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A Thriving Faith

Pride is one of the darker sins that can be named among an individual which is why the Bible no doubt has much to say about it. For example:

- The fall of Satan is traced to pride, 1 Timothy 3:7.
- Pride is one of the main reasons the non-Christian rejects God, Romans 1:22-23.
- Pride holds the first position in the list of the things which God hates, Proverbs 6:16-17a.
- The sin arises from a heart that is sick, Habakkuk 2:4.

- It usually precedes a fall, Proverbs 16:18.
- It is one of the chief sins to which immature Christians are susceptible, 1 Timothy 3:6.

At the apex of this prophecy God warned Habakkuk:

Habakkuk 2:4a, “Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him...”

In other words, *Habakkuk, you are sick! And because of your spiritual condition, your reasoning and understanding are flawed!* And flawed they were! In the opening chapters of this prophecy we read of the prophet accusing God of ill because of the national sin of Judah, Habakkuk 1:2-4. Endeavoring to manipulate the Lord in an attempt to get his own way, Habakkuk 1:12-13. Misquoting and misusing other parts of Scripture in the process of arguing for his point, Habakkuk 1:2, 3, 4, 13, 14-15; 2:1. All of this arose on account of the prophet’s pride!

But then we read of the counsel which the Lord gave to Habakkuk which made all the difference after warning Habakkuk about the danger of pride, the Lord exhorted this way:

Habakkuk 2:4b, “...the righteous will live by his faith.”

We have seen that while this statement was given by God to teach the glorious news of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone, nevertheless in its original context the Lord intended this to be an ethical calling for Habakkuk to cling to God and His word! If he would do this, far from reaping the sick results of a heart given to pride, Habakkuk would thrive amidst the horrors that awaited him and the nation!

We see this “thriving” as early as the final chapter of Habakkuk! Gone are the manipulation and the self-centeredness! In their place is a healthy, robust faith which actually smiled at a difficult future!

This brings us to the elements of Habakkuk’s thriving faith! From the first two chapters of this book we’ve learned how NOT to live! Now from the same prophet we learn how we must live! When faith is passionate and living, what does it look like? Notice, it translates first and foremost into a life of reliance upon God.

A Life of Reliance

Habakkuk resumed his calling as a watchman for the house of Israel, and thus he begins to pray. We read this:

Habakkuk 3:1, “A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet according to Shigionoth.”

On the surface, it may NOT look like there is much to be gleaned from this verse. Yet as we examine Habakkuk’s choice of words, we notice that once again, he is purposely framing his response according to a previously established pattern or form which speaks of

reliance/dependence! We've seen him do this throughout this book in his passion to manipulate the Lord to get his way. Recall:

- In Habakkuk 1:2, Habakkuk takes up the cause of Job using that suffering servant's words to express his own struggle (cf. Job. 19:7).
- In Habakkuk 1:2-3 we note that Habakkuk couched his appeal in the form of a Lament which effectively united his cause to that of David, Korah, and Asaph (cf. Psalms 3; 13; 22)!
- In Habakkuk 1:3b-4 Habakkuk alluded to the words of Balaam in Numbers 23:21.
- In Habakkuk 1:13a, Habakkuk picked back up on Job's argument against God and so attempted to "instruct the Lord" just like Job did (Job 40:7)!
- In Habakkuk 1:14-15, Habakkuk made an allusion to Creation and the call that Adam/man received to rule over the fish of the sea (Genesis 1:28).
- In Habakkuk 2:1 Habakkuk made an appeal to his prophetic calling as a watchman (cf. 2 Samuel 12; 1 Kings 17-22; Amos 7:8-9).¹

Habakkuk truly is the king of allusion! Habakkuk to this point has been fighting as a desperate man: If an allusion to Job will further his cause, he'll do it. If placing his appeal in the form of a lament will get God to answer, then he's all for it! It seems as though Habakkuk in the first two chapters has been willing to stoop to any low in his attempt to manipulate God in order to get his way. Habakkuk truly has become a master of what we might call, "God-Speak"!

