

Idolatrous Work vs Faithfulness

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Habakkuk 2-3, and Zephaniah 1-2

The punishment the people of Israel receive is of their own making. The people have been working faithlessly, turning good materials of stone, wood and metal into idols. Work that creates idols has no value, no matter how expensive the materials or well-crafted the results are. As Zephaniah puts it, “neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them” (Zephaniah 1:18).

Faithfulness is not a superficial matter of uttering praises to God while we work. It is the act of putting God’s priorities first in our work. Habakkuk reminds that “the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” (Habakkuk 2:20). This silence is not merely a religious observation, but a silencing of our own broken ambitions, fears, and motivations, so that the priorities of God’s covenant can become our priorities.

Despite the punishment that people face in exile, some also begin to re-learn how to work in faithful service to God. As he watched the carnage around him, no doubt wishing he could be somewhere else, Habakkuk determined to stay at his post and listen for the Word of God there. But more is possible than simply staying at one’s post, valuable as that may be. We may also find a way to be righteous and humble.

Zephaniah encourages us to “Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord’s wrath.” (Zephaniah 2:3)

There are no ideal places of work. Some are deeply challenging to people of God, compromised in all sorts of ways, while others are flawed in more mundane ways. But even in difficult work places, we may still be faithful witnesses to God’s purposes, both in the quality of our presence and the quality of our work. Habakkuk reminds us that no matter how fruitless our work seems, God is present with us in our work, giving us joy that even the worst conditions of labour cannot completely overcome.

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 3:17–19)

Good work is possible even in the midst of difficult circumstances when the Lord is our strength. Faithfulness is not only a matter of enduring hardship, but of making even the worst situation better in whatever ways we can.