

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Habakkuk #2
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When the Answer to Prayer is More Difficult to Embrace than Hearing Nothing at All
Habakkuk 2:1-3:19

I've often made the comment that there are two profound reasons why people struggle to embrace the Christian faith or find it difficult to remain devoted to God. The first reason is *unexplained, unjustified suffering*. We can all fairly well endure suffering that we know we deserve. It doesn't make the discomfort less painful, but it does provide us with the strength to persevere. But when suffering comes without warning or cause, and lingers, people start to question God's goodness. They even begin to question if he even exists.

The second reason why some justify their abandonment of Christianity is the issue of *unanswered prayer*. They bombard heaven with what they believe are legitimate requests to help address legitimate concerns. They persist in asking in humility and confidence that God is both good and able to help. But when the answer simply doesn't come, some people decide to quit. They can't reconcile in their minds the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving God with the fact that what they so desperately ask of him never appears.

I'm sure there are other reasons people would give for their decision to abandon or never even consider the Christian faith. But there is another challenge that we often face. I don't think many actually quit their commitment to God because of it, but it brings tremendous confusion and anguish to their hearts. I'm talking about those occasions when the answer to a frequently asked prayer turns out to be more difficult to embrace than not hearing anything at all.

There is no better illustration of this than in the book and experience of the 7th century b.c. prophet, Habakkuk. Let me briefly remind you of what we saw last week in chapter one of this short book.

Habakkuk lived in the late 7th and early 6th century b.c. when the southern kingdom of Judah was immersed in idolatry and immorality of every conceivable sort, and some inconceivable. Manasseh turned out to be the most wicked and depraved king that Judah had ever seen. As we saw last week, he eventually repented of his evil ways. It was a reminder to us all that it is never too late to turn back to God, no matter how depraved or disastrous your life may be up to that point.

But Manasseh's late-in-life repentance was not sufficient to undo the damage he had inflicted on the nation. The judgment of God was inevitable. It took the form of 70 years in captivity in Babylon.

I think Habakkuk would have fully agreed that such judgment was warranted. He knew how bad it had become in Judah. God had to do something. In fact, Habakkuk had pleaded with God over and over again to intervene and to do something about the pervasive wickedness in the land. It was a wickedness likely far worse than anything we are witnessing today in 2020. Habakkuk struggled for a considerable period of time, wondering if God would ever answer his prayer to do something about the deplorable conditions in Judah. He struggled with what he feared might be unanswered prayer.

But the greatest struggle he endured was when the answer finally came and turned out to be indescribably unbelievable. Perhaps you have experienced this as well. You've asked God repeatedly to step into your circumstances and put things right, but when he finally did, it wasn't at all what you expected. It was an answer to prayer, to be sure, but not the sort of answer you would ever have expected. Such was the experience of Habakkuk.

It was bad enough that Judah was so horribly corrupt. It was bad enough that Habakkuk couldn't himself seem to do anything about it. It was bad enough that for so long a time he prayed for God to act and yet God did nothing. It was bad enough that he had to be an eyewitness to the blasphemous and idolatrous behavior of his own people. But it was *worse still* when God finally did answer his prayer and promised to intervene. It was undeniably bad that Judah was so corrupt and worthy of judgment, but it was intolerable, as far Habakkuk was concerned, that God should use Babylon to judge her. After all, as evil and wicked and idolatrous as Judah was, Babylon was worse!

By all means, discipline your people, said Habakkuk. But not by means of a people who are even worse than we! We are truly a rebellious and idolatrous nation, but we can't hold a candle to what is happening in Babylon.

Habakkuk couldn't understand how a holy God could do this. How could God avoid being stained by the sins of Babylon by raising them up, granting them power, and orchestrating their invasion of Judah and the destruction of its capital city and temple?

Habakkuk is fully aware of the audacity of his response to the way God chose to answer his prayer. He has directly and forcefully challenged the propriety of what God had said he would do. We saw this in Habakkuk 1:12-17. He therefore braces himself for what is certain to come. He prepares himself for a swift rebuke. He will not try to resolve what seems to him to be a contradiction. Human wisdom can't solve this puzzle. So Habakkuk stations himself to wait and listen for an answer that can only come from God himself. Only God can resolve this enigma. Divine revelation, not human speculation, is his only hope.

