

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon: Nevertheless

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How long, Lord, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?

³ Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.

⁵ "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.

⁶ I am raising up the Babylonians,^[a]
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwellings not their own.

⁷ They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.

⁸ Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.

Their cavalry gallops headlong;
their horsemen come from afar.

They fly like an eagle swooping to devour;

⁹ they all come intent on violence.

Their hordes^[b] advance like a desert wind

and gather prisoners like sand.
¹⁰They mock kings
and scoff at rulers.
They laugh at all fortified cities;
by building earthen ramps they capture them.
¹¹Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty people, whose own strength is their god."

- Habakkuk 1:1-11

Transcript:

Lord Jesus, as we come to your word, I ask by the power of your Holy Spirit that you would help us to learn from it and be changed by it. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen. Well, welcome again if you are just joining us. A friend of mine said something to me recently that I've been wondering about ever since. He said, "If there's any area in your life whether it's school or job or relationship, health, or even just the state of our country, any area in your life that isn't glistening with hope, that area is under the influence of a lie. You are believing a lie about that. And I was impressed sort of by the poetry of it. Glistening with hope. That's very literary. But I've been wondering ever since, is that true? Because there's so many things that it is hard to find hope in. Cancer or school problems, relationships falling apart, pandemics, a divided country.

And if in my mind and heart those things aren't glistening with hope, am I really believing a lie about them? Or am I just being realistic? We're starting a new sermon series called Nevertheless. And I'll tell you why that title in a minute. About the Old Testament prophet, Habakkuk. And nobody actually knows how to actually pronounce his name because it may not even be a Hebrew name. Habakkuk, Habakkuk, tomato, tomato. It's all very confusing, so we're going to call him Fred. The prophet Fred. And we are going to read through the book of Fred this summer. And Fred's major question is when the world is falling apart, is there any reason for hope? Now the background to what's going on is that there's been a series of incompetent and evil and corrupt kings in Israel, and the country is coming apart.

People are stealing from each other. There's violence in the streets. And Habakkuk says this, "How long, Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen. Why do you make me look at injustice? Destruction and violence are before me. There is strife, and conflict abounds." Does that sound familiar? We see injustice and what happened to Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, many more. We are certainly seeing conflict in our culture right now. But what's interesting about this book is in spite of how terrible things get and how terrible things are, Habakkuk, by the end of the book, has found a durable hope, and he gets there in five steps. And the first step toward his durable hope is to let God have it. Habakkuk said, "God, why aren't you helping?" And we say that all the time, right? This relationship problem, school problem, job problem, state of our nation right now...

God, where are you? Why aren't you helping? Later on, he says to God, "Lord, are you not from everlasting?" And we kind of... That doesn't sound very confrontational to us, but in his culture what Habakkuk is saying is, "I thought you were the Almighty, All powerful God, but things are super screwed up right now, and you're nowhere to be found. You're all hat and no cattle, God." When the world is

falling apart, godly people pound on God's door. Because the opposite of love isn't hate, it's indifference. If Habakkuk didn't love God, he either wouldn't pray at all or offer feeble prayers. But because he loves God with tears in his eyes, he demands an answer. And his prayers challenge me. Not because they're too aggressive, but because mine are so tame in comparison. Prim, proper, paltry, puny, pale, pasty, pitiful, Presbyterian prayers. But godly people pound on God's door.

And the God revealed in scripture not only puts up with it, he invites us to do it because he wants relationship with us. And in relationship, you get mad at people and you have to talk it out and you have to work it out. So he wants us to pound on his door and let him have it. And see, sometimes when God seems silent, it's just because he's listening, and he wants to know what we have to say and he wants to hear us. And you never have... God never puts us on mute. You never have to unmute yourself with God. And that is the first step to hope. Because sometimes to receive hope, sometimes you just need to vent at first. And if we skip to hope too quickly, that is a sugarcoated false hope because it doesn't take into account how hard things are.

So for you right now, maybe your first step of hope is simply to lament with God. But if we stay there, we get stuck. So the story continues. Habakkuk says, "Why aren't you helping?" And God says, "Oh, oh, actually I am helping. Look at the nations and watch and be utterly amazed. 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 dwellings not their own. They are feared and dreaded people." And Habakkuk is like, "What? I asked you why are you letting evil and injustice rein in Israel, and God, I thought I heard you say that in order to fix that, you're going to raise up the Babylonians to conquer us. And they're even worse than we are."