It is in light of this that Habakkuk's word choice here is quite significant! For once again, he has chosen to speak by way of allusion. Notice, the expression, "a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth," is the technical language of the Psalms. In fact Habakkuk 3 closes with the same technical language.

Habakkuk 3:19b: "For the choir director, on my stringed instruments."

Furthermore Habakkuk added the Psalmic' expression of "selah" throughout his prayer (vv. 3, 9, 13).

Realize that of all the prophets, Habakkuk is the only one who pens a psalm for the nation to use in its worship!² See, he could have just prayed (as did Daniel in Daniel 9). But he doesn't! Rather he endeavored to write a Psalm to give the people of God words to speak when the end comes! Notice further, Habakkuk's choice for the word "a prayer" is the exact expression which heads Lamentation Psalms in the Bible (cf. Psalms 17; 86; 90; 102; 142). It is as if on account of his prior twisting of the form of Lamentation, Habakkuk has chosen to make good on the form and so use it to make an incredible statement!

Lastly, Habakkuk instructed that his prayer be played "according to Shigionoth" which was a dirge and in fact, according to David Baker (Robertson, 1990, p. 67), "a rare term used in the Psalter in cases of complete reliance on God's faithfulness" (cf. Psalms 7:1)! From this we derive our first point. With his faith restored and his mind now thinking aright, Habakkuk's first

response was to express an unconditional trust/reliance upon the Lord. This is how he would have the nation enter the valley of the shadow of death! When faith is burning strong, it brings the individual to the point of complete and total dependence upon the Lord where striving ceases, worries abate, and unresolved questions pertaining to the mystery of God's providence are shelved! It is a place of stubborn reliance upon the goodness of God and His sovereignty! We see it beautifully reflected in the words of Katharina von Schlegel:

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side; bear patiently the cross of grief or pain; leave to your God to order and provide; in every change He faithful will remain. Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly Friend through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.
Be still, my soul: your God will undertake to guide the future as he has the past. Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake; all now mysterious shall be bright at last. Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.
Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart, and all is darkened in the vale of tears, then shall you better know his love, his heart, who comes to soothe your sorrow and your fears.
Be still, my soul: your Jesus can repay from his own fullness all he takes away.
Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on when we shall be forever with the Lord, when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone, sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored. Be still my soul: when change and tears are past, all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

That is faith at its finest! That is how God would have us approach any trial, difficulty, or shaky future- stubbornly holding on to God! Notice secondly how "faith" expresses itself when it is healthy...

Reverence

Habakkuk 3:2a, "Lord, I have heard the report about Thee *and* I fear."

The "report" referenced here as it pertained to God is chapter 2 and the wrath that God would bring upon the Chaldeans on account of their sin (specifically Habakkuk 2:6-20). With the stubbornness of faith in which Habakkuk now clung to God; His person, His character, and His plan. Habakkuk now could see the world accurately. Consider the words of David:

Psalms 36:9b, "...in Thy light we see light."

Thinking correctly, Habakkuk is floored by the awesome power of God with which the Lord rules over the heavens and the earth (cf. Genesis 22:12; Psalms 15:4; Proverbs 1:7; Isaiah 50:10)! The word used here for "fear," denotes reverential awe! Because of God's revelation, Habakkuk sees that God does not rule over the earth capriciously. His rule is righteous and just, without mistake! Accordingly, the pride by which Habakkuk placed himself as judge over God and His will is replaced with a humility which now sees God for what He truly is: The Great I Am! Truly, when faith is thriving, the Christian lives in godly fear!

We see it in Job (who ironically could serve as the poster child for what God's people were

about to go through). God in His providence allowed Satan to devastate this patriarch. The result was the loss of his family, wealth, and well-being!

