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Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4, 3:17-19
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HABAKKUK: THE OLD TESTAMENT DOUBTING THOMAS

Okay, I am going to start out by telling you all that this is my favorite Minor Prophet (after Micah)... Probably because I can relate to him.

Have you ever finished watching the evening news (if you watch the evening news) with all the violence and injustice in the world and in frustration asked:

“Why isn’t God doing something? Why do the wicked and the dishonest people prosper? Why do they get elected to the White House?” (Okay, that’s probably not fair! No, actually, it is 😊)

I mean, if God is in control, why does evil so often win? And what is God going to do about North Korea?

How can a just God ignore injustice? And how can a good God use evil to accomplish his purposes?

If those questions are scrambling around in your brain, you should be able to identify with Habakkuk.

Habakkuk grappled with God about questions still relevant today.

Habakkuk’s name means to “embrace” or “wrestle.” As is usually the case, his name has something to do with the message of the book.

I think it relates to the fact that he wrestled with all those age-old questions we were just asking.

Based around BCE 610 after the fall of the Nineveh in 614 (*as prophesized by who??? Hosea*), Habakkuk is the last of the Minor Prophets before Jerusalem falls to the Babylonian forces in BC 597.

Habakkuk prophesied between the reigns of good King Josiah (who died in 609) and the evil King Jehoiakim, his successor.

Habakkuk tells us nothing of his personal life. I call him the Doubting Thomas of the Old Testament because it seems he has a question mark for a brain.

Maybe that's another reason why I like this book so much ... that and it's really short!

And, if you read it (hey, it's only three chapters and a total of only 56 verses), you will find that it is also unusual.

And what makes Habakkuk so unusual? Only in this prophetic book does Habakkuk begin by addressing God directly. In all the others God uses the prophet to speak God's words to his people.

Habakkuk even dares to question the plans of the Lord to use the Babylonians to administer judgment on Judah, admitting a little concern or confusion over God's plans. Listen to chapter one, verse thirteen:

O God, your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?

Good question!

But, sin was rampant in Judah. The people worshiped idols, sacrificed their children to pagan gods and ignored God.

The wicked King Jehoiakim not only refused to listen to Gods prophets, but he also burned their writings, arrested several of them and even murdered one.

Habakkuk sees this, and he sees that the official remedies of law and justice are not working.

“The law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, perverse judgement proceeds.” (1:4)

We can think of a number of modern parallels to this situation. For instance, many Southern courts failed to provide justice for African-Americans before the Civil Rights movement began making changes.

And guilty whites were able to escape punishment as the law turned a blind eye to their hate.

That even continues today, doesn't it, as we've read in the headlines over the last couple of years!

Then there are LBGTQ folks who have long been discriminated and deemed second class citizens – unfortunately, especially in the church.

Ancient Judah was just as corrupt.

And so, Habakkuk questions God: “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and you will not hear?”

Some people think that men and women of great faith never question God. They just sit and wait faithfully and patiently.

But one thing we can learn from Habakkuk is that that is a misconception. Those who trust in God **can** and **do** question God.

Scripture is filled with men who share our confusion in the midst of events and announcements.

Job, a faithful man, blessed immeasurably by God, was rocked to the core when his family and fortune were destroyed. The Old Testament records Job's and his friends' attempts to make sense of his tragedy as they engage in debates and questions.

And what about Joshua? Asked to attack a city armed with nothing but a power-walking crowd of immigrants with some trumpets?

Or Abraham, who was encouraged to try to have a baby with his ninety-year old wife?

Or Joseph, as he was sold into slavery by his brothers? And subsequently was put into prison for a crime he did not commit!

No doubt each of these men and their families were lost in the moment, and wondered where God was at that moment. Or, why they were subjected to the injustice of their situation.

After each of Habakkuk's questions, comes God's reply. The back-and-forth structure of the book is a wonderful picture of God engaging in real conversation with his people.

Habakkuk protests the contradictions he sees. Habakkuk thought he could rely on God to oppose the wicked and champion the cause of the needy.

But God seems to do nothing at all, and when he promises to intervene, it is not good news.

The unexpected, unbelievable, unpredictable “something” that God is about to do is not to usher in great blessing, but to exact terrible judgment on his people through the neighboring superpower, Babylon.

How do we trust a God who can take a bad situation and make it a thousand times worse?

Only through faith.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, describes three stages in the life of our faith.

Our faith begins with a focus on security, counting on God to provide for us emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

We naturally want to trust in God’s overarching control, but this kind of trust begins to feel impossible when we face disappointments so disruptive that our faith, life, or very identity lies in ruins.

We get hit with unpleasant surprises. A spouse serves divorce papers, a company makes unexpected job cuts, a doctor makes the prognosis of cancer, or a child brings home a finance` who will surely doom their future together.

Or we see others in similar dilemmas. Or even our nation.

