

Series: "Corona...Corona! *Habakkuk)"

Sermon: "A Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Down in the Heart"

Text: Habakkuk 3:18-19

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- Shame on me!...But, some of you guys need to listen a little better or I might trick you ;-)
- Last Week, it was about nine minutes into the sermon when I finally got to the book of *Habakkuk*. My long introduction was about "feelings." I asked especially whether or not human feelings could serve as an unchanging foundation for truth.
- What did that have to do with the book of *Habakkuk*? At the start of the book Habakkuk *feels* deserted by God who maybe doesn't even care and possibly is not even as righteous and just as he claims to be. By the end of the book, Habakkuk the prophet is feeling very different.
- BY the end, he will trust that God is the same powerful God of the miraculous redemption of his people in the Exodus from Egypt. By the end of the book, Habakkuk will do this even if God does not deliver on his promises in a way Habakkuk expected and even if God does not deliver on his promises when Habakkuk expected—even if God doesn't deliver during the prophet's lifetime.
- If you look back at ***Habakkuk 3:16***, you'll remember the prophet was filled with emotions—nearly overwhelmed by feelings due to this change in his foundational thinking about who God is and how he acts righteously to fulfill his promises in time and space.
- The prophet's heart was pounding. Lips were quivering so that he could barely speak. His whole body felt weak. His legs would almost not support him because of their shaking.
- In the midst of all this emotion—all this feeling—Habakkuk could declare a disconnect—something that was true even if his experience, his observation of circumstances, his emotions, his feelings were not aligned with that newly remembered truth about God.

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- The prophet declared at the end of verse 16, having been reminded about the truth of who God actually is and how God actually works, from the infallible WORDS of God himself, "***Yet I will wait patiently...***"
- In the prophet's case, it was waiting patiently on God in spite of his human expectations and limitations to see eternal things—wait patiently on God to deal righteously and justly with the evil Babylonians.
- Here's where listening carefully came in. I asked a question I will ask again this morning: "***Did these new, nearly overwhelming feelings result from feeling something different about his earlier feelings?*** That is where I admitted to you I was asking what could be a "***trick question.***"
- Why was it possibly a "***trick question?***" Because, we humans are not like the science fiction character of Mr. Spock on Star Trek who supposedly had the capability of exercising absolute logic separated from any feelings in making observations and conclusions about reality. We can't do that! Even Spock, who was supposed to be half-human proved the point when he often had to fight his human half to be perfectly rational instead of emotional in his thinking.
- A couple of you were brave enough to ask if I were suggesting that we might be able to live life purely rationally, like a Mr. Spock might, with our feelings never entering into our thinking about God, truth, justice and the American way.
- *Are we to follow our heart or our head?* Careful...That is the same trick question asked with different words.
- The answer is we can rarely, if ever, separate the two. The reality is, according to many psychological studies, with few exceptions most of us make emotional decisions more often than we make purely

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rational decisions even when we FEEL we are being absolutely rational in the process. In study after study, what we feel about evidence trumps the reality of evidence.

- Therefore, I suggested to you that what we feel about God will not be safe from distortions such as the distortions Habakkuk felt if we will not seek to get those feelings from the truth God himself tells us about himself. Truth about God will not be trustworthy when it is sourced in our feelings about our feelings about God.
- It will not be reliable when it is sourced in the feelings of other humans' feelings about God either! Unless of course, "a horse is a horse!" Unless of course, those feelings of others are validated as based on truth from God in his word. That is thankfully exactly one of the lessons we learn in the Word of God called the book of *Habakkuk*.
- I'll say what I said last week once again, as I review, ***"The only source I know to go to with absolute assurance that I am hearing unadulterated God truth (about God) is God's Word—and by that, I do mean Scripture—the Bible."***
- That's where I left us last week. Evidently, it was a bit of an uncomfortable place to be left for some of us. I did that admitting that we were splitting verse 18 smack-dab in half just as whoever produced the versification numbers in the NIV edition of the Bible split verse 18 in half. In reality the whole section from verse 16 to the end of the book is one, detailed idea. For this reason, as we consider the last verse and one-half today, let's read all that goes with it from 16 on. **READ Habakkuk 3:16-19**
- "God you are awesome and you have done awesome things! I remember those unchanging facts you told us about yourself now, says the prophet in the first part of chapter 3. "God I have new

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feelings about you now. My feelings have changed since that first accusatory question I asked you a while ago. I now feel weak in your awesome presence because I know just how wonderful, powerful and perfectly righteous you are!

