

**A SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE AND PRAYER  
SEPTEMBER 11, 2002**

**Mount Vernon Nazarene University**

**Sponsored by**

**The Knox County Ministerial Association**

**“Offering Hope to Those Who Live”**

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Months before the 2001-02 school year began last fall, I was scheduled to speak on September 12 to MVNU students in a chapel service. The events of September 11 shook us to the core on campus, as it did to many around the world. I will never forget praying with students, staff, faculty and their families as they came to this auditorium throughout the afternoon of September 11. At 6:00 p.m. Chaplain Sivewright and his staff led the campus community in a meaningful service of prayer and reflection.

My sermon theme for the Wednesday morning, September 12, chapel service changed radically. With much prayer and not much sleep, I spoke to our campus family on the subject, “Why Do Good People Suffer?” The text for the sermon was the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. All of us, it seemed, were asking questions and seeking answers regarding the problem of evil and human suffering.

Habakkuk, you may remember, was an Old Testament prophet who was deeply distressed by the apparent injustice that prevailed in the world. He attempted to reconcile the evil of his day to the goodness and the righteous character of God.

As a prophet of God, he was concerned with the suffering of his people.

- \* Were they not the chosen of God?
- \* Why would God use a heathen nation to chastise His own people?

Habakkuk reminded God that they were not so bad as the Chaldeans whom God was using to humiliate or chasten Judah, the children of God.

In the midst of Habakkuk's complaining to God, (in chapter 1), he breaks forth in the midst of his search for answers with this startling affirmation (in chapter 2): "The just shall live by his faith."

When God told Habakkuk that Babylon would conquer Israel, the prophet felt that this was not just. Without hesitation, he asks God why He would allow a heathen and cruel nation to oppress His people?

Habakkuk concludes his power packed three chapter book not only with the great affirmation that "the just shall live by his faith," but with these words near the close of chapter 3:

#### Habakkuk 3:17-19

“Though the fig tree does not bud  
And there are no grapes on the vines,  
Though the olive crops fail  
And the fields produce no food  
Though there are no sheep in the pen  
And no cattle in the stalls,  
Yet, I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be  
joyful in God my Savior.”

#### **Fairbanks' translation of these verses:**

When God appears silent,  
When there is no apparent evidence that  
God heard or even understood the situation,  
When all that I've worked for seems lost,

In these moments –

- \* We choose to believe radically in a God who is faithful and true.

- \* We stake our lives on His promise to never leave us nor forsake us.
- \* We pray “We don’t know what to do, but we are looking to you.”

Our faith, in these moments, is not based on feelings, but on the conviction that God is sovereign, and will bring good out of every situation in which we find ourselves.

God dealt with Habakkuk patiently until he could see that Babylon was being used by God to discipline Israel and that Babylon itself would also face the judgment of God.

The providence of God does not mean that disappointment and trouble will not come. It does mean that **NOTHING, NOT EVEN THE GREATEST TRAGEDY, THE BITTEREST PERSECUTION, THE WORST MISFORTUNE, OR DEATH OF THE BODY CAN DO ANY PERMANENT HARM OR SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD !**

This confidence in the faithfulness of God is available only through God’s enabling grace:

“Grace alone which God supplies,  
Strength unknown He does provide,  
Christ in us our cornerstone,  
We will go forth in grace alone”.

The words to this chorus reminds me of a profound experience this summer.

Anne and I celebrated our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary weekend this summer in New York City. Each day we were in the Big Apple, we walked around “Ground Zero.” We were overwhelmed by the huge number of pictures, cards, tributes, letters and prayers attached to anything and everything around the perimeter of Ground Zero. We paused and read many of the tributes, letters, cards and prayers.

In the midst of such grief and tragedy, I found myself singing over and over again the chorus of the old hymn:

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.  
All other ground is sinking sand.

Verse two of the song, written in 1834, seems especially appropriate on this occasion in 2002:

When darkness seems to hide His face,  
I rest on His unchanging grace.  
In every high and stormy gale,  
My anchor holds within the veil.