He says in 2:1, "I will take my stand on my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint." A typical city of that day would be fortified with a massive wall, as much as 600 yards long, 12 ft. thick and 36 ft. high, with numerous towers and guard posts. He envisions himself stationed there to await God's response, much as a guard would be posted on the wall to keep an eye out for approaching visitors or enemies.

God's initial response is found in 2:2-3,

And the LORD answered me: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay" (Hab. 2:2-3).

Since the fulfillment of God's promised answer is still future, it must be transmitted by a permanent written record. So, write it down, Habakkuk, that all subsequent generations may read and reflect on what I did, says the Lord.

The principle that is unpacked in Habakkuk two is simply this: "Habakkuk, don't ever think that the Babylonians are righteous simply because I chose to use them in achieving my purposes for Judah. I am the sovereign Lord over all people, both the righteous and the unrighteous, and I will employ them all to accomplish my goals."

What follows in Habakkuk 2:4-20 are *five woes, five taunting declarations* from God that describe both the unrighteousness of Babylon and the judgment that is certain to come upon them. It's as if God says to Habakkuk, "Don't worry; they'll get theirs!"

We're not going to look closely at 2:4-20, so let me briefly summarize what God says. First, in vv. 6-8, he assures Habakkuk that those who plunder will be themselves be plundered. Second, in vv. 9-11, he tells the prophet that the shameful will be shamed. Third, in vv. 12-14, he assures Habakkuk that the violent will toil in vain. It is in v. 14 that God makes the glorious promise to us that the day will come when "*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*" (Hab. 2:14). The earth may now be filled with unbelief and violence and wickedness of every sort, but don't despair, because I, God, will one day intervene and knowledge of my glory and majesty and beauty will spread everywhere even as the oceans are spread with water. This is a promise that I believe has already begun to see a partial, gradual fulfillment now, in the church age. But it will not be fully fulfilled and consummated until Jesus Christ returns to the earth at the close of history.

There are yet two woes to come. The fourth is found in vv. 15-17 where God says that the disgraceful will themselves be disgraced. As Babylon has treated others, so God shall treat them. In essence, God tells Habakkuk that what goes around, comes around! The fifth and final woe is found in vv. 18-20 where God says that people who engage in idolatry are stupid! They build a metal object or a wood figure and bow down to it, expecting it to talk back or to act on the person's behalf. "Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it" (v. 19).

Verse 20, on the other hand, describes the vitality and life and energy of the one true God, contrasted with the dead, dumb idols that the Babylonians worship. The Lord is alive and lives in his holy temple, so shut up and fear him!

That is the essence of chapter two. In chapter three, up through v. 15, Habakkuk rehearses God's many acts from the past. He uses vivid language to describe what God did when he encountered Moses on Mt. Sinai. He talks about the plagues on Egypt and the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. He mentions his leading of Israel in the wilderness and eventually into the promised land. He even describes in v. 11 when he made the sun stand still in the time of Joshua. God is repeatedly portrayed as a warrior going into battle to defeat his enemies and deliver his people. If God did it in the past, says Habakkuk, surely he can and will do it in the future.

Habakkuk's Fearful and Faithful Response

Beginning in v. 16 and extending to the end of chapter three, we read about Habakkuk's response to the impending invasion of Judah by the evil Babylonians. It is a strange mixture of both fear and faith. We would typically regard these as mutually exclusive, but when the object or focus of both is God, it makes perfectly good sense. It was out of his fear or reverential awe of God that his faith emerged. His fear is described in v. 16 and his faith in vv. 17-19.

Habakkuk's Fear (v. 16)

What we read in v. 16 should not be dismissed as hyperbole or an over-dramatization of what the prophet was feeling. This is no figure of speech or literary device. Habakkuk describes as honestly as any person could what he experienced upon hearing God's answer to his prayer. "His solar plexus convulses. His feeble effort to maintain a dialogue with the Almighty results in an uncontrollable buzzing of the lips. His bones give the sensation of rotting away. His legs quake beneath him" (O. Palmer Robertson, 242-43).

