

## Living By Faith

Rich Nathan

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Major Lessons from the Minor Prophets

Habakkuk

This morning I am going to continue in my series that I have called “Major Lessons from the Minor Prophets.” And I want to have you turn to the book of Habakkuk, which is a little book in the OT. It may be in just three brief chapters the most beautiful little essay ever written on what it means to live by faith.

I always like to give you a little historical and cultural backdrop for the book and for any passage that we look at. Habakkuk lived in a time of profound moral and cultural decay in the nation of Judah. Judah had experienced a great revival under King Josiah at about 621 BC. It was during Josiah’s reign that the law, most likely the book of Deuteronomy, was found buried under trash in the Temple. The law was dug out of the trash and re-instituted across the nation of Judah and there was a moral and spiritual revival that took place in the nation.

But after Josiah’s death, the nation sunk again into moral decay. Idolatry and immorality flourished. And a new world power was appearing on the scene – the Babylonians, who in the book of Habakkuk are named the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans attacked and destroyed the ancient city of Ninevah that we learned about over the last few weeks in our study of the book of Jonah. After Ninevah’s great repentance and spiritual revival, they sunk into moral decay. There appears to be a rise and fall as we look at the history of the human race. So the Chaldeans destroyed the city of Ninevah and they were just about to score one of the great military victories of the ancient world – a victory over Pharaoh Neco at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC.

So, let me recap what I have just said. The nation of Judah is in the midst of profound moral and spiritual decay. A new world power is on the scene – the Babylonians. And they appear poised for a military assault on the nation of Judah. It is a time of profound political crisis along with the moral and spiritual crisis that I mentioned.

Into this very troubled situation God called the prophet Habakkuk. Now it is interesting that Habakkuk’s name really sums up his ministry. His name comes from the Hebrew word meaning “to embrace; to wrap one’s arms around”. Habakkuk’s ministry was a ministry of embracing, of consoling, of encouraging people in the midst of crisis to live by faith.

Now, I don’t know applying this on a personal and individual basis, I don’t know what sort of crisis you may be in this morning. Some of you are certainly facing conflicts in your home – conflicts between you and your spouse, or perhaps a conflict between you and a parent or you and one of your children. Perhaps your crisis is longer term. Maybe it is longing to be a mother and not being able to have children, or a chronic illness that is debilitating. Perhaps your crisis is profound loneliness or an emotional or psychological problem that hasn’t gone away. Maybe your crisis concerns a need for guidance in life. Or the

break-up of a relationship or the sense that you are lacking something that you can't put your finger on, but there is a hole in your life. There is something missing.

I think it would be wrong of us to simply confine the message of Habakkuk to personal or individual crises, even our individual spiritual crises regarding ministry and ministry failures. Habakkuk needs, at the very least, to be read against the larger backdrop of cultural decline and crisis for a nation. It would have obvious application for the nation of Israel today where night after night you see the extraordinary violence and conflict between the Palestinians and the Israeli Jews. It would have similar obvious application to the former Yugoslavia and the extraordinarily ethnic violence that took place in the last few years there. Or to the nation of Afghanistan and the war that is going on in the northern part of that country right now.

But Habakkuk fits so neatly with America in 1997. Because you see the situation in Judah when Habakkuk was writing was a situation of economic prosperity and moral decay. The economy was booming. The rich were getting richer. The economic signs were looking up much like the last five or six years here in the U.S. The stock market has no ceiling. It is no surprise anymore when an athlete signs a \$50-100 million dollar contract. Billionaires in America are just multiplying. It is becoming common to become a billionaire. And millionaires – well, that was just an extraordinary rarity a few decades ago to be a millionaire. We have several millionaires in our church. People whose net worth is over a million dollars.

