“How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, ‘Violence!’ yet Thou dost not save.... For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted” (1:2-4).

Construction on a tall chimney had been completed, and the scaffolding was being removed. One man remained on the top to supervise the process. The workers had neglected to leave a rope by which he could descend. His wife was at home when her son burst in shouting, “Mother! Mother! They’ve forgotten the rope, and he’s going to throw himself down!” As she rushed out, her lips moved in the agony of prayer. A crowd was looking up at the poor man as he moved around the narrow top, terrified. It seemed as if at any moment he might fall or throw himself down in despair. His wife cried, “Wait, John! Take off your stocking and unravel the worsted.” He did so. “Now tie the end to a bit of mortar and lower it gently.” Down came the thread. Lower and lower it came, and all watched until it was finally within reach. They fastened an end of twine to the thread. “Now pull it up,” she said. The man got hold of the twine. Some rope was then fastened onto the twine. “Now pull this up,” she called. In time the man seized the rope and made it secure. There were a few minutes of suspense while he lowered himself to the ground. Then, amid the shouts of the crowd, he fell into the arms of his wife. That thread, so seemingly insignificant, gave cause for rejoicing, for it drew after it the twine and then the saving rope.

After relating this illustration, one preacher remarked, “My friend, you may have sunk very low in sin; but there is a thread of divine love that comes from heaven’s throne and is offered even to you. Seize that thread! It may appear small, but it is golden. Improve what you have, however little, and more shall be given. That thin thread of love, if you will not neglect it, shall lift you from despair to rejoicing!”

When we understand despair, we will admit that there is no justified cause for it in the Christian’s life! “Despair” literally means “to be without a way; to be at a total loss and without resources.” It refers to a state of mind in which one believes that no hope is available. Despair dishonors God. It degrades the Sovereign God to an impotent force, insinuating that He is either unfaithful to His

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promises or inadequate to help His people. Despair leads to a practical rejection of the Scriptures as God’s absolute Word. Those captured by despair have lost the faith that is essential to the Christian life. They look at the world’s resources rather than trusting in heaven’s ability. Those who despair “lose heart” and become “weary” (Hebrews 12:3).

As tragic as despair is, it is a familiar foe to God’s followers. This is why Christ urged all to “pray and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1). Paul struggled against despair and won. His confident words to the Corinthian Christians underscore the burden which despair had brought into his life. He admitted that he almost “despaired even of life.” He overcame this deadly emotion by trusting in God (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:8–10). Habakkuk also confessed susceptibility to despair:

How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, “Violence!” yet Thou dost not save. Why dost Thou make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises. Therefore, the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted (1:2–4).

Habakkuk’s vulnerability to the onslaught of despair presents a great lesson for us. In 1:2 the prophet was said to “cry out” to God. The phrase literally means “to shout or roar” in pain. Habakkuk literally wanted to scream! The Hebrew text indicates that the prophet had been protesting injustice for a long time, yet his protests had continually been met with silent rebuff. Habakkuk suggested that even screaming out to God would not help. Despair gripped him.

Like this perplexed prophet, we struggle with problems. We may pray persistently, asking God’s help, but thinking the only answer is silence. Consider this text and observe its teachings about despair. Using “despair” as an acrostic, we will discover seven truths about this treacherous emotion.

“D”—IT DESTROYS FAITH IN GOD (1:2)

Habakkuk addressed God as “Lord”—literally, the “Covenant God of Israel.” This title was used to emphasize Israel’s relationship with God after the covenant was made at Mt. Sinai. As the “Covenant God,” Jehovah was expected to uphold and protect those with whom He had entered into agreement. Habakkuk suggested that God was neglecting His covenant nation—that the promised concern was missing. The charge sounds almost blasphemous; but before we judge Habakkuk’s words too harshly, we should consider how we often react to difficult circumstances. Faith can be the first fatality when despair attacks. When we are surrounded by the “impossible,” we tend to forget God’s promises and power (cf. Psalms 13:1, 2; 22:1, 2; Daniel 9:13; Revelation 6:9–11).

King Saul illustrated how deadly despair can be to one’s faith. Saul’s defeat at Mt. Gilboa was not due to the Philistines’ strength, but to the despair which had destroyed hope and trust in God’s power. Saul’s faith had failed (1 Samuel 28:15–20). His spirit was depressed, and his courage was destroyed. Israel’s leader had been conquered by despair! Without faith his troops had little chance for victory in the next day’s battle. Saul’s distress was caused by the void of God in his life (1 Samuel 28:15b). Habakkuk was close to this same defeat as he cried the words of 1:2–4.

