

"The Message of Habakkuk"

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Date: 09 June 2024

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[0 : 00] Wildly waving from the back, don't forget to turn on the mic. Surely you have observed and likely experienced that it's not that hard to rejoice when things are going well.

When the waters we sail upon are smooth, no towering wave or fierce tempest disturbs the tranquility of our life voyage.

All is calm and pleasant. The sun shines gently upon us. The horizon is bright and beckoning before us.

And behind, our silvery wake is straight. How easy, then, to weave a garland of praise to our God, drawn from the many flowers a kind providence has amply strewn along our path.

Little surprise that under such conditions, songs of thanksgiving float aloft. It's quite to be expected.

[1 : 07] But listen to this. I find it one of the highest notes struck in the music of faith throughout the entire Old Testament.

It's on page 739 of your pew Bibles. Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit beyond the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and the fields yield no fruit.

The flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

I will take joy in the God of my salvation. I wonder if you feel the heaviness of those conditions.

Are there more dreary, disastrous, disconsolate circumstances to be imagined in an agrarian society? Loss, famine, and death mantles all like a shroud.

[2 : 17] And yet, in the midst of the outward rubble and ruin of shattered hopes and aching loss, what was the speaker Habakkuk's inner condition?

It's exultant. He's rejoicing. God had somehow imparted to him a tensile strength, an indefatigable buoyancy.

Here's how he describes it. He makes my feet like the deer's and makes me to tread on my high places. What a picture.

What were the high places in Hebrew imagery and imaginary? Well, for one, it was terrain that was very difficult.

The dangerous, perilous, slippery, precipitous places. Places where it was very easy to stumble and fall. But also, you remember, as the Israelites dispossessed the Canaanites, the high places were the last places to be conquered.

[3 : 27] The hardest to attain. And God had strengthened Habakkuk to mount to these heights. The last place to attain in our upward climb of maturity.

The places where, without maturity, we would surely stumble. Places dangerous and difficult to an adolescent faith.

Yet, such places, Habakkuk was able to traverse with the feet of a deer. That is, sure-footedly, with secure step, unfaltering.

But not only that, for a deer's foot, a deer's feet, also communicates, is it not, a lightness. There's a lighthearted spring to a deer's cadence.

Even a skipping. So, together, these metaphors communicate a capacity to navigate the hardest, most challenging places of deep life sorrow.

[4 : 37] And a deep and lighthearted joyfulness. All that with a sure-footed faith and an unfaltering trust.

Even a deep and lighthearted joyfulness. That, sisters and brothers, is a good measure of what it means to have Christian maturity.

The ability to hold together the most harrowing and hollowing of circumstances with an immovable and joyful trust in God.

Habakkuk had gained it. Oh, and it was a beautiful, sparkling thing to be desired. How did he get there?

And how may we? Now, of course, in asking how did he get there, we're acknowledging that the prophet was not there from the start. Reaching the high places requires an ascent.

[5 : 47] Reaching the high places. We're encountering him upon the peak, but a process is involved in being able truly to say, even in the midst of pain and sorrow and unanswered questions, he has made my feet like the deer's feet.

And notice in our text, it is God. God has made me thus. It was not so with me before God's gracious dealings of which I hear testify.

So let's go back to the beginning and see where Habakkuk starts out. Habakkuk begins his testimony in the valley of distress and perplexity.

Perhaps a very brief word on Habakkuk's historical context might be helpful. After good King Josiah's revival and the blessing and hopefulness that sprang from it, then bad King Jehoiakim, his successor, reverses all of the gains and the nation sank into a deep and dismal pit of idolatry and social evil.

And this grieved the prophet's heart and energized his pleas to God to intervene. In Hebrew, the book is named The Burden of Habakkuk.

[7 : 05] And this woeful declension of the people of God into national ungodliness and unrighteousness comprised much of that burden which weighed so heavily on him.

And you will notice another part of that burden was his cries to God to intervene seemed to fall on deaf ears. Verse 2.

God's non-intervention and seeming indifference was perplexing to the prophet, even agonizing, and a source of tortured wrestling.

In this respect, his name was rather fitting, for in Hebrew, Habakkuk means embracer. Not in the sense of a nice hug, but in the sense of grappling, like a wrestler, like Jacob wrestling with the angel at Jabbok.

