

Have you heard of the Philosopher's Stone? It was the search of the Middle Ages to find this magic stone that would transmute ordinary common metals into gold. The Christian has a Philosopher's Stone that we will find out about as we study the book of Habakkuk today. It is "the book of the wrestler". That is the meaning of Habakkuk - "the wrestler". He's been called the great-grandfather of the Reformation because it is here in the second chapter that we find the famous words "the just shall live by his faith". These were used by Martin Luther as the keynote of the Protestant Reformation. Paul had used them repeatedly in his epistles before that, but Paul had gotten this phrase from Habakkuk.

Well, what connection is there between a Philosopher's Stone and Habakkuk and the "just shall live by his faith"? Why is it that this man in the providence of God was given a name that means "the wrestler"? Let me read to you from the first chapter. This is a book that has three chapters. The first one contains a burden - the heavy burden of the prophet. The second chapter contains a vision. The third chapter contains a prayer. This book opens with a sob and it ends with a song and two thirds of it is a debate between the prophet and God and it is a debate about evil.

As we said last week, there's one thing that is as common as the air we breathe and the food we eat and that is trouble. The cry of human anguish is forever ascending up to heaven and we must find a way to transform it. We need a Philosopher's Stone to turn the heavy metals of life's experiences into something that gleams like a diamond. The book of Habakkuk gives us the secret. Let me read you the opening verses:

The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and You will not hear, cry to Thee of violence and Thou wilt not save? Why do you make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? Destruction and violence are before me. Strife and contention arise. The law is slacked and justice never goes forth. The wicked surround the righteous and justice goes forth perverted.

It sounds very much like a twentieth century cry, does it not? But it was written in the seventh century before Christ, at the time when the nation of Israel was rapidly ripening for judgment. It had become so careless about the law of God, that He planned to chastise it by the Babylonian armies and the Babylonian captivities. So, on the verge of that event, the captivity and the destruction of the temple, Habakkuk writes his book, wrestling with God about the problem of permitted evil.

This first chapter deals with the silence of God, the inactivity of God, the apparent unconcern of God. Here's violence abounding, lawlessness rife, blatant evil, and God is doing nothing. Then God answers the prophet, verse 5 onwards:

Look among the nations and see, wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you'll not believe if told. I am rousing up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation to march through the breadth of the earth, to seize habitations not their own. Dread and terrible are they. Their horses are swifter than leopards, their horsemen from afar. They all come for violence.

And then God goes on to say that these terrible Chaldeans are about to punish the disobedient, apostate Israelites.

But that doesn't help Habakkuk very much. He responds, somewhat disturbed that God can do that. He says to God, verse 13:

You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, you cannot look on wrong. Why do you look on faithless men? Why are You silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

So God having told Habakkuk that Israel is soon to be punished, has created another problem. The wicked Babylonians are going to do the punishing. How can God do that? So in Chapter 2 the prophet continues his debate with God but first he says that he will stand and watch, station himself on the tower to see what God would answer him. And then we have the answer and I am reading from verse 2:

And the Lord answered me: Write the vision, make it plain upon tablets so he may run who reads it.

And then the message comes:

Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him will fail but the righteous shall live by his faith.

In this verse God answers the problems of Habakkuk. He tells him that all who do evil, whether Babylonian or Jewish, shall ultimately fail. But all who do good shall live. However, in the interim, they must live by faith, by fidelity, by trust in God. This is the answer to Habakkuk's problem and it is an answer to our problem.

Faith is the Christian's Philosopher's Stone. By faith we can transform the troubles of life and turn them into gold, the gold of character, the gold of holiness, the gold of being ready for heaven. Faith is a bridge. We can throw it across our ignorance which confronts us every day. We know so little about the meaning of things, so little about God's providences. But faith can throw a bridge over the giant chasms of our ignorance.

