



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

Minister: Rev Dr André J Groenewald

8 Manse Court, East Calder, Livingston, EH53 0HF

Tel: 01506 884585, Mob: 075 888 458 14, email: groenstes@yahoo.com

www.knec4jesus.org.uk



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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Habakkuk 1:1-4; 3:16-19

The text verses for the sermon are:

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

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

Have you ever climbed a desert sand dune?

Well for one it is not the easiest thing to do. Once, when I was much younger, Nanda and I decided to climb up a sand dune in the Namibian desert. These dunes are the tallest in the world, in places rising more than 300 metres (almost 1000 feet) above the desert floor.

At first it was just ok but then later as it got warmer and the sand more slippery, it was a nightmare. For every one step you take forward, you slip two steps back. I remembered that I felt at times that I was going to suffocate of tiredness and dehydration. Nanda, off course, was as fit as a fiddle and was motivating me each step of the way. Later she was carrying our backpack since I was just too tired. I thought to myself many times, this is it. I am just going to turn on my heels and slide down the dune but Nanda kept me going.

And my oh my – how glad I was for not turning back when we reached the top of the dune. The views were stunning. To sit on the top of that dune and see the different colours of the sun shining on each dune, was just spectacular.

I guess to Habakkuk his acting as a prophet, a spokesman from God,

must have felt like climbing a sand dune. Just as he was lamenting to the Lord on the bad state of the Judean society, the Lord told him that He would send a foreign power, Babylon, to sort them out.

The background was that Habakkuk was acting as a prophet in a difficult period of time in the Judean history. The earliest possible date for Habakkuk's outcry appears to have been at the death of Josiah in 609 B.C. Before his untimely death Josiah led the nation to a time of reform, removing the places of idolatrous worship and concentrating worship in Jerusalem. According to first and second Kings, Josiah reigned as a good king because of his attempts at reformation. His second son, Jehoiakim succeeded him as king of Judah. He was unjust and wicked by nature, and was neither reverent toward God, nor kind to any human. He is also described by the prophet Jeremiah as a ruthless and merciless ruler. He cut up the scroll Jeremiah prepared and threatened the lives of Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch because of the prophet's prediction of the coming Babylonian destruction. He was the only Judean king who killed a prophet, namely Uriah, who prophesied not in his favour. Religious decay was the order of everyday as noted by the contemporary prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk. He did not share in the religious reforms of his late father!

The background of Jehoiakim's reign supports the anguish of Habakkuk. No wonder Habakkuk cried "violence" and wondered when God would act on behalf on his people. No wonder Habakkuk is crying out to the Lord: "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?"

And then when the Lord answers him it is not the answer Habakkuk is expecting, because God says to him that He will send the Babylonians to destroy the unfaithful of Judah. But the Lord also says to Habakkuk that He stays in control. "Those who are evil will not survive, but those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to Him"

It is then that Habakkuk realises it is not in his or any other human's hands. God is in control. He knows better. When Habakkuk reaches this conclusion namely to trust and believe in the Lord God, it is then that he starts to sing despite the dreadful situation. It is then that he sings:

"Even though the fig trees have no fruit and no grapes grow on the vines, even though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no corn, even though the sheep all die and the cattle stalls are empty, I will still be joyful and glad, because

the Lord God is my saviour.”

He realized that he did not need to be worried. God would take care of their situation. He was their only saviour. He would provide for them at the right time and at the right place. Habakkuk's prophecy is a journey of faith from a valley of despair to the mountain of joy, a journey of doubt to faith, one of hopelessness to trust and one of grief to hope and joy. Habakkuk needed to be told what it meant to have faith in the Lord. All that Habakkuk could see was destruction, violence, strife, conflict, injustice, and wickedness. But he cried out to God and his cry did not go unheeded. The Lord not only answered his complaint but also provided the confidence needed to lift him from the dilemma. The message is so clear: faith *is* the key to understanding the Mighty workings of God despite all the odds!

I am sure there is no one in this church this morning that has never doubted in God or his Almighty workings. Daily we climb the sand dunes of life, going one step forward just to feel that we are sliding a few steps back. The only way to manage is to do what Habakkuk did. We must realise that we are ordinary human beings who have no control of life or the outcome of events. Everything is in the hands of the Almighty God. We must just have faith in God and trust him each step of the way. We must grab on to Him when we are falling.

We must also not fool ourselves by saying that we can reach the top of the sand dune by ourselves. No, we need God's hand to guide us. We need to open our Bibles and listen to his words. We need to talk to him as often as we can in prayer. We need to attend all the opportunities to be in his presence. We need to open ourselves to His Holy Spirit to help us when our lives fall apart and we have no other solution. We need faith to help us to see the bigger picture to know that despite everything that is going wrong God is still in charge and knows what He is doing. We need to hold on to our faith that Jesus Christ saved us from sin and that through him nothing can divide us from the love of God.

If you are sitting in this church this morning and you feel:

- Tired because life is tough,
- Or distressed because you are suffering from sickness, pain, broken relationships,
- Or disappointed because God has not answered your cries,
- Or worried because of everything that goes wrong in your life

Remember the great truth of Habakkuk: do not carry it alone. Give it to the Lord and trust Him to deal with it. He is the Almighty One that takes

care of everything seen and unseen!

All that we need is faith but not a shallow faith; like that expressed by Habakkuk - faith that surpasses anything, faith that testifies that:

Although there is a war in Afghanistan,
Although there are many injustices going on,
Despite the credit crunch,
Despite all the evil in and of our world,
Despite all the sickness, poverty and broken relationships,
Despite all the tears, sadness and all our unforeseen bad circumstances,
God is in power! Glory be to His loving faithfulness!

Amen