

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

^{1:1} The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. ² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? ³ Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴ So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous - therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

^{2:1} I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. ² Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. ³ For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. ⁴ Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

Commentary

Background: *This book is one of the twelve Minor Prophets, minor mostly in that they are all short books. The book begins with a dialogue between the prophet and God which seeks to discover why Israelites suffer from foreign invaders, and in which God announces that he will deal with the wicked at the proper time, and will vindicate the faithful. It is likely that Habakkuk was written when the Babylonians were a world power, probably between 608 and 598 BC.*

An "oracle" is a message of doom, usually pronounced against foreign nations, but here it includes the judgment that awaits God's people. 1:1-2:5 is a dialogue between the prophet and God. From the text, it seems that Habakkuk wrote when Babylonian armies were ravaging Judah, before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, but the problem is universal.

In vv. 1-4, Habakkuk asks God: *why do you neither listen nor act?* "Violence" is being done to us; our basic human rights are being violated. The state is in confusion and near anarchy ("law becomes slack ... justice never prevails ...", v. 4). The "wicked", fellow Jews or foreigners have taken over! God answers in vv. 5-11: rather than promising stability, he says he is working through the "Chaldeans" (that is, the Babylonians), a people known for their ferocity and savagery. "Their justice" (v. 7) is their own (not God's); "their own might is their god!" (v. 11).

The prophet now asks: aren't you Israel's God? Surely you have marked this enemy for judgment, so why allow this misery to happen to your people? Doesn't using such wicked people as your agents go against your very essence? (v. 13) The enemy is merciless and self-serving, like someone who catches helpless fish (v. 15); he worships his own achievement, in immense pride (v. 16). Are you and the enemy intent on "destroying nations"? (v. 17) Like a sentinel on a city wall, Habakkuk awaits God's reply (2:1). God responds: make my message "plain" (2:2) so all hear it: my justice will come at "the appointed time" (2:3), in the "end" times. But God's time may not be human time, so "wait for it". "The proud" (2:4, the enemy), those who are self-sufficient, don't endure ("their spirit is not right"), but those who trust in God, "the righteous", continue to "live", to keep the faith, even in these difficult times. God has a plan for the future: the faithful will be rewarded, and the wicked punished.

Reflection

People of faith speak of their trust in God in many ways: He's got the whole world in his hands; Let go and let God. "In God We Trust" is even on our currency. But when we are faced with personal or social calamity, as the Israelites were, would we believe a prophet such as Habakkuk, who tells us that God has "a vision for the appointed time"? How has your trust in God been tested?

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

^{1:1} Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing. ⁴ Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

^{1:11} To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, ¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Commentary

Background: *Perhaps this epistle was written to combat the idea that the end of the era has come, something the Thessalonian Christians have learnt either verbally from a false teacher or from a letter purporting to be written by Paul. It says that certain events will occur before Christ comes again - and these have not happened yet, and may be some time in occurring. Scholars do not believe it was written by Paul, although the structure of this letter is similar to 1 Thessalonians, which is genuinely Paul's.*

Verse 1 indicates that “Paul” is the principal author of this letter; “Silvanus, and Timothy” share in writing it. (“Silvanus”, called *Silas* in Acts, worked with Paul in Thessalonica and Corinth. “Timothy” joined him at Lystra, in central Asia Minor.) Paul’s wishes for the “church”, the community of people of God called to intimate fellowship with Christ, are both Greek (“grace”, v. 2) and Jewish (“peace”); they are from the Father and the Son. Paul gives thanks for the Christians at Thessalonica on two counts:

- their growth in “faith” (v. 3, trust) and love – for faith works itself out in love; and
- their example to other churches of remaining faithful in spite of sufferings (probably ostracism) (v. 4).

That they do *endure* is an indication (“evidence”, v. 5) that, at the end of the era, God will find them worthy of eternal life. (Suffering is not a prerequisite for entry into the Kingdom.) When Christ comes again (“is revealed ...”, v. 7), God will cause those who hurt you to suffer (v. 6); he will grant “relief” (v. 7, rest) to those who have suffered. (God’s appearing to people is accompanied by “fire”, v. 8, in Isaiah 66:15-16.)

In general, those who have never heard of God, and those who have heard but refused to accept the gospel, will suffer “eternal [unending] destruction” (v. 9, the opposite of eternal life), forever separated from Christ. When Christ comes again, he will raise the faithful (“saints”, v. 10) to be with him. With this objective (“to this end”, v. 11), Paul continually petitions God in prayer

- to make the Christians at Thessalonica worthy of being called by God, and
- to support to completion (through the power of, “the name of our Lord Jesus”, v. 12) whatever intentions (“resolve”, v. 11) and acts of trust in God they initiate. Thus Christ’s godliness (goodness) will be seen in them, and theirs in Christ. This will be achieved through the Father’s and the Son’s “grace” (v. 12), his gift of love.

Reflection

Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonian church, because, he writes, “your faith is growing abundantly.” When we witness that faith of another “growing abundantly,” are we quick to give thanks for God for his gift? Or does our own spiritual pride sometimes keep us from rejoicing in the spiritual growth of others?

Luke 19:1-10

^{19:1} He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble

and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Commentary

In Ch. 18, Jesus was asked by a rich "ruler" (18:18) what he must do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus told him to keep the Ten Commandments, he said that he has done so since his youth. Jesus then adds: "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (18:22). The man finds it too hard to give up his wealth.

Now we meet Zacchaeus, a "tax farmer" working for the Romans and therefore also rich – a despised person and an outcast from Jewish society. He is curious about Jesus (v. 3). Jesus senses his presence up in a "sycamore tree" (v. 4). He even invites himself to Zacchaeus' home! (God extends hospitality to all people.) The crowd grumbles (v. 7), for Jesus has crossed social and religious barriers: good people don't associate with sinners. Zacchaeus, unlike the rich ruler, is prepared to give generously, and to recompense anyone he has defrauded, as the Law requires. (The Law required that a stolen sheep be replaced by "four", v. 8, sheep.) "Salvation has come" (v. 9) to Zacchaeus' house, indeed to his whole household: Jesus chose to stay with him, Zacchaeus accepted him and has changed his life. *Being saved* is the same spiritual experience as *inheriting eternal life* and *entering the kingdom of God*. In spite of the crowd's grumbling, thinking him "lost" (v. 10), the tax (or toll) collector is a "son of Abraham" (v. 9), a true member of God's people.

Reflection

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see."

Perhaps Zacchaeus is more than just a "wee little man" from this Sunday school song. It took a big person to admit his guilt as this tax collector did, and to offer to pay back his ill-gotten gains. What do you think made Zacchaeus change his mind and heart about his lifestyle?

^{119:137} You are righteous, O LORD, and your judgments are right.

¹³⁸ **You have appointed your decrees in righteousness and in all faithfulness.**

¹³⁹ My zeal consumes me because my foes forget your words.

¹⁴⁰ **Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it.**

¹⁴¹ I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.

¹⁴² **Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and your law is the truth.**

¹⁴³ Trouble and anguish have come upon me, but your commandments are my delight.

¹⁴⁴ **Your decrees are righteous forever; give me understanding that I may live.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.