

Habakkuk- Finding Faith in Trying Times

WHY??

[Hab. 1:1-4]

What do you do, when your world is falling apart? What do you do when you see injustice? Do you speak up or stay silent? In the next 4 four weeks we begin a new series called *Finding Faith in Trying Times*. *Trusting Jesus when trust is difficult*.

In the wake of tragedies such as the **December 26, 2004**, tsunami in Southeast Asia, questions about where God is in all this naturally arise. Columnist Eric Zorn (from a humanist worldview) offers his questions, and answer:

Did the tsunami reflect the will of God? Or was God powerless to stop it?

If it was God's will, what moral lesson can we possibly accept from an entity for whom individual human life is evidently so expendable?

Why isn't constant fear the only sensible attitude toward such a being?

Either way, what does it mean to trust God or have faith in God when in seconds on a sunny day a crushing wave from the deep can snatch a loved one literally from your grasp and drown him?

I call my outlook indifferent agnosticism: I don't know if God exists and I don't care.

The very inexplicability of sad events like the tsunami, like the AIDS crisis or even like the cancer death of the father of one of my daughter's 2nd-grade classmates last week are, to me, reminders to focus on our obligations to one another, not to the infinite; to honor the creator, if any, by honoring creation itself and hoping that's good enough. –Eric Zorn

Habakkuk is a prophet who looks at the injustice in his world and decides to speak up and speaks out. "Something has to be done!"

Habakkuk the man-- The Hebrew Bible provides no information concerning the prophet Habakkuk other than the contents of his book. The name is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Judging by the frequency use of liturgical language in the book, it is likely that Habakkuk is a temple prophet. As a prophet at the Temple, Habakkuk would be expected to present his oracles in an open liturgical setting.

Habakkuk witnessed a society that had been falling part in terms of its moral fabric. Everyone seems to be striving for personal pleasure and self-promotion. At every level of Judahite society, sin is rampant (Fentress, 186).

So Habakkuk looks at his world- hears from the lord- arises and begins to speak.

Read [Habakkuk 1:1-4] and pray

Today's message is simply entitled: WHY??

Body

Presumably this sermon will be difficult to many people because you were told or assumed that you should never doubt or question God. Some today have an equally turbulent yet opposite dilemma. You are looking at devastation and evil and you are screaming, why!!! And you will never trust until your questions are answered.

Our first task then is to delineate between these two terms. **Is doubt = to questioning?** We know in the Word of God that doubt is not a virtue (James 1:6 reminds us to ask without doubting). Doubt is not honored by God and is not obedience to God. **What you must do is doubt your doubt.**

Why? **The presence of doubt for the Christian should be "faith seeking understanding," not "unbelief seeking justification."** (Trevin Wax).

You can ask questions of the Lord without doubting (unbelief seeking personal justifications).

1. **Gen 18: 25** You could not possibly do such a thing: to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. You could not possibly do that! Won't the Judge of the whole earth do what is just?"
2. **Num. 11:11** So Moses asked the LORD, "Why have you brought such trouble on your servant? Why are you angry with me, and why do you burden me with all these people?"
3. **Matt. 27:46** About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lemá sabachtháni?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"
- 4.

Are you seeking understanding or justification? Faith in the midst of trying times is not the lack of inquiry, but honest questions with humility.

To say at the desperate father: **Mark 9:24** Immediately the father of the boy cried out, "I do believe; help my unbelief!"

Does God Listen? (1:1)

The prophet begins with a sharp accusation- **how long/I call/ you don't listen/I cry/ do you save?** “Habakkuk here faces the dilemma that has confronted faithful people in every age—the dilemma of seemingly unanswered prayer for the healing of society.

Obviously, whatever is perplexing this man of God has been troubling the prophet for a long time. **Ever feel like Habakkuk?** God this is been bothering me! God I have been praying for an extended season. God are you listening?

Prayer is the framework in which all the burdens of God's people may be poured out before the Lord. Prayers expressing perplexity are appropriate as long as they are offered in a context of trust. If you cannot pour out your heart and burdens to your Maker- where can you go?

Is Habakkuk seeing understanding or justification? This is the power of prayer. **Does God listen? When you look at the promises of God, you receive a resounding YES!**

Delays of God are always purposeful. “Trust Him in the waiting room”

Does God Save? (1:1)

But in Habakkuk the prophet's cry of complaint sounds forth hauntingly: “The prophet is weary— weary with the world as it is.”

The second question continues from the first. Not only is Habakkuk asking if the Lord is listening and responding. He now asks will you save? We don't know how long the prophet has been praying a prayer of salvation.