In the midst of this extraordinary prosperity America is suffering from a profound moral and spiritual crisis. There is seemingly no end to the corruption of the current political administration. One day it is sexual scandal. The next it is a financial scandal. Our military is being rocked by sexual scandals. You can't read the sports page anymore without seeing at least two or three well known college or pro players who have been arrested for assault, drunken driving, drug abuse, rape, or simply biting people's ears off. While folks are celebrating the decline of overall crime in America, youth violence remains at all time highs. And what we may be experiencing is simply a demographic anomaly – that is with the falling birthrates in the late 70's and early 80's, there is simply not that many juveniles in 1997 alive to keep the crime rate at all time highs.

But you just wait. Wait five years and watch the population curve of juveniles pick up and you may see the crime rate race past where it was in the late 80's and 90's.

What does it mean when you are going through an individual crisis, an illness, a death of a loved one, separation, or a cultural or moral crisis and you spirit is sensitive to what is happening? What does it mean in the midst of crisis to live by faith? That is what I am going to talk about today in a message that I have called, "Living by Faith." Let's pray.

I took the title of today's message from one of the most important verses in the whole Old Testament. Habakkuk 2:4, "But the righteous will live by his faith," or "But the righteous will live by faith."

Now I have structured this message on living by faith according to the structure that I discern in this book. The structure of the book is very interesting. I picture it as 3 steps down and 6 steps up. Habakkuk is going down into a sewer. First the water goes up to his legs and then up to the top of his shoulders. Finally, the sewer water goes completely over his head. He is totally sunk in the muck. But then there are 6 steps up. And that is always the way it is with Christ. He always raises us higher than we can sink low. 3 steps down; 6 steps up – that is the structure of the book of Habakkuk. The Puritans said that you could always tell a biblical sermon from a non-biblical one because biblical sermons spend more time on the solution than they do describing the problem. Have you ever noticed that when you read a secular book on some self-help problem, whether it is dealing with divorce or anxiety, or eating disorders or attention deficit disorder – have you ever noticed that most of the book is spent on the problem, diagnosing the problem, describing the problem? And then the very last chapter of 16 chapters gives you a sketchy perspective on how to solve the problem?

That is not the way it is with God's word. God's word offers more solutions than problems. But we must first begin with the problem as stated in verse 2, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you did not listen. Or cry out to you, 'violence', but you didn't save. Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me. Conflict abounds. Therefore the laws paralyze. Justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous so that justice is perverted."

Note the words used to describe the deteriorating social conditions of Habakkuk's day. He speaks of violence, injustice, wrong, destruction, strife, and conflict. The same words can be used of America in 1997, violence, strife, conflict, and injustice. Sometimes the same words can be used of our own families. But the problem is not just the decay around Habakkuk; the problem is why are my prayers unanswered? Why, O God, in the midst of this strife do you remain inactive?

And anyone who has ever cried out to God for a long period of time knows the incredible frustration and disappointment of not having God respond. That word in verse 2 "cry out," "How long must I cry out violence? But you do not save." The writer is stating the problem in the starkest terms possible. The picture is like that of being beaten in the streets and crying out, "Help! Help me, I am being robbed, will someone help me?" and having people walk by you without turning their heads. Being completely ignored even though you cry out.

Every time I read this text, I think about the neighborhood that I grew up in in New York. A woman named Kitty Genovese was brutally attacked over the course of an hour by a mugger. She screamed for help as she was being knifed on the front walk of her apartment building. Several dozen people watched from their apartment windows, but no body even picked up a phone to call the police. One person called his attorney to see if it was OK to report the crime. After she was knifed several times the mugger ran away, but when he saw that no one was coming to her aid, he came back and killed her. For years after that, sociologists interviewed the neighbors and tried to come up with reasons why people didn't

respond. Some of the folks didn't want to get involved. Some of the people had enough of their own problems. Some people didn't care.

But Habakkuk applies all of this to God. It is one thing not to be helped by a person when you cry out for assistance, but why doesn't God answer? And the simplistic answers don't address that feeling of profound disappointment when you have been crying out, screaming at the top of your lungs for relief from either cultural or moral crises in the society or individual crisis and you get no response. It is one thing to tell people to pray harder when they haven't prayed. But it is another thing to try to address the issue to someone who has been praying.