And indeed, we might think of the question marks at the end of the opening staccato questions, like grappling hooks, clinging with ferocity to God's face.

[8 : 11] I will not let you go until you answer me. Let's briefly consider the source of the prophet's painful perplexity. It had its source in a conflict of his theology with his experience.

What he believed and what he saw. A collision between his convictions and the conditions. I believe you care, God, but you seem indifferent.

I know you as active, but you seem idle. And such collisions are part of a common pattern for the believer.

We begin our adult life, our journey through, we kind of put together a rough and ready theology. Our orientation, if you will.

The categories for processing the world that we encounter. Perhaps this framework is the fruit of a childhood of Sunday schools, a diet of good weekly sermons, maybe a favorite podcast, a devotional book.

[9 : 20] And this has, so far, served us well, or well enough. There's a settledness to our Christian life. But then there comes into our settled lives a great unsettling that strains the categories of our framework.

They no longer seem adequate to cope with this new reality. As to the puzzle of life, the shape of the piece that we've just had put in our hand, it doesn't seem to fit the space in our puzzle that we've so far constructed it.

The scripts of our hopes that we've so tenderly and fondly composed are returned to us, savagely edited.

And we protest, no, don't strike out that phrase. I'm so fond of that phrase. Like Peter, we cry out in pain and incomprehension.

May it never be, Lord. Well, this is where we find the prophet. Faced with unsettling disorientation.

[10 : 34] Why do you make me see iniquity? Why do you idly look at wrong? Verse 3. This is not what I thought you to be. These are not your ways as I know you.

This is where the prophet was. I wonder if you've been there. Are you there? Have you ever said in the agony of a broken heart, Oh, no, Lord, not this.

A great unsettling. It has many faces. A loss of a spouse. An empty chair. Around the family hearth.

A lonely singleness. A lonely marriage. A lost job. Broken health. Maybe the unsettling is not a dramatic wrenching loss.

But a slow, ceaseless erosion. The quiet accumulation. The quiet accumulation of disappointment scattered across the landscape of your life.

[11 : 46] Like the trail of cherished belongings discarded from the covered wagons as they head west over the Rockies.

If you're yet a stranger to this, well, congratulations, but it won't last long. The ascent to the summit of Christian maturity is going to be one of repeated unsettling.

We really can't be spared this path to reach the heights. A good and loving God will not save us from these things.

But he will, as he did with Habakkuk, save us through them. To the other side. Where there will be a fuller, a deeper, and an enlarged resettling.

So this is our errand for this morning. To follow the prophet on his pathway to the high places of a joyful resettledness.

[12 : 48] And I want us to attend four motions critical to this journey of ascent. Habakkuk 1 processes before God.

He 2 proceeds from foundations. He 3 posts himself patiently. And he 4 he pushes from head to heart.

So think of it, if you will, as four movements of a symphony. So first, Habakkuk processes before God.

Oh, sisters and brothers, this is vital in the midst of our pain and perplexity. To pour it out before the Lord. And this is just what Habakkuk does.

He brings his questions and his confusions to God. He doesn't bury them or let them smolder. He addresses God directly. There's even an unrehearsed, unvarnished, even raw quality to his address.

[14 : 03] His opening words burst forth from frustration and bafflement. How long? Verse 2. Why do you? Verse 3. But unmistakably, Habakkuk is pouring out his heart.

And this is always the very best first aid. Just go straight to God. Go to him and empty the pockets of your heart.

Even if you're not quite sure what's in those pockets. Just empty them before him. Now, perhaps this doesn't sound very godly or pious to some of us. But I bet you we're mistaken in that.

Because the Bible is littered with emotive whys that tumble out of the mouths of the godly. Like Moses or Job or even Jesus from the cross.

God can hold the jagged brokenness of our hearts. And even when we find ourselves in pain and anger lashing out, remember that we, his sons and his daughters, we beat at his chest from within the circle of his arms.

[15 : 20] Over the years, I'm increasingly seeing the profundity of C.S. Lewis' remark that we should bring to God what is in us.

Not what ought to be. You see, it's possible to trust and to struggle at the same time. I mean, who among us has not echoed, Lord, I believe.

