



CHAPTER 32: QUESTIONING GOD

Habakkuk

Well, if you have a Bible, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open with me to the book of Habakkuk; little three-chapter book tucked away right after Nahum. Feel free to use the table of contents if you need to to find Habakkuk. We were originally scheduled to have read Habakkuk this last week, but there were some minor adjustments in the Bible reading plan that actually moved Habakkuk up a couple of weeks. So, we're a little off schedule in that sense, but I think it is under the providence of God that we would come to this book on this night.

It was five years ago tonight when Heather and I found ourselves sitting in a shelter in Central Louisiana, watching the news and seeing our lives changed right in front of us, watching the news as we saw our neighborhood under water in New Orleans. I'll show you a picture just to help you envision what we saw on that night. This is actually the church building where I used to serve on staff. You can see the water up close to the top of that building. Then, this next picture will give you a little bit better of an image. If you look up at the top left, you can see those rooftops on those houses, and our house was right up there near the top of that picture.

I had been telling Heather, once we had evacuated out of New Orleans, that I was sure our neighborhood was fine, giving her the husbandly assurance that she so clearly needed from me. So, as we watched the news, and they were doing these helicopter flyovers, this is the scene we saw. There's a gas station right out of this picture, and we saw the gas station that's right near our house and saw this picture right here, basically. Our eyes locked, and she realized what she already knew: I had no clue what I was talking about. Our lives had just been turned upside down.

Obviously, a picture like this reflects the loss of possessions in a one-story house that happens with ten feet of water, but on a deeper level, the loss of relationship. I was looking this morning at pictures of that church building and to be a part of a faith family that was much smaller than Brook Hills...probably 150 on a good Sunday...and one Sunday, to be together and the next week to have those relationships, in a sense, ripped apart in a way that there are many members of that faith family that we have not seen since. So, to have lives and relationships and jobs we loved and everything about our life turned upside down, and just to sit back in silence; what do we do?

It's those moments, and we've all had them. If we have not had them, we will have them; when something happens that changes everything. Maybe it's sitting in a doctor's office and receiving the diagnosis that you dread. Maybe it's the phone call that you received that something has happened that you never could have imagined happening. I imagine across this room there are all kinds of those moments represented in this room. Even in this last week, to see a precious child in our faith family undergo hours of brain surgery. These things that happen in our lives, we sometimes sit back and wonder, "What is going on? Why

did this happen and where is God in the middle of pain and suffering?" What I want to show you tonight is that these are not just okay questions. These are good questions to ask.

The Hard Reality of Habakkuk

In Habakkuk, we're going to see a totally different picture than we have seen in any other prophet because all these other prophets are speaking to people on behalf of God. It's what a prophet did: "Thus says the Lord..." speaking on behalf of God to people. However, in Habakkuk, we see the reverse. We see Habakkuk speaking to God on behalf of the people. What we see in the book is a dialogue with God where Habakkuk is wrestling with injustice and evil and suffering everywhere around him. The Babylonians, referred to as the Chaldeans here in Habakkuk, are about to take over Judah; the people of God, in the middle of suffering as a result of their sin, and Habakkuk wondering, "God, what are you doing? Where are you in the midst of all this?" What we see...the hard reality of Habakkuk: God uses painful experiences to accomplish His sovereign purposes. That's the hard reality of the book of Habakkuk. God uses painful experiences to accomplish His sovereign purposes.

So, what I want us to see is Habakkuk wrestling...the struggle of faith...wrestling with God. In the same way we've seen this in Job or Moses or even Jeremiah, Habakkuk coming to God with deep, honest questions that lead to deep, honest praise. I want us to see the relationship between the two: struggle of faith to the song of faith in the book of Habakkuk. So, we're going to read this first chapter. If you've got headings in your Bible, you'll notice that right above verse 2, it says, "Habakkuk's Complaint." It's what it says in mine. Same thing above verse 12: "Habakkuk's Second Complaint." This is Habakkuk coming to God with questions and complaints and what we're going to see is God's response. He responds one time, and then He responds a second time.

So, read this with me and just feel the emotion...bold emotion...before God in Habakkuk's words.

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

So, that's his first complaint, wrestling before God.

God responds, verse 5,

"Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They

laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and they take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!"

So, Habakkuk says in response to God,

Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he? You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich. Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever? I will take my stand at 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.

