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Habakkuk 3:17–19, ESV.

- 17 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.*

The Houseplant Prophet: *Faith, Perseverance, and Mantras.*

Habakkuk is one of the twelve minor prophets, and it is a unique and powerful book. Habakkuk carries on a dialogue with God, questioning God's intentions, but in the end, he concludes that living by faith is the best way to persevere during threatening times. Habakkuk also has one of the most intriguing names in the Bible. Mesopotamia is said to be the homeland of Abraham, the ancient Hebrew forefather, and it was located in modern day Iraq. "Habakkuk" doesn't seem to be related to any Hebrew name or word. But there is a Mesopotamian language called Akkadian. There is an Akkadian word that is close to the word "Habakkuk",

and it refers to a plant that was commonly grown in households; it could be a form of mint. Given the time during which we think Habakkuk prophesized, there is a chance that he was born in exile in Babylon, and this could be how he picked up such a foreign sounding name. But the Book of Habakkuk tells us little about him, other than that he was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah, which included Jerusalem. He writes from the context of the rise of Babylon as an imperial power and a growing threat to the Holy Land, but before the exile of leading Israelites to Babylon. He thus witnessed the decline of the Assyrian Empire (which had conquered Israel) and stood in the shadow of the impending Babylonian invasion. But it's difficult to firmly identify the period during which Habakkuk lived and prophesized: the book shows clear signs of being a composite work written perhaps by multiple people. The book is written as poetry.

I have spent time with family members and patients who know that things are not going to turn out the way they had hoped. One case remains with me because of the unusual circumstances surrounding it. I was asked to go to the room of a woman who had decided to stop any treatments for her cancer. She was considered too unstable medically to go to an outside hospice or to go home on hospice, and so she was going to remain in the hospital. The problem was that she was hoping for a Buddhist chaplain. Because it's Boulder, we have at least

three chaplains who are trained in Buddhist practices, but I was the only chaplain there at the time. I knocked on her door, and as I always do when entering the room of a cancer patient, I wore a mask. She was somewhat younger than me. She was sitting in an oversized chair, gazing out the window at an open space outside the hospital. She turned and looked at me and asked if I was the chaplain. I said yes. She said I could take my mask off, that there was no need for that anymore. I did so. I told her that I wasn't Buddhist, that I was a Christian reverend. She asked me to sit down beside her, and I did, of course. Then she asked me if I could do something. She said it didn't matter if I was Christian.

The Book of Habakkuk is a prophesy for people caught in a waiting period. God will fulfill his promises, but we must wait, be patient, trust God, and know that God will speak to us when the time is right. We simply need to be listening when God does speak. Habakkuk is divided into three sections. As a prophet, he was an intermediary between God and the people of God. The three chapter boundaries do not cleanly separate the three major sections of the book. Chapter 1 through 2:5 contain a dialogue between Habakkuk and God. This section contains a typical Old Testament prophet lesson: God tells Habakkuk that the Babylonians will be used to punish his people for their wicked ways. God tells Habakkuk to tell the people that they must stop being puffed up, arrogant, and

greedy, and instead to live by faith. The second section covers 2:6 through 2:20.

In it, Habakkuk describes God's pronouncements against the wicked, in particular, the Babylonians. He calls out their greed, oppression, and idolatry. He notes that evil people will harm others in many ways, including violence and invasion, by exploiting people who are vulnerable, by the use of alcohol to weaken someone, and by denying God. This section ends with a promise that God is far more powerful than the wooden and metal gods of the pagans, and that God will protect his people. We are assured by this final verse:

*"The LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him."*

The third and final section, which is what I want to focus on today covers the remainder of Habakkuk, Chapter 3. There are scholars who believe that this part was written last, and that it might be a version of an ancient poem dating back to the earliest days of Israel. It celebrates God's long history of caring for his people, and it is labelled as a prayer. Here is a highly edited version, with comments. This prayer is accompanied by the musical instruction *"To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments"*, as the prayer was meant to be sung:

O LORD, I have heard the report of you,

*and your work, O LORD, do I fear.
In the midst of the years revive it;
in the midst of the years make it known;*

in wrath remember mercy.

This says that Habakkuk acknowledges what powerful things God has done in the past and he asks God to do the same for his people today.

*His splendor covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
4 His brightness was like the light;
rays flashed from his hand;
5 Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed at his heels.
6 He stood and measured the earth;
he looked and shook the nations;
10 The mountains saw you and writhed;
the raging waters swept on;
11 The sun and moon stood still in their place
12 You marched through the earth in fury;
you threshed the nations in anger.*

These verses remind us of how God has made his presence felt in the past, and how he has been metaphorically visualized in the Hebrew Scriptures. The sky, fire, wind, plagues, earthquakes, mountains, powerful rivers, and the sun and the moon, are all associated with the power of God when he seeks to protect his people from invaders and the practices of sinful people.

*13 You went out for the salvation of your people,
for the salvation of your anointed.
You crushed the head of the house of the wicked,
laying him bare from thigh to neck.
14 You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors,
who came like a whirlwind to scatter me,
rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.*

These verses tell us about the determination of God to always crush evil, and how God can turn the weapons of the enemy against them.