I want you to notice particularly how, in the last chapter, the prophet sings a song so different to the sob of the opening. I'm reading from verse 17: It is the song of faith.

Although the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, and 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 stall, yet I'll rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. God the Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like hinds' feet. He makes me tread upon my high places.

Here is the song of Although and Yet. Although there's no food, although there's no prosperity, although there's no health, although there's no safety, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. Indeed, he says that God will make his feet like hind's feet. We know how graceful the deer are, how lively, how agile. That's what faith will do for the soul. It will make us spiritually agile. It will make us lively, even with the beginnings of eternal life.

The Psalmist too knew the song of Although and Yet. I'm turning in my Bible to Psalm 46. He knew the Philosopher's Stone of the believer.

God is our refuge and strength. A very present help in trouble. Therefore will we not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Notice what he's saying? Although and Yet. Although the earth change, though the mountains shake, though the waters roar and flood, yet God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Human nature is very piggish. A pig can't look up unless it is on its back. And that's the way it is with many of us. We refuse too often to look up unless we're on our backs. God does have a purpose in trouble and in trial. Let me read to you from the book of Lamentations some of the most beautiful verses of Scripture. The first verses tell of trouble. I'll just read some sections:

I am a man who's seen affliction. He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light. Surely against me He turns His Hand again and again the whole day long. He's made me dwell in darkness like the dead. He has walled me about so that I cannot escape. He has put heavy chains on me. He's blocked my way. He is to me like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding. He's led me off my way and torn me to pieces. He's made me desolate. He bent His bow and set me as a mark for His arrow. He drove into my heart the arrows of His quiver. I have become the laughing stock of all peoples, the burden of their songs all day long. He's filled me with bitterness, He has sated me with wormwood. He's made my teeth grind on gravel and made me cower in ashes. My soul is bereft of peace. I've forgotten what happiness is.

And then he goes on to say this. Its the Although and Yet song. Its the use of the Philosopher's Stone. Its the invocation of faith in the goodness of God. Its the assurance that comes that we can trust God where we cannot trace Him. That while God is in the shadows, He's keeping watch above His own. I'm reading now from the same chapter of Lamentations, verse 21 onwards:

This I call to mind and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul. Therefore I will hope in Him. The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul that seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord, that there may yet be hope. For the Lord will not cast off forever, though He cause grief, He will have compassion according to the abundance of His steadfast love. For He does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men.

And then later, in verse 54:

Water closed over my head and I said I am lost. I called on Thy Name O Lord from the depths of the pit. Thou didst hear my plea. Do not close Thine ear to my cry for help.

Now note verse 57:

Thou didst come near when I called on Thee. Thou didst say Do not fear.

Do not fear. God comes near when we call Him. We may have no evidence that He is bending over us with pitying love but He is even so and He is saying to us in the promises of Scripture "Fear not." There are 365 of those "Fear not"s in Scripture. That's one for every day of the year. Half of our trouble is that we try to bear tomorrow's trouble today. We've been told by the Lord "Sufficient unto the day is the

trouble of that day." Anyone can bear his burden, however heavy, for one day.

Be the day weary or be the day long  
At length it ringeth to evensong.

He comes near as we trust Him and He'll give us manna for the one day.  
The just shall live by faith.

2 Corinthians 12 has bearing on the same problem. We read that Paul the apostle is no stranger to trouble. You know the list of his persecutions as they are found in the 11th chapter. He mentions there about his great labours, his imprisonments, his countless beatings, often near death, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, a night and a day adrift at sea, on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from his own people, danger from the heathen, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren, in toil and hardship...and so he goes on - hunger and thirst, often without food, many a sleepless night and the daily pressure upon him of his anxiety for all the churches.

Well, that's quite a catalogue. But now notice how he gives the climax in 2 Cor. 12:7-9:

And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me but He said to me 'My grace is sufficient for you for My power is made perfect in weakness.' I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then am I strong.