This root נצח is used 205 times in the OT and first found on the lips of Jacob during his final words in which he says: **“I will wait for your salvation, Lord” (Gen. 49:18)**. Don't you think Habakkuk intricately knew this verse and is now asking.. I am waiting—will you save? The same word used by Moses before the Red Sea when he proclaimed, **“Don't be afraid. Stand firm and see the Lord salvation” (Exod. 14:13)**. It is the same word proclaimed to Mary: You will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus (Joshua) and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever (Luke 1:31&33)

Maybe you are asking the same question. Does God save? YES! Do not give up seeking the salvation of the Lord. **In even speaking the question we must wrestle with the promises of God in Christ Jesus.** **You cannot use the word salvation w/out the name Jesus.**

Does God even care? (1:2-4)

The prophet of God next launches into **specifics** about his life and world: **injustice-wrongdoing-oppression-violence-strife-conflict-law is ineffective- justice never emerges- wicked>right.**

The result of the abandonment of God's *mishpat* (justice) in Judean society is chaos": the law is numbed, justice does not go out,⁴⁵ the wicked surround the righteous, and justice is perverted.

With the breakdown of the social order, the nation lacked the elemental necessities for existence. When law is paralyzed and justice perverted, the righteous become the pawns of the wicked.

Habakkuk was a man who refused to ignore the brokenness of his world. And he, in the only way he knows how asks the Lord God Almighty WHY? Cancer-HIV-War-loss of a child- more wrong than right? Its ok to ask these questions. **Seek understanding not justification.** God do you care?

Conclusion- faith in trying times

Lou Little, who coached at Georgetown University before going on to become famous at Columbia University.

Coach Little had a big, strapping tackle on his team who was more like a teddy bear than a defensive tackle. In four years at Georgetown, the kid never missed a practice. In four years, he had nearly a 4.0 grade point ratio. And yet, in those four years, the kid never started.

Four days before the last game of the young man's career, Coach Little received a telegram informing him that the young man's only living relative, his father, had died suddenly. It was Coach Lou Little who was asked to pass on the bad news to the boy.

On the day of the big game, Coach Little was a little bit surprised to look up and see the young man standing there in the locker room. The boy pleaded with him: "Coach, you've got to play me today. I've never asked you for a favor, but I need to get in the game today. Just one play."

"Son, you're not a starter. This game is for the championship," he explained." Just one play Coach," he begged. "One play is all I want. If I mess up, take me right out."

The coach thought about it for a moment. What harm could it do?

On the first play from scrimmage, the opposing quarterback called an audible and handed the ball off to his big bruising fullback who dove off tackle on a trap play, aimed right at this young man. He fought off the block, tossing the pulling guard to the ground. Boom! He greeted the 240 pound fullback and dropped him in his tracks. He hit him so hard that the kid was hauled off the field.

That afternoon saw that young man make **15 unassisted tackles. He made 12 assisted tackles. He caused one fumble and recovered another. The clincher was the pass that he intercepted and returned for Georgetown's winning touchdown.**

When it was all over and done with and all the celebration had ended in the locker room, the only two remaining were Coach Little and the young man, standing there awkwardly looking at one another.

The coach said, "Son, I owe you an apology. Never have I seen you perform the way you performed today. Have I judged you so poorly?" Did you do it for your dad?

"Coach, you knew my dad died," the boy said. "You knew my dad was blind."

"Yes, I've seen you leading him around the campus when he used to visit you," said his coach.

"Today was the first time my daddy ever saw me play."

What changed about the boy on this day? To know your heavenly Father is watching, changes everything. Does God listen? Does the Lord save? Does the Lord care? A secular humanistic worldview, where man is the center of the universe, will always lead you to ignorance or indifference.

How do you trust Jesus when trust is difficult? You can place an unyielding confidence in Jesus Christ. Habakkuk without receiving a message of hope says:

Hab 3:17 Though the fig tree does not bud and there is no fruit on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though the flocks disappear from the pen and there are no herds in the stalls, **18** yet I will celebrate in the LORD; I will rejoice in the God of my salvation!

How does God respond to our brokenness? John 3:16. Loved—Gave- Son- Believes- Life

What will be your response?

Notes

Historical Intro

Habakkuk is the 8th prophet in the book of the Twelve. It follows Nahum, which argues that the downfall of Nineveh is an act of Yahweh, and it precedes Zephaniah which calls upon the people of Jerusalem and Judah to return to Yahweh and thereby avoid the punishment that will otherwise come if they continue to with pagan gods (Sweeny, 453).

Like Nahum, it therefore maintains that Yahweh controls world events and employs nations for divine purposes (Sweeny, 453).

The Hebrew Bible provides no information concerning the prophet Habakkuk other than the contents of his book. The name is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. His name may be based upon the Hebrew root hbq, "to clasp or embrace," which has prompted later medieval Kabbalistic tradition to identify him with the son of the Shunammite woman whose birth the prophet Elijah announced (Sweeny, 454).