And this is the second step to durable hope. To realize that God doesn't always make sense, and that's good news. God says, "Don't judge me by your plans, by your agendas. My ways may not make sense to you now, but eventually they will not only in your life, but in the long arc of history." And just because we don't see God working, just because you don't see God working right now, doesn't mean that he isn't working. Now, when we read a text like this, I think we find it troublesome that it says that God is raising up the Babylonians to conquer Israel. Why would God do that? Well, in their worldview, everything was under God's control whether he directly caused it or not. We might say God allowed it. But whether he allowed it or directly caused it, the ultimate point is God will always use it.

I don't think God does things like give people cancer to punish them for their sins. Jesus makes it clear God doesn't work that way. But there are natural consequences to many of our sins. If you spend a lifetime bullying people, you're going to be hated and alone. That's not God's fault, that's your sin. And God hates suffering, and that's why it didn't exist in the garden of Eden. But when we separated ourselves from the author of life that is God, everything got messed up, including our bodies and our culture, so now there's sickness and now we die and there's injustice and there's poverty. God never intended that and someday he is going to return, Jesus is going to return and make everything right. But in the meantime, he will use even the harshest things for ultimate good in ways that don't make sense to us. And that's good news.

And we, from our vantage point, can see something that Habakkuk couldn't see. See, the Babylonians did conquer Israel and took them into exile for 70 years, but God brought some good things out of that exile. First, the Israelites had two major sins that the prophets over and over rail against. The first sin was the refusal to care for four groups of people God repeatedly commands us to care for. The widow, the orphan, the poor, and the resident alien in your midst. Their second sin was idolatry. Worshiping false gods. And for centuries, God told them to stop and they didn't. So eventually God says, "Well, okay. If

the only way to get your attention is if something drastic happens, so be it." The Babylonians conquered them, take them into exile for 70 years. But after the exile, two amazing things happen. First, never again did they turn to idolatry. In Babylon, they learned to trust God alone, and they never went back to false gods and they begin to care for the poor and the marginalized.

The second thing that happened after the exile, some of the Israelites went back to Israel, but others, they moved all throughout the Mediterranean world and influenced the non Jews in the cities they moved to who became what the Bible calls God-fearers. People who believed in God. And centuries later, when the good news of Jesus started to spread, the most receptive people in those cities were not Jews. They weren't the pagans. They were the God-fearers. What Habakkuk can't see is that God is going to use the exile to purge Israel of their sin and prepare the way for the good news of Jesus to spread like wildfire centuries later.

And as it spread, things like infanticide and gladiator games and slavery, all common in the ancient world, all diminished dramatically as more and more people follow Jesus and stop doing those things because Jesus said to stop doing those things. The Babylonians' violence against the Israelites created the conditions under which the good news of Jesus spread and diminished violence all over the ancient world. That is until Christianity became the state religion of Rome, and people went from all-in followers of Jesus to consumer-Christians looking for comfort. But when people genuinely are all in following Jesus, God uses them, has always used them to bring justice and healing in the world. And he calls those of us who take on his name, those of us who follow him, he gives that job to us. See, just because God uses hard things for good does not mean we tolerate hard things in our world.

And God has given us the job of bringing justice and healing into our world in the name of Jesus, using his methods and to his glory so that no politician or activist organization gets the credit for it. Jesus does. Because only Jesus can really change a human heart, and justice is his idea. What Habakkuk couldn't see was that God was going to use the exile to purge Israel of its sin and prepare the way for the Jesus revolution. And what you can't see right now in your life are the ways that God is preparing you to whatever it is you're going through, God is preparing you for the future he has in store for you. Now you might say, "Well, that's great, but what do I do in the meantime when things suck?" Well, we'll talk about that more in the next couple of weeks. We'll talk about that. But just for now, God does give us some things to hang on to in the meantime.

He gives us other people to encourage us, worship, to remind us that he's at work and to experience his presence. Counselors, pastors, mentors, to guide us and to remind ourselves daily to trust that God to all the problems I face God is preparing me for my future. God's ways don't always make sense to us, and that's good news. Because if we just kind of cram our hope into the little tiny box of what makes sense to us, that is a little tiny bit of hope. But if we put it in a God-sized box that we don't understand that God can do, that's a lot of hope. Because even when our common sense says there is no hope, there is because of God's uncommon sense and uncommon grace.