Now Job lived at a time when it was believed that the good or ill that a person encountered was earned by the individual person on account of how they lived- and that tripped him up. For the past thirty or so years, Job had faithfully served the Lord and received God's blessings. Now with no change in Job, the patriarch lost everything. This led him to the conclusion that there had to be something wrong with God! If for thirty years God rewarded Job's fidelity with blessing, why now was God punishing him when nothing had changed in Job's life?

After grieving the loss of his family sitting in silence for some time, Job began his darkened reasoning:

Job 10:2-3a, "I will say to God, 'Do not condemn me; let me know why Thou dost contend with me. Is it right for Thee indeed to oppress?...""

Job wants a day in court to plead his righteousness before the Lord and God's injustice! In essence he says: "*I just want God to appear before me for one moment that I might give Him a piece of my mind!*" Yet, Job knew this would never happen, NOT because God is awesome, BUT because the Lord obviously was unfair!

Job 9:17-19, "For He... multiplies my wounds without cause. He will not allow me to get my breath, but saturates me with bitterness. [and what can he do?] *If it is a matter of power, behold, He is the strong one! And if it is a matter of justice, who can summon Him?"*

Hey, He is bigger and stronger than man; what can we do? Yet know this, might doesn't make right! Amazingly, God DID appear to Job as Job requested. And in His appearing, just as with Habakkuk, the Lord did not give to Job what was his due; rather, the Lord opened Job's eyes to reality such that Job could see the world aright!

Psalms 36:9b: "...in Thy light we see light."

And what effect did this have on Job? Listen to Job 42 and Job's response to God:

Job 42:3b, 5-6: "I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... [IOW, my reasoning was darkened such that I was speaking things that were completely wrong! This is where he began; notice where he ends...] I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes."

Job responded in three ways:

1. He recognized that in his pride, his mind was clouded such that his reasoning and deductions were flawed!

2. He withdrew his accusations and argument against the Lord. In other words, he repented!
3. He was moved to reverence and awe at the greatness and glory of God!

This is where a thriving faith always leads! When we live by faith, the result will be a growing apprehension of the greatness of God and the folly of man! Our lives will become characterized more and more by gratitude rather than grumbling. And we, with Habakkuk, will walk on high places! Notice lastly how “faith” will express itself when it is healthy.

A Passion for Renewal

Habakkuk 3:2b, “O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years [a reference to the lull in which God’s people found themselves waiting the coming judgment of the Babylonians], in the midst of the years- during this lull- make it known; in wrath remember mercy>”

This is a most surprising statement for it is the exact opposite of how Habakkuk began this prophecy. In chapter 1, we read of an angry, arrogant prophet who wanted God to get His people (Habakkuk 1:2-4). But now having reframed his vision by God’s word and now seeing reality aright, Habakkuk is moved to prayer for his people as together they faced a difficult future. Talk about a change! In chapter 1, Habakkuk wanted justice! In chapter 3, he wants mercy! What made the change? Habakkuk stubbornly held on to God and His word (Habakkuk 2:4)!

Now in his prayer Habakkuk asks of God three things. Let’s consider each of them in their turn. He asked that the Lord might “Revive” the greatness of His name and the knowledge of His character that once again it might be known as it was at the beginning of the world (cf. 1:12; 2:14)! “Revive” is the same word used for “live” in Habakkuk 2:4 (where it is said that “the righteous will live/thrive by his faith”). This no doubt is an allusion to that promise and so constituted a prayer both for the people of God and himself to thrive and so to live by faith as they beheld the glorious manifestation of God’s judgment! It was a longing NOT simply that God’s people might endure the coming holocaust, BUT that they might thrive in the midst of it!

