



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

HIGH PLACES

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
May 31, 2009*

We're almost to summer, which means it's time to start thinking about summer vacation plans. There are all the usual places: Camping, Disneyland, your in-laws. But there's a new type of vacation out there that may be just what the doctor ordered. All kinds of stress relieving destinations are popping up around the world. I don't mean relaxing-by-the-pool kinds of spots. We're talking let-out-all-your-aggressions-and-break-something kinds of places.

Let me give you a mini-tour of your worldwide options that might cause you to be somewhat concerned about the emotional health of our society these days. For starters, you can now travel to Thunder Ranch in Cambodia where you can fire through 30 rounds with a fully automatic AK-47 or some other assault weapon. For only \$100, you can top off your vacation by launching a shell from an M79 grenade launcher.

Or you might want to head over to Italy to check out Gladiator School in Rome. You'll learn the basic moves of self defense and how to chop off somebody's head, then get your chance to suit up and hack away at your opponent. With a wooden sword, of course.

And while you're in Europe, you can make your way over to Spain for La Tomatina – a giant free-for-all food fight with the ripest truckload of tomatoes you ever did see. You can pelt complete strangers to your heart's content and get your daily dose of lycopene in the process.

But my favorite location in the list is right here in the U.S. No passport needed: You can catch a plane down to San Diego, where you can visit Sarah's Smash Shack. For just \$35, they'll give you a stack of beautifully etched glass plates that you can throw at a wall with all your might. You can even buy glass photo frames and put a picture of that special someone in it, then hurl it to its destruction.

It's funny, but it's a telling sign of the times we're living in that people have that much stress and anxiety built up inside that they will pay good money to do something totally destructive. And it might feel therapeutic for a little while, but it won't begin to touch the deeper need to handle the pressures and cares of life.

Our friend Habakkuk entertained a few violent thoughts of his own. He had these visions of God clobbering his enemies. He knew the feeling. For the past two Sundays, we've been looking at what he had to say about life in tough times. His way of working through it was to take his hardest questions to God and keep asking even when the answers didn't look the way he wanted or didn't show up as soon as he hoped.

We've wrestled with some tough issues in this series. Today we're wrapping up our time with this short but powerful book, and I'm happy to say we end up on a high note. Because Habakkuk is in a good, healthy spot by the conclusion. His chosen form of therapy was effective, because he walks away rested and refreshed, and with a renewed confidence in who God is.

Let's dive in to chapter 3.

Habakkuk 3

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth.

LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD.

Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.

This is a great prayer. Habakkuk has been persistently going back to God over and over again with all his questions, and he comes back one more time with a final request.

But this one is different. He's not lodging a complaint. He's not asking for explanations. He acknowledges who God is and asks him to act.

I know a retired pastor named George Gulian who is now in his 80s. A few years ago, he told me his prayers have gotten simpler as he has gotten older, and that now they're mostly "God, please help" at the beginning of the day and "God, thank you" at the end.

That's what all good prayer really boils down to – "God please help" and "God, thank you", and I think that's what makes this one of Habakkuk's so powerful and applicable to us. He starts out with the Thank You. He recognizes all God's great activity from the past. He has in mind all the stories from the Bible. God rescuing Noah. God saving Moses. God helping Joseph. God bringing his people out of Egypt and parting the Red Sea and bringing down the walls of Jericho and fighting enemy armies. There were some fantastic miracles.

Remembering God's track record is a great way to put yourself in a thankful place. There are so many examples of his activity in history. God knows that's true, which is why over and over in Scripture he encourages his people to look back and retell the old stories. They reconnect us with God's character and strength.

I have an old friend who didn't grow up in a Christian family. Her parents weren't the praying type. But when she was little, someone once told her that the best way to pray was to thank God for five things and then ask him for one. That stuck with her, and now as an adult, she said she still tries to follow that. And when she does, she says usually by

the time she gets to the thing she was going to ask for, it doesn't seem nearly as important.

God thank you. I'm in awe of what you've done, Habakkuk says. Anybody here have something big they remember God doing that they can shout out a big thank you for?

Not only did the past make Habakkuk thankful – it gives him a greater sense of expectation as he makes his own petition. He knows what God is capable of and believes he can do something similar again.