Finally comes the part that I would like to focus on the most:

- ¹⁶ I hear, and my body trembles;*

my lips quiver at the sound;
rottenness enters into my bones;
my legs tremble beneath me.
Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble
to come upon people who invade us.
¹⁷ 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.

This starts out with the prophet saying that he is overwhelmed with reverence as he awaits God. Because of his anticipation of the presence of God, he is not fearful, even when invaders arrive. Then he says that even during natural disasters, when orchards die, crops fail, sheep disappear, and starvation looms, he is not afraid. The prophet knows that the reader is in a nervous time of waiting. Something bad looms. Bad times will soon come and that they may take

multiple forms. He will still rejoice – because he knows that God will come to save him. Indeed, no matter what happens, God gives him strength and lets him run like a deer. And God lifts him up to high places.

I'd like to get back to the woman who was passing away from cancer and had hoped for a Buddhist chaplain. She was a Tibetan Buddhist, she told me. She asked me if I knew anything about Buddhism. I said no, that it was the one major faith that I had never studied in any formal fashion. She said that she was hoping to have someone recite a mantra with her. I told her that all I knew was that a mantra is a phrase that is repeated. She said that she would be honored if I would please let her teach me a brief mantra, and then if I could repeat it with her. I said sure. Then she said that we only needed to recite it together 108 times. I managed to not look at my watch. I smiled and said yes.

In Chapter 2 of Habakkuk, God declares, through the mouth of the Prophet that the arrogant do not please God the way the righteous do:

*⁴ “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him,
but the righteous shall live by faith.*

This verse had a significant impact on New Testament writers. It is referenced in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. Here is Paul quoting it in Romans:

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in

it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Paul is using ironic language to say that the Gospel gives him great joy, and that God has spoken first to the Jews, then to the followers of Christ. Then he repeats that the right way to live is to always live with faith. This is often considered a summation of the central theme of the Book of Romans, Paul's most impactful letter, and the New Testament book that provides much of the basis of Christian theology. Paul tells us that the right way to live, the path into the Kingdom of God, the way to gain a personal relationship with God are all revealed to us if we simply have faith. It's not by what we do, not by our worldly acts. This is a major shift that Paul, formerly Saul, a prominent and highly educated Jewish thinker, is emphasizing. Yes, we must follow the laws of God. But our lives, unlike those of the people of the Old Testament, are not centered around following laws or rules. Yes, we will live the way God wants us to, but that is a secondary thing. We live this way as a result of the primary goal of the follower of Christ, and that is to have faith, to believe, to trust in God unconditionally.

This core aspect of being a Christian follows from the lesson of Habakkuk, one of the so-called minor prophets. His work impacted the New Testament generation and helped form who we are. Habakkuk taught us that we are to live

knowing that there will be difficult times in life, and that there will be things that we cannot fix, and God does not make go away. We will face many challenges. Still, we will strive to live in a righteous way. And if we keep our faith, we can persevere no matter what. Faith is that first step. It is the most important step. It is the step that leads to everything else we want to accomplish on Earth.

After I repeated the mantra 108 times with this woman, during which she held my hand, she thanked me for doing that with her. She explained that when her husband was dying, she had recited it with him. There were people who would have been quite willing to coming into the hospital and recite it with her, but she said that she wanted someone who would remain calm. She told me that she was not afraid of dying. She said that she was going to make it very easy on herself and let them give her lots of meds for pain and anxiety. I asked her if she had any medication in her right then. She said only some pain medication, and not much. She then proceeded to tell me something about herself.

She said that she had persevered through much during her life. She said that Mantras had gotten her through many things, the loss of one of her children as an infant, periods of insomnia, a period of unemployment for both her and her husband, and times of financial strain. She said that mantras helped her focus on her inner strength, relieved anxiety, and gave her a sense of peace. She said that

doing it with someone with a calm, affirming voice was particularly helpful, and she thanked me for doing that. I left her room, and she died that night.

Christian prayer can be like reciting a mantra. It can be a form of meditation, of centering ourselves. As you know, I grew up Catholic, and many people criticize the memorized, mechanical prayers that Catholics recite. But they are a sort of mantra. I don't want to minimize the power of memorized prayers to form a dialogue with God. When you pray, you can use your own words, you can use thoughts that are not fully formed as words, and you can use pre-existing words. But there is an added benefit with a simple prayer that you repeat many times. It does all the things that this woman accomplished with her mantra. And doing it with someone else or with a group is all the more powerful. I try to do this with the Community Prayers and Calls to Worship that I write for this church. We say it only once, but I write them with the idea that they can be repeated to center ourselves as we approach God and seek perseverance through faith.

Here is one from a recent Sunday service. I'll finish with it. By repeating this we root ourselves on the core of our faith and find security in its simplicity.

*God, the Holy Spirit is working within all people, and we ask that all people answer the call to live by the two great commandments. God, we love you and we love our neighbor, and we remember what Jesus said **"The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."** Amen.*