One of the great struggles of living by faith is the struggle of unanswered prayer. The unanswered prayer may be a small one. God, I am going to be late for an appointment. Help me find my keys. And you don't get any help. You search around the house and you can't find them. Help me to find my keys, God. I am going to be late. Eventually, you have to make other arrangements. You have to call someone to get a ride and you are late for your appointment. You know where my keys are, God. Why won't you help me?

Or you are closed out of a class that you need to take for your major. As a result, you need to totally rearrange your schedule. As a result, you graduate late. Why, God?

It can be something as minor as lost keys or as major as God not assisting you in protecting you from abuse, or a spouse's alcoholism or the breakdown of your family. In the face of repeated unanswered prayer, faith can vaporize.

Often when I share my own story of how I came to know Christ, I usually start off with the statement that I was pretty much an atheist before I came to Christ. I came from a Jewish background and I met a young woman who began talking with me about Jesus, through whom I eventually came to Christ. But the truth is I wasn't always an atheist. When I was younger, 7-8 or 9, I believed in God. I didn't know anything about Jesus since I was in a Jewish family, but I did believe in God. I personally remember being at home at night and listening to my parents violently fight with each other. My parents had a horrible marriage and they would physically fight with each other. The home was constantly filled with cursing and accusations of infidelity. The language was horrible. The police on several occasions came to my home to break my parents up from fighting.

I remember I used to lie in bed and pray. The prayer I used to pray as a Jew was the Shema. I would sit in my room as a little boy and pray the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One and ye shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your mind and with all your strength." I would say, "O please God, make them stop fighting. Please don't let my parents get divorced. Help their marriage. Help our home."

But the fighting didn't stop. Their marriage didn't survive. And in the midst of all of this chaos, I stopped believing. I wasn't born an atheist, but I became one in the face of unanswered prayer and God's inactivity or seeming inactivity.

And this sense of crisis is really compounded by God's strange answer to Habakkuk's cry. "There is violence, Lord. There is decay. Things are falling apart. Why don't you answer?"

And the Lord says, "OK, Habakkuk, I will answer."

Here is what I call God's strange answer in verses 5-11,

"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. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops headlong; their horsemen come from afar. They fly like a vulture swooping to devour; they all come bent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand. They deride kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities; they build earthen ramps and capture them. Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—guilty men, whose own strength is their God."

The reason why I say it is God's strange answer is this: Habakkuk is crying out to God about the condition of the nation of Israel. He sees that the nation of Israel isn't as faithful as he wants it to be. He realizes that it is filled violence and greed. And so God says, "OK, I see what you are saying. I am going to send the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, to overrun the nation and bring even more violence.

Have you ever had God answer you in a way that is not only unexpected, but is the exact opposite, 180 degrees, in reverse of what you were asking for? God, please save the unborn. And then we get another Supreme Court decision further expanding abortion rights. God, please bring revival to the church. And then there is a major church conflict. Or a leader blows out and we discover them in immorality. God, please help me with my job. And then the situation gets worse, not better.

Habakkuk is praying for the Jewish nation of his day. God says, "OK I have heard your prayers and I am going to send the Chaldeans to attack the Jewish people."

I think it is interesting that these Chaldeans are so modern in the description given. And though we are separated from Habakkuk's day by 26 centuries, people haven't changed and their problems haven't changed. That is what I love so much about the Bible. It is God's word. It is written 2000-3000 years ago, but God hasn't changed and we haven't changed. We may have changed our clothing. We may have changed our technology. But people as described in the Bible are exactly the same as they were 26 centuries ago.

Let me just give a few examples of what I mean. Look at verse 7 and the description of the Chaldeans. "They are a feared and dreaded people. They are a law to themselves." In other words, these people that were going to come to run over the nation of Judah were total relativists. They were a law to themselves. That means they had no ethical reference point outside of themselves and what the majority believed. They had no fixed convictions, no absolutes, and no fear of God that would limit their actions at all. If they were living in today's world, they would simply take a poll and their viewpoints would change with every changing poll. They were a law to themselves. They determined what was right or wrong without reference to God's word.

