

Prepare for an Upside Down World
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Let's start with a picture [*points to overhead screens*]. That is some of our high school juniors from our youth program off the coast of British Columbia. They're on a kayak trip. Temperature that day is probably about 101 degrees out on the water. We had a guy with a watch that was trackin' temperature. The water was almost like bath water. And it was like that for about seven days, and we just cooked—it was fantastic!—while you were up here in the Alaskan summer.

Interesting thing...before we went out for seven days of this, before we could even leave the lagoon that the base of operations was for the Beyond Malibu program, our guides felt very responsible and were very careful to make sure we could handle this [*shows a slide of a kayak upside down in the water*]; that if a kayak were to roll over, we could make what is called a *whitewater exit*. We could get out of there, bob to the top, and deal with the situation. And they wouldn't take us out into that beautiful 100 degree weather, with bath water temperatures, and start kayaking until all of us could do this. And so they taught us.

And it's really...it's not terribly complicated. There is a bit of a trick to it. And I'm gonna use one of our Wasilla Bible Church kayak chicks to demonstrate this [*shows a slide of one of the students*]. The thing that makes it a little tricky is you're in that tight cockpit and you've got a bunch of gear and everything else, and you've got this thing around you called a spray skirt. And it attaches to what's called a comb. It's a little lip that goes around that cockpit, and it attaches there. And if you go over, you're latched into that kayak and you're upside down, and everything feels kinda disoriented. And the thing is you've gotta get out of it and get to the top. Well, there's one very simple thing. You grab this, right there [*points to attach point at front of skirt*]. And you find that when you're under water; you don't panic. You find that under water, you pull on that, the spray skirt comes loose, and it's amazing how you slide out of that kayak and you're able to get back to the top and start dealin' with the situation. It is so, so, very easy—even this young man [*shows slide of clowning student*] was able to figure it out. Ok?

Now, you may be wondering 'where is this going, Larry?' I hope, I pray, and I desire that our national future is like this. I really do. That our nation, as we keep moving forward, enjoys this kind of future. But I want us to be prepared, as Christians in this nation, to deal with this [*shows slide of upside down kayak again*]. And so, what we're gonna do today is I'm gonna walk you through...I wanna give you the basics of what I'm gonna call a 'whitewater exit,' a 'wet water exit.' I guess water is always wet, isn't it? ☺ Ok.

We're gonna walk through that for when our world goes upside down, when everything we hope for, dreamed of, everything we were lookin' forward to suddenly is topsy-turvy. What do we do as Christians? How do we...how do we respond, and how do we deal with that and come up as people of faith, ready to deal with the situation at hand? Now, it's gonna be fairly simple. There's gonna be one key thing that, by the end...and it's not gonna be 'til the very end that we get to it...there's gonna be one key thing that I'm gonna teach you to grab onto. And it will be something that you'll be able to get a hold of. All of us should be able to grasp it. Alright? You ready to do this with me?

Ok, what you need to do is turn in your bibles to a little book called Habakkuk; tiny little book tucked away in the middle of the Old Testament, or towards the end of the Old Testament. It's only about three pages long; it's one of the Minor Prophets. And we've been spending our summer in these books, and this is like our fifth or sixth one we've looked at. Habakkuk—a prophet that came forward. They're called Minor Prophets because their books are so small, but they had a major, major role in Israel's history. They are prophets that arose as Israel was falling apart, and gave the nation direction, confronted them with the things that needed to be confronted with, and gave them hope with respect to the future.

When we come to Habakkuk we are going to see a situation where there is a roll-over. And as we walk through this I want you to see and follow and track the progression of how Habakkuk responds in this situation, what goes on when the kayak goes upside down. And in the process I believe we're gonna learn what we can do and how we can respond when the kayak goes upside down. That's where we're headed.

First of all, the situation. If you've found Habakkuk, we're gonna be touchin' on a number of verses here today, so it's gonna be really helpful if you've got your Bible open. But I wanna put the key verses up above. But first, let me give you a sense of the situation. Situation, as I said, is an upside down kayak, if you want to think of it that way. There had been about thirty years of spiritual renewal and national prosperity in Israel. There was a stretch of time when everything was the way you would dream it would be among God's people. Everything was all you could hope for. Not only were the crops doing well; not only were the businesses doing well; but the people and their heart toward God were following a king that had reformed 'em. And it was moving in a positive direction. And so the kayak was right-side-up. And then, in a period of about four years as that king died, in a period of about four years the kayak went upside down. And we have a time of not only spiritual failure but we have a time of national collapse. In fact, by the time this era was over the nation of Israel had ceased to exist—living in exile, Jerusalem a deserted ghost town.

