

Sunday, March 7, 2021

When?

(Tears, Ashes, and Trumpets; Message 3)

(Lent, 2021)

Habakkuk 2:1-5

Scripture:

*2 I will stand at my watch
and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
and what answer I am to give to this complaint.*

(The Lord's Answer:)

*²Then the Lord replied:
"Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald may run with it.
³For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
it will certainly come
and will not delay.
⁴"See, the enemy is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness—
⁵indeed, wine betrays him;
he is arrogant and never at rest.
Because he is as greedy as the grave
and like death is never satisfied,
he gathers to himself all the nations
and takes captive all the peoples.*

Message:

Habakkuk begins with the cry of a person in anguish over the suffering and injustice he sees everywhere because he can't reconcile it with what he has been taught and knows deep in his heart.

How is it that injustice prevails when our God is good and righteous? How is it that suffering continues when our God is a loving healer? How is it the world is such a mess when our God is powerful and sovereign?

This inconsistency - between what he's **learned and what he's **experienced** brings up all kinds of questions in his mind - along with heartache and lament.**

The first question we noted on Habakkuk's mind was "**How long?**" "*How long*" is this going to continue?" ("*It seems like we've been dealing with this forever; it doesn't seem like it's getting any better!*")

The second question Habakkuk wants an answer to is "**Why?**" Is this punishment for something we've done? Is this a test of our faith - to see if we're really committed? Is this suffering designed to strengthen our faith? Or have some other benefit? (There is a benefit, a reason, for this, right?)

When God seems to ignore our pleas of "how long" and "why"; the next question obvious Habakkuk explores is "**When?**" *When are you going to come and make things right?*"

THE DILEMMA

Habakkuk has lots of questions; they are not unlike the questions you and I have asked:

Why does evil seem to have the upper hand in a world created and ruled by God?

Why do the righteous (always) seem to suffer while the wicked (always) seem to prosper?

Why has this (fill in the blank: cancer, accident, loss, illness etc.) happened to me?

Why when I've prayed and prayed and prayed (and others have prayed with me), doesn't God seem to answer my prayer?

The things we believe about God and the nature of evil bring us a dilemma. See, Habakkuk believes there's one God who is in charge. This God made the whole world and everything in it and he is Lord over it all. Habakkuk believes, like we do, that God is **omnipotent**.

But if there is a sovereign, omnipotent, God in charge; it's logical to believe nothing can happen without his perfect or permissive will. That is, that nothing simply slips through his hands. So how do things happen outside of his will?

But believing that means the ongoing existence of evil in our world - the persistence of injustice - is a problem. Why doesn't an omnipotent, just and loving God do something about the evil?

We believe God loves his creation and creatures and always **deals lovingly** and **rightly** with us; in return, we believe God demands our righteousness toward him and one another.

Justice is often defined as getting what we deserve: i.e., a reward when we're good; punishment when we're bad; but if love is the dominant issue, why doesn't God **help** us if he says he loves us?

And therein is the dilemma: How do we reconcile completely unnecessary cruelty (shooting children in school; randomly killing concert goers) with a just, loving God?

How can a God of "*purser eyes than to behold evil*" (**Hab. 1:13**) not be compelled to do something about sin, evil, injustice, cruelty - a.s.a.p.!

We believe evil is **real**; that it entered our world when man sinned. Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science: "*If God is good and God is all, all is good and evil does not really exist*" (That's how she explained evil; she denied it). But the Bible insists evil is horribly real - not an illusion or delusion; denying it doesn't make it go away. It's involves us. So the existence of evil in our world is problematic.

Habakkuk 2 invites us to take God's justice and mercy seriously. We're to be **persistent**, refuse to give up, or **compromise** or even soften God's Truth.

Habakkuk pictures himself stationed on a watchtower or a rampart; he is looking for the **salvation** (i.e., for the relief) God will bring. A "watchman" watches and waits.

A watchman knows something is coming; he (just) doesn't know when; he needs to stay alert. He longs to always be ready so he waits attentively; one of the hardest things God asks his people to do is to wait in faith. Are we - watching and waiting in faith?

It might be appropriate to talk for a moment about those who question God. Some people believe those who question God are people who lack faith; some people think any doubt, any skepticism, any unanswered issues connote unbelief..

This naturally leads many faithful followers of Jesus to not only question their salvation but to refuse to engage in discussions (i.e., ask questions, investigate new interpretations, try something different) with other believers.

But the invitation here is to join Habakkuk in the **search** and **pursuit** of Truth. The reality is, the Bible has many great questioners: Job, David, the preacher in Ecclesiastes, Jeremiah - as well as Habakkuk. The fact is, our questions about God bring us back to God; God isn't displeased by questioners whose questions seek to engage Him more deeply.

