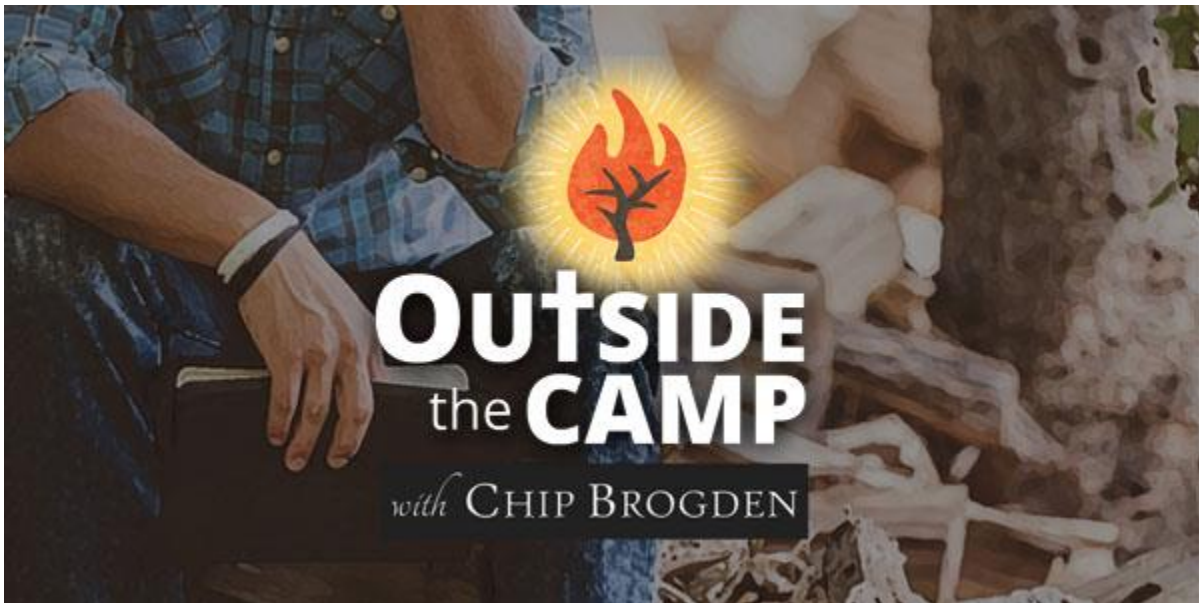


TRANSCRIPT

OUTSIDE THE CAMP WITH CHIP BROGDEN



EPISODE 13: How to Go From Frustration to Faith

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ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this edition of Outside the Camp with author and teacher Chip Brogden. Helping you discover the freedom and joy of a Christ-centered faith that is based on relationship, not religion. And now, with today's message, here's Chip Brogden.

CHIP: I found a little book the other day, nestled between some other books. It's a short book – only three chapters. More like a play than a book. It's a play written in three acts by an old Hebrew prophet who got sick and tired of praying and waiting for God to do something about all the evil in the world.

The book was written by a man named Habakkuk. And, as I said, it's a small little book in the Old Testament, a play written in three acts that doesn't get a lot of attention. You may have a hard time finding it, there in-between Nahum and Zephaniah. Habakkuk is considered a "minor prophet" – not because he isn't important, but because, compared to "major" prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel who wrote long books, Habakkuk just wrote this one little book of three chapters. You can read the whole book in less than ten minutes. But what a marvelous little book it is, because it speaks to the human condition and it describes a journey that all of us must take – a journey from frustration to faith.

The name *Habakkuk* in Hebrew can mean either one who "embraces" or one who "wrestles." This implies a double meaning in the text. The prophet begins by wrestling with a difficult problem which takes the form of a complaint and prayer to the Lord. Afterwards, when Habakkuk receives the answer, he no longer *wrestles*, but rather *embraces* both the answer and the Lord.

In chapter one of Habakkuk, we have his wrestling. Habakkuk wrote during that tumultuous period of time in Judah's history just prior to the destruction of the first Temple. The nation had backslidden, spiritual leadership was sorely lacking, and everything was spiraling downward in moral and spiritual bankruptcy.

In the first conversation with God, Habakkuk wrestles with questions asked by many of God's people throughout the ages. Why does evil seem to prosper? Why are the righteous always surrounded by the wicked? Why is the Lord so slow to answer the intercessions of His people? Why is justice delayed for so long? And, a further question of interest to those who are particularly sensitive to their environment as a direct result of spiritual discernment and prophetic burden: Why does the Lord show me all these things if He isn't going to do anything about it?