So that's the times we're in when Habakkuk begins his book. And what we're gonna find, a progression in the book of Habakkuk—we're gonna start off with a dialog, a question that Habakkuk raises and that God answers. And the question that Habakkuk raises as that kayak is beginning to turn over, the question that Habakkuk raises as he's seein' things just fall apart, and he keeps prayin' and he keeps callin' out to God, and he keeps sayin' "God, keep things afloat!", he says

How long, O Lord, will I call for help, ...

...how long will I look to you and call out for help...

...and You will not hear?

And he describes, in those opening verses, how what he sees around him is violence, strife, and wickedness, and he doesn't see God doing anything. He's praying...he's praying desperately, but the kayak rolls right on over.

God replies to His prophet. He comes back with a response, and His response goes like this. God says to Habakkuk in verse 5, he says 'I am doing something. And I'm doing something in your days. In other words, Habakkuk, right now I am involved. You think I'm hands off—I'm not.' He says, 'In fact, I'm doing something that you would be amazed at, that you would wonder over it. In fact, I don't know if you can believe what I'm doing, Habakkuk.' And then He states it. In verse 6 He says, 'I'm raising up the Chaldeans. I'm raising up the Chaldeans.'

Now this is about six hundred years before Christ, and there were three major players on the international scene during this era. Around Jerusalem to the south there were the Egyptians, and they were kinda the stable superpower. They just kinda stayed there generation after generation. And yet, off to the northeast there had been a powerful nation arise; a brutal nation, a strong nation that had swept like a whirlwind across the Mideast—the Assyrians. And they had been powerful; and they had destroyed northern Israel. They had harassed southern Israel. And they were...we've talked about them earlier as we've looked at these Minor Prophets. This was a powerful nation that no one could stop.

But God says something to Habakkuk. And what He tells Habakkuk is 'I'm doin' somethin' right now. I'm raisin' up the Chaldeans—Babylonians.' And they were emerging at this point. In fact, by the time Habakkuk writes, the Chaldeans had already humbled the Assyrians. And the Chaldeans were to become the dominant world power of their day. And they, if anything, were far more brutal, efficient, and violent, than even the Assyrians. God describes this people in these words beginning at verse 6; and I want you to try to picture this. He says

"For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people who march throughout the earth to seize dwelling places which are not theirs. They are dreaded, they are feared. Their justice and authority originate with themselves."

They are a law unto themselves in the international scene.

"Their horses are swifter than leopards and keener than wolves in the evening. Their horsemen come galloping, their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swooping down to devour. All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces moves forward. They collect captives like sand. They mock at kings; rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress and heap up rubble to capture it. And they will sweep through like the wind and they will pass on."

God says, 'Habakkuk, you don't like what's goin' on in Israel right now. I don't either. You're calling out for help; you're asking Me to do something. I am. I'm raising up the Chaldeans. I'm setting them loose to pillage, to plunder, and to destroy. A godless, arrogant people—I'm raisin' 'em up and I'm lettin' 'em loose. This kayak is gonna be upside down.'

Habakkuk responds with another question as he wrestles with that, and as God gives him that answer. He responds and he says 'Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why do You stand back and allow people who are worse than us to prosper? It's like You're bringing in a cure that's worse than the disease, God! How can You do that?' In fact, he even raises the question...he raises a question—'Are You really changeless? Are You really eternal? Are You always the same? Has Your character changed on us? Are You beginning to vacillate in who You are? How can You do this? How could You bless, raise up, and turn loose the Chaldeans?'

When he raises that question Habakkuk steps back and he says, in essence, he says, 'I'm gonna wait; I'm gonna watch; I'm gonna see God's answer.' That's the opening of chapter 2. Basically Habakkuk says, 'I'm gonna wait here and I'm gonna see what God does in reply to what I've just said.' And he gets a reply. Habakkuk does hear from God. And the response he gets is God basically says to him, in the opening of chapter 2, 'Write it down. It's gonna happen. Take a tablet, put it down there, give it to the messengers, and get the word out...because this is the way it's gonna be.' He says to Habakkuk in verse 3 of chapter 2, 'This vision, what I'm tellin' you, is yet for an appointed time. It's comin'.'

"It hastens toward the goal, and it will not fail."

Habakkuk says, 'How can you do this? Why would you do this?' And God comes back and simply says, 'Write it down. It's gonna happen.'

Now, He says more than that as you go on through chapter 2, because He'll go on and He'll talk about those proud ones, the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, those fierce warriors. And He says

"Behold, as for the proud one,"

...speaking of the ruler of the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, He describes this. He says, 'His heart's not right in him. I don't look at him as a righteous person.' And then He goes on and describes, God describes what He's eventually gonna do to the Chaldeans. And He pronounced five woes upon that nation. And He makes it very clear to Habakkuk that after the Chaldeans have dealt with the Israelites, after the Chaldeans have done the work that God has raised them up for, then God is gonna deal with the Chaldeans, and He is going to bring them down and all their pride.

