

Habakkuk 3:17-19a
"A Grateful Heart"

For some, the ideal Thanksgiving holiday raises images of heavy eating, mammoth meals, and ending with long naps and football games!

But what happens when happiness is hard to muster: When there is no TV; when there is very little food; when there is an empty seat at the table; when hope is hard to come by?

Do you think we attach gratefulness to what we have or what we don't have?

I want to introduce you to a character in the Bible you may never have heard about: Habakkuk. It's a crazy name, I know! Habakkuk was a minor prophet of which we have very little information. We know he was living at the same time as Jeremiah, at a time when the country was under attack by the Babylonian empire!

Though it was 2,600 years ago, we know a lot about the people in Judah because of the writings from that time. Many of God's people had rejected Him; they had given themselves to worshiping idols, statues made by men, sacrificing children to an imaginary god, superstitious practices, ignoring God's Temple for worship, lying, cheating, sexual orgies and adultery, and rejecting God's instructions and commandments all together! (Some might argue not much has changed in 2600 years.)

On top of that, the people of God were being burned out and slaughtered by warfare in their own borders!

Horrified by the people's immoral condition and the nation's destruction, Habakkuk cries out to God, wondering why God seemed silent! And God speaks:

God said the attacking army is His plan, His will, to punish the wickedness of His people. This warfare is an appeal to God's people to turn to Him for help; to recognize their need for some power greater than themselves!

God promised Habakkuk that justice would prevail. God intended to punish the wicked and the corrupt people who betrayed their covenant with God.

But God said the righteous will live by faith, believing and trusting in Him.

Now that's a tough lesson! How would anyone agree to trust in God when they have lost their jobs, they've lost their security, they are at war, worried and confused and frightened? How could they come to trust in God when they are burying their starving children, their sick parents, and they weren't sure they themselves would survive?

Do we forget who it is we believe in!? Do we forget who's on our side? You don't always hear this word, but our God is a sovereign God!

We are created by a sovereign God! We are loved by a sovereign God! A sovereign God has come to earth to redeem you from the rebellion, the wickedness, and disease that surrounds you!

Let me explain what the Bible means when it describes the sovereignty of God!

When we profess that God is sovereign we mean that God has supreme, absolute authority as Ruler over all creation. The Bible says, "The Lord is the true God; He is the living God, the eternal King," (Jeremiah 10:10).

While other kings and kingdoms and nations rise and fall through the centuries, God's rule extends throughout the universe and He is eternal! God did not ask if it was okay to create the universe. He didn't have to depend on anyone to supply the necessary materials. God simply spoke the word and the universe was created!

Because God is sovereign, He knows all tomorrows! He knows the purpose for the wind

to blow, He knows the reason for the bird to crow and He knows a way for your faith to grow.

So God may use a nation's enemy to bring a greater purpose, His better plan – a plan that benefits His desire! And know that His desire includes a plan to love you and save you!

Because we believe God is sovereign, we believe He has a plan for us that reaches beyond the simple existence and the brief years we populate this world. Praise God – He has a greater destination designed for you who come to love Him and serve Him!

Habakkuk believed that. Listen to what Habakkuk said from out of his own living terror:
READING Habakkuk 3:17-19a

¹⁷ Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vine; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ The Sovereign LORD is my strength! He will make me as surefooted as a deer and bring me safely over the mountains.

The losses Habakkuk describes would mean malnourishment at best and starvation at worst. The loss of sheep and cattle equaled the loss of clothing, meat, farming tools, and economic disaster. The loss of all of these would amount to collapse economically and physically.

I wonder if we understand how incredible faith would be through the seasons of suffering or pain. God had clearly warned the prophet that a wicked enemy would bring destruction to the land. That would be like Iran or China invading America!

Still, Habakkuk began to praise God: “Yet I will rejoice in the Lord...” His complaints, his confusion, his anger ...were settled in his mind, and he expressed joy to God because Habakkuk believed this sovereign God had a plan and God had a right to act.

Habakkuk teaches us something about faith:

1. His faith was not grounded on his own understanding or his own ability to live rightly. His faith was settled on the person of God. (Think about that a minute!)

2. Instead of rebelling against God when He did not surrender to Habakkuk's simple understanding of things, Habakkuk yielded to the faithful sovereignty of God.

3. Habakkuk understood that while God is beyond comprehension, He is not beyond relationship. That's the KEY for us: God is patient and gracious with us, but He does not bend to our will. God is sovereign, wise, just, loving, holy, and infinitely indescribable. But He's chosen you as His own. Our faith in Him is not based on our ability to understand the way He works. Our faith is based on Him, on who He is, and He does not disappoint. He is God, and we submit to Him as we take ourselves off of His throne.

Sometimes we get confused, believing that God is here to make sure *we* have a wonderful life. We may think of Him as Santa Claus, and that He's supposed to take care of us in the way we intend to be cared for!

Boy, are we confused!

We see an inspiring example of a brave, thankful heart in the story behind one of the church's most popular hymns, “Now Thank We All Our God.” This particular hymn was written during the Thirty Years War in Germany, in the early 1600s. Its author was Martin Rinkart, a Lutheran pastor in the town of Eilenburg in Saxony.

Eilenburg was a walled city, so it became a haven for refugees seeking safety from the fighting. But soon, the city became too crowded and food was in short supply. Then, a famine hit and a terrible plague and Eilenburg became a giant morgue.

In one year alone, Pastor Rinkart conducted funerals for 4,500 people, including his own wife. The war dragged on; the suffering continued. Yet through it all, he never lost courage or faith and even during the darkest days of Eilenburg's agony, he was able to write this hymn:

Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices,
 Who wondrous things hath done, In whom the world rejoices
 ...[So] keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed,
 and free us from all ills, in this world and the next.

Even when he was waist deep in destruction, Pastor Rinkart was able to lift his sights to a higher plane. He kept his mind on God's love when the world was filled with hate. He kept his mind on God's promises of heaven when the earth was a living hell. Can we not do the same – we whose lives are almost trouble-free, compared with the man who wrote that hymn?

“Together in Christ,” Erskine White, CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 1990, 1-55673-237-6

Faith in a sovereign God is a deliberate and pre-meditated choice to be thankful during the most difficult circumstances in life.

We believe – because we need Him in this world that rebels against Him and brings hate and violence in the way we treat one another. *We believe* – because we need Him when life cheats us. *We believe* – because we need Him in a world that is filled with weaknesses and uncertainty, troubles and hardships. *We believe* – because we need Him at a time when our mortal existence is disrupted by death – and He made us for so much more!

Will you take hold of a courageous and bold faith today?

I see some who follow Jesus as though He was a good-luck charm. They want good things to happen for themselves, and so they believe that if they claim Jesus, Jesus will deliver good things!

But what do we do when good things disappear, as they did for Habakkuk and Pastor Rinkart, and the millions of believers who endure suffering and pain?

Jesus can't be Someone you just “try on” or “test drive” to see if He fits your lifestyle. He's the sovereign Lord of life!

Let me assure you, your life-style will include conflict, grief, heartache, and confusion. All this is a part of where we live. Jesus “fits” that life-style because He is the steady, unchanging, faithful and steadfast presence and power of wisdom, comfort, courage, and love! Yes: Because He endured conflict, grief, heartache, suffering and death – He is able to visit us in our own personal disasters so that we might rise to live again!

Believe in God. Believe in the relationship you can have with your heavenly Father. We look beyond the circumstances threatening us in order to see the One who is sovereign, offering new birth! New life! New hope! And freedom! The Bible says: **We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them. For God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son...**