The struggle of faith ...

Do you see the wrestling here, the struggle of faith? Think about the questions Habakkuk is asking here and see if you can identify these questions, because I'm guessing we've asked the same questions in this room. Does God hear? "O LORD, how long shall I cry out for help, and you will not hear?" Have you ever cried out to God in the middle of pain and sensed in return nothing but the silence of heaven? These are bold questions. You almost wonder, "Is this appropriate?" I want you to see the prophet pressing into God. He is not content with surface theology; he's pressing in deeply.

Does God really hear? Does God care? "Cry out to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?" Habakkuk's living in the middle of evil and injustice and in suffering, and seemingly God is doing nothing about it. "Do you not see all that's happening? Well, I know you see it. So, then, do you not care? Will you not save your people?" Is God good? It's one of the main questions of the book and, really, one of the deepest questions in all of life: How can God be good and there be so much evil and suffering in the world? That's the ultimate question.

Is God good and is God holy? "Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?" It says later in verse 13, "You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, and yet, you're idly looking at traitors. God, you are holy." He's pressing into the very nature of God here. "You're holy, and yet, you're sitting idly by while all of this evil just runs rampant." Which brings us to the question: Where is your power? Where is God's power? "Destruction and violence are before me..." says the end of verse 3, "strife and contention arise. God, where is your power? Are you going to protect your people in the middle of all of this contention, strife, destruction, violence rising around, always before your people?"

Where is your power, and where is God's Word? Verse 4: "The law is paralyzed..." It has no effect. What good is your Word? Then, he says, "Justice never goes forth. The wicked surround the righteous. Justice goes forth perverted." Will God show that He is just? Will God show that He is just? You get to the end of this chapter, the last verse, verse 17 at the height of his second complaint: Is Babylon to go on "*mercilessly killing nations forever? Are you going to show your justice?*" Which leads to really the question I think sums up this whole picture: Is God worthy of my trust? Is God worthy of my trust?

You look at the context, what is happening here? Habakkuk comes to God with questions, and God responds. It says in verse 5, *"Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. [For] I am doing a work in your days you would not believe if told."* I've preached at mission conferences and other things where that's like the theme verse, like, "Look at the nations and watch. Be amazed at what I'm going to do." Well, the reality is that was not good news for Habakkuk, and he wanted to be a part of no conference that revolved around that verse, because God is saying that He was about to raise up the enemies of the people of God and use them to rout His people and destroy them.

Have you ever cried out to God in the middle of suffering only to find that His answer and His response only evokes more questions? It's exactly what is happening here. God responds, and then Habakkuk says, "What?" This is the struggle of faith. It is a real struggle to reconcile the character of God with the circumstances of our lives. This is not trite, ladies and gentlemen; this is deep. If we are honest with God in our lives, this is a struggle: reconciling the character of God with the circumstances of our lives. This is not just, "Be happy and move on."

There's a depth here that Habakkuk is pressing into, and it leads us to God's second response; and particularly in verses 2-4, the three most important verses in the entire book. Listen to what God says in response in the second time. *"[And] the LORD answered me..."* Habakkuk 2:2, *"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. Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but..."* Key phrase of the entire book. Underline it. *"...the righteous shall live by his faith."*

The life of faith ...

From the struggle of faith to the life of faith. God says to Habakkuk, to His people, "Here's how to walk through suffering. You live by faith." Well, how do you do that? First, you listen to the truth of God. "Write this vision down," God says. "Make it plain so it can be read and run with." Listen to the truth of God: "My Word is the rock upon which my people will stand in the midst of pain and suffering." In the midst of trial, you will never go wrong listening to the truth of God.

Our emotions will lead us all kinds of different ways. Our circumstances will lead us all kinds of different ways. Our thinking will lead us all kinds of different ways. The advice we get from others will lead us all kinds of different ways. The truth of God is the rock, the compass that brings us back to center at every point. Walking through trial necessitates that we listen to truth, and the Word of God is the truth. It may not always say exactly what we are wanting to hear. It may not speak in a way that we would like to hear, but we can listen to this truth and find a foundation upon which to stand no matter what the circumstances are. So, start here: listen to the truth of God.