Help my unbelief. And though we may stagger, we stagger in following. From his opening word, Habakkuk just hammers out his pain and perplexity on the anvil of his covenant God in dialogue.

Ever in dialogue. And you know, when we're in dialogue with God, we are on the right path. So where are you in this matter of your pain and perplexity?

Are there pockets of your heart that you need to empty before his presence? Let your prayers, like Habakkuk's, be wrung from the debris of your broken hopes, your scuttled dreams, and your tormenting tragedies.

[16 : 35] What is presently churning up your peace? As when you were a child, remember, you immediately took your bumps and your scratches right to dad or mom.

Similarly, take your wounds and aches straight away and as you are to your covenant God. He'll know what you need, and he will never withhold it.

Process your pain and perplexity before God. Also vital in Habakkuk's ascent, in his anguish and disorientation, he proceeds from foundations.

And we've observed that Habakkuk's perplexity and disorientation came from the collision of his theology and his experience. What he believed and what he saw. Why are you allowing all this

violence, iniquity, and injustice to prevail among your people?

Don't you care? Don't you see? And God answers him, No, I'm not ignoring the oppression and injustice and the unlawfulness which surrounds you.

[17 : 42] I will judge Judah. In fact, verse 5, I'm doing something in your days. I'm raising up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, as my instruments of judgment.

Now, this didn't resolve matters for Habakkuk. I mean, now he was even more confused. You're using the Chaldeans to punish your people?

I mean, as much as Judah is deserving of punishment, Babylon is far worse. Verse 13, Now Habakkuk has a more disturbing providence to deal with than the first troubling providence.

Now, the Gordian knot of his theology and his experience is even more inextricable. He's even more confused in theological vertigo.

Verse 12, Oh, Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment? You who are of purer eyes than to see evil?

[18 : 46] So, what does Habakkuk do in this really unsettled state of his framework? Something very wise.

He goes back to the foundations, to first principles, and proceeds from there. When we feel the torque of incongruity between what we believe and what we see, it's helpful to lay out and to remind ourselves afresh of what things we are absolutely certain.

However, strangely, some of these pieces of the puzzle seem to be falling into place. I'm absolutely sure of these corner pieces.

Here, at least, I have firm ground, solid mounds amidst the sinking morass. And this is what the prophet does. He proceeds from foundations.

Verse 12, Are you not from everlasting? In the midst of the vicissitudes and flux of time, it's deeply reassuring that God is not caught up in this changeable current.

[20 : 03] He's above the flux. He reaffirms God's holiness. You are of purer eyes than to see evil. He rehearses God's names.

Holy One, Rock, Each name, a Gibraltar on which we may pitch our hopes and our trust. And then, to assert his rightful claim upon these names and attributes, he uses God's covenant name, Jehovah.

That precious possession passed down with the promise, I shall be your God and you shall be my people. This foundation promise is echoed in the possessive adjective Habakkuk uses.

My Holy One, my God. Are you beset with problems? Don't just look at the problems. Look at them through the lens of God's attributes.

The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous one runs into it and is safe. Do you know how to do this practically?

[21 : 13] To go back to your foundations? And only God, only in God, do we have a sure foundation. You know, as Isaiah asked, is there any other rock? No.

We desperately need these foundations. For life is an earthquake zone. I mean, haven't you noticed? In 1999, the Taiwan earthquake, in that 50,000 buildings toppled.

Post-earthquake analysis revealed that the buildings collapsed because the support structures of the foundations turned out to be not load-bearing. Instead of the required reinforced cement due to corruption, the cement had been substituted for empty plastic bottles and empty tin cans, resulting in a fatal flimsiness.

What's your foundation made of? When the shock of earthquake comes into your life, will your foundation hold? Or does it fatally consist in the flimsiness of plastic bottles?

Of course, Habakkuk proceeding from his foundations didn't mean that all of his questions were all answered and his confusion relieved.

[22 : 36] He still has questions, but notice what he does next. He puts his questions on hold. He stops pouring out his own words to God, and he sets himself to listen for God's words to him.

Chapter 2, verse 1. I will take my stand at my watch post and station myself on the tower and look out to see what God says to me.

