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FAITH WATCHING

Today's Text: Habakkuk Chaps 1-3

Extracts:

Then the Lord answered me and said: “Write the vision and make it plain on tablets. For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it, because it will surely come; it will not tarry. Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but *the just shall live by his faith* [Hab. 2: 2-4]

Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labour of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls-yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation [Hab. 3; 17-18]

Weight watching is today a multi-billion dollar industry.¹ For example, one main provider of such services, the New York-based publicly quoted company, Weight Watchers International, Inc., reported annual sales of about \$1.5 billion for the year ended December 2007, a 19% growth over the previous year. It operates in about 30 countries, providing services to over 1.5 million members, and has 49,000 employees. Such weight watching services are geared towards making people carry the weight that will make them healthy and live longer.

According to Scripture, the prosperity of the body begins with the prosperity of the soul [3 Jn 2], our spiritual ‘body.’ That is why man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God [Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4]. We are usually very careful about the ‘bread’ part- what we eat or drink. We do not want to overeat or ‘wrong eat’ or starve because any of such habits can shorten our longevity. That is why we are ardent weight watchers. But how do we take care of the ‘weight’ of the soul?

God has told us through the prophet Habakkuk, “the just shall live by his faith” [Hab. 2: 4]. Therefore, we can measure our soul-food intake through our faith- its level and state. Just as we watch our weights, we need to watch our faith. How can we do effective faith watching? That is the subject of this week’s study.

¹Based on Hoovers’ Company Overview-Weight Watchers International, Inc., http://www.hoovers.com/weight-watchers/--ID_53912--/free-co-factsheet.xhtml and ‘Weight Watchers,’ From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weight_Watchers

1. Background: The Just shall live by his faith

Habakkuk's prophetic ministry was at a time that the southern kingdom of Judah was in its 'death throes.' The people had remained unrepentant and hard-hearted. The law had become "powerless," justice no longer went forth and wickedness had surrounded the righteous. Consequently, perverse judgment ruled the kingdom. In despair, Habakkuk asked the Lord two heart-searching questions [**Hab. 1: 1-3**]:

a) *"How long shall I cry, and You will not hear?"*

It can be assumed that the prophet had cried out to the Lord over time as he saw the wickedness of the people worsen, but he did not have the desired answers. The word of God is quite clear that "the Lord is far from the wicked but He hears the prayer of the righteous" [**Prov. 15: 29**]. He is more interested in our obedience than in our sacrifice [**1 Sam. 15: 22-23**; **Is. 1: 10-20**]. When the elders of rebellious Israel in another era, for example, came to the prophet Ezekiel to seek God's face, the Lord said to them, "Have you come to inquire of Me? As I live, 'says the Lord God, 'I will not be inquired of by you'" [**Ezek. 20: 1-3**]. So long as they had rebellion and unconfessed sins in their hearts, He refused to speak to them.

God's response to the question posed by Habakkuk should not surprise us: He was going to chasten the stiff-necked people of Judah by empowering the wicked and violent Chaldeans to overrun their nation [**vv. 5-11**]. Those who rebel against God will surely be devoured by His sword [**Is. 1: 20**]. How many of us are currently being wasted by self-inflicted injuries such as debts, divorce and disease? They may be blaming the 'enemy' for their situation when they could be their worst enemy. The soul that sins shall die [**Ezek. 18: 4**]?

b) *Why would God use the wicked to judge the wicked?*

Habakkuk understood that his people deserved judgment from a holy God, but why should He use equally wicked people, such as the Chaldeans, to punish His chosen people [**Hab. 1: 12-17**]? That is one question that only God can but invariably refuses to answer. A plausible answer can be found in how God punished David for conducting a census without His permission. The Lord sent the prophet Gad to offer him a choice from three options: three years of famine or three months to be defeated in the hands of his foe or three days' plague from the Lord on the land. David answered, "Let me fall into the hands of the Lord, for His mercies are very great, *but do not let me fall into the hand of man.*" The plague consumed 70,000 men in Israel [**1 Chron. 21: 12-14**]. Which human army could have caused that kind of damage to David's army? Therefore, using human agents may be a measure of God's leniency towards us to bring

recalcitrant sinners to their knees. In the case of the king of Assyria, God knew that he was arrogant and also had his territorial ambitions but he was the rod of God's anger against rebellious nations. In the end, God punished Assyria [**Is. 10: 5-19**].

