

Abiding Fruit

Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart

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Treading The High Places Habakkuk 3:19

This phrase is found in the last chapter of the remarkable prophecy made by Habakkuk and in the last verse. It is an appropriate expression of the ultimate triumph that the people of God shall experience since they serve a Sovereign God. There are two key verses (or series of verses) in Habakkuk that explicitly reflect the prophet's dilemma and thanksgiving. Habakkuk 2:4 raises the question of how a man can be right before God. The answer is found in verse 4 – *“the righteous shall live by faith.”* This is, of course, simply a pointer to justification by faith as the sole means whereby any person is accepted before a holy and just God. This same verse is mentioned three times in the New Testament (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). The fact that any person can be said to be righteous is because of an imputed righteousness to him rather than an inherent righteousness which no man possesses (see Rom. 3:10). The second key verse(s) is found in chapter 3 and verses 17 – 19.

Habakkuk 3:17 – 19 is the final section of the prophecy in which Habakkuk exults that there is no possible scenario in which he can now be undermined. This is due to the new understanding that he has come to possess. The process that leads to this new understanding is outlined throughout the prophecy. It is important to understand the meaning of Habakkuk, since it leads to the exercise of faith. It is not absolutely certain when Habakkuk uttered the words of his “burden” or “oracle” (1:1). It seems clear that the ancient world was in a state of transition. The Assyrians had declined as the world power of their day, and the Babylonians were flexing their muscles, and would soon take center stage. In fact, God tells Habakkuk that He was raising up the Chaldeans or Babylonians to serve His purposes (1:6). It is possible that Habakkuk prophesied during the reign of Jehoiakim (609 – 598 BC), since the illusion to the Babylonians being used by God to deal with rebellious Judah, could and probably was in the near future.

The prophecy of Habakkuk deals with a number of spiritual crises that the prophet was going through. His first problem was – *“why does God not listen to my cry?”* (1:2). The prophet complains to God, that he has been crying out to God and God does not seem to be listening. With all the violence going on, where was God? His second problem is found in verse 3. *“Why does God not seem to care about suffering and sin?”* Both of these questions are common among believers today. It is important to note that these are legitimate questions if they are asked from the right point of reference, i.e.; God's, yet they very rarely are approached like that, because we generally only see as far as our problems as they relate to us alone.

Habakkuk is concerned that destruction and violence are becoming commonplace and God was doing nothing about it. Wickedness was on the increase and there was no justice to be found (vv. 3, 4).

God's answer to these problems was not what Habakkuk expected (1:5 – 11). God's answer was to say that He was bringing the wicked Babylonians (1:5, 6) to deal with rebellious Judah. This staggers Habakkuk who cannot understand how God could use violent Babylonians who deserved God's judgment to execute judgment upon the people of God. It did not make sense to the prophet, so he raises his third and fourth questions (vs. 13) – *“why are you (God) using wicked means to bring about your ends?”* and *“why do you do nothing about the righteous suffering?”* Habakkuk describes the Babylonians as a ruthless and wicked nation (vv. 14 – 17) who seem certain to continue their wickedness in the face of a God who does nothing, except judge His people (Judah). This leads Habakkuk to raise his next question in verse 17

– “are you going to allow the Babylonians to keep on doing what they do?” In other words, was God going to let sin increase without judging it?

Habakkuk states rather facetiously that he is going to set himself as a watchman to see if God will keep His Word (2:1). God answers Habakkuk by telling him that he was working out His purpose both for the nation and for the Babylonians (2:2 – 20). It was only the righteous that lived by faith – they waited on God (2:3). God utters five woes against the Babylonians (2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19). Each woe comprises three verses each. The word “woe” suggests imminent and certain disaster. The Babylonians were guilty of intimidation (vv. 6 – 8), intemperance (vv. 9 – 11), iniquity (vv. 12 – 14), indignity (vv. 15 – 17), and idolatry (vv. 18 – 20). The Babylonians thought that they could do as they pleased, but God was in His holy temple sovereignly directing the affairs of the earth (vs. 20). He does not forget His people. He does not forget the righteous – those who live by faith.

Habakkuk 3 is a doxology in the form of a prayer by the prophet. The Person of God is revealed in terms of God’s work and judgment (vs. 2, 3). Habakkuk states that he has heard of God and His work and he thus fears the Lord (3:2). He pleads that God would revive His work and show forth His hand in power, but that God would remember mercy in the midst of His wrath. Has not our God remembered His mercy when it comes to dealing with us and our sins? He has not poured out His wrath upon us, but He has acted toward us in mercy and loving-kindness.

God’s power is demonstrated (vv. 4 – 12). The nations tremble (vs. 7). Nature trembles before God (vv. 4 – 6, 8 – 12), and is His ready instrument to do His bidding. This is the picture of God before the prophet. He sees a holy and righteous God completely in control of all things. There is no nation that can stand against God (which should give us hope in our time). There is no aspect of creation that is not under God’s control (it does His bidding as He pleases). These things move Habakkuk – they move Him to worship because of the greatness of God. What really overcomes the prophet is that God was working on behalf of His people (vv. 13 – 19). Habakkuk just did not understand that God was working in chapters 1 & 2. He wanted visible intervention immediately and God had to remind the prophet that though Habakkuk could not see the ways of God, yet God was working and patience and trust were required. This is what Habakkuk says in verse 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.”*

Habakkuk ends his prophecy on a note of praise and rejoicing in God (vs. 17 – 19). He first of all, paints a picture of the worst possible scenario occurring - no figs on the fig tree, no fruit on the vines, no produce from the olive trees, no food from the fields, no flock and no herds, yet he would rejoice in God and would take joy in the God of His salvation (vs. 17, 18). What a turn around from chapter one! This is where God wants each one of us. Take the worst scenario and then put God in the picture and hope abounds. Where Jesus is, there is joy, there is salvation. This is a lesson that every saint learns, is learning and will continue to learn until we get to glory. The source of any joy is the God of our salvation. The supply of any strength is God (vs. 19).

It is God that enables every child of God to overcome every trial and every difficulty. True joy is usually built on times of sorrow. That is why when we get to heaven and there is no more sorrow, our joy will be all the more sweet, for we shall know from where we have come and what we have been through. Habakkuk says his feet are like the deer’s. He treads on the high places (vs. 19). He triumphs in God; indeed, it is God that makes him triumphant. Jesus shall reign where’er the sun doth its successive journey run, and in the end, you and I shall be with Him, like him and He shall cause us to tread on the high places of glory with Him.