Let's experiment on human fetuses. After all, it may help us prolong adult life by a few days or may lift our quality of life. So, abortion is good because we can use fetuses to make our skin look younger or heal our diseases.

We will determine what an elderly person's life is worth. And we will redefine life-using words like "meaningful" or "worthwhile." We will speak about life that is worth living.

And we will redefine family. Family will no longer require a husband and a wife. Family is just any two people in a committed relationship – two women; two men; a woman artificially inseminated and her offspring.

We will remake life in our image after our likeness. These people are also enamored with themselves, not only a law unto themselves, but enamored with themselves. Verse 11, "They sweep past like the wind and go on – guilty men, whose own strength is their God."

Like modern Americans, they think that the reason why they are doing well is because of their own strength, their own strategy, and their own manipulation. They are self-made men and women.

Pray and things get worse? I don't know how many of you have ever heard of the Boxer Rebellion in China that took place in the year 1900. Before that, Christians all over the world were praying for China and were praying for a breakthrough and praying for the extension of the Bible. And then there was an imperial command from the Emperor. It said, "By imperial command, exterminate the Christian religion. Death to the foreign devils." Mobs ran through all of northern China looting and burning churches and the homes of missionaries and the homes of Chinese Christians. They were led by bare-chested fanatics called, "Boxers," who brandished long curving swords.

Let me read to you a few things that happened during the Boxer Rebellion in Manchuria where all the missionaries managed to escape. A Chinese pastor was caught. When he refused to deny Christ his eyebrows, ears, and lips were cut off. Still he wouldn't recant. His heart was cut out and put on display in a theater. His 14-year-old daughter was also murdered.

In Shansai Province, Mary Huston and Hattie Rice, two young women affiliated with the China Inland Mission strove to flee from an angry mob. Miss Rice was beaten to death on the roadside. Miss Huston was seriously injured by a cart run over her to break her spine. She died a month later.

In one Province a Chinese Methodist Pastor was forced to go to a pagan temple and he was mocked before idols and tied to a pillar. He spent the night preaching while friends pleaded with him to recant. In the morning, a 1000 member mob descended on him and tore out his heart.

Two Chinese women were captured and also refused to renounce Christianity. The feet of one of them were chopped off and she was killed with a sword. The other shouting to her pupils, "Keep the faith alive," was wrapped in cotton, soaked with kerosene and burned alive.

And this was all the while that Christians around the world were praying that the gospel would be extended in China.

God's strange answer.

Verses 12-17...but I will just read verses 12-13, "O Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die. O Lord, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?"

The ultimate descent in the pit is the difficulty of squaring our present circumstances with God's character. Christian theologians call this problem "theodicy" – The problem of trying to square the ways of God with what seems to us to be right and just. A lot of people think that Christianity is a crutch. They say to Christians, "Well, you know, I guess it is OK for you to believe this because it provides you with a nice answer for life. Everything is tied with a nice little bow." The implication is that only weak people, people who can't deal with the difficulty of life without some projection of a Father in the sky believe in Christianity.

But friends, the fact is that very often Christianity, far from making it easier for us to explain life, actually in many cases makes things harder. Because when you are in a crisis, a child dies or there is some random violence, a stray bullet goes through a window and kills an innocent driver of a car that happens to be passing by – it would be far easier to simply think, "Well, no one is in control of the universe. There is no one good out there minding the store. All of life is chaotic and random." The difficulty of living by faith is trying to understand how God who is holy, who is pure, who is also in control and who loves us, who answers prayer, could allow much of what we see around us to occur. Christianity, far from being easy believism, is actually one of the more challenging things for faith.