Then, second, lean on the timing of God. Lean on the timing of God. Verse 3: *"[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."* That is a great verse. We want action in the short-term. Habakkuk wants to see the justice of God now, and God says to him, "Wait. Wait. In due time, you will see my justice fully, and you will see my justice finally. Just wait." Here's the deal: Short-term circumstances provide a poor measurement of the long-term character of God. Short-term circumstances provide a poor measurement of the long-term character of God.

The life of faith says, "I don't see it now. All I see is darkness all around me." The life of faith presses in, says, "I'm going to wait. I'm going to wait." God is going to show Himself as the one who hears and cares, and has all power, and who is good and who is holy. He is going to show this. This is when we realize that suffering on earth can only be understood...trials on earth can only be understood in the timing of heaven. Think about it. Any trial we go through...any trial...we have no idea all that has gone on to lead us up to that point; not just in our life but in other people's lives around us. We have no idea what is going to come from that in our lives or the other people around us.

There is a whole perspective here that we do not have in any trial, in the midst of any pain or suffering. This is the whole point of the book of Job, right? At least one of the points. Think about it: Job has his cattle, animals, oxen ripped away from him; his servants ripped away from him; his children...all of his children killed, just like that. He has no idea what has preceded this. He has no idea that Satan had approached the throne of God in heaven. God surrounded by 100,000 angels, and Satan had come to God and said, "You pay people to worship you. The only reason Job worships you is because he has stuff. You take away his stuff, he will not worship you." As all of heaven listened silently in, God says, "Take away all his stuff." So, Satan does it. He takes away all his animals and all his servants and strikes his kids down. Unbeknownst to Job, an audience of Satan and 100,000 angels and God peering over him, and Job rips his clothes and falls on his face, and he says, "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Unbeknownst to Job, 200,000 angels' arms go flying into the sky and cry out, "Worthy is the God of Job!" Satan goes running from God's presence, but Job had no idea.

I'm not saying that whenever you go through a trial there is some divine drama that is going on in heaven leading up to this, but I am saying this: You and I have no idea what is going on leading up to this, and we have no idea what is coming out of this. Job had no idea in Job 1 where he would be in Job 42, where he would say, "I had heard of you God, but now I have seen you, and I know you deeply." He had no idea. There's a wrestling between Job 1 and Job 42. That's the picture here. There is a timing here.

Here's what we're realizing even as we read these prophets: None of these prophets ever fully experienced, saw the hope about which they prophesied. I cannot, based on the authority of God's Word, say to any person tonight about the trial that you are in in your life, that it will end in this life. The reality is you may never in this life see the end of this trial. At the same time, you can lean on the timing of God. "What do you mean?"

Well, take a step deeper. Listen to His truth. Lean on His timing. Then, live with your trust in God. Verse 4: "*His soul is puffed up...*" "*The righteous live by faith.*" The contrast here, don't miss it. The contrast in verse 4: You can, in the midst of suffering, either trust in yourself, or you can trust in your God. You can either trust in self or trust in God. Those are the two options. In the middle of your suffering, are you going to trust in self or are you going to trust in God? God says, "Trust not in yourself. Trust in me." This is where we realize where this verse even fits in with the whole scope of Scripture, because this verse is quoted a few different times in the New Testament, most notably to talk about trusting in God for your salvation.

Romans 1:16-17, Paul says, "*[For] I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...For in it the righteousness from God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'*" It quotes from Habakkuk 2:4. Same thing in Galatians 3:11-12. Paul says, "It is not based on what we do, observing the law, that we are saved. It is based on faith. By faith we are saved."

So, think about salvation. At the moment where you trusted in God for your salvation, you thrust yourself upon God, didn't you? You said, "I cannot do this. You alone can save me. I bring nothing in my hands. This is your work. You alone can save me, and I put myself in your hands for you to take my sin and robe me in the righteousness of Christ." That's how we're saved: by faith.

So, what Habakkuk is saying...what God is saying through Habakkuk to Habakkuk and to us is, just as you trust in God for your salvation, trust in God amidst your suffering. Same. It's faith, which is why the author of Hebrews, Hebrews 10, quotes from Habakkuk 2:4, talking to a people who were in the midst of persecution, and their possessions and property had been plundered. The author of Hebrews says, "The righteous ones live by faith. Remember what Habakkuk said."