Habakkuk was concerned for his nation and his people, just as we are concerned for society today. God's people (if they are honest) still struggle with the problem of evil. Like Judah of old, things seem to be going from bad to worse. When the prophet complains that, "The law is powerless, and justice never goes forth"¹ we find ourselves agreeing with him because the same seems true in our time as well. It is natural to feel frustrated and powerless when faced with overwhelming social and racial injustice, political corruption, religious hypocrisy, and a thousand other examples of justice never going forth. It seems the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer; might makes right, and the poor, weak and elderly are swallowed up and eaten alive.

If we take a good, long look at everything going on this is what we will see. Yet, frustration is the inevitable result of spending too much time looking at, and focusing on, the wrong thing. Problems will keep us busy from morning to night and from night until morning. The subject of Habakkuk's first conversation is essentially self-centered, rather than God-centered: this is what I see, this is what I hear, and this is how I feel about everything going on. Frustration tends to focus our attention on everything that is wrong, everything that is bad, everything that is dark, everything that is evil. Frustration distorts our view of the world, making bad things seem larger and larger while good things seem smaller and smaller.

Habakkuk is making a journey from Frustration to Faith. When we look at our environment, we are rewarded with Frustration. There is a great chasm between Frustration and Faith that we must cross if we wish to find a place of fruitfulness in a world gone mad.

¹ Hab. 1:4a

God’s reply to Habakkuk assures the prophet that the Almighty not only sees and hears everything that is going on, but has determined to bring judgment upon it in a time, place, and manner of God’s own choosing. The instrument of this judgment upon Judah will come forth in the form of an invasion from a foreign power: the Chaldeans, otherwise known as the Babylonians. With the benefit of hindsight and everything we now know from history, it is not surprising or shocking to us to hear the story of how Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, conquered Israel and Judea in 587 BC, decimating the Temple in Jerusalem, killing most of its population, and taking most of the rest captives back to Babylon. But when Habakkuk, writing years prior to this disaster, predicts that the Chaldeans will be raised up for this purpose, it is a shocking, astonishing thing: “I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you.”² Shocking, because Assyria was the world power at that time, not Babylon; astonishing, because in Habakkuk’s view, Babylon was more wicked than Judah!

This sets the stage for Habakkuk’s second conversation with God: “Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?”³ According to Habakkuk’s judgment, Judah had backslidden and behaved itself wickedly, but how could God use a heathen nation to punish them? While there is, I believe, some validity to Habakkuk’s question, in the end it reveals a little bit of hypocrisy similar to the Pharisee who “prayed with himself” and thanked God that “I am not as other men are.”⁴ Surely God would not turn His people over to an ungodly, heathen, idol-worshipping nation for punishment! But in reality, Judah’s behavior was no better than the “heathen” nations that surrounded it. It is tempting to want to believe that God has set apart “we” who are special and different from the rest of

² Hab. 1:5b

³ Hab. 1:13b

⁴ Lk. 18:11a

the world, as if we are forever entitled to special treatment based on status, even if we do not live any differently than the rest of the world we are supposedly set apart from.

This is an error in thinking that perpetuates to this day – that as “Christians” or believers in Jesus, God affords us special rights and privileges that keep us from harm, even if we are disobedient to the very Word of God that we wish to extract promises from. God does not abide such hypocrisy. We are not free to embrace God’s blessings while rejecting God’s commands. Like Judah of old, we have a special relationship with God that carries a great deal of responsibility and accountability, not only in God’s way of treating us, but in our way of treating God. Judah had an outward semblance of faith and tokens of a special relationship - the Law, the Temple, the priesthood – but they also held on to their idols, committing spiritual adultery and blasphemy against the Lord.

In Chapter two, Habakkuk begins to pray. Some people never get to that point. They just allow themselves to become frustrated and overwhelmed and discouraged, and they never think to pour out their frustration to God in prayer. Habakkuk is frustrated. There is nothing inherently wrong or sinful about being frustrated. Some people act so spiritual that you wonder if they have any real feeling or emotion. I think they put on a brave face for others because they want to behave the way they think spiritual people should behave, and so everything to them is just, “Well Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! It is well with my soul!” When really, it’s not well, but they are too spiritual to act like a normal human being. It’s not healthy. There is nothing wrong with feeling frustrated. Frustration is an emotional response that occurs when our expectations are not met, usually with respect to timing. We want things to be a certain way, preferably as soon as possible, and frustration is an emotional response to our inability to have what want, leaving us perplexed and irritated.