Work amongst God’s people that they might have a working knowledge of God in all that they do, “Lord, make it [God’s work, His will, and so His character] known!” This is a petition on behalf of the people of God that the scales that currently blocked their eyes to the plan of God would be removed (as they were in Habakkuk’s life). In other words, Habakkuk not only wanted the nation to behold the glory and greatness of God, but also the fact that life in this age is going to be difficult! Trial and suffering lay on the horizon of everyone’s life. How important it is that God’s people be prepared to face their uncertain future in faith/reliance upon God and His character!

Grant mercy to the people of God as they underwent the flame of affliction! The word for “wrath” actually is the word for tribulation and agitation, not judgment. As the nation faced a most difficult future, as countless would lose their lives and many more be taken into

exile, Habakkuk prayed here that God would remember mercy, which He always does!

Recall the words of James Montgomery Boice. Boice quoted one of the many passages of Scripture which speak of the promise of health and the child of God.

Psalms 103:2-3: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; who pardons all your iniquities; who heals all your diseases."

And then he said that the passage is true; we most certainly will be healed of any and all disease... either in life or in death! Family of God, "in trial God always remembers mercy!"

Psalms 149:4: "For the Lord takes pleasure in His people; He will beautify the afflicted ones with salvation."- this is what God is about... in life and in death!

Revelation 14:13b, "And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, 'Write, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!" 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.'"

Habakkuk wished for nothing less for God's people, that as they faced the hour of trial, they would NOT shrink back, BUT thrive in their faith!

Once again such a far cry from how Habakkuk began this prophecy! In chapter 1 Habakkuk is a morally superior being offended by the sin of his countrymen. In chapter 3, he now is the humble servant of Christ wanting nothing more than Christ's reviving grace to be enjoyed by His brethren to the praise of God's glory! Again, what made the change? The reframing of this world by the Kingdom and so word of God!

A thriving faith will not be content to grow in isolation. It will long for and work toward the maturation of the people of God in grace!

Now, it is important that we see that this just wasn't Habakkuk. What we have here is God's ordinary path when it comes to a thriving faith in any people! Recall the opening words of this chapter and how Habakkuk gave Psalmic instruction in verse 1. That means that Habakkuk intended this passage and so his experience both to be sung by the nation in their worship and so to be embodied by them as well! In fact, he is drawing another allusion; after Israel had entered the land, Moses was to write a song and place it in the mouths of the Israelites as a vehicle for instructing future generations (Deuteronomy 31:19). It would be a song that could not be forgotten by the children to come (Deuteronomy 31:21). God exhorted Moses:

Deuteronomy 31:19, "Now therefore, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the sons of Israel; put it on their lips, in order that this song may be a witness for Me against the sons of Israel."

With this Biblical precedent before him, Habakkuk took up the calling and likewise composed a

song to be sung by the people of God as they faced the bitterness of life! It was a song which speaks of the character of a thriving faith and so gave a voice to the genuine servant of the Lord. Truly, Habakkuk 3:1-2 is how God would have us face “the valley of the shadow of death”! O. Palmer Robertson wrote this:

Now the prophet begins his song, a song to be rehearsed in the congregation of Israel throughout the dark years which Israel must soon begin to experience. The song comes as a response to the revelation given the prophet concerning the coming days. (Robertson, 1990 , pp. 215-216)

From this we conclude that what we have here is how God would have all His people to live at all times! He would have our faith blossom such that it too is characterized by Reliance, Reverence, and a growing Passion for the Renewal of God’s People.

Bibliography

Robertson, O. P. (1990). *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company.

End Notes

¹ And in Habakkuk 2:3 when God responded to Habakkuk’s criticisms, the Lord made an overt reference to the “tablets of stone” utilized in covenant renewal ceremonies (Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 32:15–16; 34:1, 28; Deuteronomy 9:9-11; 10:2, 4; 2 Chronicles 5:10).

² O. Palmer Robertson wrote, “Nowhere else do the words of an Israelite prophet take the form of a poem composed for celebration in the context of the worshiping community.” (*The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, NICOT, p. 212)

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About the Preacher

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