This is the next movement in the Summit Bound Symphony. Habakkuk posts himself patiently. He takes his stand at his watch post.

It's a powerful metaphor. Therefore, listen the way a watchman looks. Imagine a watchman atop his tower incessantly scanning the horizon for emotion of friend and foe, or perhaps gazing out intent to

catch the first rays of light at the break of dawn.

This is not a passive waiting. This is intensely active. I remember as a little boy, I watched the sheepdog competitions for the British Isles, and I will ever possess a picture of the posture of these champion sheepdogs.

[24 : 01] Eyes locked on their master, ears cocked, just straining to catch the first note of the voice of the master to release them on their errand.

Ah, it was a thing of grandeur. And notice, Habakkuk stations himself at his post. Something you cannot leave. To do so would be a dereliction of duty.

No, one stays at one's post as long as it's required. This active waiting on God requires patience for who knows how long we're going to have to wait.

What we do know is that the timing of that wait is God appointed and therefore is always perfectly timed. God's timing is never tardy.

We wait because the vision waits. Verse 3. The vision awaits its appointed time. Now, it's certainly hard to actively wait.

[25 : 02] I certainly find it hard, tremendously hard. Likely Habakkuk did too because God graciously reassures the waiting prophet. If it seems slow, wait for it.

It will surely come. It will not delay. It's as if God is saying, hey, my word to you and your grief and perplexity only seems slow.

But it really isn't. There is no unnecessary delay involved. In fact, it's hastening. Perhaps, in his wisdom, God holds our questions until we're ready for the answers.

I mean, surely the wait is not needed for God to prepare the answers for us. Surely it's to prepare us for the answers. The inner wing must form in the chrysalis before the butterfly is released.

I wonder how often I have found such active waiting just hard. And in my pain and frustration, I've left off. I just walked away before the appointed time.

[26 : 10] And I missed of the word that would have been spoken to me. What often takes us from our post of active waiting?

Well, the text points two ways to two ways which we tend to abandon our watch post and miss of his message to us. One is pride, verse 4.

I want the answer. I will judge of that answer as adequacy myself. And I want it now. And if, God, you don't act on my terms, I'm out of here. Well, I mean, it's a thick theme of Scripture that it is the humble that God delights to address.

A second way we can abandon our post of actively waiting is through self-soothing. The pain of our condition is just so sorely felt. We feel like we have to deaden it somehow.

And then we do, and it seems to help. At least the pain has helped a little bit. But it also deadens us to the attentiveness to God that our watchtower requires.

[27 : 21] The text mentions in verse 5 wine as the sedative. But there are other means of self-soothing. I don't know, food, shopping, binge watching, even exercise.

But notice the evaluation. They are traitors. We think that they're helpful friends, but in fact they betray us and are harmful enemies.

And perhaps the text indicates another soothing mechanism in the phrase, the man who is never at rest. Yeah, the Hebrew here is uncertain.

But it certainly can be true that one way to distract from the pain is to just slap on the analgesic of incessant activity.

And this, of course, is often the preferred choice of us church folk for busyness. It doesn't quite look as bad as besottedness. But the result is the same with respect to our watch post.

[28 : 25] So what then keeps us at our post in patient, attentive waiting? The answer is the contrasting center nestled between those two thieves of pride and self-soothing.

Did you see it? The contrast is signaled with a but in verse 4. But the righteous shall live by faith. This was the word that came to him as he actively waited and listened at his post.

How long he waited for that word, we don't know. Was it worth the wait? Does that word, I wonder, have a familiar ring to you?

The just shall live by faith. This word given to Habakkuk as he waited would articulate a truth so fundamental in our relationship to God that it would become a gem set prominently in the New Testament books of Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews.

It would have a spiritually powerful afterlife echoing down through the ages of the church, restoring, renewing, reforming God's people, wherever it was grasped and assimilated.

[29 : 43] I mean, surely a word like that, that's motivating for us to wait for the word. Now, again, this word didn't really answer all the questions Habakkuk had.

But in a way, it was the answer. For it gave Habakkuk, and it gives to us, the fundamental disposition toward God, a looking to God in expectant trust.

Anything other than that disposition in relation to God, the sovereign of the universe, is unsufferable pride and displays a gross distortion of soul, utterly out of touch with reality, as it says in 4.

