

BELIEVE Chapter 22: Joy
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Genie in a Bible
Text: Habakkuk 3:16-19
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Horatio Spafford was a prominent Chicago Attorney in the 1860's. In addition to a thriving legal practice, he also invested heavily in property and real estate in North Chicago. During the great Chicago Fire of 1871, most of his investment portfolio was destroyed. Later in that same year he and his wife, Anna, lost their young son to Scarlet fever. Two years later, in 1873, Horatio decided that his family needed a holiday. Because his friend, evangelist D.L. Moody, was preaching in England that year they decided that would be their destination. Horatio had some business obligations to wrap up, so he sent his family ahead of him and planned to follow shortly after.

On November 22, 1873 their ship was struck by an iron sailing vessel and 226 people lost their lives. Upon arrival in London, Anna sent a telegram that started simply, "Saved, alone." Anna had been rescued, but all four of their daughters, ages 11, 9, 5 & 2, had perished. Horatio took a subsequent voyage and during the crossing, which took him over or at least nearby, where his daughters were lost, he penned the Words to the song "It is Well With my Soul."

The words to the first verse of that song are:

When peace like a river, attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well, with my soul

How can a man that has gone through so much personal tragedy, in such a short amount of time, be able to write such lyrics? As it turns out, there are many such as this – quite a few in the bible. Paul is a good example. Several of Paul's letters were written while he was in jail, or under house arrest. Yet he found it easy to share the joy he had in serving the Lord.

I'm going to go a little further back today, into the Old Testament, and the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk is a prophet in the 650 to 600 BC era. He is a little different from other prophets though. Most of the prophets spoke to the people from God. Habakkuk spoke to God, for the people. And he doesn't just talk to him – he argues - he complains – dare I say, he whines. At this time, Judah is in trouble. Sin is rampant, the people are worshipping idols and King Jehoiakim (Je Hoy a kim) is not a faithful king. Not only is he not listening to the prophets, but is actually persecuting them. And yet, despite all of the turmoil, it seemed to the people that God was absent.

In chapter 1, Habakkuk says,

The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received

**² How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?**

**³ Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.**

**⁴Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.**

God's reply was less than comforting.

**I am raising up the Babylonians,^[a] that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own.**

Wow! I'm kind of surprised that Habakkuk's doesn't next ask God if he misunderstood what he was saying. God is telling Habakkuk how much more difficult things are going to get. The rest of chapter one and then chapter two is much of the same. There are more complaints by Habakkuk and more bad news from God.

Chapter 3 is Habakkuk's prayer. – He starts in praise and worship of the Lord and quickly turns to explaining the pain, power and wrath that follows him, finishing with

Habakkuk 3:16-19

**¹⁶ 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.**

**¹⁷ 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,**

¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

**¹⁹ The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.**

Like Paul who followed him and Horatio years later, Habakkuk understands that while happiness and sadness can be driven by our current circumstances, true joy comes from a relationship with the Lord. As we see in Habakkuk's writing, there is not a lot going on at the time to be happy about. And yet he is still able to experience the joy in the Lord. That joy does not fill his stomach up with food, but gives him the strength necessary to continue on.

I'm guessing that Paul did not enjoy the times he sat in prison waiting to find out if, or when, he is going to be executed. Yet he is still able to write a letter that says,

¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength. - Philippians 4:11-13

Losing a child, much less 5 children, obviously had to be very difficult for Horatio, and I'm sure that the pain and grief over his losses never went away. Yet he was still able to feel joy in God and continue his faith walk throughout the remainder of his life.

These men had one very important thing in common – a relationship with God. A relationship that grew out of understanding the plans God has for them. A relationship that any of us can have – if we take the time that is needed in any relationship.

- Worship – There are many different methods to worship God.
 - There is the praise and worship during our services. This allows us to shout out to God, sing praises or just lift our arms up to him – even doing the “full Burgess”.
 - We can acknowledge how great his creation is when we see the amazing things in this world. The trees and the flowers springing to life right now. The majesty of the mountains and the beauty of the oceans are examples of his wonders.
 - We can appreciate the beauty in the child that has just been born and realize the love that he has for each one of us.
 - Worshipping God reminds us how awesome he is. This makes it easier for us to accept that there are things we can do that might not be possible without him strengthening us.
- Speaking – Prayer is more than asking God to help you, or give you things. Prayer is our way of talking to God. Of building our relationship with him.
- Listening –
 - Another part of prayer is discovering how God answers our prayers. While you may not hear audible responses from Him, He has a way of answering us in our hearts if we are listening well.
 - There is another way of listening to God. Most of us have at least one of these in our home (hold up the bible). But all too often they remain sitting on the shelf of a bookcase accumulating dust. Then, during difficult times we pull the book off the shelf, rub the dust off and expect God to come out and answer our prayers or wishes like a genie. Reading scripture is an important way of listening to God. If you've read a passage and realized that those words were exactly what you needed to hear at that point. Or if you've ever heard a sermon and thought, “Wow! How did he know that was troubling me?” This is listening and hearing what God has to say to you.