As Christians, our hope is in Christ! By grace alone, we convictionally affirm this hope in the midst of the suffering from economic privation, vast social disparity, political dictatorship or the hideous work of terrorists.

Our hope as Christians is in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. The center of the Christian gospel is the reconciliation of all creation to God through Jesus Christ.

The old gospel song has it right, “This world is not my home, I’m just passing through.” We are to live in the world but not of the world.

As Christians, our hope is not for this life only, it is for life eternal with the Triune God. The question we face as followers of Jesus Christ is: Are we living faithfully as members of the “community of the King,” with Kingdom “eyes,” ruthless thrust and a radical hope?

Anne, Stephen and I lived in Manila, the Philippines, prior to moving in 1989 to Mount Vernon. At the time, the average per capital income was \$700 a year. The minimum wage at the time was under \$3.00 per day. Yet we

worshipped with beautiful Filipino Christians whose joy was contagious. Their church facilities were simple. Their homes were modest. Some of our closest friends lived in what we in America would call “shanties.” Many traveled to the market each day for food because of no refrigeration in their homes.

Yet, these Christians were joyful, because their hope was not in their government, their job, their income. Their hope was in Jesus Christ for their salvation and for their comfort. They truly believed that, “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through.”

Hope in Christ does not mean we will avoid or be able to ignore suffering. We know that hope born of faith is nurtured and purified through pain, suffering and difficulty. The basis of our hope, however, has to do with the One who is stronger than the suffering we encounter.

The people of Israel repeatedly reflected on their history and discerned God’s guiding hand in the many painful events. Memory reminds us of the faithfulness of God in the hard times, and joyful moments. Without memory, there is no expectation.

With expectation, we experience the minutes, hours and days of our life differently. When hope takes up residence, Christian hope is not dependent on peace in the land or justice in the world.

A chorus we sing often in chapel services includes these words.

My life is in You, Lord  
My strength is in You, Lord  
My hope is in You, Lord  
In You, it’s in You

I will praise You with all of my life  
I will praise You with all of my strength  
With all of my life  
With all of my strength  
All of my hope is in You

My life is in You, Lord  
My strength is in You, Lord  
My hope is in You, Lord  
In You, it's in You

Hope is willing to leave questions unanswered and unknown futures unknown. Hope makes you see God's guiding hand not only in the gentle and pleasant moments but also in the shadows of disappointment and darkness.

Why? Because we believe!! In the memorial chapel service on campus this morning, we sang this chorus.

### BECAUSE WE BELIEVE

We believe in God the Father,  
We believe in Christ, the Son;  
We believe in the Holy Spirit,  
We are the church and we stand as one.

We believe in the Holy Bible,  
We believe in the virgin birth.  
We believe in the resurrection,  
That Christ one day will return to earth.

We believe in the blood of Jesus,  
We believe in eternal life;  
We believe in His blood that frees us  
To become the Bride of Christ.

**(Chorus)**

**Holy, holy, holy is our God;  
Worthy, worthy, worthy is our King!  
All glory and honor are His to receive;  
To Jesus we sing because we believe.**

And because “we believe,” we offer our lives to Christ as a living sacrifice. I close with these words we often sing.

**I OFFER MY LIFE**

All that I have, all that I am,  
I lay them down before You, O, Lord.  
All my regrets, all my acclaim;  
The joy and the pain, I'm making them Yours.

**(Chorus)**

**Lord, I offer my life to You--  
Everything I've been through,  
Use it for Your glory,**

Lord, I offer my days to You,  
Lifting my praise to You  
As a pleasing sacrifice.  
Lord, I offer You my life.

Things in the past, things yet unseen,  
Wishes and dreams that are yet to come true.  
All of my hopes, all of my plans,  
My heart and my hands are lifted to You.

What can we give that You have not given?  
And what do we have that is not already Yours?  
All we possess are these lives we're living  
And that's what we give to You, Lord.

**(Chorus)**

**Lord, I offer my life to You--  
Everything I've been through,  
Use it for Your glory,**

May these words speak grace, peace and hope to us as we remember and reflect upon 9/11.

Amen.