God, please, Habakkuk says. Please do something. There are three elements of his prayer that I think are good guidance for our own prayers, things we can always ask of God.

God, please be personal.

When Karin and I first moved up to Washington from California, we were kind of depressed. We had no friends, it was gloomy and cloudy, our apartment had a smell. We needed some fun, so we decided to go to the premier of Robin Hood. It was back when SouthCenter mall had the two huge theaters, so we went there to watch it.

When we got there, we began to have some serious questions about what planet we had moved to. Because there were all these people who had also come to the premier, dressed in medieval garb. Ladies with the pointy hats and long dresses. Men in tights. They talked to you in bad English accents and wanted you to interact with them like they were from Sherwood Forest. It was quite the bizarre costume party.

You felt like these people desperately wanted to be living in a different time and place. They talked about it. They dressed like it. They were living like it was true in their minds. But wanting to be part of Robin's band of merry men from ancient history wasn't doing much to help them connect with present day realities.

Remembering God's history is great, but it's not a place we can live. Because no matter how much we think about it, we're still here. And the really good news is that God is here as well – he's not stuck back in Bible times. Habakkuk wanted to see God in the present tense, doing something in his life and his time.

Being a Christian is not just a matter of becoming familiar with Bible stories, it is opening up your own story here and now to God's saving work. It's not a matter of rehashing ancient miracles like we're living some Christmas pageant -- it's inviting Christ to do the same sorts of things here and now within your own heart.

It's much easier and safer to keep God at arm's length. We'd sometimes rather think of him as separated from us by thousands of years. But if we're going to pray like Habakkuk, it will be in as personal a way as we can to ask God to work directly and specifically in our current situation.

God, please be powerful.

I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day. Habakkuk is talking about the big deeds. The awesome, jaw dropping, life changing kind of deeds. And that's what he's asking God to do again.

Do you ever get embarrassed by your own prayers? I do. Karin and I try to pray together at night, which sounds like a great spiritual bonding experience. But half the time, I'm so tired that my prayers are for really lame things, like that God will help us get some rest or have a good day the next day. What kind of prayers are those?

Not that there's anything wrong with asking for sleep if you need it. You can ask God for anything. But I find I drop down to these safe, meaningless requests that don't stretch my faith at all, let alone tax God's abilities.

Meghan sent us an email this week with a quote from Alan Redpath that was saying this very same thing. He said, "Much of our praying is just asking God to bless some folks that are ill, and to keep us plugging along. But prayer is not merely prattle; it is warfare."

If I'm going to take the time to approach God, I want it to be with bold and courageous requests. I want to pray prayers that count. I always come back to that story of the preacher John Knox, who was overheard praying on his knees, "God, give me Scotland or I die!" He was so consumed with a passion for the good news of Jesus Christ that he felt he would rather perish than see any man or woman or child in Scotland go through life without knowing their Savior.

Ask for the big things. If you're wanting God to renew his deeds in our day, what could that look like for you? "God, save my marriage." "God, work in my neighborhood." "God, give me hope." "God, deliver us from the evil one." "God, rescue my friend."

Habakkuk asked for the big things. But then he makes this very interesting statement:

In wrath remember mercy.

God, please be merciful.

As he is asking for a powerful intervention, Habakkuk has not forgotten how this conversation started in the first place. There was a whole lot of evil breaking out everywhere in Judah. God's people weren't living like they were God's people. So Habakkuk knows as he is asking for God to do something amazing, it's not because he has a right to ask it. The population has kind of forfeited that.

All he can do is throw himself on the mercy of God, hoping that even though God is holy and just, he will also be compassionate and forgiving as he brings judgment.

Some years ago, a friend of mine got a nice bonus at his job, back in the days where bonuses were to be had, and he wanted to share a pretty generous chunk of it with another

guy he knew who was going through a rough patch financially. But he didn't want there to be any awkwardness between them, so he had me help with delivery so it would be anonymous, which is one of my favorite things to do.

Not too long after that though, the person who had received the gift, came to me all hurt and offended that the friend who had done the giving didn't buy some product from his business. Apparently he was doing his shopping elsewhere. He thought this guy should be showing support for him, especially since he knew he was struggling. I couldn't say anything, but I wanted to scream, "You have no idea how supportive he's been to you! That little purchase you wanted him to make is nothing compared to how he has already helped you."