Now note that the mighty apostle Paul, the greatest missionary of all ages had a thorn in the flesh. The Greek word here can be translated "a stake". It is as though he had been crucified by it. A messenger of Satan harassing him. And he sought the Lord repeatedly about it. It reminds us of Christ in Gethsemane praying three times the cup might pass and getting the same answer. Both Christ and Paul got an answer. An answer from Heaven indeed. But the answer was No. The answer was "something better is coming up". And for Paul the something better was that God would so endow him, so endue him with grace, that he would glorify God through his weakness. My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness. God's grace. That means His love, His favour, His active goodness on our behalf. It is sufficient.

Can you imagine a little fish in a mighty river like the Amazon wondering whether it is going to drink up all the water? The Amazon would surely whisper to it "Little fish, little fish, my water is sufficient for you." Can you imagine a little mouse in the granaries of Egypt after the seven full years when the granaries were laden with wheat and the little mouse is nibbling away in a corner wondering whether there will be enough wheat to last him for his life. Would not the storehouses, if they could talk, say "Little mouse, little mouse, our granaries are sufficient for you." And then picture a man on the rim of the world breathing in the air and fearful lest he should exhaust the atmosphere. Wouldn't earth say to him "My son, my son, my atmosphere is sufficient for you."



The grace of God is infinite. It is sufficient for us, we poor fish, we foolish mice, God's grace is sufficient for us. Take it to pieces and look at it word by word: "My" - that belongs to Christ. It is Christ that's speaking. The grace that He had. The graces in His heart. His mediatorial grace as He stands for us before the throne of God, as He observes all that happens to us. As His Hand is over the whole show, surely His grace will be sufficient for us. His grace - His love. We know what that love is - love for the loveless. It is mercy for those that have been merciless. It is forgiveness for those that have been unforgiving. It is righteousness for the unrighteous.

"Is sufficient for you"; whoever the "you" is. For you and you and you. It is all dependent on our faith, only in the sense that faith is the hand that brings Christ to us, for faith has no virtue in itself. Faith is like glasses. Glasses only have virtue in their object. And faith's virtue is in Christ. But the just shall live by faith. Not by feelings. They change a dozen times a day. They're like the weather. When Isaac depended on his feelings he got the wrong boy. He felt the skins on the arms of Jacob and he thought it was Esau. We mustn't trust our feelings. The Bible says "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool." We mustn't trust in our own thoughts. We trust in the goodness of God Who said that His grace is sufficient for us.

The greatest preacher since Paul was probably Spurgeon. I'd like to share with you a few things he said about faith:

Faith's motto is victory. She ever rides forth upon the white horse conquering and to conquer. Faith is the child of the Omnipotent and shares in His omnipotence. It is born of the Eternal and it possesses His immortality. You may crush and grind it, but every fragment lives. You may cast it into the fire but it cannot be burned. Neither can the smell of fire pass upon it. You may hurl it into the great deeps but it is bound to rise again. Faith has an eye that was made to drink in the sunlight and so long as God is a Sun there'll be eyes of faith to rejoice in Him. If we have faith, there is that in us which overcomes the world, baffles Satan, conquers sin, rules life and abolishes death. All things are possible to him that believeth.

Faith triumphs in every place, notwithstanding that her life is one of continued trial. Sense is broken like a potter's vessel and reason is frail as a spider's web but faith abideth and groweth and reigneth in the power of the Most High. Remember, the lowest form of faith will save and even the smallest measure of faith is effectual for salvation, though not for consolation.

Look, look to Jesus. There's life in a look. There's heaven in a look. Look unto Me, He says, and be ye saved all the ends of the earth. If thou canst not go forth to fight by faith, stand still and look by faith. If thou canst not declare the glory of the Lord, yet look. If thou canst not tell what God hath done for thee, yet keep thou still looking by faith to see what God will do for thee. Look again and again for we must believe again each day. Yesterday's believing will not do for today. Christ is always a sinner's Saviour. If you cannot come to Him as saints, come to Him as sinners. If your unfitness for fellowship as a servant comes before your mind and breaks your heart, yet remember that you may always return as a prodigal son.