All this begins when Habakkuk "hears" God's answer to his prayer. He is awestruck by a God who is so majestic and sovereign to do things the way he does. He may even have heard or seen in a vision a revelation of what God has done in the past and what he is planning on doing in Judah in the very near future. The impact on him was literally staggering.

"My body trembles" (v. 16a) is probably not the most literal rendering of Habakkuk's words. The term "body" literally refers to the lower abdomen, the belly, the womb, all of which point figuratively to the innermost thoughts, feelings, and intents of the heart.

The word "trembles" literally means to convulse, to be shaken to the depths of your being. This is more than a mild case of the butterflies (see Exod. 15:14; Deut. 2:25; Job 37:1-2).

This reaction is provoked by the voice of God! The Lord had pulled back the curtain on his power and purposes and the frail frame of this finite creature, Habakkuk, couldn't withstand the devastating impact. When the "voice" of God thunders, the response of all creation is breathtaking:

"The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. . . . The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, 'Glory!'" (Psalm 29:3-5, 7-9).

I strongly suspect that Habakkuk was quite familiar with this psalm of David, but up until now he had never actually heard the voice of God. Now, however, he fully understands what David wrote!

Do you realize that every time you read Scripture or hear it proclaimed or taught, you are hearing the very same voice of God? And how do you react: with a yawn and another cup of coffee?! You don't have to hear God's voice with your physical ear to truly hear him. This book is his voice, perfectly and permanently inscribed for us.

"My lips quiver at the sound" (v. 16b). Habakkuk tried to speak, but couldn't. His lips were shaking and buzzing, not from exposure to extremely cold air but from awe and amazement at the revelation of God's power and purpose.

“Rottenness enters into my bones” (v. 16c). There evidently came upon him a feeling of gradual decay, a disintegrating weakness in the marrow of his bones.

“My legs tremble beneath me” (v. 16d). I faltered, struggled to keep my balance, and ultimately collapsed. This was also the experience of Daniel (10:9-10) and John the Apostle (Rev. 1:17). During the First Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards described the reaction of many in his Northampton, Massachusetts, church. At the close of one sermon in 1746, he said:

“Toward the close of my discourse, divine truths made considerable impressions upon the audience, and produced tears and sobs in some under concern; and more especially a sweet and humble melting . . . that I have reason to hope, were truly gracious” (88).

He also spoke

“of persons’ flesh waxing cold and benumbed, and their hands clinched, yea their bodies being set into convulsions, being overpowered with a strong sense of the astonishingly great and excellent things of God and the eternal world” (313).

The sort of experience that came upon Habakkuk and on those in 18th century New England is not the result of an intensified spiritual atmosphere, as if this sort of response can be manipulated by something we humans do. It only comes on those who are by God’s Spirit awakened to and conscious of God’s powerful and glorious presence and bitterly aware of their own helplessness apart from grace.

We must remember that Habakkuk didn’t seek this experience. He didn’t ask for it. He was seeking God. He was longing for truth. He didn’t pray for fear or trembling or for bodily weakness or quivering. He simply wanted more of God. He wanted to hear God answer his prayer. And when the Lord pulled back the veil and allowed a glimpse of his glory to shine into Habakkuk’s heart, there was simply no other way for the prophet to respond. The impact of God’s revealed voice was physically, spiritually, and emotionally profound.

Notwithstanding this visceral response to divine revelation, Habakkuk decides that the better part of wisdom is for him to keep his mouth shut and wait for God to act (v. 16d). The “day of trouble” is coming. The invading Babylonian army is near at hand.

Habakkuk’s Faith (vv. 17-19)

When the Babylonians come sweeping into the land of Judah, the ravages of war will leave the land desolate. The senseless rapacity of the invading Babylonians will consume everything in their path, wreaking havoc on the whole of society.

Each of the elements mentioned in v. 17 were vital to the economy in Judah. The “fig tree”, the “fruit on the vine” and the “olive” were the choicest products of the land. In the absence of grain from the fields and the loss of cattle and sheep, there would be no bread, no milk, no meat, no cereal, no vegetables, no mutton, no wool. To help us make more sense of this, substitute each of these with the price of oil, natural gas, wheat, beef, as well as the loss of jobs, loss of health, the collapse of our economy and the bankruptcy of social security, not to mention the deterioration of the family. How would you respond?