And I will tell you the toughest crises of faith are not those on the part of unbelievers. The toughest crises of faith are those suffered by mature, deeply rooted Christians, who know their God and trust their God. When such people are thrown curve balls by life, when such people experience the seeming absence of God, they are the ones who struggle with faith more than a simple unbeliever.

Well those are the 3 steps down. Now let's talk about ascending to the heights. As I said before, the biblical message is that Christ restores more than Adam lost. That grace goes beyond all of our sins and that God's healing is always far more extensive than our sickness. So how do we live by faith in the face of God's inactivity, his strange answers, and the difficulty of squaring his character with our circumstance?

First of all, we must get alone with God. Chapter 2:1, "I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me and what answer I am to give to this complaint."

In the King James version of the Bible, it talks about standing at my watch and stationing myself on my tower. What is the Christian's watchtower in 1997? It is the place and time when the Christian gets alone with God. For you, it may be the quiet place of your study in your home. If you are in a busy family, it may be the early morning hours or the late evening hours when the activity in your

home is at a minimum. For me, my watchtower is outside taking a walk around the neighborhood, getting out of the house. But the first step out of the pit is getting alone with God.

See, we live the life of faith by first of all taking all of our problems, disappointments, frustrations, and hurt to God. And the reason why many folks never learn how to live by faith is that they almost always take their problems and their disappointments and hurts to another person. They talk to their counselors or friends, or spouses or to a pastor. And there is nothing wrong with talking to another person, but you never grow in the life of faith unless you learn to go one on one with God and talk to him about your problems. Many of us avoid being alone with God because that puts us on the raw edge of our pain. All of our loneliness, our shame, all that we feel – there is no place where that comes to the service more than during a time of quietness.

And so we would rather not be alone and face the broken pieces of our lives. We get a measure of comfort from others. We get some insight. We can temporarily feel better. But you are never going to learn to live the life of faith and really get at what you truly believe about God unless you get alone with him.

And in that alone time there is a waiting period with God. The Lord replied, “Write down the revelation. Make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.” The idea of running or walking with something in the Bible often describes a life of faith, and a life of obedience. And how are we to live the life of faith? Verse 3, “We need to wait for God’s answer. For the revelation awaits an appointed time. It speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.”

From the beginning, people of faith are required to wait upon God. Abraham waited for his promised child for 25 years. Habakkuk is warned here that God will fulfill his promises when he gets ready to do so and not before.

One Christian writer said, “God’s train is never late. It always arrives on time. God always keeps his appointments.” But unfortunately, God doesn’t calculate time the way we do or even the way Habakkuk did. Remember his original complaint in 1:2 was “How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you don’t listen?”

Well, God didn’t think he was waiting too long to respond. And his delays in our life don’t mean that he doesn’t hear or that he is not going to be active on our behalf. His delays simply mean that God is going to act in his appointed time.

2 Peter 3:9 says the same thing, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises as some understand slowness. He is patient with you not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” People in the Bible are always required to wait upon the Lord. Moses had to wait for God’s glory to pass by. Elijah had to wait on the mountain for God’s revelation. When Habakkuk is called to wait for the Lord, or when we are called to wait for an answer, that is God’s normal way of dealing with things. If you are in a waiting time right now in dealing with a problem or a crisis, if things seem to be lingering on and on, then you are exactly in God’s will and God is treating you exactly the way that he has always treated his children.

So we get alone with God. We pour out our heart and our questions before him and we wait for his answers. And in this place of waiting and being alone



with God, we make a willed choice to live by faith rather than by unbelief. Verse 4 lays it out very starkly, “See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright – but the righteous will live by his faith.”

I like the way Hebrews 10:38 quotes this verse: “But my righteous one will live by faith and if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.”

There are just two possible alternatives regarding the way we live. And every step along the way you are faced with a choice, especially during times of crises. You either choose to believe in God or you shrink back and withdraw yourself. You give up. You say, “I can’t keep going on.” And much of the shrinking back has to do with attempting to explain life based on your own reason rather than on the word of God. So you look at your marriage that is falling apart and you shrink back when you say, “I can’t see how my marriage can be fixed.” That is the life of the unrighteous who self-destruct and who get destroyed.