In the middle of that pronouncement, in the middle of that prophetic word, He also gives a statement of promise of what the future ultimately will be. God states categorically to Habakkuk. He says, 'Listen, the earth will be filled. It will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, just as the waters cover the sea.' The last word is not gonna be the Chaldeans. The last word is every being is going to know the glory, the wonder, and the mystery of our God. Everyone will know the excellence of God. That's His answer.

As God gives that answer to Habakkuk He also gives him a principle, something to hang onto, a truth to remember. And He states it in verse 4 when He talks about the pride. And we need to note this principle. You need to latch onto it. It's not the key yet, but it's important to get. The principle He gives to Habakkuk as He goes through this dialogue with him is this. He says, 'Listen...'

"Behold, as for that proud one, the Chaldean, his soul is not right within him."

God says, 'I know he's not a righteous person. I know the Chaldeans aren't good people. I know that.' But He goes on and He makes this statement. This is gonna become one of the most significant statements. It's quoted in the New Testament a number of times. It's foundational to understanding our relationship with God. God goes on and He says this to Habakkuk. He says, 'But for the righteous,' the person whose soul is right within him, the person who is living life the way God wants it to be lived, He says

"But as for the righteous, he will live by his faith."

'That's what I'm lookin' for. And the people who get it right are the people who are livin' by faith.' That term in the Hebrew has a very strong sense of perseverance, of loyalty, of consistency, of continuing forward—so much so that some commentators would prefer to see it translated here that 'the righteous will live by his faithfulness,' rather than simply saying 'by his faith,' his confidence in something unseen. But actually, both terms come together; both ideas come together here. And the idea is the righteous person is a person who will consistently continue with our God, and in faithfulness because of his conviction of the things that are not seen. He is absolutely convinced that the sovereign rule of God will someday end in the absolute knowledge of God's excellence covering the earth as the waters cover the sea. And so he remains faithful to our God. It's a hard attitude. He says, 'I believe You, God,' and remains true.

We could work with that definition; we could try to analyze it more. But probably the best thing to do is look at an example of it. So we're gonna go one more chapter—chapter 3. You're getting a complete review of Habakkuk today. You move on to chapter 3, and what you are gonna find there is Habakkuk's faith response. After this exchange with God, after getting God's final word, having heard that yes, the Chaldeans are gonna come and this is gonna happen, and that call to faith—Habakkuk responds with faith. And so all of chapter 3 is Habakkuk's faith response. And verse 1 introduces it as a prayer of Habakkuk.

It's a powerful poetic prayer with some really vivid imagery. There's one basic petition to it, one basic request that Habakkuk has, looking at the vision that God has given him, the understanding of what lies ahead—Habakkuk has one basic request, and it's found in verse 2. He says, 'Listen...in wrath remember mercy, God. Go forward with Your plan, do what You're gonna do; just please, Father, in Your wrath remember mercy.'

He goes on from there with a very dramatic vision of God at work in judgment, and wrath, and justice. And then there's a really important part as you come near the end where, after that vision of God, he comes back and we have a commitment of faith, a statement of faith where Habakkuk stands and he...almost like the upside down kayak, he bobs to the surface in faith. He's made his wet water exit. It reads like this, and I wanna pick it up and I just wanna walk us through it and read it, because it's so powerful. Habakkuk says, in verse 16, he says

I heard and my inward parts trembled.

He's talkin' about this vision of the Chaldeans devastating his land, the land of Israel; of God unleashing that hoard. He says

I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay, [he says] enters my bones, and in my place I tremble.

'This has gone to the very core of my being, seeing that this is the future for my people.' He goes on and he says

Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us.

He says, 'I am devastated, God, because there's nothing I can do but wait; to wait for the Chaldeans to destroy us.'

This isn't a happy message. But he goes one step further. He goes on and he says, 'Yet...'

Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet...

...he says...

...I will exult in the Lord. I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.

Though there's no flocks, there's no herds, though there's no crops, so the food is gone, he says 'though the Chaldeans come and wipe us out, in essence,' he says, 'you know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna exalt in the Lord.' He goes further and says, 'I'm gonna rejoice in the God of my salvation. I,' he says, 'I'm gonna live by faith in who You are, in what You're doing, God. And it isn't gonna be a 'clenched-your-teeth, hanging-on-by-the-fingernails-I-hope-things-work-out.' I am going to rejoice in You.'

