

Sermon Outline

**“GOD THE LORD IS MY STRENGTH”:
FINDING OUR CONTENTMENT AND HAPPINESS IN GOD**

GOD THE LORD IS MY STRENGTH

Habakkuk 3:17-19

I. Introduction

II. Respecting the Struggle (Habakkuk 3:17)

- A. We have to be realistic. It is good to have some idea as to how difficult contentment with God can actually be.
- B. Sometimes, when we talk about themes like being contented with God, or resting in God, or even being satisfied in God—all of which are different ways of describing the same reality—we may be tempted to do two things.
 - 1. We may brush aside these themes as being too sentimental and not deserving of our serious reflection. (Which would put more than a thousand years of Christian spirituality into question.)
 - 2. We may treat these duties as being very easy.
 - a. We think: “How hard could it be to rest? How hard could it be to be contented, whatever that means?”
 - b. At a superficial level, resting in God seems very easy.
 - c. But finding our rest and contentment in God is possibly one of the hardest things that anyone can do. For if resting in God were so easy...
 - i. How is that Christians who claim to believe in the love of God can struggle so much with anxiety?
 - ii. How is it that Christians who believe in the freeness of God’s grace continue to labor under so much guilt and legalism?
 - iii. How is it that Christians can still find themselves making moral compromises when the going gets tough?
 - d. The fact that we Christians struggle so much to rest in God and to know him as our Satisfaction demonstrates just how difficult the battle really is.
 - e. Contentment with God is difficult precisely because it has to do with our interior lives, our inner beings, and the remaining power of sin that continues to reside there.
 - f. The great struggle of the Christian life is essentially the fight to find our satisfaction in God over and above the things of this world.
- C. To help us get a healthy respect of the struggle to be content in God, both in ourselves and in others, let us consider some of the external and internal factors that make us want to simply give up the quest.
- D. We consider Habakkuk 3:17. Listen to how the prophet Habakkuk describes the fall of Judah:

*Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls [.]*

1. Habakkuk is presenting us with an increasing scale of difficulty, an increasing intensity of judgment. The food or means of sustenance in this text range from non-essential to essential.
 - a. Figs and grapes were luxury items (Barker and Bailey, *Micah, Nabum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 375).
 - b. Things start to get harder with the produce of the olives.
—Olive oil was used for both cooking and lighting.
 - c. Then we come to the grain from the *fields*—barley and wheat were staple diets for Palestinian Jews. When the fields produce no grain, large segments of the population would starve.
 - d. Finally, the *sheep* and the *cattle*.
 - i. The sheep and the cattle made up much of the wealth of Palestine (Barker and Bailey, *Micah, Nabum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 375).
 - ii. They provided wool and the occasional meat for the Israelite diet.
 - iii. Israelites did not normally eat cattle, but they used these animals to prepare the soil for planting, perhaps for transportation, and other forms of manual labor.
 - iv. If the sheep and cattle die of starvation, work would be brought to a standstill. The economy would come crash.
 2. David Prior: “The devastation is akin to that described by Joel in the wake of invasion by a vast plague of locusts. Everything has been destroyed. There is no grain, oil or wine. There is no meat or wool. There is no food of any kind—fruit, vegetables, cereals, milk, meat. It is not simply a devastated economy. It is the end of everything that can keep body and soul together” (Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah and Habakkuk*, 275).
- E. Let us also not forget the invasion.
1. Not only are your food supplies down. There is a monstrous army waiting at your doorstep.
 2. The whole Israelite way of life is torn apart as a consequence of divine judgment.
- F. Most of all, let us not forget the deep sense of isolation from God.
1. But starvation and invasion are still external factors.
 2. The great internal struggle amidst all this has to do with the fact that Israel is being punished for their sins: *Has God abandoned his people?*

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What works against our contentment or satisfaction in God? (2) Based on Hab 3:17, what were some struggles that would tempt the ordinary Israelite to look away from God?

III. Israel’s Struggle and Ours

- A. Such are the types of struggles that are before us as we seek to grow in contentment with God. We struggle with...
1. The hardness of life.