It's a little bit like blue cheese. Okay, stick with me on this analogy. It's a little bit like blue cheese. I love blue cheese, but blue cheese doesn't make sense because the blue is mold. That's a bad thing, right? And who invented this? How did blue cheese become a thing? Did someone at a fraternity house leave cheese on the counter for three months because that could totally happen, and then did some guy come along and go, "Oh, look covered with mold. Wonder what that tastes like? Hey, this is kind of good." It doesn't make any sense, but the bad somehow makes it good. Which brings me to the third step toward durable hope, and that is to trust the backwards irony of God, who uses defeat to bring victory. And of course the best example is the cross where the devil's most evil plan was to put God to death in the

person of Jesus on the cross, but God used that to pay the price for our sins and conquer death by raising Jesus three days later.

That's the backward irony of God. He compels the bad to yield good. God delivers the Israelites in the way they least wanted, being conquered, and yet somehow in the backwards irony of God, that actually yielded something good. I have a friend who his whole married life he and his wife struggled financially. They had a lot of student debt. They had jobs that didn't make a lot of money. Well then about a year ago, my friend's boss fired him because the boss said that my friend's competence made him feel incompetent, so he fired my friend. But my friend ended up getting a job that he loves that pays way more than he's ever made. And for the first time in their life, they're not rich by any stretch of the imagination.

They're not rich, but for the first time in their life, they have financial margin. Getting fired when you're financially struggling seems like a step backwards, but in the backwards irony of God, that was actually his deliverance. And he said to me a while back, "What do you think, should I send my old boss like a thank you card for firing me? Thanks for firing me, sucker. I'm so happy now that I don't have to work for you." God uses all the parts of our lives, even the bad for good. And I've told you that dozens of stories about people in the worst circumstances finding hope in God. A family that loses their house, but in the process become closer together so they don't mind so much that they lost it. A woman who loses a leg and eventually dies because of cancer, but in the process finds an incredible supernatural joy.

There is no good answer for the question of why is there suffering. There's no good answer for that. If you're an atheist, you say, "Well, stuff happens. Too bad. So sad for you." Every other religion in one way or another says, "Well, you must be suffering because you must have done something terrible to deserve it." But it's interesting when Jesus has asked the question why is there suffering, he never answers it. Instead, he gives three promises.

First, I am with you in it. If having a crucified God means nothing else, it means he understands what our pain feels like. We're not alone. Second promise, I will use it for good someday. Just like he used the cross. And third promise, I will put a stop to it all one day. Which we will see in the weeks ahead where God tells Habakkuk, "I will use the Babylonians to purge the Israelites of their sin, but I will also hold the Babylonians accountable for their sin. And justice will be done." Because to paraphrase Dr. King, among others, God always bends the long arc of history toward justice. Which brings us to the fourth step of durable hope, which is to hope in the character of God. Not in our circumstances, not in our ability to understand what God is doing, but hope in the character of God, hope in the character of God that is in God's nature to overrule evil and compel it to yield good.

That's just what God does. He can't help himself. He can't stop himself from forcing evil to yield good. That's just what he does. That's his character. And that is a durable hope because it is grounded in the unchanging character of God rather than the ever changing nature of our circumstances. And this is why we call this sermon series Nevertheless. As you've heard me say before, the theologian Karl Barth said that joy is the nevertheless of God. "I've been laid off. Nevertheless, I know that my God will provide so I will rejoice." "I have lost a loved one. Nevertheless, because of Jesus, I will see them again so I will rejoice." See, hope doesn't pretend that things aren't awful. Hope just says, "But nevertheless, God." And this is where my friend was right. That if there is any area of our life that is not glistening with hope, that area is under the influence of a lie. And the lie is that God is not at work working for good, and that lie blinds us to the nevertheless-ness of God.

But once you know God, once you know the nevertheless-ness of God, then from then on no matter what comes your way you realize that your enemy may just be your friend. Trust in the nevertheless-ness of God. That's the fifth step. Trust in the nevertheless-ness of God.

