

## HOW LONG?

**Habakkuk 1:1-4** The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out 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. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

**Habakkuk 2:1-4**

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. Then the LORD replied: “Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For 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. “See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright— but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness —

**Habakkuk 2:13-14, 3:16-19a**

Has not the LORD Almighty determined that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire, that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea... I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. 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. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.

**Psalm 13 For the director of music. A psalm of David.**

<sup>1</sup> How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

<sup>2</sup> How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

<sup>3</sup> Look on me and answer, LORD my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,

<sup>4</sup> and my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”

and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

<sup>5</sup> But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

<sup>6</sup> I will sing the LORD’s praise, for he has been good to me.

## MESSAGE:

In the Book of Revelation, Jesus prophesied that the worst enemies of His church would arise from within the church itself. That prophecy is reflected in an old saying that where ever God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel. These days the devil's chapels are in many places replacing God's church.

The largest Lutheran Synod in America approves of homosexuality, helps pay for abortions, and promotes transgenderism in their youth ministry. In spite of papal warnings, Roman Catholic bishops in Germany are performing same sex marriages. The minister of the largest single Christian congregation in America preaches that faith in Jesus Christ brings material rewards to those who have it and cites his \$100 million dollar net worth as evidence. There's a joke going around that he has had a yacht built that is so thin it can pass through the eye of a needle.

Mainline Protestant denominations no longer consider the Bible to be God's inspired word and prefer to create their own theology, one which is more "progressive" and "world friendly" and is less likely to offend non-believers. Meanwhile, those of us who hold the Bible to be God's word and strive to live by its teachings are feeling more and more out of touch with our society.

Well, it may surprise you to hear that God *wants* us to feel out of touch with our society. God did not intend for His church to be progressive or world friendly. He intended for us to live like the Israelites during the Exodus: as strangers in a strange land, pilgrims whose guiding star is God and God alone.

During the exodus Israelites lived in a state of what you might call "now and not yet": they had now been delivered out of slavery to Pharaoh but they had not yet reached the Promised Land. Like them, we Christians are people who live in the "now and the not yet": we have now been delivered out of slavery to sin but we have not yet reached our Promised Land of heaven and the new Jerusalem of God, and because we live as strangers in a strange land and in the "now and the not yet" we live in a state of tension with the world and we are constantly looking to God for answers when things seem to be falling apart. And when God's answers are not forthcoming, when heaven remains silent, we cry, we lament.

Lamenting is often the primary language of strangers in a strange land as we try to make sense out of things that just don't make sense. Yet Christians often tend to shy away from lamenting. Lamenting gives the lie to our pretenses of happiness and exposes our vulnerabilities as hurting people. We even fear that our lamenting might indicate a lack of faith on our part. *But far from indicating doubt or unbelief, lamenting is the very deepest cry of faith.*

The prophet Habakkuk provides a good model for lamenting when life seems to be falling apart. Habakkuk ministered in the late 7<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. when things in Israel were going from bad to worse. The Israelites had utterly rejected the Lord since the time of Manasseh. They were, however, enjoying a brief period of prosperity after the collapse

of the Assyrian Empire. But prosperity brought its own problems. It led people to trust in themselves rather than God, and to ignore the needs of their neighbor.

Habakkuk saw these evils and could not understand why God permitted them. God had promised to take care of the poor and the vulnerable and God was always faithful to His promises. The fact that God was not doing either of these things led Habakkuk to lament. His lament and God's response is a great example of wrestling with God during times of suffering. "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are all around me and strife and conflict abound. The law is ignored and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."

Habakkuk is not looking for a response from God to his questions; His words are a lament: he is crying out to God in pain because his faith conflicts with his experience. For some reason God is allowing the powerful to inflict violence upon the powerless. He is allowing the wicked to prosper and the righteous to suffer. Habakkuk is wrestling with the pain of suffering when life doesn't make sense. And God does not condemn Habakkuk for his words because lamenting is not a sin: it is the language of faith struggling to understand. It neither shies away from sinful realities nor denies the goodness of the Lord: it simply cries out to God in pain, saying, "I don't understand! I just don't understand!" Sound familiar?