- *And God, even though there is a 'disconnect' between what I see and what I feel at time...God, YET I will trust you and wait patiently for you to do fulfill your promises and reveal your absolute righteous behavior.*
- *And God, even though there is another 'disconnect' between the circumstances I see with my own eyes and that trust in you, I will choose to allow your truth that you yourself establish as perfect and unchanging to inform and form my human feelings rather than my changing fallible human feelings forming what I think of as truth about you.*
- Did you hear what I think he just said—what the prophet who reacted to circumstances much as most of us would concluded? God's facts, God's truth from God's Words, will form my feelings rather than my feelings shaping what I believe (usually what I feel *want* to believe) to be truth about who I want my God to be.
- This is critical stuff for us as individuals who want to glorify God and as a community of the Spirit that desires to glorify God by how we think and live together.
- Are there human feelings in these concluding thoughts from the prophet? You bet there are. He seems to have been a pretty emotional guy.
- Even with the disconnect of the circumstantial evidence around him he can see with his own eyes of flesh, he now feels **joy** that leads him to expressing that joy in **re-joicing**. AND, he now feels able to commit himself to "**be joyful**" going forward.

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- The NET Bible—that's the one with bible.org on the spine I used one time before in this series—goes so far as to translate this commitment of future feelings as. "***I will be happy....***"
- How many of us will commit that we will ***feel*** happy tomorrow no matter what befalls us—no matter the circumstances of our life?
- Can any of us promise that we will feel that way using our own power to control all our feelings? Are you able to do that by sheer human willpower?
- I have known people who act as if they are able to do it but they have ultimately been revealed as people who are good at hiding some of their true feelings even from themselves by stuffing them down deep inside risking the explosion that comes later when those feelings break loose unexpectedly.
- In the midst of this statement about feelings of joy and happiness, the prophet does talk about strength when he says, "***the sovereign LORD is my strength.***" Here, is he talking about the strength to defeat the coming Babylonians? No, I think he is talking about strength to make things right in the right time, which then is strength for faith, which then is strength for feelings like joy and happiness.
- It is put another way in a more famous verse we had likely all heard before—if not, we sang it this morning. "***The joy of the LORD is my strength.***"
- That form of this recorded, trustworthy truth from God comes in the context of the experience of Habakkuk's people years later even though it is recorded in ***Nehemiah*** chapter 4, verse 10 a book located earlier in the printed order of the Old Testament.
- As promised, the Babylonians came and enacted judgment on God's people. They destroyed the temple and most of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Then in 539 BC, the Babylonians were judged by the Persians. God

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didn't tell Habakkuk this detail of Babylon's destruction only that righteousness would prevail in his plan.

- Now the stories in the books of *Ezra*, *Nehemiah* and *Esther* describe the time when the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their houses, city walls and even the Temple of the LORD.
- They returned and rebuilt in what seem like somewhat ragtag bunches of people. What they could eventually rebuild was nothing in comparison to the glory of the city before the judgment. The new Temple was so less glorious that those older folks who had seen the former Temple of Solomon wept at the sight of the less glorious building replacing it.
- In Nehemiah 8, Ezra, a scribe—a man connected with the WRITTEN Word of God and with passing it on as God's TRUTH—a man that had a leadership role with God's people after the fullness of 7 months returned to the land and the city called the people together to listen to something important.
- He called them to gather for a reading of God's Word—and an explanation of what those words meant. He called them together to hear what was foundational truth from God about God and his ways.
- This foundational, unchanging truth was meant to trump their own personal theologies and even their own personally concluded feelings about God and what he was doing with his people now.
- This reading for God's Word was to be the foundational truth for a nation and people going forward again.
- He read it. The teachers explained it. The people got it and they wept because of the truth. Their feeling hearing the truth from God instead of making it up themselves from what they had felt about God was they were abject failures. They were sinners without any hope. That's how they felt.

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- What was Nehemiah's answer to their idea of the truth built on their feelings about themselves and God? It was pay attention to what God says is truth not your feelings.
- Nehemiah 8:8-12 reads: **READ Nehemiah 8:8-12**
- The recorded and preserved truth about God, God's ways, and even who they were as part of God's plan from God's unchanging Word was to shape their feelings. Their feelings were not infallible indicators of the truth.
- Living by their feelings as indicators of truth about God and what God wanted from them instead of the WORD of God is what brought them to this point that made them FEEL so sad that they wept when the truth was they should be rejoicing.
- Why should they have been rejoicing? Because as great as the disconnect was with what their eyes of flesh were observing and their expectations of God and his work—as great as that disconnect was, they were watching God's plan being fulfilled as promised.
- They were being shown it was not through the plans, dreams, visions, nudges, abilities or anything else of human beings but rather the "**strength of the LORD**" that God's plan would be carried out perfectly in absolute righteousness.
- Therefore, and here is mainly why I brought you here to Nehemiah—these people of God could rejoice—feel joy—not because their feelings could change their feelings—but because there was a source of joy from knowing, in spite of current circumstances, God was powerfully and perfectly at work fulfilling his plan.
- **This is the "Joy of the Lord that could be their strength."** The joy of the LORD that can be the strength of his people is not a human feeling that produces feelings that produce human strength.

