

**08-30-09**

**Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:2-3<sup>i</sup>**

### **Introduction**

- **Headline: Bomb kills 30.** A powerful car bomb exploded outside a mosque in the Iraqi city of Mosul as worshippers were leaving Friday prayers. 30 people were killed and 72 wounded.
- **Headline: Suspect had license suspensions.** With 45 “administrative suspensions” of her driver's license on file — but no record of ever having had a driver’s license — a 33-year-old woman was arrested today while driving a car that had been reported stolen.
- **Headline: The Impossible Politics of Deficit Reduction.** The country's fiscal health took a two-by-four to the head yesterday, as new estimates of our ten-year deficit jumped to \$9 trillion, setting the stage for what some experts are predicting will be the biggest deficit fight in US history.
- **Headline: Elderly man may face charges in home invasion.** An elderly man who was tied up and robbed in his own home by four teenagers may face charges after police say he chased the suspects down and shot one of them to death.
- **Headline: Starvation ravages Africa.** A food crisis has swept through war-torn Somalia and neighboring Kenya, forcing millions of people to seek aid, and the World Food Program to call for emergency funds to fill a deepening financial gap.

Do you ever get the feeling that something is desperately wrong with the world? Every day, the news is filled with a constant stream of stories about deceit and destruction and death. Even our so-called ‘entertainment’ is packed with betrayal and violence and sin. And if all that wasn’t bad enough, our own hearts are often consumed by questions and struggles: worries about jobs and finances...disappointment with projects gone bad and relationships in disarray...fears about our health and our future.

- What are we supposed to do with all this brokenness? And where is God in the midst of our need?
- **Headline: How long, O Lord? How long must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore, the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.”**

### **Transition**

This is the last week in our little tour through the Minor Prophets. Back when we started, I told you that these ancient messengers of God—(these men with obscure names...whose writings are tucked away deep in those parts of our Bibles that don’t get opened very much)—I told you that these messengers help us answer a very important question: Does God still speak?

- And I suggested...that even though they lived in a culture that was very different from our own...they still addressed people who were a lot like us—people whose lives were controlled by forces they didn’t always understand...people who bounced back and forth between obedience and sin...people who wondered from time to time: Is there a word from the Lord that would make sense of all this?

And as we wrap-up this series today, I want us to look at the message of Habakkuk...because he—even more than the other Minor Prophets—delivered a message that seems almost eerily up-to-date. You see: he, too, got the feeling that something was desperately wrong with the world. He, too, wondered what to do with all this brokenness. And in his confusion and heartache, he cried out: “How long, O Lord.”

- And if we’ll pay attention to that question...if we’ll let it linger in our own hearts a little...I believe we can learn three vital lessons<sup>ii</sup> about what it means to have faith in a world that so often calls faith into question.

## The Prophet's Setting

Like the other prophets we've studied, I think we need to know at least a little Habakkuk's historical setting. This background, however, might not be as important as it was in previous weeks, because—unlike the other prophets—Habakkuk doesn't really speak directly to the people of his day. His book isn't filled with warnings and pronouncements, aimed at calling the nation to repentance.

- Instead, Habakkuk records a dialogue—a conversation between himself and God—in which he offers questions...and God responds...and the prophet is changed along the way.

And what inspires those questions? Well...to be honest...a lot of the same things that inspire our questions: corrupt politicians...evil that seems out-of-control...moral decay and perversions of justice. Habakkuk, you see, lives in the waning days of Judah's glory. This nation that started with so much promise when David and Solomon sat on the throne is now floundering.

- The leaders are drifting further and further away from God. The rich are exploiting the poor. The people—rather than being faithful to the God who blessed them and gave them this good land—are turning from God to worship idols. And on the horizon, there are rumblings of an uncertain future...rumors of a distant nation growing stronger and posing a threat to the way of life that the people of Judah have come to take for granted. Any of that sound familiar?

Habakkuk (for his part) doesn't understand! He has prayed long and hard about the unsettling circumstances that surround him. But he just doesn't see any sign that God is doing anything. In fact, he's not even sure that God is listening. And so...Habakkuk unloads. He vents his confusion and anger... and he calls out, "How long, O Lord? How long must I call for help, but you do not listen? How long must I cry... but you do not save?"

- And in doing that, Habakkuk demonstrates the first lesson in what it means to have faith in an uncertain world: Faith Wonders. Listen to that one more time...Faith Wonders.

