

Habakkuk 3:17-19
In Everything Give Thanks
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This coming Thursday is Thanksgiving, that uniquely American holiday where we take off from work and school, we eat turkey and dressing, and we watch parades and bowl games on television. But we need to remember that Thanksgiving is more than a day off and a special meal and seasonal TV programs. Thanksgiving is first and foremost a day which our culture sets aside to count our blessings and to give God thanks.

I want to begin this morning by sharing with you a few reasons why the Christian, of all people, should be thankful. And then I want to look at our Scripture reading for today taken from the book of Habakkuk and look at what it tells us about why we should be grateful people.

As I said, the Christian, of all people, should be thankful, and here are a few reasons. First, the Christian should be thankful because he knows that his present life is but the prelude to a better life. He experiences both pain and pleasure, both poverty and prosperity, both affliction and advantage. Yet the Christian knows that the misery of this life is temporary, a transient experience which will soon pass away. The Christian also knows that the good things of this life, the true pleasures of this life, are but crumbs on the floor from the heavenly feast which he will one day enjoy. The joys of this life are but a foretaste of greater and better things to come.

For the wicked, the situation is just the opposite. The pleasures of this life are like a last meal on death row. The last meal is a temporary kindness from the judge before the final punishment. Even if a last meal is a true gourmet's delight, how difficult it would be to truly savor it, to truly enjoy it, knowing that it is indeed a last meal and a prelude to punishment. For the wicked, the miseries of this life and not the pleasures are a foretaste of what is to come. In their heart of hearts, they know this.

When you think about this contrast, you can see why the Christian is the one who should be thankful. It is natural for a person to be thankful for something when he knows that even better things are coming, and when he knows that the current difficulties and problems which accompany even the good things of this life are temporary.

This also explains why there are people with much material wealth and many creature comforts and other apparent advantages, who nevertheless are neither happy nor thankful. In their heart of hearts, they know that their grasp on these good things is temporary and that their future beyond this life holds no promise for anything better.

A second reason the Christian, of all people, should be thankful is because the Christian realizes that every good thing he receives is a gift of mercy which he does not deserve. Sin is a rebellion against creatureliness which demands prerogatives and rights and privileges which really belong only to God. When the spirit of sinful rebellion dominates in a person's heart and he

receives something good in this life, that person always has a mistaken sense that he really deserves something better. The sinful spirit can never be satisfied, much less truly thankful.

In contrast, the Christian realizes that not only is he a creature, but he is also a member of a sinful race which has rebelled against God. Because of this, all that he truly deserves is the misery of punishment. The Christian has accepted this reality. The Christian also appreciates the price which God had to pay in order to be merciful to him and to give him blessings which he does not deserve. The price: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.” Jesus had to suffer on the cross to atone for the Christian’s sins, and the Christian knows it. Because Jesus died for the Christian’s sins, God is able to treat the Christian with the kindness of mercy instead of with the harshness of justice.

Two men receive something good in this life. One of them is dominated by a sinful spirit, and he says in his heart of hearts, “I really deserve something better than this and more of it.” He is not really thankful. The other man has a faith relationship with Jesus, and he says in his heart of hearts, “I deserve the wrath of God, but Jesus died upon the cross that God might instead be merciful to me and give me this blessing.” He is truly grateful.

A third reason the Christian, of all people, should be thankful is because the Christian knows that God is working all things to the good of those who love Him. The Christian is like a grateful young child with a kind benevolent father. The young child may

not understand why his father makes him eat his vegetables or sometimes takes him to a doctor to get a painful shot or makes him go to school. Yet the child knows that his father loves him and that his father knows best. And so the child is grateful even though his experiences are not all pleasant and even though he doesn't fully understand their purpose. In like manner, the Christian can be grateful, even in painful situations, because he trusts God's love, God's wisdom and God's power.

The Christian is thankful because he knows that his present life is but the prelude to a better life. The Christian is thankful because he knows that every good thing he receives is a gift of mercy which he does not deserve. The Christian is thankful because he knows that God is working all things to the good of those who love Him.

This last point about God's working all things to the good of those who love Him, is well illustrated in our Scripture reading for today. The book of Habakkuk ends with this wonderful poem in which the prophet states that He is going to rejoice in God even in the worst possible circumstances. He is going to give thanks in everything.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

- 17 Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls--
- 18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

19 The LORD God is my strength; he will make my feet like deer's feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills. ...

I want to look at the background to this hymn of trust under three headings: the puzzle, the principle and the peace.

First, we will look at the **puzzle**. The prophet Habakkuk lived in the southern kingdom of Judah. He was disturbed by wickedness which prevailed in that society, and so he cried out to God, How long? How long would it be before God intervened and did something? How long would God tolerate the wickedness of Judah? Judah had become characterized by violence and injustice, and God seemed to be doing nothing about it.

God answered the prophet by telling him that He was even then raising up the Babylonians to judge Judah. God said to Habakkuk, "I will work a work in your days." God is never indifferent to the sins of His people, and the prophet would see within his lifetime God's judgment upon Judah. God's statement that He would use the Babylonians to judge Judah was a surprise. The Assyrians had long ruled the world and had been the chief oppressors in that area for about a century. The Babylonians would rise as the new world power with astonishing speed. These new world rulers were an arrogant and violent people. They would quickly conquer the world with terrible ruthlessness. They were fierce and without conscience, and they worshipped their own strength and power.

