

THROUGH JESUS WE HAVE JOY**Habakkuk 3:17-18; 1 Peter 1:8-9**

Intro: I don't know if this is an apocryphal story or not, but it's been around for a long time, and for good reason, it makes a good point.

I don't know who the story teller is, but he was obviously in the communications tower business and, since I have a friend who climbs towers for a living, it makes it special for me. Here it is.

Michael is the kind of guy you love to hate. He is always in a good mood and always has something positive to say. When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply, "If I were any better, I would be twins!" He was a natural motivator. If an employee was having a bad day, Michael was there telling the employee how to look on the positive side of the situation.

Seeing this style really made me curious, so one day I went up to Michael and asked him, "I don't get it! You can't be a positive person all of the time. How do you do it?" Michael replied, "Each morning I wake up and say to myself, you have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or ... you can choose to be in a bad mood. I choose to be in a good mood. Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or ... I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or... I can point out the positive side of life. I choose the positive side of life.

"Yeah, right, it's not that easy," I protested. "Yes, it is," Michael said. "Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or bad mood. The bottom line: It's your choice how you live your life."

I reflected on what Michael said. Soon hereafter, I left the Tower Industry to start my own business. We lost touch, but I often thought about him when I made a choice about life instead of reacting to it. Several years later, I heard that Michael was involved in a serious accident, falling some 60 feet from a communications tower. After 18 hours of surgery and weeks of intensive care, Michael was released from the hospital with rods placed in his back.

I saw Michael about six months after the accident. When I asked him how he was, he replied. "If I were any better, I'd be twins. Wanna see my scars?"

I declined to see his wounds, but I did ask him what had gone through his mind as the accident took place. "The first thing that went through my mind was the well-being of my soon to be born daughter," Michael replied. "Then, as I lay on the ground, I remembered that I had two choices: I could choose to live or ... I could choose to die. I chose to live."

"Weren't you scared? Did you lose consciousness?" I asked.

Michael continued, "...the paramedics were great. They kept telling me I was going to be fine. But when they wheeled me into the ER and I saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses, I got really scared. In their eyes, I read "he's a dead man." and I knew I needed to take action."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Well, there was a big burly nurse shouting questions at me," said Michael. "She asked if I was allergic to anything. "Yes, I replied." The doctors and nurses stopped working as they waited for my reply. I took a deep breath and yelled, "Gravity."

Over their laughter, I told them, "I am choosing to live. Operate on me as if I am alive, not dead."

Michael lived, thanks to the skill of his doctors, but also because of his amazing attitude. I learned from him that every day we have the choice to live fully. Attitude, after all, is everything. *"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."*

Matthew 6:34

After all, today is the tomorrow you worried about yesterday.

Now this message isn't about how to survive a 60 foot fall by thinking positive thoughts, but it **IS** about choosing joy in the midst of hardship and tragedy and bad news. It is a message that is like Michael in that we choose joy and hang on to it for dear life.

We thought 2020 was a rough year with COVID and everything it brought, but 2023 has been a challenge in different ways. Our church family here at ABC has experienced a lot of hospital time, illness, and we've lost

a number of our dear ones. But we have joy despite what life throws at us. In fact, at the funerals of those ABCers I have used 1 Peter 1:3-9 as a way of encouraging the ones who have lost a loved one. The passage ends with *Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* 1 Peter 1:8-9 (ESV). As the people of God, we have joy that is inexpressible.

As the people of God we also rejoice with the prophet Habakkuk that when EVERYTHING goes wrong, and off the rails, we will take joy in the God of our salvation.

This is uniquely Christian. This is what makes people scratch their heads in wonder as they look at Ron & Bonnie Graves and see their hope and peace despite Ron's terminal diagnosis. Is Bonnie dancing in the street, NOPE! She is very sad. Her dear husband of 53 years is dying. But she has joy.

So instead of dancing in the street, she is witnessing in the street. Listen to portions of an email I got from her on Thursday:

The Lord gave me an unusual meeting today. A student whom I had not seen in 17 years walked by my house while I happened to be raking leaves. He lives in Bali, Indonesia, and has married an Indonesian. He was an outstanding Latin student but he had such a sad home life. I tried to encourage him and offer him compassion when he was my student. He said he remembered that.

We talked for about a half hour and he shared his life with me. It was wonderful to see him once again! I said that I wanted him to be one of my forever friends in Jesus. We talked about the Lord and his interest in traveling and history led us into discussing the powerful impact Christ has had on civilization.

Please, pray for Josh. I so hope he will meet the Savior. What is strange is that his name came to my mind just a few days ago. I told him that. I believe the Lord prepares us to for divine encounters. I hope Jesus gives me many more opportunities to witness to His amazing love and sacrifice. I love sharing the Gospel. I so look forward to seeing Christ. May you, also, have many opportunities to share the Great News of Salvation.