Such predicaments seldom make us feel like we can “let go and let God.” Instead, we are hit with confusion. “Why God are you doing this?” we cry out.

And, our faith becomes painfully disoriented.

Many of us spend most of our lives in the first phase. Securely oriented in our faith, we feel we have no need to dig too deep into what we believe or why.

But when a catastrophic event comes along, the resulting painful disorientation and our faith may seem irrevocably broken.

But disruptive events God initiates do not always debilitate faith. Sometimes they deepen it.

This potential third phase, a surprising reorientation, results in a stronger, deeper faith.

Building a strong and reliable faith does not mean avoiding challenges, but rather finding a way to see through them to something greater on the other side.

Three clues in the story of Habakkuk help us develop a faith that is able to face up to, rather than shy away from, the uncertainties God sends into our lives.

The first clue relates to the future: God's first response to Habakkuk's complaint is to tell him to look, watch, and wait.

Waiting is a difficult thing in our culture of immediacy. But God exhorts Habakkuk to play the long game. Things may seem unpalatable in the short term, but God promises that one day there will be a reckoning. That one day things will work out.

And God calls each of us to patient endurance, to trust that his apparent unpredictability will ultimately be proven to be utter consistency. Even if that is not realized until we pass over to the other side.

Our second clue has to do with the past: Habakkuk remembers. In the third chapter, we read of Habakkuk recounting God's rescue of his people from Egyptian tyranny.

He remembers details of the Egyptian soldiers, with their horses, arrows, and chariots, defeated in the waters of the Red Sea.

Looking to history helps Habakkuk remember God's compassion, power, impeccable character, and timing.

But, it is not just remembering personal experiences of God's blessing that helps.

The more conversant we are with stories of faith in the Old and New Testaments, the less historically myopic we become, and the better equipped to be faithful in unpredictable times.

And then finally, our third clue involves the present. Sometimes life feels like a zero-sum game with winners and losers.

Habakkuk definitely felt like he was on the losing team, and the Babylonians looked like they were on a winning streak.

If our love for God is dependent on being on the apparent winning side at all times, we are destined to be disappointed.

Habakkuk knew that true faith was about living in the ups and downs of the present, knowing that God is in control, whichever way things go.

His final prayer models a type of faith which runs absolutely counter to the consumer mentality that infects many of us.

At one of the darkest points in Israel's history, with disaster looming, Habakkuk composes a song of praise and unshakable faith—whatever surprises and shocks God may have in store.

When justice lags, we have the feeling that it will never come, but God promises that it will.

It is faith in God which makes us believe there is light at the end of the tunnel. It is “the light at the end of the tunnel” which helps us make it through.

It is the pregnant lady's knowledge that the pregnancy will finally end that helps her endure.

It is the soldiers hope of escape or rescue that helps him endure as a prisoner of war.

Even as Habakkuk heard that God would use the Babylonians to punish the people of Judah, the bigger point was God's statement about how to handle life in the meantime:

“Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by faith,” says God (2:4).

“The just shall live by faith.” That quote is of particular theological importance in the Bible.

No less than three New Testament letters mention this passage (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

Here, Habakkuk finds in this verse a way out of his confusion.

While he had hoped for an explanation from God regarding the methods he chose or the timing he would use, instead God provides Habakkuk a path of action.

Habakkuk doesn't have to understand or like God's plan, and he doesn't even need to question it, he just has to trust God and live by faith.

Habakkuk reminds us that it is perfectly fine to suffer and be confused. We need not pretend everything is fine and put on a mask of tranquility when we are in turmoil.

While we search for answers, we need to remember that our God is bigger than our questions and problems.

We need to trust that God is ultimately good, even when we can't comprehend his plans.

This kind of faith is not blind. It simply puts more confidence in the truth of Scripture, than the pain of our own experience.

And so, the last chapter of Habakkuk provides the perfect prayer. It's the one prayer that always is answered.

It's part of the prayer Jesus taught. It's what he prayed himself in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The perfect prayer that's always answered is "Thy will be done."

Jesus shaped his entire life to accord with God's will.

Habakkuk, after complaining about unanswered prayer, eventually did the same.

He came around in chapter 3: "O Lord, I have heard of your renown... I stand in awe... of your work."

The prophet continues, "In your own time revive (your will); in our own time make (your will) known.

And then he concludes his book with,

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exalt in the God of my salvation.

Habakkuk is saying, in effect, "Thy will be done." He promised that even if things got bad, the crops dried up, the herds destroyed, he still would trust God.

And in the final verse he writes: "God, the Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer," an animal that treads safely in high and dangerous places (3:19).

Habakkuk prays that God's deeds, not his own deeds or desires, might be renewed.

The best prayers draw us closer to God. The best prayers line us up with God's will.

That's where Habakkuk eventually got to in his prayers. He started complaining. But as he prayed, his attitude changed.

And so might ours. Trust God. Be patient. And know that a better future is in store!

Amen.