

# “Not So Minor Prophets: 3) Habakkuk”

a sermon by

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June 20, 2010

**Text: “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in the God of my salvation.” (Habakkuk 3:17-18)**

Over the past months our nation has experienced a number of crises that have proven very difficult to understand and to know how to respond. In early April, a huge explosion at the Upper Big Branch coal mine 30 miles south of Charleston, West Virginia, took the lives of 29 coal miners who were trapped in the mine after the explosion. Then on April 20, 2010 an explosion on the Deep Horizon Oil Rig in the Gulf of Mexico took the life of 11 workers and unleashed 5,000 feet below the surface an enormous outpouring of oil that continues today to threaten the entire ecosystem of the Gulf Coast.

In both tragedies there have been so many innocent people who have suffered. Those 29 miners were only doing what thousands of miners have done before them through the years, entering into the bowels of the earth to harvest the veins of coal that help to feed the energy needs of our country.

In the case of the Gulf Coast now thousands of people whose livelihood depended on the Gulf are out of work, their future uncertain, and the host of wildlife that depends on the wetlands of the Gulf Coast is threatened as well.

All of us are aware that often people bring trouble on themselves, but in the case of these two disasters, it is also clear that there are many innocent people who are now suffering who did nothing to cause these terrible disasters.

## I.

Over the weeks of June we have examined again a portion of the Old Testament that is often overlooked – the so-called Minor Prophets – those prophets who spoke the word of God in various times of Israel’s history.

One of these prophets was a man by the name of Habakkuk. Like so many of the prophets, we know little about Habakkuk. He was probably a contemporary of Jeremiah, who prophesied in the very last days of the nation of Judah, before the Babylonian armies under King Nebuchadnezzar poured into the city of Jerusalem, destroying the holy temple, razing the entire land, and taking the king and many of the leaders of the nation into exile to Babylon.

There is a perspective of Habakkuk that is quite unique in the Old Testament. He sees the punishment of his people at the hand of the Babylonians. But he recognizes that the Babylonians were evil as well. They were violent, vicious, and brutal conquerors and the question with which Habakkuk wrestles is the question: why does God allow these kinds of things to happen? The moods of the prophet Habakkuk range from doubt to faith to religious indignation. “The wicked surround the righteous – therefore justice becomes perverted” (1:4)

The complaint that Habakkuk registers with God is the complaint that the wicked are often rewarded and the righteous often suffer. For Habakkuk there is a great injustice in the world and he rails against it. Yet, remarkably, one finds in this third chapter of Habakkuk a remarkable passage that defines the real nature of faith:

“For if the fig tree does not blossom  
and there is no produce on the vines,  
The produce of the olive fail  
and terraces give not food,  
The flock be cut off from the pen  
and there be no herd in the stalls;  
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,  
I will exult in the God of my salvation. (3:16-17)

This is a strange but significant legacy of the prophet Habakkuk. When the Babylonian armies began to attack the nation of Judah, he complained loudly about the unfairness of it all. But when things got worse and the figs, grapes, olives, grain, sheep and goats were destroyed, and the people were starving, yet the prophet does not give up. “Yet, I will rejoice in the Lord,” he cries.

## II.

Adversity then, far from being a mere nuisance or cruelty, is one of the essential elements in all great living.

To be sure, that is not our first reaction. Our first reaction is to avoid adversity at all costs. We seek to crowd it from our lives, but at the end of the day, it is always present. Adversity is a constant and constituent element of human life upon this planet. It offers us something that nothing else can afford us. It offers us an opportunity to shape our character in ways that we would have never had, if adversity had not shown its face to us.

Remember the Apostle Paul, who knew trouble if ever a man did, writing to the church at Rome, “We rejoice in our tribulations.” That is an essential element in the Christian gospel and the person who does not understand it, is farther away from being a Christian than the individual who doubts some formal creed.

One of the most famous sermons ever preached was preached by a Scottish minister, Arthur John Gossip, who was then pastor of the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen, Scotland. Entitled “But When Life Tumbles In, What Then?” It was preached in 1927, the Sunday after Gossip’s wife had died suddenly without warning. Even after almost 100 years the sermon has a certain kind of power that the passage of time has not diminished. In this sermon Gossip warns that religion can often be a fair weather type of faith. After all, each of us has the usual little rubs and frets and ills of life that fall to everyone. And if these have broken through your guard, pushed aside your faith and make you sour and peevish and cross toward God – God help you, what will happen when sudden as a shell screaming out of the night, some one of the great crashing dispensations bursts into your life, leaves an emptiness where there once was a home, a tumbled ruin of your ordered ways, a heart so sore you wonder how it holds together.