Boy, I read that and I wonder—how does a person have that kind of faith? How can you have the kayak roll over like that and you manage to get out and come to the top rejoicing in the reality of your God? How do you do that?

Here's the most important verse in Habakkuk, verse 19 of chapter 3. It reads like this. Habakkuk says

The Lord is my strength.

The Lord is my strength. And he gives a picture of it, a word picture. He says

He has made my feet like hinds' feet,

...like the feet of an alpine deer. In our culture, in our setting, in our state, you might think of those mountain goats that hang on the mountain side and seem to be able to scurry around and jump all over the place, and never lose their footing. And Habakkuk is saying, 'You know what? God is my strength, and He's made my feet like that. And he makes me walk on my high places. God gives me a stability. He gives me a strength. He gives me an ability to go through situations like this and do it with a firmness of footing—my faith doesn't falter.'

Now understand, at this point he is not making a statement of commitment. He is not saying, 'I hope this'll be the way it is.' He is saying a word of testimony and he's saying, 'God has made me this way. God's made me this way. God has touched me in such a way and has worked in me in such a way that I can sit here and have this sort of vision and I can wait for the Chaldeans to come and destroy us, and I can do so with a firmness of loyalty and commitment because that is what God has done with me. He's made me this way.'

And my immediate question is, "Habakkuk, how did that happen?" Here's the answer, and this is what you gotta catch. I'm convinced it's because, when the kayak went upside down Habakkuk went heart-to-heart with God. When his world turned over he went heart-to-heart with God. On a deep and personal level he went to God and he said, 'What are you doin'?' And he entered into dialogue with the God of the universe. And God's word and God's Spirit gave him feet like a mountain goat. Gave him strength, and he could be that person of faith when everything turned upside down.

Ok. You've been patient with me. You walked through the book of Habakkuk, and you got to that final point, that crucial part of what I call a wet-water exit, when we say, 'Ok, what are you gonna pull when everything's upside down. What is it you're gonna grasp?'

And my response is you go to God. You go heart-to-heart with Him. That's important. I need you to grasp it, because when I look at the future of America, my hope, my prayer, my desire is it looks like this [*shows the first slide with sun and everyone rafted together*]. It really is. But I want you to be prepared. In fact, I have a pastoral responsibility to make sure you're prepared if it goes like that [*slide of upside-down kayak*]; and it could. It could.

What if...right now, God chose to respond to our nation, God chose to respond to our moral slippage, our persistent moral slippage? In fact, let's be more precise—our persistent moral rebellion. What if God chose to respond to our chronic greed, that we don't even recognize as greed anymore? What if God responded to our pervasive, our pervasive personal and national pride? What if God chose to respond to our epidemic gluttony? In a starving world Americans are trying to figure out how to get thinner. What if God responded to our multiple addictions? What if God responded to our endless excuses? What if God responded to our persistent self-absorption? That in any circumstance and any situation we'll say 'me-first', no matter what it does to our family, no matter what it does to our friends, no matter what it does to our community? And what if God chose to respond to our casual and careless worship? *And yes, in America worship is casual and careless!* What if God chose to respond to that by raising up a modern version of the Chaldeans? It's possible.

It's so very possible that God, instead of responding by granting spiritual renewal and sustained prosperity, He could just as easily...it's conceivable that He could just as easily, for example, raise up a revived, prosperous and powerful Communist Russia with a web of alliances across the Middle East. And our gas pumps would go dry. The dollar would collapse. And the markets would crash. The kayak could go upside down. And it could happen in a matter of weeks. That could happen. It could happen by this fall.

And do not think that God has ever guaranteed it would not. And don't think that God would not. If He was willing to raise up the Chaldeans in ancient Israel, He's willing to go to any extreme. We could find ourselves living in a land of foreign investment like tenant farmers, begging for scraps off the table of some other new superpower's prosperity. That could happen, and it could be God's doing.

If that were to happen, could we say, "I exalt and I rejoice in my Lord and my God"? Could we say that?

I think so. I think we could be a people with faith that resilient. But we wouldn't get there by listening to the talk show hosts. We wouldn't get there by discussing what it was like in the 'good old days, when Americans were really Americans.' We wouldn't get there by rounds of endless debate over policy. We wouldn't get there by turning our pulpits into political podiums. We wouldn't get there by going into deep philosophical discussions about the nature and character of God, and the problem of evil. We wouldn't get there by rallying the most frenzied reformers that rise up.

The only way that we would be a people who could exalt and rejoice in our God, no matter what happens, is if we go heart-to-heart with Him and we hear Him answer us with His word and His Spirit. We have to be a people whose faith rests upon, and is sustained by, listening to our God.