If you cannot feed in green pastures as sheep for the fold, yet yield to the strong hand of Him Who seeketh the lost sheep. If you cannot come to Jesus as you should, yet come just as you are. If your garments are not clean as they should be, yet come and wash them in the blood of the Lamb.

To trust Christ when thou hast a shallow sense of sin when thy heart is glad and thy face is bright is but a slender trust in Him. But to believe that He can cleanse thee when thy heart is black as hell, when thou canst not see one good trait in all thy character; when thou seest nothing but fault and imperfection about thine entire life and all thy outward circumstances seem to speak of an angry God, and all thine inward feelings threaten thee with doom from His right hand, this is faith indeed. Such faith the Lord deserves of thee. If thou be only a little sinner a little Saviour and a little faith may serve thy turn. If thou hast but little fear and little burden and little care and little need, why then, thou canst not greatly prove or trust thy Lord. But if thou be up to thy neck in sorrow, ay, if thou be drowned in it and be driven well nigh to despair and thou hast a great God, thou shouldst glorify Him by greatly trusting Him.

Let us resolve to believe, though the world be in flames and the pillars thereof be removed. Let us believe though the sun be turned to darkness and the moon into blood. Let us believe though all the powers of the earth be marshalled in fight and God and Magog gather themselves to battle. Let us believe though the trumpet sounds for judgment and the great white throne is set in the open heaven. Wherefore should we doubt?

The covenant confirmed by promise and oath and ratified by the blood of Jesus places every believer under the broad shield of divine truth. What cause can there be for fear? You cannot banish faith. Her home is everywhere. Throw her wherever you may. It always falls on its feet. If faith be in a little child it gives the child wisdom beyond his years. If it be in a decrepit old person, it makes that person strong out of feebleness. If it be faith in solitude, it blesses that soul with the best of company. If it be faith in the midst of adversaries, it brings to him the best of friends. Faith in weakness makes you strong, in poverty makes you rich, in death makes you live. Get a firm confidence in God and then you need not ask what is going to happen. All must be well with you. Winding or straight, up hill or down dale, or through the fire or through the sea, if you believe, your road is the king's highway. If faith does not fail, nothing fails. Faith arms a person from head to foot with mail through which neither sword nor spear nor poisoned arrow may ever pierce, though it be forged on the anvils of the devil's greatest subtlety. No weapon can prosper against thee, true believer. You are as safe as He in Whom thou believest. 'He shall cover thee with His feathers, under His wings shall thou trust. His truth shall be thy shield and buckler.'

Faith is the Christian's Philosopher's Stone. Our Lord Himself has shown us the way for on the cross when all was dark, when the universe seemed to be turning inside out, when all the clashing gears in His soul testified of God's wrath against the sin which He bore, when He cried out:

"My God, My God, Why hast Thou forsaken Me?", when reviewing all, He saw how His family had one time turned against Him, how the local synagogue had risen up against Him, how the whole Jewish race had turned on Him with the exception of a remnant, how state as well as church had become His opposition, and now God in heaven had forsaken Him; at that time, Christ, by faith, was Victor. And the darkness on His soul rolled away as it rolled off the earth. He came back into life by faith and faith alone. "Into Thy Hands I commit My Spirit." His first and last prayers on the cross began with "Father". "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do....Father, into Thy Hands I commit My Spirit."

We are to trust God where we cannot trace Him. By faith in the goodness of God we will have a Philosopher's Stone that can transmute every base experience and turn it into gold. Look unto Jesus and faith will be born. Look unto Jesus and faith will grow. Look unto Jesus and you will become useful in this world. Look unto Jesus and you can never, never perish. God bless you, my friends.