

August 30, 2026 – Trinity-13

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Our Scripture Lessons today are quite relevant for living in a world of chaos, deception, & turmoil, even though, by God's Grace, we are placed in a community largely shielded from much of the disorder that afflicts the rest of the world. Traverse City, in fact, has been rated No 1 among the 12 happiest small towns in Michigan, the "*undisputed crown jewel*" among good places to live (YouTube "*US Historian*").

The people of Judah & Jerusalem similarly may have imagined themselves to be the world's crown jewel in the days of Habakkuk, the prophet. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was not so fortunate. It was conquered more than 100 yrs earlier by Assyrian barbarians. The Assyrians ruthlessly destroyed Israel, forcibly deported its citizens (the story of the "*10 lost tribes of Israel*"), while settling foreign nationals among the remaining Jews. Intermarriage between Jews & foreigners, gave rise what Judeans considered racially impure "*half-breeds*", foreign interlopers who corrupted the Mosaic covenant, pejoratively called *Samaritans*. Judeans bragged about an assumed favored status with God because Assyrians failed to conquer them in earlier attacks.

Into this setting, God sent Habakkuk who observed Judah's lack of gratitude for God's blessings & their descent into rampant sin & immorality. "*Wise in their own conceit*" - Proverbs 26:12 - Judeans became ungrateful fools, blinded by pride into self-righteous immorality, a condition mirrored by many in our own land today. In his distress, Habakkuk quarreled, & complained that God should not have allowed evil to prosper. His lament is a recurrent theme in history, known as the paradox of "*theodicy*".

Protest against God's presumed indifference to evil dates back to Job in the Old Testament, dramatized by the American playwright Archibald MacLeish in his 1958 drama entitled "*JB*". There, Job sitting on a heap of ashes mournfully chants "*if God is good, He is not God*", meaning, He is not powerful enough to prevent evil. But "*If God is God, He is not good*" because He - a "*good God*" could not possibly permit evil schemes & agents to prosper. Job challenged God - but then God challenged Job: "*Who are you, with limited understanding, to question My purposes?*"

Habakkuk similarly challenged God - v13 - "*You, who are of purer eyes than to see evil & cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look on traitors & remain silent when the wicked swallow up men more righteous than they?*" Sinners in Israel were still more righteous than the Assyrians. And yet, today's psalm asserts that righteousness leads to blessings. But "*the desire of the wicked shall*

perish" - Ps112:10. God's justice endures, even though the time frame is up to Him. Habakkuk's lament, including his dragnet illustration, covers the whole 1st paragraph. Habakkuk exhausted himself in frustrated protest. Habakkuk's name actually means "*embracer, wrestler*". He had wrestled with Judah to repent, to "*walk in newness of life*" but without success. Then, he wrestled with God to terminate evildoers. For all his efforts, Habakkuk only received abuse, rejection & scorn from his contemporaries. And so, in H2:1 he resolved to retreat to his tower watchpost & wait for God's next move.

In v2, God did respond - "*Write the vision on tablets so that the reader may run & save himself from the coming judgment*". The appointed judgment may seem slow in coming, but will be perfectly timed. It will not be delayed. Those who imagine themselves safe, those "*puffed up souls*" will surely fall. But "*the righteous shall live by Faith*" - v4 - Martin Luther's favorite Bible verse.

Habakkuk has been called the Waiting prophet, singing in the Night about God's ultimate promise that "*the earth Shall be Filled with the Knowledge of the Glory of the Lord, as the Waters cover the Sea*" - v14. We too, are free to sing in the very Night of an increasingly godless culture, clinging to God's promise that He will save for Himself a faithful remnant, living by Faith in the Risen Christ.

Singing in the night was also the response of St Paul's & companions in the face of evil, injustice, & corrupt religion. Paul, together with Silas & Luke, were ministering in the Roman colony of Macedonia, in the city of rampant evil, Philippi. Here Paul founded a church, that soon splintered into factious bickering. Paul earnestly exhorted them to settle their self-serving conflicts & to practice humility, service, & obedience. "*Work out your salvation with fear & trembling*" - he commanded in Phil 2:12. God has changed you, now show that change in your daily actions, life, love, & glad obedience

The New Testament reading begins as the 3 Saints were making their way to a prayer meeting. A slave girl followed them unbidden - v18. With a supernatural spirit of divination, she was a fortune teller for money & had greatly enriched her masters. She followed Paul & company for many days - v18 - declaring "*these men are the servants of the most high God, which show us the way of salvation*". Should Paul have been grateful for free & truthful advertising? He was not.