Suppose that to you, as to Job, suddenly, out of the blue, there comes a dreadful tidings of a great disaster, would you have the courage to pull yourself together and to say as did Job, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away”? Or suppose that to you as to Ezekiel, that valiant soul, there comes a day, when with no warning you are given that bleak message, “Son of man, behold I take away the desire of your eyes in a stroke; yet, neither shall you weep, nor let the tears run down. So I preached in the morning; and in the evening my wife died.”

Gossip goes on to say, “I do not understand this life of ours. But still less can I comprehend how people in trouble and loss and bereavement can fling away peevishly from the Christ faith. In God’s name, fling to what? Have we not lost enough without losing that too? If Christ is right – if, as he says, there are somehow hidden away from our eyes as yet, still there, wisdom and planning and kindness and love in these dark dispensations – then we can see them through. But if Christ was wrong, and all that is not so; if God set his foot on my home crudely, heedlessly, blunderingly, blindly, have I not the right to be angry and sore? If Christ was right and immortality and the dear hopes of which He speaks do really lie a little way ahead, we can manage to make our way to them. But if it is not so, if it is all over, if there is nothing more, how dark the darkness grows! You people in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadow must believe it. We have nothing else.”

## II.

There is something else as well that Habakkuk helps us to discover. Adversity and trouble can also be used to deepen our sensitivity and intensify our usefulness. After all, it takes adversity to understand adversity and history is replete with some wonderful illustrations of hardship highly used.

When most of us think of Charles Dickens, we are reminded of his great literary gifts. We are not as likely to remember him as a social reformer, but he was that. He was a great influence in 19<sup>th</sup> century England in the humanitarian movement to abolish debtor prisons, to improve conditions of labor, and to cleanse the English schools of their worst barbarities.

He was not simply a marvelous story teller; he was an effective reformer. How vividly he described the abominations of his time. Why? Because he had experienced them first hand. Micawber was his father. His father had been in a debtors' prison. As a young boy, crushed with shame and crippled with poverty, Dickens had crept up to that barbarous place day after day, to visit his father. When Dickens was ten years old he worked long hours for a pittance, pasting labels on bottles in a blacking factory, and in his own person he endured the stupid cruelties of the old pedagogy. Then he rose above his adversity, transmuted by magic its lead into gold, made of it deep insight, profound understanding, keen sympathy, and widespread public service. That is trouble finely used.

It is nonsense to call an untroubled life the ideal. What can an untroubled life know about living? How can that help anyone?

### III.

Then too, trouble and adversity can also cleanse us our intellect and our character of some very dangerous illusions. In particular, it ought to cleanse us of the illusion that life is fair or that we ought to expect it to be fair. Despite the accumulated wisdom of the ages, one continually meets people complaining that life is not fair.

One wonders where these people have been living or what books they have read. Not the Bible. Was life fair to Habakkuk? Was life fair to Jesus? Was the cross a just punishment? When he set his face to go to Jerusalem, did he really think he would be received by the Scribes and Pharisees as a saint? Or what about those individuals that one finds in the early church, of whom the New Testament says the world was not worthy of them, who were sawn asunder, slain with the sword, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated – was the world fair to them? Someone has said that the beginning of wisdom is to give up the idea and expectation that life is just and fair.

Suppose for a moment that life was fair. Suppose that for every good deed we did we were rewarded and for every evil deed we were punished. Where would our moral heroes be? Where would be the people like Queen Esther who, choosing to risk her life for her people said, "If I perish, I perish." Or what about Jesus, who in Gethsemane prayed, "If it be possible, let this cup be taken from me. But if not, not my will but thy will be done."

If there is one thing that Scripture teaches us, it is that we should expect trouble. Never ask of life that you be spared it. Ask that, when in due season it comes, you may handle it well.

### IV.

The conclusion of this, of course, is that trouble and adversity can open up within us deep wells of spiritual power. Suffering, someone wrote, accepted and conquered, can give a person a serenity that may well prove to be the most valuable thing in your life. That is a strange thing, is it not? Suffering bring out serenity? That is certainly not what most of us get out of suffering. We get resentment out of it. We get rebellion out of it. We get self-pity out of it. But serenity?

At the end of that famous sermon preached in Aberdeen, Arthur John Gossip concludes with these words:

“I do not think we need to be afraid of life. Our hearts are frail; and there are places where the road is very steep and very lonely. But we have a wonderful God. And as Paul puts it, who can separate us from his love? Not death, he says immediately, pushing that aside at once as the most obvious of all impossibilities.

No, not death. For standing in the roaring of the Jordan, cold to the heart with its dreadful chill, and very conscious of the terror of its rushing, I too, like Hopeful, can call back to you who one day in your turn will have to cross it, “Be of good cheer, my brother, for I feel the bottom, and it is sound.”

Amen.