So this is the great watershed. Two fundamental dispositions toward God. Pride or faith.

But how does one nurture faith? If the answer Habakkuk received from God was, trust me, how did Habakkuk achieve that unflinching tenacity of trust?

[30 : 53] How was it fashioned in him? So let's follow the prophet in this final, a relief to all, final movement in his ascending symphony.

We've noticed the critical step of posturing himself on his watchtower in active waiting on God. So what is this active waiting, this active looking and listening?

What form does it take? What was he actually doing? Well, chapter 3 gives us the answer. And don't miss this, for this is critical. He was rehearsing the report of God and his saving works.

Verse 2 of chapter 3. I have heard the report of you and your work. What reports were these? Well, likely Moses' reports of the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan is preserved in the law.

Or perhaps the psalms passed down used in temple worship, such as that wonderful narrative Psalm 136, the one with the refrain, his loving kindness is everlasting. His loving kindness is everlasting.

[31 : 59] And if you scan the first half of chapter 3, it confirms this. The subject of his musings were, verse 13 sums them up, God going forth for the salvation of his people.

Verse 5. Pestilence and plague, that refers to the Egyptian escape. Verse 8. Wrath against the rivers, that's crossing the Red Sea and the Jordan. Verse 3, 7.

Perrin, Cushion, Taman, Midian. Those are all wilderness wanderings. Now, Habakkuk was a prophet. I mean, this would not have been new information for him. We've noticed that he had a really solid theological foundation, but something is being added to his theological categories.

As sound and precise as they were, something was being deeply stirred. For look at the effect upon him of these musings. Verse 2. I have heard the report of you, and I fear.

Fear. There was an awful terror kindled in him. This was not the God contained in his tidy and tiny theological frameworks.

[33 : 13] This God exceeds the boundaries of our box. He bursts out of our headspace and ignites our heart. Here is no lion safely in a cage to perform pleasant tricks.

As was once asked of another lion, is he quite safe? Safe, replied Mr. Beaver. Who said anything about safe?

Of course he isn't safe, but he's good. What happened when Habakkuk listened from his ramparts? Verse 16 sums it up.

I heard, and my inward parts trembled. My lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones. My legs tremble beneath me. What's going on here?

He's encountering God. God is disclosing himself to him. God caused his splendor and power to press upon him, weigh heavily upon him, almost overwhelmingly.

[34 : 16] As he was meditating, the truth began to shine. The reality of his attributes, God pushes down from his head to his heart where they caught fire.

As would happen centuries later to a Frenchman, his testimony was found at his death, sewn into his jacket pocket, read, from 1030 in the evening to half past midnight.

Fire. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the intellectuals. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling.

Joy. Peace. The God of Jesus Christ. Joy. Joy. Joy. Tears of joy. Do you know anything of this?

We can't linger over this experience of God pressing on Habakkuk, but let's grab at the hem of it as we pass. Notice, with God, even the overwhelming manifestation of his radiance is really a concealing.

[35 : 21] Verse 4. A veiling of his power. When God goes forth, even the great forces of nature reel at his power. And remember, earthquakes, storms, oceans were the greatest forces in the lives of

the ancients, and in ours too, if we ever experience anything like that.

But next to God's power, these superpowers convulse and cower. Verse 10. Mountains quake. Deep utters forth its voice.

Lifts high its hand. Sun and moon stood in their places. Then they flee. The truly and the terribly impressive are utterly overshadowed and outclassed.

The sun says, whoa, that's bright. The tornado in the typhoon, whoa, that's power. It was this encounter with God arising from his meditation that gave the prophet stability.

You see, in order to reach the heights, Habakkuk needed to have the reality of God pushed down into the depths of his inner being.

[36 : 26] And that soul core kept him from collapsing when all around him collapsed. This is the very thing Psalm 1 promises to the one who meditates day and night.

She's like a tree firmly rooted, not like chaff that the wind drives away. Why is the tree so stable? Oh, it's rooted by streams of water. A tree that's not rooted needs rain or it withers.

But the tree rooted by streams has its source of nourishment independent of its circumstances. Its leaf does not weather, wither, even when it doesn't rain. It has green leaf and drought time.