Habakkuk’s response is found in vv. 18-19. What we read here is no stoical resignation to the inevitable, no solemn resignation to what is unavoidable. This is not Habakkuk simply giving up to what he can no longer control. He’s not saying, “Oh well, I’ll make the best of an inescapably bad situation. One thing is for sure, you can’t fight city hall!”

No. This is more than a man simply gritting his teeth, grinning and bearing it. Habakkuk discovered the secret to joy even when every instinct, fiber, cell, and muscle of his body cried out with grief and confusion.

One might even say that the privation that he knows is coming and the catastrophic loss of all material blessing drives him to the enjoyment of God! After all, God is all he’s got left! There is no one or anything else to rely on. This is certainly a firm resolve in Habakkuk, but not a grim concession.

Therefore, what we read here is not making do with what one can't escape. It is the sacrifice of praise! It isn't the power of positive thinking in religious clothes or a Pollyanna-style optimism. This is the discovery of the secret to spiritual survival: God! He is our strength and salvation! The crops may fail. The market may crash. The social fabric may unravel, but one thing will never fail: God!

None of this is meant to suggest that Habakkuk has simply closed his eyes to the chaos that is coming or that he is playing spiritual make-believe. It simply means that he is willing to take the long view in the assurance that God's justice will prevail over the oppressors. D. A. Carson explains what is meant by taking the long view:

“By taking the ‘long view’ I mean that Habakkuk can more easily accept that punishments will be meted out on the short term by a nation yet more evil and violent, if he is assured that all nations, including the oppressor that will administer the chastening, will ultimately be held to account” (76).

And the only way that Habakkuk or you and I can take this stand of faith and rest in this triumphant trust is in view of the fact that this God is my God and my strength (v. 19).

The imagery he uses here in v. 19 is of a deer that with sure-footed confidence traverses the heights of the mountain terrain. Try to envision in your mind's eye a high mountain with exceedingly rugged terrain, rocks littering every pathway, danger at every turn. Yet the deer deftly makes its way through with sure-footed confidence, almost playfully, undeterred and unfazed by the obstacles on every side. Can you see it? That's you! How? Through the moment by moment reminder that the Lord is himself my strength. When I am weak, he is strong. When I am confused, he is in control. When I feel abandoned, he is at my side. When everyone else abandons me, he is still here. When others betray me, he can be trusted.

Conclusion

I have two practical implications for us from Habakkuk.

First, can you trust God even when his answer to your prayers is either No or, as in the case of Habakkuk, when his answer is remarkably different from the one you had hoped for? Can you “rejoice in the Lord” when everything on which you had previously depended is cut out from beneath you? Can you “take joy” in God when he's all you have left? Do turbulent and tumultuous times, such as Habakkuk faced in the 7th century b.c. and we now face in 2020, lead you to lose trust in God or drive you into even deeper dependence on him?

Second, you may be inclined to read the story and experience of Habakkuk with a measure of envy. It isn't his frustration or confusion at how God answered his prayer that you envy. It isn't even the physical, emotional, and spiritual manifestations he experienced as he reflected on the majesty of divine judgment that first came to Judah and then, in turn, to Babylon.

Many read Habakkuk and envy his having heard the voice of God. Don't. Please don't. Because you, too, have heard the voice of God. It is a reflection of how low our estimation of holy Scripture has fallen that we regard it as of less value than the audible voice of God. Perhaps that is due in part to the fact that God's voice, as preserved for us in the Bible, is always available. We never have to search for it or pray for it or fast for it. It is here, every minute of every day. We have become bored with it because we so readily take it for granted.

Yes, I would love to hear the audible voice of God as Habakkuk evidently did. I would love to be the recipient of dreams and visions and revelatory words. But I will never allow myself to think that I am at a disadvantage to Habakkuk or any other OT prophet or NT apostle simply because I “only” have the written voice of God in Scripture.

Today, no less so than Habakkuk in his day, I can rejoice in the Lord no matter what may come, because I have encountered the living God and heard his voice in Scripture. Today, no less so than Moses in his day or Paul in his, I can take joy in the God of my salvation, because their God is my God. He is my strength, and he tells me so repeatedly in his Word.