THE DIALOGUE

First, note the importance given to what God says (2:2). Whenever the Hebrew idiom “*make it plain on tablets*” (lit. “*inscribe on tablets*”) is used in the Old Testament, it means this is so important you need to “write it down. While normally this phrase is singular, here, interestingly, it is plural. The only other time it’s plural in the Scripture is when it’s related to writing down the law. So Habakkuk is saying this “word” is of significant importance for Israel and even for us.

Second, God wants everyone to know he keeps his word, that he is faithful, that he can be trusted, that this “revelation (or vision) will not fail” (2:3). That is, everything God has **promised** Israel and Habakkuk - in the past and in the present - will happen! **Guaranteed!** What God says he’ll do; God will do. You can trust him.

The only variable is “**when.**” God says, “*Don’t expect it instantly, or even tomorrow.*” Fact is, God is saying, the fulfillment of what we’ve been talking about may take a while; it may take your lifetime or multiple lifetimes; I will not be hurried.

Habakkuk lived in the time when Babylon came, destroyed Jerusalem, and carted every man, woman, and child off to Babylon and ruthlessly pressed them into slavery. But the judgments pronounced here on Israel’s enemies will not take place in Habakkuk’s lifetime.

God is saying, “*Habakkuk, you only see (know) a few pieces of the big puzzle; I know you’re frustrated; but trust me. I know the data says the sky is falling, but don’t panic. Your perspective is too small. Only I know the big picture. I’ll make everything beautiful in my time*” (cf. **Ecclesiastes 3:11**). (I not real fond of that verse - the first part is great; but the “*in his time*” part is really hard to accept and to live with).

Habakkuk isn’t arrogantly shaking his fist at God; he is genuinely confused and is agonizing over the apparent inconsistencies and injustices in life he can’t explain.

Third, God reminds Habakkuk the **unrighteous must and will be judged (2:3 - “*Though it linger, wait for it, it will certainly come and will not delay*”).**

God is saying, “*Habakkuk, your world is going to get real ugly. My judgment is coming because my people made some really bad choices; they’ve been arrogant (i.e., they think they don’t need me), self-indulgent, and self-important.*”

God is also saying he will allow another nation to come and purge his people. God is lamenting that his people have forsaken their covenant commitment. God is lamenting that his people will suffer, but he’s tried everything else to

bring them back, so for a time, he will not protect them from the consequences of their sin.

Then God tells Habakkuk, after a time, Babylon will also be judged/punished for their sins.

Fourth, God reminds Habakkuk the righteous will not be abandoned (2:4 - “The righteous will live by their faith”). In the midst of all this confusion and frustration there is a way to live Biblically: we must trust God to fulfill his promises - even if we don't yet understand. God is sovereign; He loves those who follow him. He will never abandon us.

THE DILIGENCE

As we've noted, Habakkuk 2:2-5, is the answer to the question “When?” For some, the question, “How Long” and “When” have the same answer; and some are eager to supply it: forever! (At least that is what it seems like!)

With it comes the danger of losing one's faith entirely; of giving up on God or expecting anything from him or of hearing his voice. Meanwhile, God's answer seems to **contradict** itself: “*Though it linger, wait for it, it will certainly come and will not delay.*” How does it both linger and not delay? It will be slow, but it'll get here quickly! What does that mean?

It is God's way of assuring us there is an **answer** and he will give it; that he will not forsake his people but act on their behalf; but the “**when**” is his to decide. So we are left with a mystery because we can't figure out his “when” and we don't understand why it can't be now!

Only God knows...and that's where **faith** comes in.

God says, “The righteous person will live by his faithfulness.” This verse is better known as “*The just shall live by faith!*” This passage is found quoted in the New Testament in **Romans 1:17**, **Galatians 3:11** and **Hebrews 10:38**. This is the passage Martin Luther encountered in Romans and it ignited the Protestant Reformation.

In the Hebrew, it is just three words, literally **righteous, faithfulness, and live**. The “righteous” or just (*tsaddik*) is one who is **vindicated**; one whom God has declared to be **right!**

There is a legal connotation to this word: it refers to the one who has won their case in court. It is more than just a sense of internal goodness; it is used in controversial situations to state which side is right.

In **Habakkuk 1:4** and **1:13**, it is contrasted with *wickedness*; here in **2:4**, it is contrasted with arrogance, being puffed up or presumptuous and having distorted desires. God himself is the standard; those who reflect God's will and ways in their life are the “righteous.”

