says, “O, I rejoice that I have You, God. Even if everything else is gone, I am Yours and You are mine.”

I can remember my Nanna Hazel singing and playing on the piano, “Now I belong to Jesus, Jesus belongs to me—not for the years of time alone, but for eternity.” In that, we can rejoice.

When Kate was first diagnosed with her cancer, someone gave us Charles Spurgeon’s book Beside Still Waters. I think they intentionally put their greeting card to a certain page, because this quote stood out to us right away and it’s been precious to us ever since. Spurgeon said, “Believe that the deepest afflictions are always neighbors to the highest joys.” Believe that. The worst you can go through—if you go through it in faith, rejoicing in the Lord and waiting on Him—that affliction, deep as it is, will become the neighbor to your highest joys. Spurgeon also said, “The greatest possible privileges lie close to the darkest trials. Our afflictions are the highway that leads us closer to God. Our troubles are a fiery chariot to bring us to God... The more bitter your sorrow, the louder your song at the end.”

Isn’t that beautiful? That’s what Habakkuk is learning. “I will rejoice in the Lord. I will celebrate and take joy in the God of my salvation.” I want to just stop here for a moment on the phrase “the God of my salvation.” Can you say, “God, my Savior”? Can you say that? Do you have a source of joy that nothing in this world can take away? The worst could come, the very worst circumstances could come and everything could be stripped away—even not knowing where your next meal is going to come from—yet you can say, “I have joy in God my Savior.” Death itself cannot destroy that joy.

Do you have that? What do you look to for your salvation? What do you look to to bring you joy and peace and contentment in this life? And what happens if it all is stripped away from you? Ultimately it will be, because one day, we will have to part with all the joys of this life. But if you can say, “God, my Savior,” you have a joy that nothing in this world can rob. Jesus died, Jesus lives and He is here today by His Spirit, offering Himself to you, saying, “Take Me. Receive Me as your joy. Let Me become the joy of your heart.” Jesus can and wants to do that for you.

Practice #5 – Look up! God gives strength to rise above, not live under our circumstances.

When you have this joy and peace, that leads to the last practice: look up! Habakkuk 3:19: “*God, the Lord, is my strength...*” It’s not a technique. It’s not what He’s given you. It’s not some extraordinary experience. It’s God Himself. As someone has said, “He’s an inner reservoir of boundless resources.” “You are my strength.” God gives strength, not just to stand firm and cope with this life, but to rise above and triumph.

Habakkuk said, “You make my feet like the feet of a deer.” They can go into those nooks and crannies in the mountain crevasses where there’s nothing but sheer cliff on the other side, where it’s even icy and slippery. They can navigate those tough places and keep climbing higher and higher and higher. That’s the way God’s people are.

Think of the high places in the Old Testament. What do they often represent? They represent the places of pagan deities. Throughout the Old Testament the kings of Israel are condemned because they did not tear down the high places. The idea was that whoever was up there was running the neighborhood. That’s the place of dominion and control. That’s the place of authority.

No. God always said to His people, “Tear down the high places, because I’m the God Who’s in control. Show that I have dominion and authority over all the earth.” What Habakkuk is saying here is that God wants us as His people not just to be timid, barely surviving. He wants us to be a people who are advancing into enemy territory, taking that which rightfully belongs to Christ. That’s the purpose of our lives. It’s not just to tread water or just to get through life. It’s to advance the gospel, because the gates of hell cannot withstand the advance of God’s people.

In order to do that, we need to know that Jesus has got the high ground. As we advance, we’re following Him, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith. Just think of how this chapter points us to Jesus: “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.” Think of how He lamented on the cross, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”, pouring out His lament to the Lord. Think about how He remembered the eternal covenant of redemption and in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said, “Yet not My will but Your will be done, O God.”

He had that sweet, inward, quiet submission to His good, good Father. He submitted to the point of death and said on that cross, “In Your hands I commit My spirit.” He did it for the joy that was set before Him and because of that, He triumphed. He is now at the highest place. When we say, “I can’t do that; my circumstances have got me under,” we miss so much of the joy of seeing what He is able to do in us and through us.

Howard Hendricks was a professor in Dallas. One day he was walking across the seminary campus when he saw a young woman who had been in one of his classes. He could tell she was crestfallen and discouraged, so he asked, “How are you doing?” She said, “Well, I’m doing okay, under the circumstances.” He said with a smile, “Under the circumstances? What are you doing under there? A Christian should never be under the circumstances.”

That’s what Habakkuk is learning. *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Therefore, we are “*more than conquerors through him who loved us*” (Romans 8:37-39). So let’s cry out to Him out of the depths, cast our cares on Him and learn to be content in the midst of our greatest sorrows, knowing they’re neighbors to our highest joys.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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