The prophet responded with a combination of confidence and confusion. First, the statement of confidence:

Habakkuk 1:12a

12 Are You not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. ...

The Babylonians worshipped raw power, but the God of Israel is the Lord, Jehovah God, the Holy One who is from everlasting. God had entered into covenant with Israel and had promised to use the seed of Abraham to bless the world. Therefore, the prophet stated with confidence, “We shall not die.” He was not saying that he thought he and others would somehow escape the very experience of physical death and live forever. No, it is given unto man once to die. What the prophet meant was that He was confident that God would not allow the covenant people to perish as a people. God would chasten Judah, but God would not obliterate His covenant people from history as God had done to Sodom and Gomorrah. The prophet was confident that whatever happened, God would preserve a righteous remnant with which to keep His covenant and to work out His plan for history.

That was the prophet’s statement of confidence, “We shall not die.” But then the prophet expressed His confusion. Why is God going to allow a treacherous people such as the Babylonians to judge Judah? Yes, Judah has behaved wickedly, but Judah is righteous compared to the Babylonians. Why is God going to allow these godless hordes to conquer Judah as easily as shooting fish in a barrel? How can God observe such evil behavior without stepping in to intervene? That is the prophet’s puzzle.

First, we have seen the prophet's puzzle. Second, God answers Habakkuk with the **principle**, The just shall live by faith.

Habakkuk 2:4

4 Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith.

God acknowledged that the proud Babylonians were not a morally upright people. And for that reason, they would not survive as a people. They would be judged. They would disappear from history. They would be destroyed.

God was going to use the Babylonians not to destroy the people of God but to chasten them and to purge them. Indeed, God would use the Babylonian exile to purge the sin of idolatry from Israel. The revival in Israel associated with the end of the Babylonian captivity and with the return to Jerusalem would be a preliminary fulfillment of the new covenant prophecies. God was going to preserve a righteous remnant within Israel to continue on in history as the people of God.

Through their faith relationship with God, the righteous were going to survive this time of judgment, this time of purging, this time of chastening. The Babylonian flood would immerse Judah, but the righteous through faith would be within God's protecting ark. The angel of death would pass through the land of Judah, but the righteous through faith would have the blood of the Passover Lamb on their door posts. The storm of judgment would come upon Judah, but the righteous through faith would build their houses on the solid rock which provides the sure foundation.

Let's look at each word of this important statement: the just shall live by faith.

First, the just or the righteous. Those who look to God in faith are called the righteous first and foremost because they have a righteous standing before God after the pattern of Abraham.

Genesis 15:6

6 And [Abram] believed in the LORD, and [the LORD] accounted it to [Abram] for righteousness.

The New Testament enables us to better understand this saving transaction. When a person looks to God for salvation, God reckons that person's guilt to Jesus, and Jesus pays for that person's sins through His suffering upon the cross. Then God takes the righteous record of the life Jesus lived, a life of perfect obedience, and God reckons that to the person of faith. Through his faith relationship with Jesus, the person has obtained a legal standing of perfect righteousness before God.

So a person who looks to God in faith for salvation becomes a righteous person in the sense that he has a perfect legal standing before God. But God doesn't stop there. A person's new legal standing of righteousness is going to have its own effect upon a person. The legally righteous person is freed from the claims of Satan upon him. The legally righteous person is freed from the dominion of sin. The legally righteous person experiences God's transforming grace. Thus, the legally righteous person progressively becomes the personally righteous person. That is

why in our text, the righteous or the just are contrasted with the proud Babylonians whose souls are not upright. The righteous are righteous not only legally but also personally.

The just shall live by faith. From the human perspective, faith is a person's looking to God for salvation through the work of Christ. From the divine perspective, faith is the human experience of the covenant union with Christ which God establishes as a work of sovereign grace. Through this covenant union with Jesus, the person of faith receives spiritual life both initially in regeneration and continually as the basis for living the Christian life.

Colossians 2:6

6 As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, ...

We received Christ by grace through faith, and we live the Christian life by grace through faith.

The person of faith also lives by faith in the sense of persevering. It is through his faith relationship with Jesus that he is daily delivered from the power of sin and from the power of the evil one.

This principle can be applied in different ways. In our passage for today, God applies this principle to the historical context of the prophet Habakkuk. The morally crooked Babylonians will perish from history, but the righteous remnant within Israel, those who truly look to God in faith, will live and be saved in the sense of persevering in history as a people.

With that explanation, the prophet was at **peace**, which is our third point. He thought upon God's mighty working within history in the past, and he prayed for God to again actively work within history. He knew that when God works within history, there is a shaking of the nations. When God works within history, there is judgment upon the wicked. But the people of God, the righteous remnant, the people of faith are that one eternal kingdom which cannot be moved and which will never fall. In His wrath upon the wicked, God remembers to be merciful to His people.

In chapter three, verse sixteen, the prophet Habakkuk said (reading from the English Standard Version), "I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us." The prophet then understood that God would use the Babylonians as an instrument of chastening for the spiritual good of Judah. And then at the appropriate time, God would destroy the Babylonians in judgment upon the wicked. The prophet was then at peace and quietly waited for that day.

It is in that context which the prophet said,

Habakkuk 3:17-19

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- 18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

19 The LORD God is my strength; he will make my feet like deer's feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills. ...

The Christian, the person of faith, the righteous one, is able to give thanks in everything because He knows that God, in all His love, wisdom and power, is working out everything for the good of those who love Him.