

Habakkuk 3:17-18

“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 rejoice in God my Savior

To those who have been truly blessed,

I still remember one of my first lessons in thanksgiving. It happened at the dinner table, on no special occasion. After running around outside for a couple of hours, I came to the table, absolutely starving and eager to eat. What did I see on the table? Liver! There I was with an empty stomach, looking forward to a good meal, and instead I saw (and so vividly smelled) liver. I couldn't keep my response to myself. “Yuck. We have to eat that?” To which my parents said, “You should be thankful that you have food to eat. There are people in Africa who are truly starving who would love to be able to eat what you get to eat.” When I suggested that we could mail it to the people in Africa if they really wanted it, I was sent to my room. I learned a lesson that day — “be thankful for whatever you see on your plate . . . or else.” Our theme for this Thanksgiving sermon will help us see what true thanksgiving is all about.

Theme: Find True Joy and Thanks In The Unseen!

- 1. Earthly joy may disappear**
- 2. Spiritual joy lasts forever**

Genuine thankfulness, of course, doesn't arise from fear of being sent to your room. Some people might suggest that the key to true thankfulness is opening your eyes to see all that you have. Look in your refrigerator and you'll see reasons for thankfulness. Look on the table this afternoon and you'll see how good your life really is. Look at the family gathered around you or the people that you have had in your life and you'll grow in thankfulness. Look in your home and see the computers, televisions, books, furniture — all the comforts of home — and you can't help but be thankful. Look at the roof over your head when many are living on the street; look at the job you have when many are out of work; look at the wealth you have compared to many in the world. Just open your eyes and you'll see the many reasons you have to be thankful.

Do you recognize the potential problem with that approach? If thankfulness arises from what you see, what happens when what you can see is taken away? And it may well be. Think of what happened to Job. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East. He had it all — significant wealth, a large family, and a great future. In one day, he lost all of his wealth and all of his family, except his wife. He even lost his health a little while later. If what you see is truly the key to thankfulness, then there may be times when you have no reason for thankfulness. Yet God says, **“Give thanks in all circumstances.”**

If we were to read through the first couple of chapters of Habakkuk, you will quickly get the impression that Habakkuk was something less than thankful. Habakkuk had learned to base his thanksgiving on what he saw. The problem was that what he saw led to him complaining, and not being full of thanksgiving. Listen to the first chapter of Habakkuk, verse 2: **“How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save?”** When Habakkuk looked at what was happening in Judah around 625BC, he was not impressed. People were acting like they could do whatever they wanted to do. If they wanted to take what rightly belonged to another, they did, and here was the worst part: nothing happened to them (they weren't struck down by lightning or punished in any way). If they wanted to end the life of someone who irritated them, they did, and nothing happened to them. What

Habakkuk saw gave him reason to complain, not to be full of thankfulness, because the Lord wasn't doing anything about the horrible rebellion among the people.

The Lord graciously answered Habakkuk's complaint. In verse 5 of chapter 1, he said, **"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."** In other words, "Habakkuk, just because your eyes tell you that I don't know what's going on or I don't care what happens, doesn't mean that's the truth. I will see to it that the people of Judah learn that there are consequences for rebellion. I will have the Babylonians take them into captivity and destroy Jerusalem."

Habakkuk responds to the Lord's words in the final verses of chapter 1. In short, his response was, "Say what? With all due respect, you are the holy God. How in the world could a holy God employ in his service a nation that is more corrupt than Judah? It doesn't fit. That would actually be encouraging Babylon in her godless ways. It would be sending the message to other nations that they need not acknowledge you and yet they can still have great success and great wealth." What Habakkuk saw did not give him reason for thankfulness, but reason for complaint.

Again the Lord graciously answered Habakkuk's complaint. The Lord said, in essence, "Just because your eyes tell you that I don't know how to handle the situation doesn't mean anything. Rest assured that I will destroy the Babylonians for their arrogance. I will make it perfectly clear that those who worship wood and stone don't stand a chance against my almighty power." At the end of chapter 2, the Lord makes his final point to Habakkuk: **"But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."** The Lord is not to be questioned or doubted, because he cannot and will not make a mistake. The one who formed the world and continually sustains it knows exactly what to do in every situation. Human beings are in no position to offer counsel or advice. They are to be silent before him.