Habakkuk witnessed a society that had been falling part in terms of its moral fabric. From the political leaders to the common people, everyone seems to have forsaken the Lord and His covenant with His people. Everyone seems to be striving for personal pleasure and self-promotion. At every level of Judahite society, sin is rampant (Fentress, 186).

The Prophet/Vocation

Many follow Mowincnkel who argues that Habakkuk was a cultic prophet stationed in the Temple. This contention is based upon the frequent appearance of liturgical language in the book, such as the terminology of the complaint psalms in Hab 1:2-4 (Sweeny 456).

Watch post could refer to the priestly watches or obligations for cultic service to the Temple.

As a temple prophet, Habakkuk would be expected to present his oracles in a liturgical setting.

The Book of Habakkuk contains only the most essential information. From the title verse the reader knows only that the message comes from a prophet named Habakkuk,⁵ who is otherwise unknown in the Old Testament. Neither the prophet's hometown (see Nah 1:1) nor his lineage (see Zeph 1:1) is known. Information about dating the prophet also is missing, as is information about his audience (cp. Amos 1:1; Mic 1:1; Isa 1:1; and Nah 1:1).

Theme

A matured faith trusts humbly but persistently in God's design for establishing righteousness

in the earth (NICOT, 136).

Hab. 1:1 The pronouncement that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

Pronouncement

The term *massa* is derived from the verb root *ns'* to lift up and frequently is translated as burden. This genre is a type of prophetic discourse in which the prophet attempts to delineate how Yahweh's actions are manifested in human affairs.

Oracle" or "burden" (*maśśā'*) is a common way to describe prophetic material, especially material that deals with prophecy against foreign nations.⁹ It is the least understood of the words describing the content of the prophetic books. The word obviously describes prophetic utterances that primarily speak of foreign nations, but the word carries the idea of a load or burden, as if the prophet was burdened with the message he received from the Lord.¹¹

- Prophetic books usually contain a superscription or title verse with the essential information needed by the person hearing or reading the prophecy. In general the larger books contain more detailed information than the smaller books.³

Prophet

The title verse identifies Habakkuk as "the prophet," an unusual designation for the title verse of a prophetic book. Only Habakkuk, Haggai, and Zechariah are identified in this way in title verses. The Hebrew word for "prophet" (*nābî'*) has traditionally been interpreted as coming from a Hebrew root meaning "to bubble up,"

At times a prophet is called a *hōzeh*, a "seer" (Amos 7:12; Mic 3:7; Isa 29:10; 2 Kgs 17:13; 1 Sam 9:9). The content of much of Habakkuk's message points to the emphasis here on reception rather than the visionary experience, for a prophecy dominated by lament and dialogue does not appear appropriately called a vision. Patterson thinks "Habakkuk's stress seems to be on his own participation in the revelatory process."

2 How long, LORD, must I call for help
and you do not listen
or cry out to you about violence
and you do not save?

The speech employs the typical vocabulary of the complaint psalms to demand action from Yahweh concerning the oppression of the righteous by the wicked (Sweeny, 462).

Complaint and Beginning

The Book of Habakkuk has a strange beginning for a prophetic book.

- Isaiah begins with God’s complaint against his people. Jeremiah begins mysteriously with God’s description of a prenatal call experience to which the prophet raises a lament. Ezekiel starts off with an eerie theophanic experience; Amos, with a more normal theophany followed by oracles against foreign nations including Israel and Judah. Hosea begins with God’s invitation to marry a harlot. Joel begins by asking the people questions about the causes of current conditions. Obadiah opens with God’s call to battle against Edom, introduced uniquely by plural voices. Micah announces a theophany. Nahum begins with a confession of faith in a jealous and avenging God of wrath. Zephaniah starts straightforwardly with an oracle of judgment. Haggai begins with God’s condemning quotation of a complacent people’s refusal to do his work. Zechariah introduces a call to repentance immediately. Malachi begins with God’s confession of love for a people who do not believe him. God—his word, his actions his coming, his call—opens prophetic books.

But in Habakkuk the prophet’s cry of complaint sounds forth hauntingly: “The prophet is weary—wary with the world as it is.” It warns the reader to expect something different here, to read closely between the lines. We must first determine why the prophet complains and ask what answer he expects.

Un-Answered prayer

The opening “tension of **unanswered prayer**” sets the tone for the entire book. “Habakkuk here faces the dilemma that has confronted faithful people in every age—the dilemma of seemingly unanswered prayer for the healing of society

Prayer is provided specifically as the framework in which all the burdens of God’s people may be poured out before the Lord, prayers expressing perplexity are appropriate as long as they are offered in a context of trust (NICOT, 138).