## Faith Wonders

Does that surprise you at all? After all, if you stop and think about it, saying that 'faith wonders' almost seems like a contradiction in terms, doesn't it? I mean, "faith trusts" or "faith believes"...that we would understand. But 'faith wonders'? How can wondering and questioning and even doubting be part of what it means to have faith in difficult times?

- Well...Habakkuk is one of those essential heroes of scripture...who remind us that God is big enough to handle our questions. Like Job, who faced disaster and asked, "Why did I not perish at birth?" (Job. 3:11)...and like Jesus, who hung on the cross and cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Habakkuk demonstrates that honest questioning isn't opposed to faith. In fact, it turns out that questioning can actually be a sign of faith.

Think about it like this: If you had no faith...why would you wonder? If you looked at society and saw greed and cruelty and sin...if you looked at the world and it seemed like everything was falling apart...without faith in God, why would any of that surprise you?

- Only those who believe in God... who trust that he is holy and powerful and good...who are convinced (deep in their hearts) that He 'knows the plans He has for us...plans to give us a future and hope'—only those with faith have reason to question the state of the world...because they're the only ones who know that God has both the desire and the ability to do something about it.
- And based on that faith, they're willing to ask God for answers. They don't sit quietly and resign themselves to the whims of fate. They don't shrug their shoulders and say, "It must be God's will." They don't look at all the brokenness around them and say, "Don't worry, be happy."
- No, they storm the throne of grace. They drop to their knees and pray, "How long, O Lord? Why don't you do something? When will you act?"

And Habakkuk learns (as we do) that God answers those prayers. “Look at the nations and watch,” he says. “Be utterly amazed...for I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told” (1:5). Habakkuk gets an answer. Now that doesn’t mean it’s an answer he fully understands. In fact, God’s answer creates more questions...

- Because what God tells Habakkuk is that He’s going to raise up Babylon—“a ruthless and impetuous people...who sweep across the earth to seize dwellings not their own...who are feared and dreaded and are a law unto themselves” (1:6-7). God is going to use this evil nation to accomplish His purposes.
- And once again, Habakkuk doesn’t get it. “Your eyes, Lord, are too pure to look on evil,” he says. “You cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”
- Habakkuk wonders...because faith wonders. But that’s not all faith does.

### **Faith Waits**

The second lesson Habakkuk teaches—about what it means to have faith in an uncertain world—is that faith waits. Although it is completely consistent with trust in God to ask questions about what He’s doing and not doing in the world...faith also recognizes that our limited perspective doesn’t always allow us to make sense of the answers God gives. “My thoughts are not your thoughts,” the Lord declares in Isaiah; “Neither are your ways my ways” (Is. 55:8). And so—having faith means having humility enough (to acknowledge that we may not know the whole story)...and having patience enough to wait for God to do His work...in His way...on His schedule.

- And so, at the start of chapter 2, Habakkuk waits: “I will take my stand at my post...and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me” (2:1).

Now let’s face it—waiting is never easy. Especially for people like us...who live in an ‘instant gratification’ kind of world (where the microwave cooks our meals in seconds...where cell phones connect us with anyone, anytime we want...where the internet means that almost all the information we could ever want is never more than a few clicks away)—in a world like that...there’s something frustrating and scary and downright upsetting about having to wait for anything. And yet, isn’t waiting an essential part of becoming whole?

When we wait, we release the illusion of being in control. If it weren’t so dangerous to our physical and emotional and spiritual health...it’d be almost funny how tightly we cling to the fantasy that we are the masters of our fate. We’ve got places to go and people to see and things to get done—and so we rush...and worry...and burn the candle at both ends...and get tied up in knots when things don’t go the way we planned (at least I do...I don’t know about you).

- But then one unexpected phone call or traffic jam shows us that we can’t control our schedule. One little virus reminds us that we can’t control our health. Waiting reminds us that God is God...and we are not...and that’s a vital lesson to learn.

When we wait, we refine our priorities. Many times, things that seem important (in the crush of the moment) turn out to be far less significant when seen through the perspective that only a little time can give.

And perhaps most of all—when we wait, we discover new capacities to deal with life. When we don’t wait...when we let ourselves get pushed into knee-jerk reactions and off-the-cuff responses—we operate out of a very limited set of options and resources. But given some time—given some waiting—we discover that the range of possibilities is a lot bigger than it appeared at first. We discover that we’ve got more energy, more ideas and more confidence at our disposal than we ever thought was possible.

- No wonder scripture says that those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength (Is. 40:31).