It made me think about how I act in prayer. We can so easily come across like God owes us something, like he hasn't done anything for us already, demanding that he treat us better or do something big for us. But he's already done way more than we even realize, and we are called to throw ourselves on his mercy. We're coming with nothing. We don't deserve to have his power displayed on our behalf – we depend on his grace. And he's already heaped it on us as it is.

God, please be personal. Please speak into my specific situation here and now. God please be powerful. I'm asking you for the big things. God please be merciful. You have every right to be angry with me, but I'm counting on your forgiveness. Those are the ingredients of a healthy prayer life. If we can remember those three elements, it will shift our expectations, strengthen our faith and make us more open to what God has in store for us.

As Habakkuk prays that way, God responds. And in that response, we can gain some clarity about how God will respond to us.

God doesn't immediately act on the request and set everything right again. But he does do one thing for Habakkuk. **He gives a new vision of himself.** It's so vivid and descriptive, I'd like to read through it as a unit.

*God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran.
Selah.*

*His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth.
His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden.*

*Plague went before him; pestilence followed his steps.
He stood, and shook the earth; he looked, and made the nations tremble.
The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed. His ways are eternal.
I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish.
Were you angry with the rivers, O LORD? Was your wrath against the streams?
Did you rage against the sea when you rode with your horses*

and your victorious chariots?

You uncovered your bow, you called for many arrows. Selah.

*You split the earth with rivers; the mountains saw you and writhed.
Torrents of water swept by; the deep roared and lifted its waves on high.
Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows,
at the lightning of your flashing spear.*

*In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations.
You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one.
You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness,
you stripped him from head to foot. Selah.*

*With his own spear you pierced his head when his warriors stormed out to scatter us,
gloating as though about to devour the wretched who were in hiding.
You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters.
I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled.*

Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.

We went and saw the new Night at the Museum movie, where all the exhibits magically come to life. There's one scene toward the end where these three junior high boys are walking past the dinosaur skeleton as it moves its head from side to side. One of the boys says, "Yeah, these animatronics are so lame. They're not lifelike at all." Then the dinosaur gets right down in their faces and lets out this incredible roar that blasts their hair back and sends them running for cover.

I don't think Habakkuk was feeling as cynical about God, but this vision blasted his hair back and left him weak in the knees. He was not anticipating the enormity of it.

Remember the words from The Battle Hymn of the Republic? "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on." This is the same scenario – a picture of God's truth on the march. God is pictured as this powerful warrior, arriving at last to defeat his enemies.

And it's a terrifying picture. All the forces of nature – hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, wind – it's the kind of scene that makes you think, "Be careful what you wish for." Habakkuk had asked for God's response, and when he sees what that involves, it overwhelms him with its ferocity and magnitude.

Why did God show him this? It's not a physical battle scene that took place between God and the Babylonians. What good did this image do for Habakkuk? For me, the key

comes in the middle of the vision. We see God thundering across the earth, and Habakkuk tells us why:

You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one.

The only scene big enough to fit Habakkuk's awesome vision is Christ's death and resurrection. That's where God delivered his people AND saved his anointed one, Christ, by bringing him back from the dead. That's when the earth quaked, the sky grew dark and the temple curtain tore in half. Cosmic forces clashed like never before as God pierced the darkness with everything he had.

Making a way to save us is what most fully brought out God's biggest fire power. When Scripture talks about God's creative process, look at the description:

Psalm 8:3

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers...*

Finger work. That's light, easy stuff for God. Not a problem. But when Isaiah talks about God working on salvation, watch how he describes it:

Isaiah 52:10

*GOD has rolled up his sleeves.
All the nations can see his holy, muscled arm.
Everyone, from one end of the earth to the other,
sees him at work, doing his salvation work.*

God's power is demonstrated at the highest level in salvation. And just to hammer the point home specifically, look at what Paul told the Ephesians:

Ephesians 1:18-20

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms...

When he is given this incredible vision, Habakkuk doesn't know when or where it's coming. But he knows one thing for certain: All of God is brought to bear on the work of rescuing his people. There can be no more doubt in his mind that God cares or is powerful enough to deal with the situation. Habakkuk has seen for himself the wonder of wonders – the God of the universe riding out in unstoppable strength to deliver.

