

Watch and Be Amazed

Habakkuk 1:1-11

July 4, 2010

We know very little about Habakkuk. We are not certain when he lived, but his message is most appropriate for the nation of Judah around 610 B.C. This would make him a contemporary of Jeremiah. His name is probably Babylonian and may be a response to the method and people through which God was going to bring about destruction on His people. Habakkuk's book stands alone among the prophets because it never records a word from God for the people. Most of the prophetic writing consists of God's commands to the prophets to give His messages to the people. There is none of that here. Instead, the entire book is a conversation between Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk offers two complaints which God answers. Finally, Habakkuk offers a prayer to God in light of the answers. All of this was written down so Judah, and we, might listen in.

We begin by looking at Habakkuk's first complaint and God's answer. Habakkuk did not like what he was seeing around him and he called out to God to intervene. While at first it seems he is calling out for help for himself, his real complaint is that he has to look at injustice, violence, and strife all around him. He wanted to know, as we so often do, why God tolerates evil and violence.

Habakkuk began by asking God how long he was going to have to cry out to Him for help. Habakkuk had been praying, but so far he had not gotten an answer. God seemed to be silent. Habakkuk called out to Him that there was violence in the land, but as far as

Habakkuk could tell, God was not doing anything about it. His cry to God echos the Psalms in their desire to know from God why He does not seem to care at times about the suffering of His people and has taken so long to act on their behalf.

Habakkuk said it had gotten to the point that those who were entrusted with preserving the peace and bringing justice were part of the problem, not the solution. Look again at verse 4. *"Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."* What a situation in which to find yourself, where the wicked are in control and determine what the righteous can and cannot do. What an indictment against the government and the leaders of the people. This was the situation during the reign of Jehoiakim. He was corrupt and, instead of leading the people into greater faith in God and obedience to Him, he led them astray.

Justice was in short supply and corruption in the government and in the courts is what drove Habakkuk's complaint. Bribery was rampant. The rich bought verdicts from the courts and the wicked acted with impunity. The government that was supposed to protect the people was aiding and abetting the robbery. Even the king himself acted like a murderous thug.

So, what was God's response? While Habakkuk's complaint provides the introduction and basis for what follows, our real concern, then as now, is God's response to the sinful state of the world. Why does justice seem to often to be delayed. Why do the wicked prosper and do well? How did God respond to Habakkuk?

The answer begins in verse 5. *“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”* God told Habakkuk to look around him at all the nations. God wanted him to get his gaze off of his **problems** and immediate surroundings and look at what God was doing. He was to watch and be amazed!

Even if God should reveal the fullness of what He was up to, Habakkuk would not have been able to believe it. God was going to bring punishment on His people because of their sin. It’s not that God did not know about the sin, or that He didn’t care. God is loving, patient, and merciful, and so He was giving plenty of time for the people to either repent or to complete their slide into sin and rebellion against Him. Because their slide would continue, God told Habakkuk He would bring the Babylonians to bear. The people trusted in their strength, so God would overpower them with a stronger nation. The Babylonians were an up-and-coming empire with a lot of energy and a thirst for power and domination. Still, as great as they would become, they were only a tool in God’s hand, as they would soon find out.

God does **amazing** things. We learn this when we take the time and make the effort to look. We have seen answered prayer in this congregation. We have seen God work out His plan of redemption in His word, through history and in the history of this church. We have seen His promises in His word. Sometimes God uses what we would consider unlikely people as tools,

but it is still God who will bring justice and an end to wickedness.

We are so rarely able to comprehend what God is doing. For that matter, we tend to fall prey to the belief He is not doing anything. We do not watch, and so we are not amazed. It is when things seem to be at their worst that God is at His best. The history of the church is full of the stories about how God strengthened and kept His people through even the worst of persecution. God does not always save His people from oppression, but He does always provide the strength we need to get through it.

We will face problems in life, and the more obedient we are to God, the more problems we will face because of it. God was able to so grow His church even in the midst of persecution that one of the church fathers, Tertullian of Carthage, declared in the late 2nd or early 3rd century, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The more the culture suppressed the church, the more she grew. The church’s faithfulness to God, and their steadfast devotion and loyalty to the teaching that had been handed down to them—especially the death and resurrection of Jesus—attracted the people around them so much that people converted and followed Jesus, even when doing so almost certainly meant suffering and death. Such is God’s power and grace. It’s not our problems that hold us back, it’s our lack of trust in, and dependence on, God and faithfulness to Him.

I wonder if that is because it is only when things are really bad that we truly trust and rely solely on Him. If that is the case, how good would things be if we just relied on God from the start? What blessings would He

be able to bring if we just set aside our self-reliance and trust in earthly things for good and trusted only in Him? How different would life be if we were perfectly obedient and did nothing out of our pride? After all, one of God's complaints was that the people so trusted in their own strength they had made a god of it.

Look with me at one of Paul's benedictions in Ephesians: *"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."* (Ephesians 3:20,21) God is still able today to do more than we can ask or even imagine. God still seeks to bring glory to Himself in the **church**.

Looking just at the numbers might cause us to despair for this congregation. Attendance is down from previous years. Giving is not enough to meet our expenses. There seem to be so few people here that we cannot see how we can do the things we are called to do.

Yet if we look below the surface we see lives that are being changed by the word of God. We see people that are filled with faith and growing in it. We see a church that is starting to reach out to those around us in new ways and to cooperate and work with the community in ways that were unthinkable not too long ago. Even though we have fewer people in attendance, we are having a greater impact than some of the churches around us. I am impressed by you in that, while we have the same number, or fewer, on Sunday mornings, we have more people ready and able to serve in ministries like Angel Food and Family Promise. Other churches are coming to us for help with their ministries. That is

impressive. Most of all we see here a church with a new and growing focus on the mission God has given us instead of our own desires, heading in a new direction, and seeking to be led by the Holy Spirit. We are not called to compare ourselves to others. Doing that will never end well. But we should look back from where we have come and look at the changes God has made in us because that is evidence that He can and will continue to grow us in faithfulness and health, and that growth will open the way to the power of the Holy Spirit working through us. God still calls us to step out in faith and obedience to Him. He is able to do things that will amaze us if we will just watch for Him.

The call goes out to our nation and to our church. Today is Independence Day for the United States. It is the celebration of the day a group of leaders chosen from the colonies declared that we would no longer be subject to the British crown. They took a bold step on the belief that God was with them. Time and again they referred to their dependence on what they called Divine Providence. They relied on it. They called people to pray for it. They sought to carve out on this continent a new type of nation and they expected God's help to do it. The United States of America is the result. While we have our problems and are far from perfect, it is true that people from all over the world have watched the development of this nation and been amazed. While God brought an amazing amount of destruction on His people through the Babylonians, He has brought an amazing amount of good through this nation. We had best remember that He is the source of all good things and that we have Him to thank for all the blessings He

has given us and brought through us. Because of God's amazing grace and blessing on us as a people, like the ancient Israelites, we are tempted to believe we deserve it, or even worship the country instead of the God who has allowed us the privilege of living in it.

If God could bring about the downfall of Habakkuk's nation, if God could raise up our nation, if God could take a couple hundred frightened people hiding in an upper room, turn them into His church and change the world through them, what do you think God can do with us? All we have to do is be faithful to what He calls us to do. We have to be faithful to reach out to those around us. We have to serve others in His name. We have to tell others about the grace and mercy we have found, and about the punishment for sin that remains for those who are not in Christ. We don't have to strive for greatness, just **faithfulness**. He will do the rest. It is up to us to watch and be amazed.