You look at an illness and say, “I can’t figure it out, I can’t see, I can’t reason it out how I could ever be well.” You look at the culture that is decaying all around us and you say, “I just can’t imagine. I have read the experts and I have read books by people much smarter than me and they say there is not going to be much change; we are just headed for disaster. The economy is going to collapse and morals are going to decline.

When you get along with God and when you are waiting upon the Lord you are faced with the great alternative, a great crossroads, regarding your choice. Are you going to withdraw, shrink back, quit by living life based on what your reason tells you unaided by God’s word, or are you going to choose to believe, to live in faith, based on the revelation that comes to us in the book, that comes to us through God’s written word. Sometimes it is just a sheer decision. I can’t feel it. I can’t see it. I can’t experience it, but I am going to choose to believe it and move forward in faith based on this book.

Well here is the fourth step up, a call to look ahead to the future. One of the great problems that we have, especially when we are in crises, is that we live so completely in the present, right now in this 2-minute time span, if I don’t see an answer in the next few minutes, if I don’t get a breakthrough today, if God doesn’t show me what I am going to do with my life over the next week, I am going to die. But Habakkuk hears in verse 3 wait. And then in the rest of chapter 2, God tells Habakkuk to look ahead to the future. For the rest of chapter 2 God pronounces five woes on the Chaldean people. He says here is what is going to happen to the Chaldeans, verse 6,

“Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion...(verse9) Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain...(verse 12)...Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed...(verse 14, here comes the climax to the woes)...For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the water covers the seas.”

What God is saying to Habakkuk and what God is saying to us is very simple in these verses. Whatever you are presently going through, know for certain that God will ultimately triumph in your life. It doesn’t seem that way now, but God

will triumph and he will triumph over not only your life, but also all of history. "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the earth is covered by the seas." There are things that certainly will happen. One of the beautiful things about Bible prophecy is the certainty that they will happen. There are a lot of things in life that we look at that feel uncertain to us. There are a lot of things that are doubtful. We don't know what is going to happen in the next election. We don't know what is going to happen regarding our marriages. We don't know what is going to happen with the economy. We don't know what is going to happen concerning a rebellious child.

But there is one thing that is absolutely sure. Bible prophecy is absolutely sure. I think back to a prophecy given to Abraham in the book of Genesis 15. God said, "Know for certain that your descendents will be strangers in a country not their own and they will be enslaved and mistreated for 400 years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. In the 4<sup>th</sup> generation your descendents will come back here. For the sins of the Amorites have not reached their full measure."

Think about this. Here you are, some man standing in the desert almost 1900 years before the time of Christ and God comes along and says, "I want you to know something for certain. 400 years from now I am going to take your descendents out from the land of Egypt, out from a land where they will be slaves. I am going to deliver them and I am going to allow them to take the wealth of Egypt with them. They are going to come back here, to the spot that you are now standing on, and I am going to give them all the land around you, every thing you see." And every word of that prophecy was fulfilled exactly as God promised.

There is not a lot that we can be certain of in this life. But we can be certain of the triumph of God and the fulfillment of every promise of God. The word of God is sure. And sometimes we have nothing else other than the bare promise of the Bible.

What can you be sure of? You can rest assured that every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. You can rest assured of that. Some people when they see Jesus will just voluntarily throw themselves before him because their lives have been lived in loving adoration. They have already, 100 times, 1000 times, bent the knee before Christ out of love and out of a habit of life. When they see Christ they will bow before him.

Other people will be forced to the ground by some strong angel kicking them in the back of their knees, but they will bow. You can bank on it.

You can bank on the fact that the New Jerusalem will descend from the sky. You can be certain that all of your pain and all of your tears and all of your struggles will disappear in the New Jerusalem. And in this world, right now, you can be certain that before Jesus returns the gospel of the Kingdom of God will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations (Mt. 24:13). The gospel will be preached throughout the whole world.