Christians can sympathize with Habakkuk. It is not that we fail to believe in God’s ability to correct society’s ills, but we wonder if God truly cares or if He has forgotten us. Like Habakkuk, we want to scream to get God’s attention. We are frustrated by the apparent success of evil and the suppression of good. We see teen-age immorality, AIDS, violence, and abortion, and we ask, “Where is God? How can He allow these horrible things to happen?” These questions stalk faith, but the answer for dealing with them is stated by Jesus in Luke 18:1—we must not “lose heart”! We must learn, as Habakkuk learned, that God’s silence does not mean that He has abandoned us.

When the trials of this world burden Christians, they must guard their faith in God. In order to survive the dangers of a hostile world filled with violence, lies, and deceit, Christians must have a trusting and absolute faith in God. When we allow despair to destroy our faith, we lose all hope!

“E”—IT ENCOURAGES STRIFE, QUARRELS, AND BITTERNESS (1:3b)

Habakkuk’s society illustrated the tragic fruit of despair. When despair drives people away from God, mortal understanding alone is left to confront the injustices in life. Some think that their wisdom is sufficient to reconcile injustice. However, mortality is abysmally inadequate. Jeremiah spoke to a generation who trusted in mortal wisdom for proper understanding: “I know, O Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself; nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23).
When those ensnared by despair trust in their own wisdom to resolve evil, the situation only grows worse. Self-serving individuals who ignore God’s Word are marked by a readiness to blame others for their troubles. They become expert fault-finders and hold grudges against all who disagree with their “wisdom.” They dissolve into factions. There is disturbance, hatred, and insecurity.

Israel had been warned about this bitterness of despair. Moses said, “You shall find no rest, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot; but there the Lord will give you a trembling heart, failing of eyes, and despair of soul” (Deuteronomy 28:65). Israel had ignored this warning and followed her own “wisdom.” Let God’s followers repel temptations to despair so they will not become the source of strife, quarrels, and bitterness!

“S”—IT SURRENDERS VICTORY
(1:2b)
Despair leads us to capitulate to Satan. We are blinded by gloom and doom; we believe that we cannot win. We have no hope. The wisdom of Proverbs cautions, “If you are slack in the day of distress, your strength is limited” (Proverbs 24:10). Jeremiah provides an accurate description of those overpowered by despair: “They will say, ‘It’s hopeless!’” (Jeremiah 18:12a). Those who surrender to despair cannot enjoy the victory that comes by trusting in God’s power (Jeremiah 8:20; Psalm 31:22a).

As Christians we must determine that we will trust God’s power regardless of how impossible a situation may appear. We must rally to the call of an unyielding confidence in His abilities (cf. Hebrews 10:35–39).

Let us be prepared for the onslaught of despair! We must never surrender the victory that is ours in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:31–39; 2 Corinthians 4:8).

“P”—IT PLACES BLAME UPON GOD (1:2a)
Habakkuk was angry because he thought that God was forcing him to witness a rampage of evil that would not be censured. His response shows us how despair often distorts our understanding about how God works. We often blame God for what He has not done, rather than thanking Him for what He has done! This distorted understanding is illustrated by Job, who stated, “He bruises me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause” (Job 9:17). Even the psalmist fell prey to this evil of despair as he asked, “Will the Lord reject forever? And will He never be favorable again? Has His lovingkindness ceased forever? Has His promise come to an end forever? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion?” (Psalm 77:7–9).

God’s goodness is undeniable. Everything God does is good (James 1:13, 17). Habakkuk was unable to see this because despair had distorted his eye of faith. Let us beware so that we do not fall into this same trap.

“A”—IT ALWAYS SEES THE NEGATIVE, NEVER THE POSITIVE (1:4)
As Habakkuk looked around, all he saw was how everything had gone wrong. He was so blinded by despair that he could not see anything positive that God was doing. His words describe a terrible situation. First, he claimed that God’s Word was viewed with contempt—“ignored.” This word refers to something that is “dead, having no force—paralyzed.” To Habakkuk, God’s Word had become ineffective. Second, he stated that justice was not visible, not being “upheld.” The truth was covered by deceit and lies. Third, he stated that those who upheld righteousness were treated with hostility, threats, and treachery; justice was “perverted.” Everything associated with truth was abused, and it seemed that no one, not even God, would correct the matter.

Habakkuk’s negativism is often seen in individuals trapped by despair. They are unable to see any good, any prospect of righteous retribution, or any promise that their situation can become better. Job 3:1–26 and Psalm 42:3, 10 illustrate how despair can adversely impact our lives.