When we don't have answers to our why questions, when we're beaten down by life, one of the things we need most is a bigger vision of Jesus and the incredible lengths God has

already gone to to come to our aid. There can be no doubt of his love and power when we catch a glimpse of the extreme measures he's taken on our behalf.

It's this new vision of God that enables Habakkuk to stop and say,

Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.

Now that he has a bigger, truer vision of God, he can wait. He even goes further:

*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 stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.*

Everything on it is a product of human cultivation. You can farm or grow all those things. So their absence represents human failure. It represents a loss of success. It represents a loss of control, since all the effort put into the growing didn't result in a harvest. It represented the loss of provision. Where would food and clothing come from now? It represented a loss of wealth and security.

It's not just that there's no food – there's no NOTHING. When everything the world views as important has been stripped away, Habakkuk says, it's still okay. More than that – he's rejoicing.

It seems not only did God give Habakkuk a new vision, **he gave him a true center of joy.**

Instead of in his circumstances, Habakkuk was finding joy in God himself. What an incredibly freeing prospect – to no longer have your happiness tied to things that can't last or satisfy. The purest and simplest truth of Habakkuk is that God is enough, no matter what.

A.B. Simpson wrote a hymn with these words:

*Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord.
Once it was the feeling, now it is his word.
Once the gift I wanted, now the Giver own.
Once I sought for healing, now himself alone.*

Wouldn't you like to be at that point? It took both resolution and resignation on Habakkuk's part. Resolution to keep believing in spite of how things looked, and resignation to the fact that the external things weren't what mattered. To find joy in God means to give up the search for it elsewhere.

Fortunately, we don't even have to exert this huge effort on our own to do it, because look at the next verse:

The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

God not only gives us a new vision and a truer center of joy, **he gives us better feet to get there.**

Did you happen to catch any of the Planet Earth series when it was on a while back? Absolutely breathtaking images of God's creation. It gives you so much appreciation for God's fantastically beautiful work.

One of my favorite segments was about mountain goats. I loved the way the camera started way back with this view of a sheer mountain cliff, then slowly moved toward it. As it gets nearer, you can make out these animals standing on the side with barely any ground under their feet.

Every time I see one of them, I'm just amazed. Mountain goats like to live on mountains that are at a 60 degree angle. They may not sound that steep, until you realize the average ski slope is 35 to 40 degrees. They live above the treeline where there's hardly anything but rock.

They look like they are all wrong for being climbers. But God has given them amazing feet. They have cloven hooves that spread apart while climbing. They have a pad in the center that is sticky on the bottom like a good rock climbing shoe. And they have what are called "dewpaws" on the back of their foot – additional little grabbers to give them a secure hold.

You go, "Why would they live on such impossible terrain?" The answer is simple: Their enemies can't get them there. Up on the slopes, they are safe from wolves and bears that want to eat them for breakfast.

King David once wrote,

2 Samuel 22:32

*For who is God besides the LORD?
And who is the Rock except our God?*

Here's the bottom line: When the fig tree has no figs, and the vines have no grapes, when there are no crops and no animals in the stall, all we're left with is the bare rock underneath. That looks like an impossible slope to live on. If we've got none of the trappings we come to depend on for security and health and safety, how will we ever make it?

We make it because God has given us feet that know how to stand on only him. He's built us to be able to live by faith and not by sight. Why would he do that? Because when we reach that point, when we're no longer dependent on all the normal earthly

support systems, we're safe from the enemy. The devil wants to eat us for breakfast, but there's no way he can reach us when we're standing on the heights of God.

In the face of having nothing, Habakkuk discovered he had something: He had God. And that was enough, no matter what.

Put yourself in God's place for a moment and ask yourself: What does my asking look like? What does he hear when I pray? Is it preceded by thankfulness? Am I making my requests personal and not keeping God at arm's length? Am I asking for the big things? And am coming humbly, leaning on his mercy?

And then, from my own vantage point, what haven't I been expecting from God that I can? Is my view and vision of God too small to sustain me? Where am I looking for joy? Do I need a new confidence that God has given me the right feet, that he's built me to live in the high places?

God thank you. God please help. He's always enough, no matter what. He'll give us everything we need so that, as Oswald Chambers puts it, we can obey him with glad, reckless joy.