In response to Habakkuk's question, God gave a profound answer: "the just shall live by *his faith*" [**Hab. 2: 4**]. The answer was not for Judah alone because it was "yet for an appointed time" [v.3], "for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" [v. 14]. The answer was for everyone who aspires to be a faithful believer. Amplifying the subject hundreds of years later, Paul wrote, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation *for everyone who believes, for the Jews first and also for the Greek*. For in it *the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith"*" [**Rom. 1: 16-17**].

Armed with a deeper knowledge of God, Habakkuk changed his prayer orientation. He acknowledged the presence of God Himself in the temple and the people's need to give Him reverential worship [**Hab. 2: 20**]. He offered prayers of genuine repentance and acknowledged the great things that the Lord had done for Israel and for all [**Hab. 3: 1-16**]. He came to realize the need to put his faith totally in God. He came to know that *no matter* how much damage came from the destruction that would come, he could always rejoice in God's salvation and in His strength. God would make his feet "like deer's feet" with which to "walk on (His) high hills" [vv. 17-19]. Habakkuk's faith had made him spiritually fitter and more trusting of his God. That is what faith watching can also do for us.

2. The significance of faith

The word of God says that we walk by faith, not by sight [**2 Cor. 5: 7**], and faith has been defined as "the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen" [**Heb. 11: 1**]. 'Substance' and 'evidence' are tangible and, therefore, factual. But 'hoped for' and 'not seen' are intangible. That is the problem that we have with faith. Economic and emotional problems have become more complex, if not intractable. If and when we can afford it, the first people we contact for solutions are experts- economists, doctors, lawyers, psychologists, etc. Some people go to psychics, faith healers and prophets when logical answers seem not working. What are they really looking for?

In view of the fact that our expectations are not tangible, we tend to see faith outcomes as 'forecasts' and 'predictions,' or 'unscientific.' Yet, the bulk of human behaviour is heavily dependent on faith, not sight. For example, why do you work first and get paid later if you do not believe in your employer's ability to pay? Why do you set up a college education fund for your 5-year-old child if you do not believe that s(he) will still be alive far into the future? Why does a child run and jump into mummy's arms if s(he) is not expecting to be warmly

held up from crashing? Even medical treatment works by faith because prescribed medications that we take are mere vitamins and minerals. We will faithfully take them from doctors and *be healed* whereas if an auto mechanic were to give us the exact same medications, they would not work!

From those simple illustrations, we learn the following things about faith:

- We must *trust the power or person behind the promise*. For example, you trust the doctor (for hospital treatment), the employer (for your wages) and the mother (for baby's needs). God also requires you to trust Him- to believe that He exists and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him [**Heb. 11: 6**].
- You must *act in advance of seeing the expected outcome* because faith without works is dead [**Jam. 2: 26**]. You worked *in advance* of pay in obedience to your employer's demand. The child jumped into the air *in response* to her mummy's invitation. God expects you to also respond to His invitations by faith.
- *Those who believe*, that is, act before the 'things hoped for' are manifested, *are regarded as just or righteous*. For example, at the age of 75 years, God had told Abraham (then called Abram) to leave his country and move to Canaan where he would become the father of many nations. He left with his 65 year-old barren wife, Sarah (then called Sarai), among others [**Gen. 12: 1-9**]. Ten years later, nothing happened. God appeared to him and assured him that the promised child would come out of his own loins. God showed him the stars of heaven and assured him that his descendants would be as many. Without any tangible proof as yet, Abraham "believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" [**Gen.15: 1-6**]. Isaac was born fifteen years later! The just Abraham lived by his faith in God.

