

“Managing Life’s Challenges”

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Habakkuk 3:16-19

In 2007, ABC aired “Building a Dream: The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy,” which chronicles the inception of Oprah Winfrey’s boarding school for girls in South Africa. In this one-hour special, many of the girls say in their own words how things have been hard, yet they are able to achieve amid adversity. Thando, age 13, reared by her grandmother, wants to be South Africa’s first female president. Living with her grandparents because her mother died from AIDS, 12 year old Zodwa is afraid when she comes home from school because “people carry guns, knives” and boys are grabbing you.” Nevertheless, she walks that road to school every day because she wants to be “a leader” and “an example.” At ages 5 and 6, Sade and Megan were orphaned because, in the midst of an argument, their father shot their mother and then shot himself. But despite their horror, Oprah describes Sade as “walking sunshine” and wonders, with their dim history. “Where does that light come from?” It is the story of the brilliance of all of these girls that led me to the book of Habakkuk.

The prophet Habakkuk lived under rising Babylonian power. It was a time of brutality and bloodshed, as King Nebuchadnezzar quickly and without hindrance moved through Habakkuk’s homeland to Egypt and destroyed the Egyptian army, which previously controlled Palestine and parts of Syria. So, in chapter 1, Habakkuk challenges God who sees but does not intervene. YHWH says things will get worse before they get better. The situation is dramatic. There is conflict, violence, injustice, idolatry, famine and illness. Yet, in these tough times, Habakkuk writes a song of hope.

But unlike Habakkuk and the girls from South Africa who vow to keep going in the midst of their tragedy, we do not always remain productive when we face hard times. We do things we should not do because we are unable to cope with our circumstances. Consequently, we are prone to plunge into a period of

detrimental living. We spiral into destructive behaviors by overeating when we feel stressed. We harass and become aggressive in our behavior. We regress and begin to use inappropriate language. Or we max out our credit cards through our compulsive shopping for a temporary sense of relief. If we continue to harm ourselves, we will become broken. If we become broken, we will lose self-esteem. If we lose self-esteem, we will not see our true value. If we do not see our true value, we will lose our sense of purpose. As in Habakkuk's day, we will be like the fig tree that has no blossom. In the New Testament, when Peter had difficulty dealing with his failure during the trial of Jesus before the crucifixion, after the resurrection his belief system was weak and so the man who had been called and charged to become fishers of men told the brethren, I'm going fishing – returning to his old life's occupation.

The first step to "Managing Life's Challenges" is admitting our reality. We must candidly confront our crisis and see our situation as it is. It is imperative that we face the facts, since acceptance is the first step to recovery. We can tell the truth by taking inventory of our situation , Or, like Habakkuk in verses 16 and 17, we can tell God about our trouble.

In our text, verses 16 and 17, Habakkuk confesses his concerns to God in a psalm. The fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vine. The fig tree symbolizes prosperity and peace, and the fig also is used as a laxative and a cure for swelling. Both figs and grapes are used to make wine. So, not only is Habakkuk living in a time of poverty and conflict, but also there is no medicine to cure disease and no wine to dull the pain. Additionally, the failed olive crop sabotages the society's success because the olive is necessary for cooking, lighting and ointments. Moreover, the fields and the cattle barns are empty. Thus, in addition to the violence in chapter 1, chapter 3 details deprived conditions with no cattle or crops for nourishment, medicine or trade.

Rather than piously ignore the situation, Habakkuk admits that things are not going well. And like the prophet, we should admit what is going on in our lives. If we are hungry, we need someone to feed us or buy our groceries. If we have been evicted, we need someone to open up his or her door to us. If we are sick,

we need someone to pledge with the Tom Joyner crew to “Take a Loved One to the Doctor.” It is time to engage in what renowned feminist bell hooks calls “truth telling.” The Eternal does not expect us to be sightless about our situation. If we deny our problems, we will be less apt to find ways to fix them. But like Habakkuk and the girls from South Africa, we cannot allow difficulty to lead us to despair.

After we admit our reality, the second step to “Managing Life’s Challenges” is to adjust our attitude. The Almighty has come to our aid. We can, in the words of Jesse Jackson, “keep hope alive” because the Lord has a history of lifting people up. We can, as the song goes, count our many blessings and “name them one by one,” or remember when we got through other life situations. Like Habakkuk in verse 18, we can transition out of our sadness with a “yet.”

Habakkuk does not deny the evil he faces, but he does not surrender to it either. He acknowledges the problems and then in verse 18 says, “Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.” Habakkuk could adjust his attitude from complaint to celebration because God has saved before. In verse 2 of this chapter, the Good News translation reads, “O Lord, I have heard of what you have done and I am filled with awe.” Though Habakkuk is frustrated, he changes his perception when he considers God’s reputation. With God, people have survived trouble and managed challenges before. We do not have to be discouraged. Instead, we can follow Habakkuk’s example and think back. If God worked it out before, God can do it again. I don’t just see problems but possibilities....opposition but opportunities....experience affliction but affirmation....intimidated but a sense inspiration....tribulation but triumph

After we admit our reality and adjust our attitude, the last step to “Managing Life’s Challenges” is to acknowledge the source of our strength. Our God can give us the muscle to climb mountains. We must cooperate with the Architect of our lives. Cultivating a relationship is the key. We gain power by partnering with El Shaddai, who grants us strength to tread upon heights. We partner by asking for direction through prayer, allowing God to order our steps.

Habakkuk's problems are overwhelming but not insurmountable. He says in verse 19, "God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hind's feet, he makes me tread upon my high places." The prophet is confident that, like deer, he will hold well on the roads of life with help from the Divine. We may not have power to move mountains, but we can keep going. Our Maker will give us strong deer-like legs. With God, we can finish our degree program and become our own boss. With God, we can live with what others have died with. With God, we can dream the impossible dream and pursue it. With God, stress is replaced with strength. With God, disappointment is replaced with determination. With God, stumbling blocks become stepping stones. With God, we can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil. With God, he will prepare a table before me in the present of my enemies and anoint my head with oil. With God, no weapon formed against you shall prosper. With God, every tongue which rises against you in judgment You shall condemn.

When we acknowledge the source of our strength, we follow the forerunner of our faith, Jesus. Just as Jesus was betrayed, we will bear some burdens. Just as Jesus was hung high, we will have some hard knocks. And just as Jesus was crucified, we will contend with catastrophe. And, just as Jesus denied death, we can defy defeat. As Jesus was resurrected, we can recover from ruin. Like Jesus, we can triumph over tragedy and glory after grief. Like Jesus, we can succeed in a struggle, achieve amid adversity and conquer any crisis.

In the end, we can confront life's challenges and, following the instructions in verse 19, sing a song of hope.

"I feel like going on, I feel like going on; though trials are oppressing me, I feel like going on."

The Lord is my light and my salvation: Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked came against me To eat up my flesh. My enemies and foes. They stumbled and fell. Though an army may encamp against me, My heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, In this will I be confident. One thing I have desired of the Lord, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord All the days of my life, To

behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple. For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion, In the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock....Therefore I will offer sacrifices of joy in His tabernacle; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises to the Lord.

We must admit our reality, adjust our attitude and acknowledge the source of our strength.