- a. The unfriendliness of the world
 - b. The hostility of human beings
- 2. Guilt concerning our sins.
- B. Such struggles—external and interior—have a way of working against our hope.
- C. In an effort to regain some semblance of peace and fulfilment, what do people do?
 - 1. They turn into themselves.
 - 2. They close themselves off from the sufferings of others.
 - 3. They run from God.
 —In the process, we increase our spiritual and social problems.
- D. This is the struggle that we must respect, when it comes to seeking contentment with God.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How do people you know address the hardness of life and their sense of guilt? (2) How have you addressed these issues? Have you used them as excuses to run further from God and his people? How so?

IV. The Obligation of God-Centered Contentment (Habakkuk 3:18)

- A. Yet, as we saw in the previous sermon, contentment with God is not something that we can choose if we want. *It's the path that God calls us to take in spite of whatever suffering we have.*
- B. In verse 18, the prophet resolves: “yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.”

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How is the prophet’s vow in verse 18 an example to us? Is joyful contentment in God optional for the believer?

V. The Grounds of Our Holy Joy I: Our God Is YHWH (Habakkuk 3:19)

- A. Given the challenges that we have highlighted, finding contentment with God is going to be a hard thing. How then can we be contented with God when the whole world seems to work against us? And how can we be contented with God when even God himself is seemingly against us?
- B. Habakkuk says, “GOD, the Lord, is my strength...”
 - 1. In the arrangement or the flow of this passage, these words are the prophet’s reason why he *can* and *will* make his choice to rejoice in God.
 - 2. While some of these reasons that we find in verse 19 were already addressed in verse 18, verse 19 makes it even clearer that this is the prophet’s own reason for being content with God, for rejoicing in God even when things don’t go well.
 - 3. This is the reason that you and I can take up for ourselves when we come to our own times of testing.
- C. Essentially, we can and should rejoice in the Lord even in times of pain precisely because of who God is for us.
 - 1. God, the Ever-Living, gives himself to us to be our Lord and Strength.

2. It is because of this, that we will not be ultimately destroyed.
- D. The first word in verse 19 in the ESV is translated “GOD.”
1. “GOD” translates the most holy name of God, YHWH.
 2. YHWH is the personal Name by which God wants his own people to know Exodus 3:13-14: “Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”
 3. The name YHWH or “I AM WHO I AM” points to the fact that God is the self-existing, self-sustaining, self-defined One. God is the pure Being, pure Life and Power.
- E. When it comes to YHWH, the great “I Am,” we are talking about ultimate Being himself; the One who from whom all other beings derive their existence.
- F. The truths communicated by the name YHWH can be further explained according to three key qualities: God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.
1. *Infinity* has to do with the scope and extent of God’s being—God is everywhere.
 2. *Eternality* has to do with the duration of God—God has always been and will always be.
 3. *Unchangeability* has to do with God’s quality—God neither increases nor diminishes in his powers.
 - a. He will always be the fully holy, fully loving, fully good, and fully powerful God that he was at the dawn of time.
- G. In summary, “infinite,” “eternal,” and “unchangeable” are how we would describe this Being who reveals himself as “I AM WHO I AM.”
1. This is the God who has now lovingly condescended to become our God through Jesus Christ.
 2. For this reason, you and I can rejoice even when our worlds come apart because our God will never come apart.
 3. He will always be YHWH, the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable One.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What does the name YHWH connote? What qualities does it imply? (2) What does it mean to say that God is (a) infinite, (b) eternal, and (c) unchangeable? (3) How do these qualities of God help in your struggles today?

VI. The Grounds of Our Holy Joy II: YHWH Is Our Lord (Habakkuk 3:19)

- A. But Habakkuk also calls YHWH by a second title: *adonay*, “the Lord.”
- B. This is yet another reason why we can rejoice—because YHWH has chosen to be our Lord.
- C. In our democratic age, most of us do not like the idea of being ruled by some power. And so the last thing we want to be given is the gift of a lord.
- D. Yet, this is precisely how YHWH gives himself to us—to be our Lord.