Habakkuk did not, in the first two chapters of this book, give thanks. All because he was considering only what he could see with his eyes. What he saw gave him reason to be anxious. It gave him reason to worry and complain. What you see in your life may have the same effect on you. Because you live in a sinful world, surrounded by sinful people, and carrying a sinful flesh with you, you will find reason to complain. You may see your child die suddenly and unexpectedly. You may see a malignant tumor on your MRI. You may see a pink slip on your desk or your house destroyed by fire. You may see your spouse be unfaithful to you or a friend betray you. You may see your stock values plummet, your bank account in the red, your house in foreclosure, your car repossessed.

If your thankfulness is dependent on what you see, you will not always give thanks. You will instead find many reasons to complain. It is reflecting not on what is seen but on what is unseen that leads a person to give thanks in all circumstances. Habakkuk learned that lesson. Let's say that more clearly. The Lord taught Habakkuk that lesson. Proof is found in the closing verses of this book which are the words for our text today: **"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."**

Habakkuk looked ahead to the fulfillment of the Lord's prophecy concerning Babylon. He knew what the Babylonians would do to Judah. They would take from the people everything they could lay their hands on — the sheep and the cattle — to make themselves rich. They would trample the land and destroy it. His eyes would tell him, "There is no reason to give thanks. There is reason only to complain."

What would Habakkuk do when all visible reasons for thankfulness had been taken away? **"Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior."** In the unchanging Lord who always keeps his promises, he found reason to rejoice. In the Lord who desires that all live with him forever, in the Savior God, who would send his Anointed to live and die for all sinners, he found reason to rejoice. In the knowledge that he was loved by God, forgiven of all his sins, and an heir of life, he found reason to rejoice. Focusing on unseen blessings led him to give thanks.

By constantly fixing our attention on what we can see, the devil has us right where he wants us. He has us looking in the wrong place for peace and joy. He may say to you, "Look at all you have. You have a

good life. God has given this to you and wants you to enjoy it to the full.” (The devil always mixes some portions of truth in with his lies, you realize.) He goes on to say, “You’re obviously in his good graces (he wouldn’t allow you to have this if you weren’t). So don’t be too concerned about living in repentance, continually confessing your sin and your need for his forgiveness. Don’t be too concerned about expressing your absolute dependence on his grace and blessing. He’s pleased with you no matter what.”

Or, the Liar takes the opposite approach, saying, “Look at what you don’t have. God has decided to withhold some things from you that he has given to others.” (Again, the devil does include some truth with his lies.) He goes on to say, “There must be some good reason for God to do that. You must have done something to arouse his anger. He obviously doesn’t love you the way he loves others. Why bother with him?” Just like that, the devil has you focused on yourself — either as deserving of every good and not in need of grace or deserving of every evil and beyond the pale of God’s grace.

The last thing the devil wants is for you to focus on that which cannot be seen. He doesn’t want you thinking about how Jesus has lived and died for all of your sins. He doesn’t want you to recall the righteousness with which the Lord clothed you at your baptism. He doesn’t want you to reflect on the life that is yours as a child of God. He doesn’t want you looking forward to being in the presence of God in the new heavens and the new earth. If you do, you will find yourself rejoicing even when the stock market plummets, when someone you love dies, when you lose your job, or get betrayed by a friend.

This is thankfulness taught only by the Spirit of God, for only the Spirit can convince us that joy is found in blessings unseen. That’s why the Lord pleads with us to make his Word our constant companion. That’s why he encourages us to remember that we have been baptized. That’s why he directs us to come to his table regularly for the Sacrament. There he points us to blessings that last forever. In Christ Jesus, who lived as our perfect Substitute under the law, we have a flawless record before God. In Christ Jesus, who suffered the hell that we earned, we have peace with God, because we know that we will not be punished. In Christ Jesus we have a Mediator, who constantly pleads with the Father to forgive us on the basis of his sacrifice on the cross. We are loved by God himself and kept by his great mercy. That love never changes.

The Spirit teaches us true thankfulness and joy by teaching us to focus on blessings unseen. We are redeemed, forgiven, loved. We are children of God. We are heirs of life. Please don’t misunderstand. It is by no means wrong to open your eyes and look at the blessings that the Lord has showered upon you. You are right to give him thanks for food, clothing, shelter, and everything you need for body and life. Every one of those gifts came to you by his grace and compassion. But don’t start there and don’t stop there, because you will rob yourself of the joy and thankfulness that the Lord wants you to have, not for his benefit but yours. Focus on the unseen blessings — the Lord is your Savior. He is your righteousness, your strength, your hope, your life. In him you will have reason to give thanks in all circumstances. Amen