So often, the church has fallen into a defeatist mentality as it looks at the culture. Christians start living in survival modes and in self-preservationist

modes as they see the culture around them decay rather than in a triumphant mode understanding God's program and planning for the ages. I don't want to be simplistic here. God's promise doesn't imply that the whole world will respond or be converted. But the gospel will be preached as a testimony. Some will respond; some won't respond. And the gospel is going to be preached in the whole world, in every little corner of the Islamic world, among every little people group packed away in caves and in deserts and on Pacific islands.

Many Christians say, "Aren't things supposed to get worse and worse in the last days? Aren't we to expect suffering and rejection and a further decay rather than a triumph of the gospel?"

The Bible tells us that evil will intensify. But it also tells us in the last days that God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh. The last days will be evil, but not totally. The last days include the power of God to come upon us in increasing measure so that the gospel will be taken to the world. I love the way George Ladd puts it. He says, "We are not rosy optimists expecting the gospel to conquer the world, but we are not despairing pessimists who feel that the world is hopeless. We are realists, biblical realists who recognize the terrible power of evil and yet who go forth on a mission of worldwide evangelization to win victories for God's kingdom until Christ returns in glory to accomplish the last and greatest victory."

There was an old hymn that Dr. Roland Bingham, the old founder of the Sudan Interior Mission used to sing. It went this way, "Faith, mighty faith, the promised ceased and looks to God alone. Laughs at impossibilities and cries, 'It shall be done.'"

King Jesus says that the gospel will be preached. It will be done. It will be done. Not only must you be certain that God will triumph in the future, but the life of faith is built by steeping yourself in the knowledge of God's past victories. In 3:2, Habakkuk utters those words that we sing here in the Vineyard, "Lord, I have heard of your fame. I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day and in our time make them known. In wrath, remember mercy."

Then Habakkuk goes on and talks of God's great deeds in history. He speaks of the Holy One being at Mt. Paran. That is another name for Mt. Sinai in Deut. 33. Habakkuk speaks about the plagues that fell on Egypt in verse 5, "Plague went before him. Pestilence followed his steps."

He speaks about God's presence in the days of the Judges – in the days of Othneo and Gideon. Verse 7, "I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish."

I like the way Martyn Lloyd Jones puts it, "If God did not actually do the things recorded in the Old Testament for Israel, then the whole Bible may just be a piece of psychology meant to keep us happy. But the Bible plainly shows that my comfort and consolation lie in facts, the fact that God has done certain things and they have literally happened. The fact that God, in whom I believe in, is the God who could and did divide the Red Sea and the River Jordan. And in reminding himself and us of these things, Habakkuk is not just comforting himself by playing with ideas. He is speaking of things that God has actually done. The Christian faith is solidly based on facts and not on ideas. And if the facts as recorded in the Bible are not true, I have no hope and no comfort. We are saved

not by ideas, but by facts, by events. God has actually turned around times that were much worse than the times we are living in today.”

You will recall earlier that I spoke about the Boxer Rebellion and the terrible persecution that befell Christians in China at the first of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Do you know what happened immediately after that? Revival broke out. Missionaries pressed by persecution confessed sins of arrogance, pride and ill feeling toward their co-workers and asked for forgiveness. Pastors confessed failures to their churches. Family members who had been estranged made tearful reconciliations. Parents asked their children for forgiveness. The Spirit of God began to fall on all of north China. And in one Province alone, in the five years following the Boxer Rebellion, 20,000 people gave their lives to Christ.

Some of the people who gave their lives to Christ were as direct witnesses to the persecution against Christians. They couldn't forget it just like Saul of Tarsus witnessed the stoning of Stephen and couldn't forget that. There was one man, Feng Yu-Hsiang, a soldier who watched some murders in his Province said, “I saw Miss Morrill offer her life for her friends. And a missionary walking with his sons on his veranda in calmness and peace while flames rose in their house to envelop them. I could never forget that.” This man gave his life to Christ and he became China's most famous Christian General. He won hundreds of officers in the Chinese Army to Christ. He forbid gambling and prostitution in his camps. He taught thousands of men a trade so that they could advance after they got out of the Army.