The substance of the prophet’s complaint centers on unanswered prayer (NICOT, 138).

How Long

The “how long” implies that the question had been troubling the prophet for a long time.

The prophets accusation that Yahweh does not deliver is intended to motivate a presumably just Deity to a situation of urgent need (Sweeny, 463).

Perhaps it might have been some consolation to the prophet if he had recalled that the Lord himself was the first to cry “how long?” (Exod. 16:28)

- Habakkuk’s problem lay in what he knew about the Lord rather than in what he did not know. He knew that the Lord is holy and righteous. In the words of the great Old Testament text, Habakkuk knew the Lord to be a “compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.
- In the Old Testament, “hearing,” like most mental functions, implied more than simple hearing. It meant to hear and to respond.

3 Why do you force me to look at injustice?
 Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
 Oppression and violence are right in front of me.
 Strife is ongoing, and conflict escalates.

- Habakkuk’s additional question continued the thought of the passage. How could God allow the prophet to see such trouble?
- The question implies that God’s inactivity had allowed wicked people to dominate Judah. Such wickedness had come upon the whole land, including the prophet himself. The language picks up themes from Num 23:21 with similar verbs and objects.
- The second part of the question refers to God’s inactivity.
 - The prophet was incredulous: how could God look on trouble such as this and do nothing? The NIV has caught the force of the question: “Why do you tolerate wrong?” Though the interpretation seems free from difficulty, the remainder of v. 3 presents several problems for the translator.
- The passage contains four nouns that indicate the problems in Judah during the reign of Jehoiakim. Jerusalem and Judah under the leadership of Jehoiakim could be described as a city of destruction and violence where contention and strife abound.

4 This is why the law is ineffective
 and justice never emerges.
 For the wicked restrict the righteous;
 therefore, justice comes out perverted.

Law

In this situation, possessing the law does Israel absolutely no good. God’s law is numbed (NICOT, 140).

The result of the abandonment of God’s *mishpat* (justice) in Judean society is chaos”: the law is numbed, justice does not go out,⁴⁵ the wicked surround the righteous, and justice is perverted. No wonder the prophet complained about such a sorry state of affairs.

The “law” can refer to a number of different ideas such as the Ten Commandments, the law of Moses, or specific sets of law material. The most natural meaning is the “instruction” of God without reference to specific passages of Scripture.

With the breakdown of the social order, the nation lacked the elemental necessities for existence. When law is paralyzed and justice perverted, the righteous become the pawns of the wicked.

- Who were the wicked? Although some interpreters have looked to identify the wicked with Babylon,⁴⁷ most modern biblical scholars see the wicked as inhabitants in Judah, probably during the reign of Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.)
- In the Old Testament justice and righteousness are intertwined. Righteousness meant that a person met the demands of a relationship. Righteousness toward God meant meeting the demands of the relationship with God; righteousness toward a fellow human being meant meeting the demands of the relationship with another. Justice carried righteousness into the legal sphere.
- The final verb (in v. 4) describes what happens when the law is paralyzed and justice is not carried out: the wicked hem in the righteous, and justice is “bent out of shape.” Another meaning of the verb is that justice is made “crooked.”
- “The Israelites’ rejection of God’s authority mediated through the law merely exposed them to the harsher experience of his authority mediated through an alien people.”⁵⁸

Illustrations

The presence of doubt for the Christian should be “faith seeking understanding,” not “unbelief seeking justification.” (Trevin Wax).

Frederick Douglass, former slave, abolitionist, and engineer on the underground railroad, was a popular speaker on the anti-slavery circuit. He traveled thousands of miles each year, giving hundreds of speeches. Yet the money he earned from lecturing was not enough to become financially comfortable, and he and his family struggled. Douglass was disillusioned by the repercussions of the Fugitive Slave Act, and his abolitionist leanings grew more strident and bold. If the citizens of Rochester, New York had expected to be flattered by Douglass when they asked him to speak on the Fourth, they were soon disavowed of that idea. Douglass took the opportunity to defiantly point out the ripe hypocrisy of a nation celebrating their ideals of freedom and equality while simultaneously mired in the evil of slavery. While the speech surely made even the most

liberal audience members squirm; nonetheless, the crowd let loose in “universal applause” when Douglass finished.

Worthy Excerpt:

I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you this day rejoice are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence bequeathed by your fathers is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today?

Application

- Have you ever felt God doesn't listen? (1:2)
 - In the face of death, true life only comes in Jesus Christ
- Have you ever felt God doesn't care? (1:3)
 - Habakkuk is not afraid to ask God big questions about huge issues.
 - Evil is a major problem in this world.
- Have you ever felt like God is paralyzed? (1:4)