There is a natural, self-centered frustration we feel whenever we do not get our way. We don't want to stay there, but let's don't pretend we don't feel it from time to time. There is an understandable frustration when we don't understand why things happen the way they do. But there is a holy frustration that occurs when our best efforts, even our best intentions on behalf of God, seem to be thwarted. We set out to be, do, have, or achieve a certain thing according to what we feel is good, right, correct, or best. We wish to live a holy life, to obey God, and to do the right thing. We think we are on the right path. Then, things do not go as planned (they seldom do) and the emotional response to unmet expectation is frustration.

While frustration is natural, even understandable, it puts us on an emotional path that diminishes spiritual authority. Frustration can lead to other, more negative emotions such as anger, jealousy, bitterness, depression, or hopelessness.

Frustration is often revealed in questions that contain the phrases "Why?" or "How long?" The interesting thing about Habakkuk is he realizes that he is frustrated. He knows it. Yet he expresses it. He does not put on a brave face to hide his feelings, nor does he give a pithy, pious response like, "Thy Will be done" or "God moves in mysterious ways" or some other trite little saying to make himself sound more spiritual. We read his words, we feel his frustration, and part of us tends to agree and relate to what he feels, because if we are honest, we often feel the same way. Why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't God heal me? Why didn't God prevent this from happening? How long must I wait? How long before the answer comes? These are a sampling of complaints from the frustrated soul, sometimes breathed out in prayer to God, often muttered under our breath to no one in particular, and frequently rehearsed over and over again in our mind.

Habakkuk's response to frustration is important because it shows us that even a negative emotion like frustration can be used for a holy purpose. When a person is frustrated over a righteous cause (as Habakkuk) then it shows someone who cares. They are concerned. A complacent, passive, self-centered person does not experience holy *frustration* because they do not pursue holy *purposes*. But when the righteous are frustrated for good cause then it can be a catalyst for doing exactly what Habakkuk did: to watch, pray, and wait for an answer.

It would seem that the only way to avoid all frustration is to adopt a “who cares?” attitude about everything. Passively surrender yourself to whatever happens, desire nothing better for yourself or your loved ones, give up fighting for what you believe in, and you will certainly eliminate frustration. This is the philosophy of many eastern belief systems; simply accept everything as it is, do not seek to change it, and you will supposedly experience the supreme happiness. That is certainly one way to eliminate frustration, but it also inadvertently eliminates a lot of other good things, such as passion, justice, standing up for your beliefs, overcoming evil, making positive changes in the world, and experiencing the joy and satisfaction of spending your life in the pursuit of a worthy purpose bigger than your own personal happiness. Yes, we can avoid the agony of defeat if we give up playing the game, but we also give up the thrill of victory.

For the righteous, frustration can be a call to prayer – an invitation to make a fresh surrender, to begin again, to reconnect with our core values and beliefs. It brings us to our knees and causes us to examine ourselves and see where we might have missed it. It tells us we need to retreat, refresh, regroup, and reset ourselves for what happens next. It motivates us to keep pressing in, keep moving forward, and keep standing firm for what is right.

Jesus told a story about a widow woman who pestered the local magistrate night and day until she got the justice she wanted. The point of this story is to teach us to always pray, and never quit.⁵ Frustration could have caused the woman to quit after the first two or three attempts to get the judge to pay attention to her. But at some point, *frustration becomes fuel*. Frustration is transformed into an energetic determination to keep going, to keep hanging in there, to keep pressing on no matter what. Frustration drove Jacob to wrestle with God all night, and gave him the strength to hold on and to persevere until he got what he wanted: “I will not let you go until you bless me.”⁶ Countless numbers of God’s people become frustrated and quit too soon, when a little patience and perseverance may yield an outcome much better than the one they have decided to settle for.

Habakkuk did not allow his frustration to freeze him into inactivity; instead, frustration became the fuel for his pursuit of God. He secluded himself in the watchtower to watch and pray until he got an answer. It may not be an answer he wanted, or an answer he liked, or even an answer he understood or agreed with, but he would not be denied his petition. He had filed his complaint with the Heavenly Court and he would not be denied an audience with the Judge.

