



## THE TWO-FOOT PUTT

Habakkuk 3:17-19

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Habakkuk is having a very difficult time. He sees the coming destruction of Israel.

His home,  
his people,  
his land,  
his loved ones.

The heart and soul of the Israelites, their land, will be taken and, in time, they will be exiled. He believes this destruction is a result of Israel's sins and the judgment of God.

And he doesn't think it is fair! Why should the righteous suffer for the wicked's transgressions? God does not answer; no rationale is given. But you and I know this is the reality of our world. Children suffer for the sins and shortcomings of their parents. Nations suffer for the weakness of their leaders. We have seen in our investigations of child poverty the perniciousness of the obvious – the only person truly innocent of the sins of child poverty is the child!

It is a universal truth that all suffer where one falls. We could explore this prophet's frustration in our global world today. But ultimately, this prophet's work, unlike that of Amos and others, is not a call to go out and do justice. Amos called for a rebalancing of the scales in favor of the poor. Jeremiah called passionately for God's vengeance to rest upon Israel's enemies. And that call is present in Habakkuk, but instead we will bring it down to our individual lives. We will explore his spiritual solution to this eternal frustration. He will not answer "why". Why do the righteous suffer? Why do the wicked prosper? Why is there evil and suffering? Why do crops fail and lakes dry up? But "what"; what to do in light of this reality?

And in this way Habakkuk offers us something unique.

And it is for you and for me and everyone seeking to find serenity when life seems to be out of control or simply frustrating beyond belief.

...He shows us how to live in the midst of a world that sometimes feels as if it is falling apart.

...He shows us how to become invulnerable to the whims of our circumstances.

...He shows us how to keep our head high, our heart confident, and our soul filled with hope.

In only a few concluding verses, Habakkuk offers perhaps the most powerful tool for our spiritual peace.

Habakkuk lived around 600 BC - around the destruction of the southern kingdom of Israel. His prophecies reflected their defeat to the Babylonian empire. We cannot argue against the authentic suffering he experienced which, in turn, makes his solution all the more powerful for us today.

He teaches us the central disposition of faith, that cannot be shaken in times of trouble. He shows us our true problems are not physical, are not "out there" but are spiritual, they are "in here" in our heart and mind and soul.

We will explore his answer. But first, a little bit of golf. Like the life of the disciple, the golfer relies tremendously on trust. Nowhere in golf is this more evident than in the two-foot putt. It looks like the easiest thing in the world. And it is! A two-year-old can make that putt. It requires no great physical talent. Anyone can do it. And anyone can miss it! The best players in the world have missed that shot...when the money is on the line...when it matters most! Scott Hoch lost the Masters in 1989 when he whiffed a two-foot putt on the 18<sup>th</sup>. It didn't even graze the hole.

The golfer has learned the best stance and stroke to offer a consistent result on the green. The

golfer has hit that putt thousands of times! Thousands! The simpler the stroke, the better the result.

So, it is not about the physical challenge. But the mental. You are not really trying to hit it in the hole. To make that putt all you need to do is trust. Trust your stroke. Trust what you have been taught. If you hit it properly, it will go in.

But when doubt creeps in, suddenly you are second guessing what you have been taught your whole life. You second guess what you know and you know you are second guessing what you know. But sometimes you can't stop yourself and you get tentative. And instead of putting a good stroke, you try to steer the ball into the cup and you make a mess out of it!

It is the same error we make in the life of faith. All of us. We know what we are to do. It is simple. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly. But most of all the call to trust. To trust that God has the world and us in the divine powerful and loving hands and that is truly all we need in this life...and the next.

All too often we reduce the call to trust to simple belief in Jesus' power to save us from Hell into Heaven.

Trust in the faith is about a lot more than mere belief. Trust in Jesus' power to save is the mere beginning.

On the one hand there are many aspects of God's power that we trust without question and without even realizing it:

- We trust that gravity will work;
- We trust the sun will rise tomorrow;
- We trust there will be breathable air when we go outside.

None of these are guaranteed. But other things we don't trust, despite God's promises. We don't trust in God's mercy, so we often fail to be merciful ourselves. We don't trust in God's providence, so we are tempted to hoard things.

Like that two-foot putt, when we start second guessing what we know in our heart, more often

than not, we miss the mark. It happens when we allow fear to creep into our hearts. And we try to "steer" our destiny through taking short cuts in our moral lives.

Habakkuk makes it clear that the role of the faithful is to trust the precepts of God, the commandments and the principles, and that God will guide our destiny. We control our behavior and God controls the outcomes.

This desire to control the outcomes results from a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of life.

God has made this wonderful world and all that is in it. The joy that we have when all things are going well is tremendous. Think about when you got that promotion; when you received a clean bill of health; when a fractured relationship was made whole; when your finances were growing rather than shrinking. In those times you truly feel that God is on your side; that life is most wonderful and beautiful and glorious. And it is.

But the problem arises when the converse of this beauty creeps in. When the hardships hit you one after another; you lose your job; the cancer returns; your relationship sours; your reputation is tarnished. Since you felt the support and love of God when times were good, you now feel the opposite. Perhaps that God is against you.

But like when all the money is on the line with a two-foot putt, it is most critical to not try and steer your fate but to trust in what you have learned.

Active shooters on college campuses have become a plague in our country. A few months ago, a campus had gone on lock down. Shots were fired and at 11pm the alert went to the student's phones and they remained in place, turned out the lights, and listened terrified at what might happen.

More shots were reported, confusion abounded. One student called his father and they told each other about their love. The father checked the websites of the local news stations. They noted the active shooter status but nothing more. Over the

next three hours they spoke briefly and texted but, not wanting to alert a possible shooter, they kept their conversation to just a few words.

Habakkuk found himself amid a firestorm of hellish war, of betrayal by his king, and the loss of his home and his country. At first, he wailed to God, seeking justice and deliverance. He wanted God to smite his enemies and free Israel from oppression. But after exhausting his fear, after exhausting his anger, he penned some of the powerful words in all scripture.

He realized true salvation is not found in earthly prosperity but in discovering the core of the divine Spirit. Which once it dwells within you and is fully embraced and trusted, it gives you the sense of being like a leaping deer, which can soar to the spiritual heights, no matter what earthly events encircle you. Nothing had changed for Israel. But for Habakkuk everything had changed, so he wrote these words:

*Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold  
and there is no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
God, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and makes me tread upon the heights.*

Habakkuk came to the fundamental realization that God's glory and wonder are always available to us. That salvation is not being rescued from earthly trials but living within the loving, glorious arms of God, no matter our situation, so that no earthly condition can extinguish, or even dim, this light.

But for the young man, his fear and dread continued to grow. The good news is the whole situation was confused and the students were never in danger. But they did not know that.

The minutes turned to hours and each little noise magnified his worry. So, the son turned to

what he knew. He turned to what his church and his parents taught him. He turned to what he learned in Sunday school as a little boy. It was simple but beyond powerful.

So, my son Matthew closed his eyes, folded his hands and said, "Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..." He recited the Lord's prayer over and over and over again. And it gave him a measure of calm, some measure of peace.

As the old hymn declares, "Trust and obey for there is no other way..." Amen.