A man by the name of Todd Billings wrote about how lamenting helped him when he received a diagnosis of incurable cancer: "We don't have to suppress anger or confusion or misery before coming to God. With an open heart we bring all this to Him...trusting Him to hear our cries and asking him to confirm our trust and make us faithful to Him. As we pray this, we confess, 'I am not my own': we are displaced from our old self, which seeks autonomy, and rediscover our new and true life in that of the crucified Lord, the One toward whom the Spirit turns us." Lamenting is a cry of faith and God uses it to strengthen our faith for the journey that lies ahead.

How does God answer Habakkuk's lament? "Then the Lord replied: 'Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For 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...For [one day] the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea...the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.'" *God's answer to our lamenting is to confirm us in our faith.*

The end of our suffering is not known to us any more than the hour when Jesus will return in glory. And so when, like the martyrs who are described in the *Book of Revelation*, we say, "How long O Lord?"—God's answer is, "A little longer. Meanwhile you are my blessed righteous ones and I will give you faith to live by." Therefore, Habakkuk says, "The righteous one shall live by his faith." And these eight words—"The righteous one shall live by his faith"—sum up the message of the entire Bible.

Faith is not only the basis of our salvation, it is what nourishes and sustains us in our Christian lives. If, as the Scriptures tell us, Jesus Christ is the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end of all knowledge, then faith is the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end of a Christian's life. We receive Christ through faith, we serve Christ through faith, and we go to be with Christ through faith when we leave this world. Without faith, we are bad trees that bear bad fruit which God despises, but through faith we become good trees that bear good fruit in which God rejoices.

God may or may not change the things that cause us to lament, but He will always strengthen our faith through our lamenting. He may or may not give us the things we pray for, but he will always keep us praying. And our continuance in lamenting and in praying nourishes our faith. If in His omniscience God judges the things we pray for to be to our good, He will do them and if not, He will not, for God is love. And shouldn't that be enough for us?

Habakkuk did not live to see his hopes for Israel fulfilled. In fact, after his death things got worse—far worse: the Babylonians invaded Judea, sacked Jerusalem, demolished the temple of God and hauled off the Israelites to Babylon as prisoners of war.

But twenty-one centuries later a young German monk who had all but despaired of his own salvation read Habakkuk's words, "The righteous one shall live by his faith," and he suddenly understood the Good News that God's forgiveness of sins was freely available to all men through faith, and that faith itself was a gift from God. His despair turned to joy and when he published that Good News it spread like wildfire and gave birth to the Reformation.

Faith brings God's grace into our lives and faith keeps us in His grace. It is the greatest gift imaginable.

Unfortunately, we have a way of hedging our bets when it comes to our faith. We have a tendency to trust God to take care of us only as long as it appears to us that we are being taken care of. When things start to go south, there's a part of us—a tiny part of us—that says, "Lord, I'll trust you to take care of me *as long as long as you do so.*" The implicit threat is, "If things don't turn out the way I think they should, I reserve the right to revise my opinion."

This is called a "contingent faith"—one that is based on our approval of how God is handling things. And that, my friends, is not faith at all: it's bargaining with God. It amounts to saying, "I'll believe in you, God, as long as you give me what I want." It's pagan religion which treats God like a trading partner rather than the Lord of all creation. It puts the one who is praying at the center of his prayers rather than God. But the righteous one lives by his faith—not by his assessment of God.

Faith—true faith—is surrendering to the will and the knowledge and the love of God. It is letting man be man and God be God. It is reflected perfectly in words of Jeremiah, a prophet like Habakkuk who lamented over this world and rejoiced in God—sometimes at the same time:

Jeremiah wrote, "I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. The word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long...[but]...Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord! He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked!"

Jeremiah could lament and rejoice almost simultaneously! He knew how to let God be God and man be man. He knew how to live by faith and faith alone. And so, God willing, it will be with us. As we sing in one of our hymns:

"Lord, be our light when worldly darkness veils us;  
Lord, be our shield when earthly armor fails us;  
And in the day when hell itself assails us,  
Grant us your peace, O Lord."

Amen