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- ***The joy of the LORD is the truth from his word that his power will accomplish all he has promised even when his people, can't see how that will be!***
- This why Habakkuk proclaims he will rejoice and be happy even if he doesn't see what he thinks ought to happen finally happen. Because, as he wrote in verse 19, ***"The Sovereign LORD is my strength!"***
- Let's come at this from a different direction so we all might understand it better.
- Most of us have been to enough Bible studies to have learned about the biblical meaning of "love." It can be a confusing word since much of literature and our culture tends to think of "love" as mainly an emotion that we experience—that we FEEL.
- That is why we say things like "they FELL in love." Their emotions captured them and they fell as inevitably in love as gravity would cause them to fall into an unseen pit.
- Shakespeare had a running battle with trying to explain "love." He seems to have sensed that it was more than just a feeling but he never quite got it figured out because love always seemed to have feelings attached to it.
- Try to get away with this one from Sonnet 141 as a statement of great love to your wife the next time she comes home from getting her hair cut and asks if you like it: ***In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes, For they in thee a thousand errors note. But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise. Who in despite of view is pleased to dote.*** In other words, the cut is ugly but I love who you are not your haircut.
- At least the bard was working toward a definition of love that was deeper than physical attraction or just the accompanying feelings.

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- You have also probably learned that there are three Greek words we translate as "love." Then we teach they have perfectly discrete meanings and the best one is always *agape* love. This is not strictly true but it works for an illustration.
- *Agape* love is called the best love because it seems to be God's way of loving. My simple way of defining *agape* love for myself is to say: ***"agape love is a choice of the will (sometimes we call that the "heart" but that gets confusing here too)—a choice of the will to do what is actually the best for the sake of the one loved even at the cost of great sacrifice to the one who is loving."***
- I purposely leave out any comment on feelings because even though *agape* love will always produce feelings in humans it is not defined by or based on good or bad feelings by the giver or the receiver.
- Many times when I have loved people in churches with *agape* love, instead of them responding with the warm feelings we associate with love they respond with anger and vitriol. However, if I have loved them with what they have truly needed instead of making them feel, as they desired to feel, that is true *agape* love.
- So, this biblical love may produce feelings but it is not based on or mainly concerned with feelings. Feelings will likely result but they may not be the cause they are an effect of the love that is the application of TRUTH.
- Nehemiah and Habakkuk consider the ***joy*** they speak of and even the happiness they address in the same way. The feelings accompanying Joy and happiness are not the foundation. The truth of the LORD's strength to carry out his promises is the foundation. We don't get that truth from feelings about our feelings or from emotional nudges. We can ultimately only get that strength in

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unadulterated forms from the TRUTH God reveals about himself in His Word.

- Rick Warren says, "***Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright and the determined choice to praise God in every situation.***
- I think, like Shakespeare the inseparable human mix is here in Warren's statement. Unlike Shakespeare, the answer is here as well. Joy is the choice we make that we will trust God to be who he says he is not who we feel he should be no matter our circumstances and no matter our feelings.
- This is true even when both of these, our feelings and our circumstances, may feel like a big "***disconnect***" from the truth God has given us about himself in his Word.
- How did Habakkuk find strength to commit to choosing joy and even happiness after feeling abandoned by God? He didn't find it is creating new feelings himself. He found strength from the LORD in believing the ***truth*** God had written down about Himself as His Word and the feelings of joy and happiness resulted.
- "***The only source I know to go to with absolute assurance that I am hearing unadulterated God truth (about God) is God's Word—and by that, I do mean Scripture—the Bible.***"
- "***The joy of the LORD is my strength***" means the strength of my joy is sourced in the unfailing truth of God. I am happy and strong because God is who he is and I trust that truth. I am not strong simply because I feel happy.
- Some suggest things like "Fake it until you make it!" Act joyful and you'll eventually really feel joyful. That suggests I can make or control my own human feelings directly.

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- I say believe it until you feel it and then keep on believing it. You will know the strength of the LORD in your life when you do that.
- Human feelings, inseparable from our life experience, are never infallible sources of truth.
- BUT, truth from God himself will always be an infallible source for the *right* human feelings that accompany choices made in faith such as love, peace, joy, and even being happy in our time and place.