Luke 4:31 tells of another demon spirit who testified to Christ's divinity. In the Capernaum synagogue a man with an "*unclean spirit*" cried out "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? We know that you are: the Holy One of God*". Here too, Jesus rebuked the demon & commanded him to leave his possessed victim. What lesson is there for us?

The enemy is still using the same strategy today. We might call it *"Name it & Claim it"*. The devil can quote God's Word for ungodly purposes, to claim authority over it and how it should be interpreted. This we saw, for example, in Christ's temptation in the desert. Some Churches use Christian terminology while changing meaning, message, & theology in order to deceive.

The Barna research group, reporting on Christian demographics, warned about the fall of American Christianity in a 2021 report. They wrote *"Thanks to cultural corrosion & a lack of biblical literacy, a new 'Fake Christianity' has raked the dry ground of the American church. The counterfeit religion actually is a form of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), a system that looks nothing like historical Christianity, despite their claims"*. Instead, it is a *"watered-down, feel-good, fake Christianity"*. It is *"the most popular worldview in the US today, held by ~38% of Am adults. Simply & objectively stated, Christianity in this nation is rotting from the inside out."*

A YouTube documentary collated the *"20 most corrupt churches in the world"* that included multimillion dollar enterprises operating under a Christian veneer for self glorification & enrichment. Among the 20 are familiar names, like *Eagle Mountain Intl Church* with Kenneth Copeland, the *PTL Club* with Jim & Tammy Faye Baker, the *New Life Church*, of Colorado, with Ted Haggard, former president of the Natl Association of Evangelicals, the *World Healing Center Church* with Benny Hinn, the *Family Worship Center* with Jimmy Swaggert, the *Ravi Zacharias' International Ministries*, *Hillsong Church*, & the *Trinity Broadcasting Network*, with Paul & Jan Crouch.

They could have included other well known names with international audiences like Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, & Robert Schuller. These are all high-profile *"Christian"* ministries. But even our own community has churches that claim Christ, yet promote woke & worldly doctrines contrary to God's Word. I suspect that Jesus & Paul would rebuke these modern manifestations of unholy deceiving spirits as well.

But opposition to demonic forces comes at a cost. The slave girl's handlers, losing income, arrested the three & arraigned them before the city magistrates. There, their clothes torn, they were beaten & flagellated & turned over to the jailer to be put in stocks & kept in the deepest dungeon of the city jail. But the enemy could not break the Saints' spirit. Even in pain, the three Saints sang God's praises into the darkness & into the spiritual night. (Would we sing too under such conditions?)

Around midnight, an earthquake shook the prison, & miraculously broke stocks & chains; doors swung open. The warden awoke in panic. Loss of prisoners

would surely mean his own death sentence. In despair, he prepared to kill himself. But Paul called out: Stop ! Relent !- all the prisoners are still in place. The jailer & his family were going to be spared. This was the jailer's rebirth into a new life. Shaken to the core, he fell on his knees before the Saints & begged "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" The answer, v31, is the same then, & now: "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, & you will be saved - you & your household*". With this good news, the whole family was baptized, rejoicing in God's Grace & Mercy. Then they ministered to the Saints, washing their wounds, feasting, & communing with them. I suspect that they joined the new Church of Philippi with a powerful testimony, receiving & believing God's Word with gladness in praise & in song.

The story ends with the city's magistrates learning that both Paul & Silas were Roman citizens. As such, they would have been entitled to a fair trial & barred from flogging. The magistrates had committed crimes, but the Saints did not press charges, but offered forgiveness instead - on condition that the magistrates would come in person to offer apologies before the Saints - repent & walk in newness of life.

With this, the magistrates gladly complied. I like to think that they too became members of the Church of Philippi, a church that remained Paul's life-long favorite. The Saints' opposition to the deceit & false claims of evil spirits, plus their Suffering for Christ's sake became an immense blessing for the Church & to generations of Christians under attack. Their life & Ministry are models for faithful Service to God & man. May God give us Grace to follow them in such Discernment, Service, & Endurance whenever we are called to battle against evil, deception, & the temptations of the world. **AMEN.**