A man who had once been active in the church had basically quit working for the Lord. He was a “pew warmer.” He would forsake the worship assembly if other plans conflicted. When asked why he had undergone such a disappointing change, he replied, “I suppose I lost faith in my brethren. I saw how they would act on Sunday and then act another way the rest of the week. Some lied. Others cheated in business deals. Many didn’t come to services as they should.” He went on and on about the failings of his brethren. This brother had been conquered by despair and could only see the negatives. He failed to realize that if Christ had used this standard, He, too, would have given up His mission. Our Lord endured Judas, a faithless traitor, and Peter, an arrogant loudmouth. Christ was constantly in the midst of Pharisaical hypocrites and unscrupulous businessmen who cloaked
their evil with piety! Still, He did not give up. We must follow Christ’s example to avoid the danger of despair. No one in the Lord’s church is perfect. While some are disappointing, not everyone is a disappointment. For us to avoid being discouraged by the negativism of despair, we must do what Christ did. We must do the work before us, refusing to let despair focus our attention on the negative! You may have many negatives before you, as did Habakkuk, but do not ignore the positives! Look for the good that is always present.

“I”—IT INSISTS UPON “NOW” (1:2)

Evidently, Habakkuk had been praying about the surrounding evils for a long time. In fact, he had begun to despair of any answer being given. Because he thought that God was not listening and would not answer, Habakkuk’s tone became demanding. He wanted God to respond “right now!” This reveals another subtle behavior of despair. It causes us to be impatient.

While many have demonstrated this impatience, few are willing to admit it. It is difficult to wait for God when we are surrounded by injustice. It is hard to rest confidently in God’s provisions when evil appears to be victorious. Many are like Habakkuk in wanting God to work on their time schedule instead of demonstrating patience in Him (Romans 12:19).

The psalmist confessed his error in this matter. He was caught in distress, and despair overcame him. His cries to God seemed to go unheeded. He concluded, “I am cut off from before Thine eyes.” All appeared gloomy and hopeless, yet help did arrive. As the psalmist reflected on his impatience, he stated, “Nevertheless Thou didst hear the voice of my supplications” (Psalm 31:22). He must have been ashamed as he relived that situation. How could he have thought that God was unconcerned? How could he have concluded that God had “cut him off”? In retrospect, he saw that it was folly to think that God abandons those who obey Him.

We should be encouraged by God’s faithfulness! We must strive to develop the trusting faith that does not insist that He act “now.”

“R”—IT RUINS ALL HOPE FOR THE FUTURE (1:3, 4)

Habakkuk did not believe that any good could come to the nation in the future. He concluded that the situation in Judah could only become worse. Like Job, Habakkuk might have asked, “Where now is my hope?” (Job 17:15; cf. Proverbs 13:12a).

Christians should understand that hope for the future is banished when despair conquers our faith. God had warned His people about this. If they rejected God’s will, all hope would be lost: “So your life shall hang in doubt before you; and you shall be in dread night and day, and shall have no assurance of your life” (Deuteronomy 28:66). What a dreadful position in which to find oneself! Judah later found God’s Word to be truth. As Jeremiah walked through the rubble of the conquered city of Jerusalem, he remarked, “My strength has perished, and so has my hope from the Lord” (Lamentations 3:18).

The Christian’s hope “an anchor of the soul, a hope sure and steadfast” (Hebrews 6:19). It is founded upon a trusting faith that God has the power and desire to offer His followers a glorious future.

God sees the end from the beginning. As Christians we have received an eternal “hope” that is sure and steadfast. This “hope” enables us to trust in God, even when we cannot see the end or understand the “whys.”

CONCLUSION

Despair is a cruel burden that often captures and destroys God’s followers. Christians must guard against this evil and overcome its temptation. Those who conquer despair will find rich rewards. During “King George’s War” the New Hampshire troops went forth to engage the enemy at Louisburg, a French stronghold deemed impregnable and called “The Gibraltar of America.” Before the troops left their home post, they fashioned a banner that would be carried before their column. In the spirit of the Crusades it read, “Never Despair With Christ for Leader!” The banner was a constant encouragement. The troops effected the surrender of the stronghold to the English. The victory was regarded as little less than miraculous.2

We, as Christian soldiers, are marching forward to battle the forces of Satan. Let us take heart with the message of the New Hampshire banner—“Never Despair With Christ for Leader!” We will face injustice. Disappointments will compound sorrow in our lives and tempt us to retreat. Let us resolve to maintain faithfulness to God and never sound retreat (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

2Foster, 245.

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