

HABAKKUK: Fortuitous Events

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Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

"Billionaire Dies at a Fortuitous Time." That was the headline of a 2010 article in the journal of the American Bar Association. Which invites the question: "Is there really a *fortuitous* time to *die*?" We usually think of a "fortuitous event" as a fortunate event or a stroke of good luck. Attorneys and other readers of the ABA journal, however, would know that in legalese the word "fortuitous" means "an unforeseen event that occurs by chance or accident from natural or man-made forces over which an affected person has no control. A fortuitous event can have either positive or negative consequences."

Whether positive or negative, fortuitous events are always outside of our control. Insurance companies call instances of uncontrollable natural forces in operation "acts of God." In legal contracts, a *force majeure* is a chance occurrence or unavoidable accident that results from a power superior to that of any human actor. Things like the weather or death are beyond our control.

The article under this headline told about the passing of a 77-year-old Texas oil-pipeline billionaire, Dan Duncan. His death was fortuitous not to him, but to his heirs thanks to a quirk in the U.S. estate tax law. Duncan died within a one-year exemption window from the estate tax. Had Duncan died three months earlier, his \$9 billion estate would have been taxed at a rate of at least 45 percent. If he had lived until the following year, the tax rate would have been 55 percent. Since he died within that window of exemption, however, his whole fortune went on to those to whom he willed it.

That was indeed fortuitous for his heirs, but bear in mind that if the estate tax had worked the other way, that is, if he had died during a window when death taxes were higher than usual, the outcome would still have been fortuitous for the heirs. They would still receive his estate (just a little less of it). As already noted, a fortuitous event can have *either* positive or negative consequences.

I'll bet that you can recall a time when something happened and, at first, you weren't sure if it would turn out to be a good thing or a bad thing. The story of the Chinese farmer illustrates this perfectly. A Chinese farmer gets a horse, which runs away. A neighbor

says, "That's bad news." The farmer replies, "Good news, bad news, who can say?" The horse comes back and brings another horse with him. Good news, you might say. The farmer gives the second horse to his son, who rides it, but is thrown and badly breaks his leg. "So sorry for your bad news," says the concerned neighbor. "Good news, bad news, who can say?" the farmer replies. In a week or so, the emperor's men come and take every able-bodied young man to fight in a war. The farmer's son is spared. Good news, of course. Sometimes things don't turn out the way we want only to find out that something way better transpires.

A classic biblical example is Joseph who is sold into slavery by his brothers and shipped to Egypt. Bad thing, right? But in Egypt, Pharaoh notices Joseph and puts him in charge of Egypt's food production. Later, when Joseph's brothers come to Egypt in search of food, he tells them: "*Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as [God] is doing today*" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph's presence in Egypt ensured that God's people survived the famine. Something that started out badly turned out to be God working behind the scenes for something better. A fortuitous event.

The book of Habakkuk is also about a fortuitous event. Habakkuk lived in the late seventh and early sixth century B.C., during the waning years of the kingdom of Judah and not long before the Babylonians conquered Judah and sent the people into exile. Although this Babylonian destruction did not occur until 586 B.C., the threat of invasion hung over Judah for years before the final blow fell. This was the political reality under which Habakkuk lived.

Habakkuk is different from the other biblical prophets in that he does not preach to the people. Instead, he has a conversation with God. Habakkuk asks God the same kind of questions many of us would ask: Why do you allow evil and injustice to go unpunished? Why do you allow someone who is evil to inflict suffering on someone who is not as evil?

Habakkuk asked the first question because he noticed the moral and spiritual decline in the kingdom of Judah. Specifically, Habakkuk saw the oppression of the weak, endless litigation and quarrels, dishonest practices, immorality and careless worship. The prophet viewed communal life in Judah as far from what God wanted for God's people.

Apparently, Habakkuk prayed about the perverse situation in Judah for some time, for the book opens with the prophet asking, "*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not*

listen?" (1:2). Habakkuk wants to know how long before God will restore order and justice to the people? Why did God allow the people to carry on in their sinful ways and not put a stop to it? "How long, O Lord, are you going to tolerate such injustice?" Habakkuk asks.

Habakkuk eventually received an answer from God, but he may have wished he hadn't. God told Habakkuk that God would use the Babylonians to punish Judah for her sins. Babylon would invade Judah as the arm of God's judgment against God's people.

Naturally, this divine response alarmed Habakkuk. But, beyond that, it raised a larger issue: Why would God use people who were even *less righteous* than the people of Judah to punish the Judahites? Habakkuk knew his people were far from behaving as God wanted them to, but the Babylonians were much worse. The Judahites at least gave lip service to God, even if their follow-through was poor. The Babylonians didn't worship God at all. They were a brutal, pagan nation.

So, Habakkuk posed his second question: "*Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?*" (1:13). In Habakkuk's mind, Judah's defeat at the hands of the Babylonians was fortuitous only in the most calamitous sense. He drew no comfort from God's answer to his question, even though God added that in time the Babylonians would be defeated as well.

God's answer pointed to a larger settling of the scores and of righting the wrongs, an ultimate fulfillment of all things righteous and good. God told Habakkuk, "*For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay*" (2:3). It was in that context that God told Habakkuk that the righteous live by faith (2:4). God told Habakkuk that he would continue to live in a time when justice would be hard to find, but he should trust God's vision of a fully just time yet to come. If that vision seemed slow in coming, Habakkuk must wait for it. Thus, for Habakkuk, living by faith meant holding fast in his belief of God's preferred and promised future.

So, was the Babylonian conquest of Judah a good or bad thing? If you were one of those killed in the invasion or marched off into captivity, you'd be hard-pressed to label it good. Yet from the perspective of history, it may look different.

Separated from the temple which now lay in ruins in Jerusalem, the Jews could no longer offer sacrifices, but they continued to worship God. They discovered that their faith was not dependent on a location or the temple building. Local community synagogues continued to gather God's people together and teach the faith. The captives learned that their faith would survive and could be practiced anywhere. Most importantly, there was a significant reduction in idolatry; the people stayed true to God even far from home. This time of testing strengthened their faith in God and their belief in God's providence.

There was also an increase in literary production. Scholars collected and organized the writings we call the Old Testament during the exilic period. They compiled the history of Israel in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy-2 Kings) and wrote down and preserved the sayings of the prophets for future generations. The exiles learned the truth that, as the apostle Paul later wrote, "*All things work together for good for those who love God*" (Romans 8:28). In these writings we see God actively at work, behind the scenes, directing Israel's future. God's unseen hand brought fortuitous events, things beyond Israel's control, to accomplish God's purpose and to further God's kingdom.

Therein is the lesson for us. We may not like the way the world is today. We may not like our elected leaders. We may not feel we have much control over our own destiny. But it is just possible, even highly probable, that God is working behind the scenes to fulfill God's vision for the world. We often simply cannot see the positive side of many things at first...or perhaps never in this life. But because of Christ's resurrection, we are assured that the future is brighter than the past, and we can trust that, since we have given ourselves to God, what befalls us is *fortuitous*. It may be out of our control, but it is in the hands of God and that's good enough to get us by from day to day.

Prayer: Visioning God, teach us to trust in you. Remind us that your plans are to help and not harm. For you are a loving God. You know all our days. You have numbered the hairs on our heads. Help us to hear you calling and respond as faithful children. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Sources:

- "Fortuitous." Dictionary.com.
- "Fortuitous event." BusinessDictionary.com.
- Weiss, Debra Cassens. "Billionaire dies at a fortuitous time." *ABA Journal*, June 9, 2010. ABAJournal.com. Retrieved July 8, 2019.