Do you want to build your faith? You start by reading history. There have been times much worse than the times we live in. God absolutely turned it around. There was a dark time when it seemed Nazis were going to rule the world. God broke their power. It seemed like the Communists were going to take over the world. God broke their power. It seemed like the Roman Empire would last forever and crush these little groups of Christians and God broke the Roman Empire.

Here is the last and important lesson – the last step. In a certain sense it is the summary and distilled essence of the book of Habakkuk. We get alone with God. We wait for him. We make a choice to believe. God speaks to us about his certain triumph in the future. God speaks to us about his past triumphs in history. When all is said and done, Habakkuk understands something that is so important about the nature of faith. We don't always get the “whys” in this life – why an illness, why a death, why the decay. Instead, Habakkuk says in 3:16, “I heard and my heart pounded. My lips quivered at the sound. Decay crept into my bones and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. I know there is triumph in the end...”

Here is the essence of faith, the bottom line message of living by faith, verse 17, “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior. The sovereign Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.”

Do you understand what he is saying? What Habakkuk is saying is that life and God are not the same thing. Life around us, at least for some period of time, can be devoid of blessing, it can be devoid of answers to my prayers, it can be devoid of what I want, but God is still good. And on the other hand, life can be easy. You can have a great wife and two healthy children as I do at this moment, and a church that is being blessed and a ministry that I love. But God isn't any better for it. But what I get out of this passage that talks about no buds on the vine, no grapes, nothing going right, is that faith is a lot like love. You see it in its purest form when it has no strings attached, when it is not based on outside circumstance, when it is there totally alone, you see faith in the same way you see love best revealed when there is no reason for it, when nothing is producing it, when your spouse is ill, when they are going through a depression, when they are suffering a long term illness, when they don't look as good as they used to and you say, "Despite everything, the fact that I am not getting anything out of this relationship, the fact that it is hard, I still love."

That is the way it is with faith. Pure faith, living by faith, is not a matter of life going well for you. It is not a matter of your circumstance. It is not a matter of God giving you a sign and proof of his existence. It is not clinging to what you want to have happen. It is not dependent on your ability to read God's will or interpret God's mind. Faith when it is mature is utterly unconditional. Totally based on seeing God who is invisible.

During the worst of the Boxer Rebellion a young woman named Lizzie Attwater wrote to her family and said, "Dear Ones, I long for a sight of your dear faces, but I fear we shall not meet on earth. I am preparing for the end very quietly and calmly. The Lord is wonderfully near and he will not fail me. I was restless and excited while there seemed to be a chance at life. But God has taken away that feeling and now I just pray for the grace to meet the terrible end bravely. The pain will soon be over and oh, the sweetness of the welcome above. My little baby will go with me. I think God will give it to me in heaven and my dear mother will be so glad to see us. I cannot imagine the Savior's welcome. Oh, that will compensate for all these days of suspense and tragedy. Dear ones, live near to God. Cling less closely to earth. There is no other way that we can receive the peace from God, which passes all understanding. I must keep calm during these next few hours. I do not regret coming to China, but am sorry that I have done so little. My married life, my two precious years, has been so full of happiness. We will die together, my dear husband and me and my baby. In the midst of all of this, I love Jesus more than ever."

This is it, dear friends, faith, mature faith, is always absolutely naked and without support of any kind. It stands alone – sometimes without any input to our senses or our intellects or our understanding. Though he gives me no sign, no answer, yet I will rejoice in God and obey him and he will set my feet on the heights.

Do you know that God can lift you higher than any depth you have fallen in? I don't say your circumstances will be so much more wonderful than they have ever been. But I am saying that in meeting God and in being with God you will

be lifted far above any crisis, any struggle, any difficulty that you find yourself in.  
Living by faith...Let's pray.