- E. Why is it a good thing that YHWH is our Lord? It's a good thing because it means that YHWH will never let us go.
1. When we talk about the lordship of this particular God, YHWH, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we're not just talking about any kind of master-servant relationship.
 2. We are talking about a special kind of lordship that is conditioned by the character and purposes of this God.
 3. We're talking about a lordship in which the King takes responsibility for the welfare and wellbeing of his people.
 4. To say that YHWH is our Lord is not only to confess his power over us, but it's also, I believe, to confess his commitment to us. *Because YHWH is Lord, we have hope.*
 5. YHWH's own words in Hosea 11:8 are relevant here: "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender."
 6. Because YHWH is our master—the master who has devoted himself to make something glorious of us—he will not give up on us until his work is finished.
 7. Which is why Paul can speak with such assurance, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). The fact that YHWH is our Lord is a good thing.
- F. All this speaks of course to the sense of abandonment by God for our sins that so often afflicts us when we go through hard times. Is God punishing me for something I did wrong?
1. These are questions that are not always easy to answer, because the Bible does teach (a) that God chastises his children; and yet, (b) that not every trial is due to some specific sin.
 2. Even if God does chastise us for our sins, we can rejoice and hope in him.
 3. Micah 7:8-9 features the guilty but believing sinner trusting in the Lord's justification.

*Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise;
when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me.
I will bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against him,
until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me.
He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon his vindication.*
- G. When we find ourselves looking to God for mercy in our trials, it shows that we are indeed his children. *The fact that we look to God is itself an act of God's grace.*
1. Paul says, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom 8:26).
 2. This verse shows us that our prayers do not always have to be well-articulated prayers.
 - a. The Holy Spirit uses our deep groanings and turns our very cries of pain into prayer.

- b. The fact that our sufferings may be some form of chastisement for our sins in no way undermines God’s love for us.
- c. The fact that we are still able to pray shows that God has not removed his Spirit from us—and God will never remove his Spirit from us because he has taken it upon himself to be our Lord.
- d. What we have to do in our suffering is to keep on crying out to God. Like the tax collector, we pray: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Lk 18:13).

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Why God’s lordship good news to us? (2) How does Micah 7:8-9 encourage the guilt-stricken believer? (3) How does the Holy Spirit help us in our prayers? How are our prayers an indicator that we do belong to God?

VII. The Grounds of Our Holy Joy III: YHWH Is Our Strength (Habakkuk 3:19)

- A. The third reason we can rejoice in God is because he is our strength.
- B. To say that God is our strength means...
 - 1. That God is the One who provides the strength we need to hold on to him.
 - 2. That God is the One who preserves us even when we feel like we have no more strength left in ourselves.
 - 3. That God is, in fact, our Savior.
- C. Consider the prophet’s own words in the rest of verse 19:
 - he makes my feet like the deer’s;*
 - he makes me tread on my high places.*
 - 1. Those words communicate a sense of energy, joy, and victory. And the idea of victory is very closely linked to the idea of salvation.
 - 2. To say that God is our strength is basically to say that God is our salvation.
 - 3. Which takes us back to verse 18: “yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.”
 - 4. If strength is linked to salvation, then clearly, the Holy Spirit has much more in mind than just giving us new energy to live our lives in difficult times. He is giving us a vision of the destiny of the saints.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What does it mean to say that God is our strength? (2) Why do we think that “God is our strength” overlaps with “God is our salvation”? (3) How will you let God be your strength at this moment in your life?

VIII. Fighting Our Emptiness with God

What is our basis for rejoicing in God even when things don’t go well? The Holy Spirit calls us to look at who God has chosen to be for us. Look at how God has given himself to us. God is the God of Life. God is YHWH, the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable One. God is the Lord who will never let us be lost. And God is our strength, who ensures that we will be victorious in the end. To experience contentment with God, we must go to God, the Lord who desires to be our peace, our satisfaction, and our eternal happiness.