The stronger your relationship is, the closer you get to God. He's always there, waiting for us. But sometimes we wander so far that when we need him, we can't find him. Communicating with him on a daily basis when things are going well, allows us, when we need him, to reach out a hand and ask him to help us along. And if things really get difficult, he'll just pick us right up.

In March of 1987 Michelle and I were married, right down that hallway in the sanctuary. At that time, Michelle's son Jimmy was six and a half years old. So when Pastor Steve said, “I now pronounce you man and wife,” I not only became a husband but also became an instant father – albeit a step-father. We became a family and started a new chapter in our lives. We went on vacations together, spent holidays with our extended families and did all of the day to day things families do. Like most families we had our ups and downs, but we were happy. Six years later we brought our daughter Lizz into the world. Life continued much as it was going only now there were 4 of us, rather than 3.

Around 1999 things changed and life became significantly more difficult. It was around this time, when Jimmy was about 19, that we discover he was using drugs. And not just any drugs, he was using heroin. I wish that I could say I turned it over to God at this point, but this was a good 6 years before I turned to Jesus. We began a difficult cycle that included enabling him, getting him into treatment plans, being lied to, have things go missing and then trying the tough love approach and kicking him out of the house. He would come back days later promising to change and to get help. He would start off well, but then we would get back in to the same cycle – and this would continue. We finally got him to accept a long term program in Florida. He was there for about 3 years and things seemed to be going well. Then in 2007 a hurricane hit his town. The restaurant he worked in was closed and a tree wrecked his car so he had to come home. At first it seemed that he was in a much better place and had put his drug problems behind him. But we soon found out that he hadn't kicked his addiction problem; he had just replaced the needle with the bottle. The cycle restarted.

After dealing with it for a while we finally came to the realization that the current arrangements were not healthy for any of us. An addiction is not just unhealthy for the addict, but affects the whole family – physically, financially, emotionally and spiritually. We made the decision that he either had to go back to a long term treatment facility, or that he had to leave. He decided that he didn't want to go back to treatment so he went to live with his father in Camden and work for him at his business. Things seemed to settle down somewhat. Jimmy worked hard at a very physically demanding job and from all reports we had, he did good work and seemed to enjoy it. He did not put away the bottle but seemed to have found a way to lead a productive life. He would come home to visit us some weekends and holidays. There was often tension in the air due to circumstances, but we were able to also enjoy some good times together.

Then about a year and a half ago, Jimmy's father, Chuck, told us that Jimmy was back on the heroin and had overdosed a couple of times. We tried to get him connected to the ministry for help but he either avoided the phone calls or insisted that he could handle it and get clean by himself. On October 10th, just a little over 6 months ago, I received a phone call that all parents dread. Michelle called me and told me that she had just gotten off the phone with Chuck. Jimmy had overdosed again, but this time, by the time he was found, the paramedics arrived, it was too late. Jimmy was now another statistic in a growing epidemic in our country.

Since then my emotions are like a roller-coaster: anguish, disbelief, acceptance, anger, depression and grief. My family, Woodside & the ministry, provide me with amazing support and love. But I wouldn't be able to handle this experience without the love, peace and the joy in my life that arises from my relationship with God. When I have felt guilty over things I feel I did, or didn't do; I have felt the joy of God's forgiveness. When things happen that cause me to remember our loss, the joy that the love of Jesus gives me allows me to redirect my memories to happier times or to just deal with the grief. And I thrill in the joy of power that the Holy Spirit gives me. That Joy that has given me the strength to speak and share my testimony at coffee houses, recovery meetings and even here.

I know that I will never "get over" the loss. But I know that from my continual growth in my faith I can use the Joy of the Lord to live with my loss. "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior." I stand up here in my grief and can truly say, "It is well with my soul." Please pray with me.