Even when the yield of the olive fails, it can exalt and rejoice. Even when the flock is cut off from the fold, yet it can have deer feet. Joy is not the absence of trouble.

It's the presence of God. That's where Habakkuk's joy came from. Verse 18, I will rejoice in the Lord. I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

[37 : 31] And meditation got him into God. Meditation gets you into contact with the water that is there when all the other waters dry up.

Meditation gets you into a light when all the other lights go out. Meditation gives you strength when all the other might melts like wax.

So why is this so critical for our faith? Because it's not as if we can just determine to trust God. Trust grows out of a certain soil.

Trust grows as we contemplate and internalize the trustworthiness of God. As we contemplate His credentials. And they ignite in our minds and burn their way down into our hearts.

Oh, friends, do you know how to do this? Can you do a Habakkuk? When you find yourself sitting amongst your ruins, can you rehearse God's gracious dealings in your life?

[38 : 37] Can you weave an ever-lengthening narrative like Psalm 136, punctuate of the clause? His everlasting, His loving kindness is everlasting. Are you building Ebenezers, those stones of remembrance along the way?

A promise, a presence, a person, a book, an experience, a mercy that God has brought into your life? Do you mark them? Don't let moss cover over those paths of God's providential kindness and sovereign grace.

Keep those paths well-worn in your ever-fresh memory and use. Like Mary, make your heart a treasure chest.

Fill your memorial Ark of Covenant with your cups of manna, those tokens of God's provision. Or your budding rod, those tokens of God's guidance.

I'm told that in the Midwest, snowstorms are so blight and blinding that they call them whiteouts. In an anticipation, farmers, when a whiteout is about to come, they string a rope, they run a rope, stout rope, from their house to the barn.

[39 : 48] Gripping that rope, they're able to make their way through the blinding storm. If they let go of the rope, they're lost. And they're done for, too.

Friends, meditation is the way we tightly grip the rope of God's attributes and His promises in the storms of life. A rope we dare not let go of.

And let me ask you, if Habakkuk could exult as an Old Testament saint in the God of His salvation, looking at the Exodus escape and the Canaan conquest, do we not now have even greater display of God going forth for His people?

Has not God updated His CV? I mean, what meaning for a New Testament believer does verse 13 take on? Have we not even greater material with which to braid our rope of hope?

More themes for our shigianoneth, that's what that word is. It's creative poises of praise. Oh, friends, if this be the meat for our meditations, if our roots go down into these streams, our leaf will never wither, no matter what drought surrounds us.

[41 : 04] We shall find ourselves on the high places with deer's feet. For we will know that our life is hid with Christ in God, and that is a joy that no one can take or touch.

This, friends, is Christian maturity. And what's more, it's genuine joy and a joy indestructible. William Cooper penned, a man who struggled with serious depression, though vine nor fig tree neither, their wanted fruit shall bear.

Though all the fields should wither, nor flocks nor herds be there, yet God the same abiding, His praise shall tune my voice, for while in Him confiding, I cannot but rejoice.

Brothers and sisters, what are your those this morning? Though I am still not married, though the doctor said it was cancer, though I don't know how I will live without her, though I don't know how I'll pay this bill, though I didn't get into grad school, though I lost my job, take those those to the Lord. Tread the ascending path of Habakkuk to the high places of rejoicing in God and discover that whatever the circumstances, yours is yet a sure-footed, light-hearted joy, for God is enough.

[42 : 32] Can it really be? Yes. In 1851, missionary Alan Gardner, seeking to reach the remote Patagonian Indians, was stranded with his small band with little food, no shelter, beyond the hope of any rescue.

And they all slowly starved to death, Gardner the last. When the rescue party finally arrived, Gardner's journal was found near his body. The last entry that he weakly scrawled was a line copied from Psalm 34.

Oh, fear the Lord, all you His saints, for those who fear Him have no lack. The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

Let's pray. Amen. Holy Spirit, we ask you to graciously and effectually take these truths and these wonders and seal these things upon our heart.

May we try you and test you in this, that those who fear you have no lack. May we be living, vivid testimonies of the truth that they who seek you shall lack no good thing.

[44 : 03] for your great renown and our great joy. Amen.