To “*live*”, in Hebrew thought, is more than just existing or breathing or being physically alive. The understanding is that one is not really *alive* while (if) one is sick, weak, in danger, in pain, depressed and/or discouraged. To have *life* is to have a sense of **vitality**, security, health, and honor; to have a purpose and a deep passion; to dream and be stretching to attain it.

This is not telling us how to persevere by hanging on by our fingertips, but how to fully embrace life...abundantly.

I read a book a while back to review for *Deeper Journey*, entitled, “*Everyone dies, but not everyone lives*” (M.S. Bickford). That is what God is talking about here.

God is saying that “faith” and “faithfulness” are concepts that can’t be separated; they are two sides of the same coin. The Hebrew word (*‘emunah*) here can mean “to be **steadfast**.” Like when the Israelites were battling the Amalekites and Aaron and Hur held Moses hands steady (**Exodus 17:12**) as he prayed (*‘emunah*).

It is the word for being faithful in your marriage; in the discharge of your duty, in giving your witness over a long period of time; in finishing well.

In the Old Testament, the word seldom means “what one believes”; but focuses on following God in obedience, staying close, hanging on.

In the New Testament, Paul gives the verse a little twist by using it to give a doctrinal lesson, a tutorial on justification by faith. But the reality is, the Bible does not allow us to separate what one **believes** (faith, orthodoxy) from how one **behaves** (i.e. What one does, faithfulness; orthopraxy).

So how does this answer Habakkuk’s complaint and question, “When?!”

The set of contrasts Habakkuk cites in **2:4-5** underscore the huge **divide** between those who believe in him - the righteous - and those who do not...

The righteous are those who **remain faithful** to God precisely when believing in God makes **no logical sense**.

--For example, when God is silent; when his justice isn’t evident; when his mercy seems lost; when people are senselessly murdered, when the righteous continue to suffer.

--For example, when God calls us to hang on and not give up when there is no reason we shouldn’t throw in the towel; and God promises if we remain faithful we will LIVE.

If we have **faith** in God and are **faithful** to him, we’ll be justified by his life.

This may, on the surface, appear unrealistic and not very helpful; truth is, it can't be thought out, it has to be **lived out**; and it can be lived out only if it is **believed**.

It doesn't explain - or even attempt to - how evil exists in God's good world. It accepts the fact that evil is all around and with it - suffering and pain. It declares, in spite of the data, the certainty of God's rule because we are able to live in a world where evil exists and we're not be overcome by it.

Again and again we find believers who persevere, who are willing to live counter-cultural and counter-intuitive lives - without any earthly reward or satisfaction.

People do it in their **marriages**; one (or both) partner's needs are left largely unfulfilled (this often leads to unfaithfulness or divorce; our culture suggests it should be about you! You should have all your needs met). But sometimes the spouse will keep covenant and persevere. There is a Biblical word for this - *hesed* - faithful. It is how God behaves.

It happens in **families**. A child is conceived with severe challenges (in the world this often leads to abortion or institutionalizing). But sometimes the parents put aside their own needs, wants, desires and goals in order to lovingly and faithfully care for them.

It happens when people are diagnosed with a **chronic illness**. People have every reason to become angry and bitter about their pain and suffering... But they don't give up; they still feel blessed; they still have something left to give.

There are believers around the world who are intensely **persecuted** simply because they name Jesus as Lord; sometimes it is entire families, sometimes whole churches. While some deny their faith under pressure; many embrace the sufferings, even death. In their faithfulness, they not only survive, but they also thrive spiritually.

We could put the **doubters** and questioners here along with Habakkuk. They are struggling; yet in spite of their struggles they hold on, continue to be faithful even through the dry periods. They keep praying in spite of God's silence; they stay faithful even when the joy eludes them; they persevere even when life seems hollow.

It happens in the **local church**. People bail quickly on the church today.

Many have the misunderstanding that the church is for and is supposed to be about us; so when a decision doesn't go our way, we stop giving; when the sermon doesn't satisfy, we complain; when there is a twinge of controversy, we leave; when the church encounters a rough patch we're gone to the next up and coming place.

But not all bail; many remain faithful, many persevere, many face the difficulties head on. God blesses faithfulness.

We long for clear explanations, well-thought-out logic and answers that keep us in our comfortable zone. But God doesn't always provide **clarify** (to our satisfaction); he seldom provides us answers that meet our time schedule; instead, he offers us the **presence** of his Son.

God's response to our "When?" (as it was to our "How Long" and "Why?") is to learn not to live by **sight** and solutions, but by faith – often by **faith** alone – in our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.