

Treading on High Places **Habakkuk 3:17-19**

This is the first Sunday and the first sermon of a new year, and as we move forward into this new year we all face different circumstances in our personal lives, families, and social settings. Some of these are optimistic and hopeful – they bring excitement and we joyfully face them. But others are negative and discouraging – they bring anxiousness and dread.

Some of you are facing ongoing health problems that are going to be difficult to overcome. I remember last year when Matthew was wheelchair bound because of a badly broken leg. It took about 3 months before he was able to walk again. As tough as that was, some of you face much greater obstacles this year. Some of you are dealing with financial problems. There just isn't enough coming in to meet your needs and you don't see a way out. Some of you have a relative who's suffering, or problems with your kids or marriage. Some of you are in the middle of a major issue at work or at school that makes life miserable and causes you to lose sleep. In our society there are rumors of war. There's bitter political division with an election coming up and articles of impeachment against our president. There's immorality and wickedness growing in our schools, universities, and all across our media.

If you're like me it can be easy to get caught up in the circumstances of life and ride the waves – up and down – sometimes on top, sometimes in the turbulent waters below. Circumstances in life can have such a drastic effect on us – our emotions, stability, and outlook on life. They can make us a fun-loving, positive person one day and a grumpy, angry, negative person the next.

They can also play games with our faith and our relationship with God. When things are going well we know God to be gracious, merciful, and full of favor. But when things are not going well, we have serious doubts and questions: "Does God see what's happening to me? Does he care? Why doesn't he do anything?" Up and down we go with the waves of life's circumstances.

That's the tendency at least – something we are all prone to experience to some degree. And for that reason, as we begin this new year, I am excited to preach through a little book in the Old Testament. It's not usually on the top of anyone's list of Bible books to read or study and it tends to hide in obscurity. But as I was

considering what to preach on and looking through the books at the end of the Old Testament, I came across this book and felt like it was where we should camp out for a few weeks.

It's a little book called Habakkuk, only three chapters long, tucked in the middle of a section of books known as the Minor Prophets. Most of you have probably heard of it, but probably not given it a lot of attention. One of the reasons we do give it attention is to try to decide how to pronounce it. Some say "Ha-bak-kuk," others say "Hab-a-kkuk." I actually looked up the pronunciation on BlueLetterBible.org and it's pronounced: "Havak-kook." And I'm pretty sure none of us are going to actually go with that, so however you want to pronounce it is just fine – none of us will be quite right. I'm going to go with "Ha-bak-kuk," because that's how I learned it and hopefully that won't cause you to stumble.

Habakkuk is a very intriguing book, once you get into it. It's written in a very unique way – a dialogue between a prophet and God about the terrible circumstances surrounding him. It brings up the big and difficult questions we all ask when we're going through hard times and it gives us God's answers in that particular situation. It reveals the author's raw emotion and struggles with what's going on, which I think will help us relate to him in a personal way. I think more than anything it will help teach us how to rise above the waves of life's circumstances. Those circumstances that so easily pull you down, don't have to have that strangle hold on you. You can have hope and security and even joy in the midst of your struggles and my hope is that God will use the book of Habakkuk to help you find it.

This morning I want to give an introduction to the book – kind of a short teaser that I hope will pique our interest. We're going to take a brief look at what was going on when it was written so that in coming weeks we will be able to understand what it says more deeply and engage with it in our own lives.

To understand the time when it was written we have to go all the way back to the time of the kings of Israel. (Picture – OT Timeline) If you look at this OT Timeline you can see that right in the middle, God had delivered the Israelites out of Egypt during the time of the Exodus and brought them to the Promised Land of Canaan. Under Joshua's leadership, they drove the Canaanite nations out of the land and settled in. What followed was a long period where they were ruled by Judges that God raised up to rescue and protect them from their enemies. And then another

period of about 400 years, which is the red, green, and purple sections, when they were ruled by kings. The first three kings were Saul, David, and Solomon who ruled over a united kingdom for about 120 years. But after Solomon, the ten tribes to the north revolted and formed their own kingdom known as Israel. (Picture) The southern kingdom was known as Judah. The kingdoms remained divided for over 200 years until each were demolished by successive world powers that invaded from the north and east. Israel fell to the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C., which was a fearsome and violent empire. (Picture) And Judah fell to the Babylonian Empire in 586 B.C., who had conquered the Assyrians and taken over all their territories about 20 years earlier.

Habakkuk was written about the time that the Babylonian Empire was coming to power, but before but before Judah was conquered. (Picture – OT Timeline) So it was written during the final decline of the nation of Judah, which takes place in the purple segment on the timeline.

The book bears the name of a prophet who lived in Judah during the years leading up to the Babylonian invasion. The northern kingdom of Israel was already gone – destroyed by the Assyrian army. And that army had come to destroy Judah as well, but the Lord miraculously delivered them. After that time the Assyrian Empire became less of a threat and the nation of Judah was left alone for about 100 years before the Babylonians rose to power. So it was during this time of transition in world super-powers when Judah was at peace that Habakkuk lived and wrote the book – probably just before 600 B.C.

But even though it had been a time of peace in Judah, things were not good. Habakkuk had seen a steady decline in the obedience and morality of his people and a steady increase in corruption and wickedness. We will look at that more next week. Things were about as bad as they had ever been because of the leadership of some very, very wicked kings, and it was very, very troubling to him. His circumstances were bleak. Things were happening in Jerusalem and Judah that were absolutely deplorable and it had gone on for so long that it seemed like God didn't care and wasn't going to do anything about it. So not only was Habakkuk deeply disturbed by the behavior of his people, but also by the apparent indifference of God toward all the violence and evil they were doing. He asked questions that most of us find ourselves asking in difficult times. The book begins like this: *"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?"³ Why do you make me see iniquity, and*

why do you idly look at wrong?" (Hab. 1:2-3) His circumstances were dragging him down and he was in a dark place.

I think most of us will be able to relate somewhat to what he was going through. There are a lot of parallels in our personal lives and in our society. But the message of the book is about hope – hope in God. God didn't leave Habakkuk in a dark place. He eventually revealed things to him in different visions – God allowed him to see things that would come to pass and at first he was very troubled, but in the end God showed him that he had not abandoned him or his people. God was still faithful, just, good, and wise in spite of the circumstances and Habakkuk came to trust him. His circumstances hadn't changed, but the way God revealed himself to him radically changed his outlook on life. He was able to rise above the waves of his circumstances with a faith that couldn't be shaken.

This is how the book ends: Hab. 3:17-19: *"Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places."*

Those are powerful words. A complete turnaround from where he was at the beginning of the book. His circumstances hadn't changed, but his outlook was completely different. (Picture) This is what a deer treading on high places in Israel looks like – surrounded by dangerous boulders, cracks, and cliffs, but sure-footed and steady. And after the encounters that Habakkuk had with God that we will see in this book, this is how he felt. His questioning turned to confidence and no matter how bad things got, he knew that he could stand secure in the Lord, rising above the circumstances that had once dragged him down.

That's the kind of faith I want to have as I move forward into this new year. The problems that you're facing right now – the problems you will encounter in the coming year – you can have joy and strength and stand secure in the midst of them. You can rise above and keep your feet on solid ground... And the book of Habakkuk can help us see how.