The interesting thing about Habakkuk’s prayer is that right from the start he knew he was wrong and needed correction. Habakkuk 2:1 says, “I will stand my watch and set myself on the rampart, and watch see what He will say to me, and what I will answer when I am corrected.” Isn’t that amazing? He knew something wasn’t right, something was a little off in His perception of God, and he didn’t deny it. He said I’m going to watch and pray with the expectation that God is going to straighten me out in all the areas I need straightening out in. So observe how he is very bold in going to God in

⁵ Lk. 18:1

⁶ Gen. 32:26

prayer and getting an answer, but he is very humble in his acknowledgement that he needed correction, and he was open and receptive to it.

Too many people, I'm afraid, go to God with a predetermined expectation of what they want, how they want it, when they want it – and if it doesn't manifest right away, look out! They become even more frustrated and angry and upset, like a spoiled little child who didn't get the toy he wanted for Christmas. That, I believe, is the fault of preachers and teachers who make it sound like God is just waiting for you to pray the right prayer and say the right words and then – Presto! – instant wish fulfillment. Compare that attitude with Habakkuk, and you tell me which approach seems to be more respectful, and which approach God would be more inclined to pay attention to.

Well, we don't know how long Habakkuk had to wait to get his answer from God. Could have been hours, days, week, or months. But as a reward for watching and waiting, Habakkuk the “minor prophet” received two major revelations. The first revelation is in Habakkuk 2:4: “The just will live by faith.” What does it mean? When God talks about faith, what He is saying is, “Trust Me.” Faith is more than just belief, it is trust. I trust God. It is easy to trust and obey when we understand what is happening, when things make sense. What about when we don't understand our circumstances, when things make no sense? Trust Me, He says. What if things go from bad to worse and there is no relief in sight? Trust Me. In other words, the just will live by faith. Faith is trusting God, not just during the good times, but especially in the bad times, in the hard places, in the midst of fear and failure and frustration. A life of faith means we do not have the luxury of trusting God when things are going good but abandoning Him (or feeling like we have been abandoned) when things go wrong. To live by faith means to trust God no matter what happens.

That's a big revelation for a "minor prophet," isn't it? But it gets even better. The second revelation is in Habakkuk 2:14: "For the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea." Isn't that a beautiful way of saying it? Habakkuk has been frustrated over evil and injustice, he's been frustrated at the prosperity and longevity of the wicked, and he's been wondering why, if God is so good, so many things in the world are so bad. But God shows Habakkuk the end result – that nothing is wasted, that everything is heading towards a very beautiful conclusion, and in the end, it will all work out. That's the basic message. But look at how he expresses it: "The knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea."

You know? Every day, as I pray for God's Kingdom to come and God's Will to be done, I use that little phrase uttered by Habakkuk so many centuries ago. I recently spent some time at the beach, and I would get up in the morning to pray and to watch the sun rise out of the ocean, and what a great visual for my praying and affirming what Habakkuk saw: "The knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea." And as I looked out upon the sea, I saw the vastness of it, and I considered: just how completely does the *water* cover the *sea*? It's meant to be something of a play on words, isn't it? There is no such thing as an ocean or sea that isn't wet! Everywhere the sea is, the water is – the two are inseparable. In the same way, the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover the earth. When all things are submitted to Christ, not just in theory but in fact; when every knee has bowed and every tongue has confessed that Jesus is Lord, when all creation has surrendered to the preeminent of Christ, then Scripture says that Christ will submit Himself to God the Father, and then God will be "all in all." Not all in some, not some in all, but *all in all*. I'm not making that up, it's in First Corinthians 15, verses 24 through 28. That's the fulfillment of what Habakkuk saw. As sure as the ocean is wet, so God's glory will cover the earth – it will saturate everyone and everything.

Amazing, marvelous revelation that gives us hope and faith to see beyond our present frustration to the glorious fulfilment of everything that God has promised. If not in this Age, then certainly, beyond a shadow of doubt, in the Age to come.

I don't think I'm quite finished with Habakkuk yet, but I'm going to leave it right there for now. I encourage to grab a Bible, find that little book of Habakkuk there in the Old Testament, and take ten minutes to read it. You'll be delighted and encouraged. Let me know what you see, and we'll talk again soon. Until then, this is Chip Brogden, reminding you that this is the day that the Lord has made, so make it a good day; and remember that greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world!

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