Bonnie Graves

Bonnie has the joy of the Lord and her greatest joy is serving him and telling others about him. Even when she is sad, she has joy.

Know why? It's in what Jeffrey read to us . . .

We have joy because God is unchanging

- Pastor David Guzik says of Habakkuk, *"He knew that this God of majesty and power is not diminished because man faces difficult trials. Sometimes we think, "If God is so great and powerful, how come I am going through a hard time?"*

Speaking of attitude, Habakkuk knew this was the wrong question and the wrong attitude. Instead, he said, even if EVERYTHING is going wrong, and a lot, if not all of it, is because we may have brought it on ourselves, we will still rejoice. This seems crazy, but really it's Christian.

- We might not see the way, but we know who knows the way out and we rejoice because he never changes.
- Leo Stevens-Hodge, referring to Habakkuk, says "The prophet has great faith even in the midst of loss: "Though everything which, humanly speaking, supports life may fail, yet he can now rejoice in the Lord. Personal faith is the practical answer to life's discontents." Personal faith is the answer to tragedy and pain and loss.
- Once again, F. B. Meyer says it the best, *"If all God's gifts failed, we would still possess the Giver."* What Habakkuk realized was that God shows up even more when, in Meyer's words, *" . . . the fields and the farmsteads are bare."* When everything else is gone – our vision is clearer, when we have our eyes on the Lord.
- So, even though everything is destroyed and lost, the people of God will rejoice in the Lord. Hardships must be endured but, truly, it's only temporary, because God's plan is perfect. Until delivery comes, we rely on the Lord and we rejoice in him who is the God of our salvation.
- As I said a bit ago, we see clearly when we have our eyes on God. And so . . .

We have joy because we have real life

- Habakkuk didn't have Norman Vincent Peale's power of positive thinking books on his shelf. He knew all about the barren fig tree and the empty cattle stalls. He accepted their reality. Instead, he saw them for what they were and remembered that God was greater than them all. In a VeggieTales song Junior Asparagus sang,

*God is bigger, bigger than the boogie man
He's bigger than Godzilla or the monsters on TV
Oh, God is bigger, bigger than the boogie man
He's watching, watching, watching
Watching out for you and me . . .*

The reality is God is watching and we can rejoice because of it.

- James H. Gailey, Jr. writes, "*Habakkuk asserts his own joyful dependence upon the God of his salvation. When first he felt helplessness and terror, his spirit is quickly calmed as he determines to wait quietly for the day of trouble to come upon the invaders. He returns to the thought of God who is a present help in trouble. Though the economy of his land is ruined by the devastation of the enemy, Habakkuk can conclude, "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." The real and vital presence of God gives him strength and a sense of triumph which goes beyond the patience and perseverance called for by the declaration, "The righteous shall live by his faith."*"
- Habakkuk knew what Peter was talking about hundreds of years before the apostle wrote about . . .

Joy that is beyond the power of words

- In 1 Peter 1:8 the word translated "*joy that is inexpressible*" is the only time it occurs in the New Testament. I use this passage for funerals and I use it today, because it describes, in the words of Wayne Grudem, "*a joy so profound as to be beyond the power of words to express.*" And it is because it's a heavenly joy. The angels sang of joy to the world, and what they sang about was, as one writer describes it "*no ordinary, earth-born joy.*" As I say over and over, this is uniquely Christian.
- Peter was writing to Christ Followers who were being persecuted. And where he had had the blessing of seeing, talking to, and walking with Jesus Christ in the flesh, he was pointing out the extra blessing of those, who, though tested and tried, had not seen Christ, but they loved him without having seen him. They believed in him, and even under trials they experienced joy beyond their power to express it. The outcome, the end product, of their faith was that ultimate complete salvation of their souls.
- What a promise!!!! No wonder their joy was beyond words. Their faith in an unseen Lord brought life, and not just life, but life eternal. Ray Summers puts it this way, "*This life from God is life, NOW. It is life, BY GOD'S MERCY. It is life BY BIRTH. It is life which looks to life. It is life in union with the living Christ. It is life which is secure in God's power. It is life which is to be consummated at the coming of Christ.*"

Conclusion: I think this is a good place to draw this talk to a close. On the Advent Sunday of Joy we can celebrate a uniquely Christian phenomenon – Joy beyond words. In the midst of pain, loss, despair, and tears, we can have joy. We can choose joy because of the promise that we have of eternal life. And, it's not just for us. The angels said they brought . . . *good news of great joy that will be for all the people.* Luke 2:10b. All the people. We need to share that joy with the world. It's the truth that, through Jesus, our Savior, we have JOY! Amen.