

Thanks for Nothing

Habakkuk 3:17-19 (NIV)

¹⁷ Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. ¹⁹ The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.

When was the last time you heard a Bible reading in church from the book of Habakkuk? In the three year rotation of Bible readings that we use here at Light of the Valley, this book only comes up once every three years. Habakkuk is a small book of the Old Testament of the Bible, only three chapters long, named after the prophet who received this recorded word from God around 600 B.C. Unlike other prophets, Habakkuk addresses this book to God, not to the people of Judah. In it, he questions the wisdom of God as God has foretold that the unbelieving nation of Babylon would come and destroy Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple. The wicked are prospering while the believers are getting their blessings taken away. It wasn't right to him. Habakkuk had been faithful to God, and this is what he gets. Thanks for nothing, God. In fact, thanks for a lot of nothing. No figs. No grapes. No olives. No food. No sheep. No cattle. Thanks for nothing again, God.

When you came tonight, did you come begrudgingly? Were you kind of upset with what God has been doing, or, as you see it, what God hasn't been doing in your life? Did you come out of a sense of obligation that I know I should thank God just like I should thank Aunt Bessie for that awful looking sweater she got me at Christmas? Even if you didn't come tonight with a "Thanks for nothing, God" on your mind, you have thought it, maybe even said it out loud.

Sadly, it is very easy to forget all the benefits and blessings that God showers on us day after day. We focus instead on what we think we should have. We focus on the things taken away instead of the things received. We feel entitled, that we should have what we want when we want it. In our disappointment and our entitlement, it doesn't take much for us to think, "Thanks for nothing, God."

Yet, here at the end of Habakkuk's book, he does not sarcastically thank God for nothing. Instead, he realizes that even when all earthly blessings are taken away, he has something that looks like nothing to the rest of the world. Yes, there are no figs, no grapes, no olives, no food, no sheep, no cattle. Outsiders could say that Habakkuk has a whole lot of nothing. But even with nothing, he has the LORD. He has God his Savior. This fact lifts him up in joy so that he can indeed thank God while he has nothing.

Tonight, we are going to look at three "nothings" that God provides for us so that by the end of the night we, like Habakkuk, can thank God for nothing. Amen.

Thanks for Becoming Nothing

Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV)

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!

Can you imagine Jesus before being conceived in the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit? Can you picture this Ancient of Days, this one true God, sitting on his throne in heaven, ruling over the whole world with power and might - commanding angels, healing diseases, stopping wars, answering prayers? And he does this all with ease. He doesn't have to wrestle with the decisions. He has no pain, no hardship, no exhaustion. Everything is good; nay, everything is perfect. Who would ever leave that?

Jesus did. He saw his creation suffering in the throes of sin. He knew that if he stood by and did nothing, all of his creation would go to hell. He would not stand idly by because his love and his compassion and his mercy was so great, so undeserved. "He did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage." (verse 6)

So, Jesus stepped down from his throne. "He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." (verse 7) Jesus took on human flesh and put aside the use of his full divine power as God. He did not shield himself from pain, from hurt, from hunger, from sleep deprivation, from sadness. He gave it all up to become nothing, not even having a place to rest his head, let alone a palace on earth.

Why did Jesus make himself nothing? So that he could become "obedient to death— even death on a cross!" (verse 8) He gave up all the heavenly glories and luxury in order to die, to experience pain and suffering that he never should have experienced. He gave it all up because this was the price of our sin. He gave it all up to save you and me from our deserved eternal death. Thanks, God, for becoming nothing to save me. Amen.

Thanks for Doing Nothing Wrong

Luke 23:39-41 (NIV)

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?" ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

The setting for these verses is the day we have come to call "Good Friday." In the hours leading up to these words, the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, had pulled out all the stops in order to get Jesus a death sentence. They paid off Judas to lead them to Jesus in the middle of the night so that no crowds would cry "Injustice!" After Judas reflected on what he did, he confessed to them, "I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood." (Matthew 27:4) They conducted an illegal trial at night bringing in false witnesses, bribing them to lie about Jesus, but the false witnesses couldn't even agree on the deceitful charges. When Jesus said that he was the Son of God (which was the truth), they declared "Blasphemy!" and hauled him off to the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate for an execution order. When they got to Pilate, they made up new charges against Jesus claiming that Jesus was subverting the nation, opposing payment of taxes to Caesar, and that he claimed to be a king who would take Caesar's place – all of these charges false. When Pilate could find no basis for a charge against Jesus and was ready to release him, the Jews railroaded Pilate into issuing a crucifixion order, lest the governor have to deal with a riot in Jerusalem during the massively attended Passover. And so Jesus was nailed to the cross.

How many people noticed Jesus' silence during the illegal trial with false charges? How many noticed that when Jesus was nailed to the cross he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"? (Luke 23:34) How many noticed that while Jesus was being cursed while hanging from the cross that he never once retaliated, never once spoke ill of those who reveled in his death?

At least one person noticed some of this. He hung next to Jesus. He was a criminal. His crime we don't know, but we know it was bad enough to warrant the death penalty. He knew and confessed that he was being punished justly. He was getting what his deeds deserved. He recognized right and wrong. He recognized that what was being done to Jesus was not right. "This man has done nothing wrong!" (verse 41)

Jesus did nothing wrong. Isaiah prophesied this. Peter, who walked and talked with Jesus, confirmed it. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." (Isaiah 53:9; 1 Peter 2:22) Jesus lived a perfect life because that was what was needed so that we could claim that we had no sin. He did nothing wrong for us as our substitute.

Like the criminal on the cross, I know that I deserve punishment. I have done wrong. Begrudgingly, I have to admit that I deserve that death sentence. Jesus, though, he did nothing wrong. He was and is perfect. His perfection is gifted to you and me. In the eyes of God, we are perfect, no sin attached. God, thanks for having done nothing wrong so that your perfection would cover my sins. Amen.

Thanks, for Nothing will Separate Me from God

Romans 8:37-39 (NIV)

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God has given us a whole lot of nothing. He made himself nothing so that he could die our death. He did nothing wrong so that we would have his perfection. By all these “nothings,” he is our Savior from sin, death, and hell.

The world wants to take these “nothings” away from us. Admittedly, the world is stronger than us, like a big brother who can rip the toy from your hands or the bully at school who can shake you upside down to get your lunch money. Can the world take away my “nothings” from God?

The thought crossed the Apostle Paul’s mind as well as the Roman Christians he ministered to. As they saw their fellow Christians be lit on fire to serve as torches throughout the city of Rome by Caesar Nero’s orders, fed to lions, beheaded, crucified, robbed of their home and property all because of their faith, it was tempting to think that it was all for nothing, that because they followed God, they had nothing.

But nothing can take away the “nothings” we received from God - the “nothings” of Jesus that are our eternal salvation. The most powerful things in life can not wrestle away our “nothings” from God – not death, not life, not angels, not demons, not the present, not the future, not any powers, not any authorities, not any governments, not any height, not any depth, not any distance, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing can take God’s love and what he has done for you and me away. This means that there is now no condemnation for us. We are saved. We are more than conquerors of the strongest things in this world because our God is stronger than them and has conquered them. Thank you, God, for the fact and the reassurance that nothing will separate us from your love. Thank you, God, that nothing will keep us from being with you forever in heaven. Amen.