

**“Touching Heaven:  
A PRAYER OF FAITH”**

**Habakkuk 2:1-4, 3:17-19**

*In the meantime, we live by faith.*

A sermon preached by  
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One of my favorite stories has to do with a monk who signed on with a very strict monastic order. In fact, they were so strict that the monks had to take a vow of silence which could only be broken every five years, and then with only two words. After his first five years, the monk went in to see the abbot for his two-word interview. The abbot said, “My son, you have been with us for five years now; what two words would you like to say?”

The monk said, “Bed hard.”

“I see,” the abbot said. “You are excused.”

After five more years, the monk went in again to see the abbot. The abbot addressed the monk with, “So you’ve been with us 10 years already. What two words would you like to say?”

The monk said, “Food bad.”

“I see,” the abbot said. “You are excused.”

After five more years, fifteen in all, the man appeared before the abbot one more time. Again the abbot asked, “What would you like to say?”

And the monk replied, “I quit.”

The abbot responded, “Well, I’m not surprised. All you’ve done since you got here is complain!”

It’s easy to be a complainer, isn’t it? There’s always something we can gripe about if we want to. Sometimes even our prayers can become a list of complaints, as we tell God everything that’s wrong with our lives and the world. We pour out to God our litany of woes, and you know what? God listens. It’s OK, because our God is a great big God, and he has been hearing the complaints of his people for millennia. God can take it.

Even in the Bible, we hear prayers of complaint over and over again. Many of the Psalms contain complaints. Moses complained to God about the stiff-necked Hebrews. Elijah complained to God about the hardship and persecution he suffered. And the prophet Habakkuk starts off his book complaining to God.

Understand that Habakkuk lived in a troubled time in the history of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. Judah was caught between the two superpowers of that time, Egypt and Babylon. They bet on Egypt to win, and when the Babylonians beat the Egyptians, the Babylonians began to oppress the Jews. Judah went through a series of weak and ineffective kings. Finally, the Babylonian army was descending upon them from the north. Clearly the days of Judah were numbered. So Habakkuk cries out to God: *“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.”*<sup>1</sup> Habakkuk’s complaint rises to God.

Having issued the challenge, then the prophet climbs up to a high place and sits down to wait for the Lord to answer him: *“I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.”*<sup>2</sup> It’s really interesting that when Habakkuk hits the hard times, the first one he goes to is God. For many of us, when we hit the rough places, the first thing we give up on is God. But Habakkuk doesn’t quit believing; he doesn’t quit practicing his faith. He goes directly to God for answers.

And God does answer, doesn’t he? God says, *“Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.”*<sup>3</sup> The promise was a promise of peace, a promise of prosperity, a promise of the Kingdom of God. The promise had been made, but it had not been fulfilled. Habakkuk had heard of it, but he had not seen it. He was still waiting for fulfillment.

Sometimes there is a long time between the vision and the fulfillment. Sometimes our hope and the current reality are far apart. Last Tuesday, for the Fourth of July, we did not go out to any fireworks show, but we watched the fireworks in Washington, D.C.,

on TV. I think it's always inspiring to see the fireworks go off with the Washington Monument illuminated in the foreground. But did you know that this great symbol of our nation almost never got built? It was the dream of an architect named Robert Mills, who presented the plans in 1836 to the newly-formed Washington National Monument Society. It was a big dream—555 feet of granite, the tallest structure in the world at that time.

But funds came in so slowly that construction on the monument did not even start until twelve years later. Then the engineers discovered that the ground would not support the weight of the monument, so it had to be dismantled and moved to a new site. Work proceeded slowly, and then a series of acts of vandalism in 1854 stopped progress altogether. Robert Mills, the architect, died the next year, with the monument looking like a squat, ugly, 150-foot stump.

But his vision did not die. Twenty-five years later, forty-four years after Mills' plan was adopted, work resumed on the monument. Four years later it was capped off. And today the Washington Monument stands as the tallest masonry structure in the world, visited by over a million people a year.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes there is a long time between dream and fulfillment, and in the meantime, we have to go on living. Habakkuk lived in the meantime, between the former glory of Judah and the time when God would restore his people. We spend most of our lives in the meantime, too, somewhere between the dream and its fulfillment, somewhere between what we want to accomplish and what we actually accomplish, somewhere between our initial belief in God and the promise of heaven.

So how do we live where we are? How do we live in the meantime? Habakkuk gets the answer from God. God answers his prayer of complaint. God tells him to live by faith.

*"The righteous live by their faith."*<sup>5</sup> This is one of the most significant verses in the whole Bible. It is picked up and repeated in the New Testament several times. Paul quotes it in Romans and

Galatians, and it forms the basis of our understanding of salvation. Let's look at it today as Paul says it in Romans 1:17--"*The righteous by their faith shall live.*" What does that mean?

"*The righteous*" are those who are in a right relationship with God. It's not about how many good things you've done, and it's not about how any bad things you have not done. It's all about our relationship with our heavenly Father. We come into that relationship when we confess our sins, ask Jesus Christ to be our Savior, and give our heart to him. Righteousness simply means living in relationship with God.