From the forgoing analysis, we can conclude that faith is the very foundation of human behaviour. Even some scientists who claim not to believe in God believe in something else. It is faith in God that sustains you when you are fasting because, ordinarily, you will feel serious hunger pangs when you miss one meal! Nevertheless, we do not all have the same measure of faith [**Rom. 12: 3**]. Some of us have no faith at all [**Mk 4: 40**]; some have little faith [**Matt. 6: 30**]; while others have great faith [**Matt. 8: 10**]. Yet, we all need *great and sustainable* faith in God and His Christ if we want to please Him [**Heb. 11: 6**] or be regarded as just or righteous [**Rom. 4: 13-24**], and ultimately obtain salvation when we die [**Eph.2: 8**]. We can never have enough of it because challenging situations keep growing. Therefore, our faith is worth watching- even more than our weight!

3. How to faith-watch

The starting point is to determine your faith level, just as you ask your doctor to measure your cholesterol level. Using the measures provided by Jesus, as already

indicated above, you have *no faith* if, like the disciples in the midst of a storm, you doubt or disregard the divinity of Christ. At the other end, you have great faith when, like the centurion, you can believe in Christ without any iota of doubt. As we said earlier, the more faith you can have, the better for your spiritual walk, as those listed in the ‘Faith Hall of Fame’ would confirm [**Heb. 11: 8-40**].

Borrowing from the four pillars of the science-based approach used by weight watchers,² you can also faith-watch as follows:

a) *Food*

Since we live by bread (for the body) and the word of God (for the spirit), you must feed on Scripture for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness [**2 Tim. 3: 16**]. It must not depart from your lips. You must meditate on it day and night so that you may observe to do in accordance with what is written therein. That way, you make your life prosperous and successful [**Josh. 1: 8**].

Cultivate the habit of reading the Bible with your family everyday, along with constant prayers. Cut down on ‘spiritual calories’, such as fear and doubts [**Phil. 4: 6**] and avoid temptations [**Prov. 6: 20-35**]. Check your cholesterol level by confessing your sins when you fall so that you can maintain good standing with God [**1 Jn 1: 6-9**].

Attempt to eat only those foods that are on God’s approved diet [**Lev. 11**] because your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and you do not want to pollute it [**Lk 1: 15; 1 Cor. 3: 16-17**].

b) *Exercise*

Endeavour to “exercise yourself toward godliness, for bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come” [**1 Tim. 4: 7,8**].

Therefore, watch and pray so that you do not run into temptation [**Matt. 26: 41**]. Exercise your faith by first seeking God’s guidance before acting [**1 Sam. 23: 1-13**], or by acting strictly in accordance with His word [**Acts 27: 13-38**].

c) *Behaviour*

God has not given us the spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind [**2 Tim. 1: 7**]. Therefore, when trouble comes, you should not fret or betray anxiety and fear. Instead, your behaviour should confirm your total trust in God. For example, Paul and Silas were chained up in prison and

² According to www.weightwatchers.com

badly beaten. At midnight, they started singing and praising God. Immediately, there was an earthquake that shook the prison's foundations! The doors were thrown open and the prisoners' chains were broken. As the prison officer tried to kill himself, fearing that the prisoners had escaped, Paul calmed him down and preached Christ to him. He and his family gave their lives to Christ that night [Acts 16: 16-34]. So, demonstrate your faith by giving to others even when you do not have, forgiving those who have offended you [Matt. 6: 14-15], and by not avenging any hurt against you [Rom. 12: 19]. Do not be tired of doing good [Gal. 6: 9], and no matter your circumstances, always give thanks to God [1 Thes. 5: 18].

d) *Support*

The psalmist says, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord'" [Ps. 122: 1]. Successful weight watching requires support through group meetings and interactions with other committed weight watchers. That way, your gains are consolidated. In like manner, you need to be in the company of fellow believers through worship, fellowship and other occasions for interaction. You should read books documenting other people's testimonies of what God has done for them.

4. **Conclusion: People of faith are called believers!**

In the words of Jesus, you only need faith the size of a mustard seed to do exploits [Lk 17: 6], but why stop at little when you can have more? When your faith is great and *sustainable*, it becomes precious faith [2 Pet. 1: 1-10], the type that makes you fruitful in the knowledge of Christ,; the faith that confirms the assurance of your election and calling. With precious faith, you have the mind of Christ [1 Cor. 2: 16] in all that you do. You become one of the true believers and followers of Christ.

Are you one of them? If not, become a faith watcher.