When I did college ministry, there was a young man I'll call Joe who attended my college group. And Joe was so shy. He couldn't talk to anybody. He hadn't done very well in high school, so he couldn't get into any four-year colleges. My college group was all Stanford students. That kind of he went because of his age, but it made him feel like he didn't fit in. And he'd frequently say, "If people knew who I was really they'd want me gone." Well, finally he told me what he told nobody else ever. That growing up, his dad had repeatedly told him that he was a disappointment as a son, and his dad would yell at him in public. Sometimes hit him very hard. This is a terrible kind of emotional physical abuse from his dad, and then eventually his parents got divorced. As a teenager, Joe then ran away, got involved in the rave scene which had a lot of drugs involved in it. Eventually, he came back home, and then six months later, his mother attempted suicide and nearly succeeded.

And when he went to visit her in the hospital, the first thing his mom said was "You just need to know, Joe, that the reason I tried to kill myself is because you ran away from home." Wow. On top of all of that, he had a sexual addiction that made him feel unlovable. When he got done telling me all of this, I said, "Man, Joe, I have so much respect for you because that took a lot of guts to tell me all of that. And I want you to know all of this does not define you. Your mom's attempted suicide, Joe, it wasn't your fault." And he said, "Well, but she said it was my fault." And I said, "That's her pain talking. It wasn't your fault." And he kept saying, "Yes, it is. It is my fault." And I just kept saying, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault." And finally, he started to cry and said, "Well, maybe not. But the drugs, the running away..." And I said, "Well, that is your fault, and you have to own that." And then he said, "The sexual addiction," and I said, "Jesus can free you from that. And there are people around you that are going to want to help you." He didn't believe me. But over the course of the next four years, four years, he started praying more honestly, just letting God have it. "Why did you give me such lousy parents? That wasn't fair." But out of that, he began to sense a hunger for a real father which drew him closer to God, his heavenly father. He joined a small group and made some friends and eventually told them about all of his past and his addiction and they didn't freak out. And suddenly those things didn't seem so shameful because nobody freaked out right there, out in the light, nobody freaked out, so he started to think, "Well, maybe I am lovable after all."

He started seeing a Christian therapist to work through some of his pain and his issues. He hadn't been able to get into college because of his high school grades so he went to community college, got his grades up for a couple of years, and then he decided to go be a missionary to one of the most wicked evil parts of the world, Cal Berkeley. I told him not to, but he did anyways. But there was still this sexual addiction. Well, one summer he took a camping trip with his friends to the Grand Canyon. Late one night, he got out of the tent and went to the Canyon's edge and prayed for three hours, and he said he just felt God's arm around him the whole time. And at the end of that, he picked up a rock and thought, "This rock symbolizes my sexual addiction," and he said, "Jesus, this is yours." And he threw it into the Grand Canyon as hard as he could.

And from then on whenever he was tempted to that addiction, he would just remember that feeling of Jesus' arms around him as he prayed and slowly over time the addiction went away. And then he went on to graduate school to become a professor because he wanted to help college students, get in relationship with college students, and help students who had very painful lives just like his painful life, and he knew that his past experience would make him a good mentor for those students. He let God have it. God's ways didn't make sense to him, but God used having such hurtful parents to draw Joe

closer to God, the perfect parent. And he used all that pain to prepare Joe for a future where he could help other hurting people. And in the meantime, Joe had friends, a counselor, me, and hope in the nevertheless-ness of God. Who didn't save him in spite of his pain, but saved him through his pain. So as you look at your life, COVID, division in our country, as you look at all of that, pray honestly and trust in the nevertheless backward irony character of God that where our common sense says it's hopeless. God's uncommon sense means that there is always hope not because of our circumstances or our abilities or this politician or that politician who's supposed to save us, but because of who God is and what God does. So that our song can be the same song that Habakkuk writes at the end of this book when he has found hope in God.

Habakkuk writes a song at the end of this book that says, "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 stall, nevertheless, 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 tread upon the heights. In spite of all that is so wrong, nevertheless, God."

Lord, we put our hope in you and in your unchanging character, in our personal lives, in our life as a nation. Lord, we know that you bring hope. We know that you overrule evil and compel it to yield good. And God, we ask that you would show us how to be a part of that, and to follow you in that. Lord, we trust in the nevertheless character of you and our hope is in you and you alone. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Please Read Habakkuk 1:1-11

1. What is the essence of Habakkuk's complaint to God? Why does it bother him so much?
2. What is God's answer, and why is it surprising?
3. What are some of the things you learn about God from this passage?
4. How has God used evil for good in your life?