John Guest, in an article called "Only a Prayer Away," describes such a relationship: "Just as husband and wife live out their lives against the backdrop of being married, so do we live out the entirety of our lives against the backdrop of a constant relationship with God. He is always there, always loving us, always ready to listen to us. As we recognize his unwavering commitment to us, we are able to live in the day to day adventure and challenge of his presence. We enjoy the dialogue. It's as if we say, 'Oh, I must talk to him about this!'"<sup>6</sup>

One of the things I have heard from many people who have lost loved ones is that something will happen in the day, and they will involuntarily think, "Oh, I need to tell my husband/wife/mother/father that!" Then they realize with fresh pain that their loved ones aren't around to talk to any more. The good news of faith is, God never leaves. He is always there for us. We can always live in relationship with him. That's righteousness.

"*The righteous by their faith shall live.*" Our relationship with God is built on faith. What is faith? Hebrews defines faith as "*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*"<sup>7</sup> Faith is belief in spite of evidence to the contrary or lack of evidence. Faith is belief in the meantime between vision and fulfillment.

If you had predicted in the summer of 1995 that the Northwestern University Wildcat football team would play in the Rose Bowl on January 1, 1996, people would not have called you a person of faith.

They would have called you a fool. Northwestern had the worst record in college football. They were a small, academically demanding school competing with some of the great football powerhouses of the nation—Michigan State, Ohio State, Notre Dame. They were a perennial laughingstock.

But their new coach Gary Barnett took his team to the Rose Bowl that year. He began with summer practice, instilling the goal in his players. He ordered a Rose Bowl flag to fly over the field house, and he kept a fresh rose on his desk every day of the season. At the very first team meeting of the summer, he told the young men that they needed belief without evidence. They had no evidence that Northwestern could play football. If they were going to compete, they needed first to believe they could compete. “You know what that’s called?” he said. “That’s faith.”<sup>8</sup>

But faith has to do with the heart as much as the head. It is more than just intellectual belief. It is trust. It is dependence upon God. Bible scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier says that faith in this verse really means “faithfulness,” and “faithfulness here means trust, dependence, clinging to God; it means living and moving and having one’s being in him alone; it means relying on him for the breath one draws, for the direction one takes, for the decisions one makes, for the goals one sets, and for the outcome of one’s living.... Faithfulness means placing one’s whole life in God’s hands and trusting him to fulfill it, despite all outward and inward circumstances; despite all personal sin and guilt; despite all psychological and social and physical distortions. Faithfulness is living by God’s power rather than by one’s own; and therefore it is truly life, because it draws its vitality from the living God who is the source of life.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the greatest Christian leaders of the last century was John Stott, rector of All Souls Langham Place in London. He was an Anglican priest, but also a powerful preacher and Bible teacher, author of significant books on Christian belief, and a global Christian leader. He was also a loyal friend and pastor to many. As Stott was near

death in his home in London, he was visited by Os Guinness, another prolific author and influential Christian leader. Guinness and Stott shared for an hour old stories and memories. Finally, Guinness asked Stott how he could pray for him. Lying weakly on his back and barely able to speak, Stott answered in a hoarse whisper, "Pray that I will be faithful to Jesus until my last breath."<sup>9</sup> That should be the prayer of every true disciple of Jesus.

*"The righteous by their faith shall live."* This is the good news. A relationship with God built on faith brings us life—life abundant now in the meantime and life eternal forever. This is the vision that awaits its time—the Kingdom of God. But we don't have to wait until the end of time to truly live. We can do that now! We can experience life in its fullness. We can know salvation!

We can live with confidence day by day, despite any troubles we face. In the Letter to the Hebrews, the writer quotes the prophet Habakkuk, encouraging his readers: *"Do not therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet 'in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.' But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved."*<sup>10</sup> We can live with confidence in the meantime between promise and fulfillment, because we are already tasting the reward God is giving us.

Even in the midst of a devastating situation, the prophet Habakkuk can live by faith. Even in the midst of the most devastating situations of our lives, we can also live by faith. Habakkuk begins with a complaint, but he closes his book of prophecy with this beautiful prayer of faith:

*Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
And no fruit is on the vine;  
Though the produce of the olive fails*

*And the field yields no food;  
Though the flock is cut off from the fold  
And there is no herd in the stalls,  
[In other words, though everything in the world goes to pieces]  
Yet [what a huge little word!] I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
God, the Lord, is my strength;  
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
And makes me tread upon the heights.<sup>11</sup>*

Like a deer standing on the mountaintop, we can live with confidence and hope. That is the victory for the meantime. That is the victory of faith. That is the victory of God!

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<sup>1</sup> Habakkuk 1:2-4.

<sup>2</sup> Habakkuk 2:1.

<sup>3</sup> Habakkuk 2:2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin A. Miller, *Secrets of Staying Power* (Waco:Word, 1988), n. p.

<sup>5</sup> Habakkuk 2:4b.

<sup>6</sup> John Guest, "Only a Prayer Away," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, No. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 11:1.

<sup>8</sup> Sherman L. Burford, *Leadership*, Vol. 17, No. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi (Interpretation Commentaries)* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), p.46.

<sup>9</sup> Os Guinness, *Impossible People* (IVP Books, 2016), *PreachingToday.com*.

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 10:35-39.

<sup>11</sup> Habakkuk 3:17-19.