So Habakkuk waits...and God rewards his waiting. In the second part of the scripture lesson we heard a few moments ago, the Lord offers assurance that He is working...and that His will will be done: “Write down the revelation and make it plain,” God says. “For the message awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and it will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay” (2:3)

Now if you read the rest of chapter 2—which serves primarily to describe God’s impending judgment on those who create the kind of injustice and violence that Habakkuk cried out against—you’ll find hidden among the woes and warnings several little nuggets of promise—that remind Habakkuk and us...that good things come to those who wait in faith:

- The righteous will live by faith (2:4)...The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (2:14)...The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him (2:20).

And in response to those promises...in response to the new perspective he’s gained through waiting, Habakkuk teaches us the third lesson about what it means to have faith in an uncertain world. We’ve seen that faith wonders...and that faith waits...and here at the last, we learn that faith worships.

### **Faith Worships**

The last chapter of Habakkuk begins and ends in prayer...prayer that tells us a lot about the way faith responds...when it learns that God is at work in the world (despite signs to the contrary). First, Habakkuk prays: “Lord, I have heard of your fame; and I stand in awe of your deeds. Renew them in our day. In our time, Lord, make them known.”

- Isn’t that the cry of a heart that worships—a heart that acknowledges all the great things God has done...and yet yearns for all the great things God is going to do? Renew your deeds in our day, Lord. Do it again, God. Make yourself known.

This is the kind of faith that prays with Jesus, “Thy kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This is the kind of faith that declares with Paul, “I know whom I have believed, and I’m convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.” This is the faith that cries out with the early church, “Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus.” And, of course, a faith that prays like that...lives like that.

- It lives in obedience, knowing that God’s way is the only way that leads to life.
- It lives in confidence, knowing that violence and injustice and hatred don’t get the last word, because the last word belongs to THE Word—Jesus Christ, who is the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

Now in response to that prayer...in response to that faith, God gives Habakkuk a vision—a vision of the Lord coming in power to establish his kingdom. And if you read it sometime...it’s almost a little scary. It sounds like something from the book of Revelation. There are mountains crumbling and seas raging and lightning flashing.

- But what matters aren’t the images contained in the vision. What matters is what the images represent: God’s complete victory over every sin and every injustice and every form of brokenness that has ever marred this good world that He created and for which He gave the life of His Son.
- That’s the assurance that comes to Habakkuk...and to all of us who place our faith in God. For now, we may wonder: “How long, O Lord?” But the day will come...when we wonder no more...and all things are made new.

Of course, that still leaves the issue of what we do in the meantime. How does ‘faith worship’ when what we see seems to be so far from what God promises? And that’s why...of the two prayers that stand at either end of this final chapter in Habakkuk...I’m even more impressed by the second—the one that comes after the vision. Because as the book closes, the prophet prays this:

Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

When everything is said and done, you see...faith is about so much more than the evidence we can see. In fact, the book of Hebrews says, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." And based on that hope—based on that certainty—'faith that worships' dives in...holding nothing back...and lives like the promises are true: Though the fig tree does not bud...yet I will rejoice.

### **Conclusion**

I believe in my heart that there are people here this morning who've been standing on the edge of faith, unwilling to dive in. You trust God enough to wonder what He's up to. You believe strongly enough wait on Him. But when it comes to taking the plunge...when it comes to having a faith that worships...a faith that bets your life on the promise of God and says, "Even when I cannot see...I will rejoice"—when it comes to having that faith, you've been hesitating:

- You've heard the promise that God wants to do a new thing in this community through First Baptist Church...but you've been reluctant to invest your time and your energy and your treasure in that new thing.
- You've heard the promise that God wants to make you part of this family of faith—a family that will care for you and encourage you and offer you a place where you can care for others—but you've been hesitant to unite with this family.
- You've heard the promise that Jesus Christ wants to cleanse you of your sin. He wants to become your Savior and Lord, and make your life something glorious. But you haven't been willing to let go...and place your life in his hands.

How long, O Lord? Why not today? Why not let this be the day that you receive faith—faith that wonders, faith that waits, but—most of all—faith that worships by responding right now like the promises are true?

- Our hymn of response is # 326: Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling. And that is what he's doing. How will you respond?

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<sup>i</sup>Habakkuk: How Long, O Lord? Fourth sermon in a series of four: *Major Truth from Minor Prophets*.

<sup>ii</sup>This structure adapted from Warren Wiersbe, Wiersbe's expository outlines on the Old Testament. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993).