So, here's the picture: Just as at the moment of your salvation you thrust yourself upon God and said, "You alone can do this. I need you. By faith...that's the only way I can be saved." The same way in your suffering. Thrust yourself upon God. "I can't do this. I come with empty hands. I can't do this. You must do this in me. I need you to do this. I put my whole life in your hands. You take me. You enable me. You strengthen me." Live with your trust in God in the midst of suffering, just as you have trusted in God for your salvation, and God will show Himself faithful. In the same way that He has saved you from your sins by faith, He will sustain you in your suffering by faith. Live with your trust in God.

Now, we come back to the timing thing. As you live with trust, look forward to the triumph of God. You read verse five and the rest of Habakkuk 2, and what you'll see is God bringing His judgment upon the Chaldeans, the Babylonians. They will get their due, but right in the middle of this, there are two verses tucked away that are these glorious glimpses of hope for Habakkuk. One is verse 14. Listen to it. God says, "Habakkuk, the earth will be filled..." Habakkuk 2:14, "Habakkuk, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." Yes. "Habakkuk, there is coming a day when I will show my glory." There is coming a day when God will show His glory in an astounding, universal way.

This is so huge. If you are walking through suffering right now, if you are going through a difficult time...pain and hurt...know this, hold onto this: There is coming a day when the pain and the hurt and the suffering will fade away, and the glory of God will fill the whole earth. It will be beyond dispute: He is indeed good, and He is indeed holy, and He is indeed just and right and worthy of our worship.

Look forward to the triumph...oh, this is Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:17: "Take heart. These light and momentary troubles and afflictions, they are passing away. So, we fix our eyes, not on what is seen. We fix our eyes on what is unseen." Yes. If you are in the middle of suffering in your life, lift your eyes and look toward that which is unseen. God is going to show His glory in a way that will cause all the hurt and all the pain and all the wrestling to fade away. God will show His glory, and we will stand in awe.

The other verse is Habakkuk 2:20, "The Lord, Habakkuk, is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him." There is coming a day when all of our questions and all of our struggling will give way to silence, and we will see the Lord in His holiness, and we will stand in silence.

The song of faith ...

All of this then leads to the song of faith. This last chapter of Habakkuk is absolutely amazing. It is literally a song. It's intended to be used as a psalm in worship. What

Habakkuk does is he just reviews the greatness of God and the history of His people. So, I want us to read it, kind of pause along the way. I kind of wish we could sing it. It'd be totally cool, but I am totally behind the microphone, so that would not work well, so do that on your own time. Just, like, get in your quiet time and make up a tune to Habakkuk 3, but we're just going to read it now.

Listen to what he says. This is Habakkuk's conclusion after all of this. Deep questions now result in deep praise. *"O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear."* Pause. Habakkuk concludes, God is awesome. "I fear you, God. I have heard the report. It's kind of similar to Job in Job 42: "I had heard of you. Now, I've seen you. I fear, revere you." *"In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy."* Habakkuk says God is full of wrath.

You go back up and read the part we skipped in Habakkuk 2 there, and you see that woe is pronounced from God upon the Chaldeans, the Babylonians. You realize that He is indeed holy, and He is indeed just. God will show the full extent of His wrath due sin and sinners alike. He is full of wrath. At the same time, Habakkuk says, He is full of mercy. Wrath and mercy. Isn't this the picture we're seeing every week in these prophets? Wrath. Mercy. Helping us understand the depth of the cross where wrath and mercy meet together in one. He's full of wrath. He's full of mercy.

Then, verse 3: *"God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran."* God is present in all of creation. I wish we had time to turn there now, but Deuteronomy 33, you realize that this is a reference to when God came down among His people at Mount Sinai, revealed Himself to His people, among His people at Sinai, and this is really, really, really, really good news.

When you walk through suffering, you do not have a God who is distant from you. You have a God who is present with you. He is with you in the valley. He never leaves you alone. You're never alone in suffering. Your God is present, and He is praised by all of creation. *"His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. Selah"* Pause. Contemplate the glory of God filling the earth.

Next, God has power over all things. You listen to these verses that follow. Starting in verse 4, we're just going to read a bunch of them here, and just hear the imagery here; God's power over everything. Just think about the imagery here in nature, in nations.

His brightness was like the light; rays flashes from his hand; and there he veiled his power. Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels. He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways. I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD? Was your wrath against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation? You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows. You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice; it lifted its hands on high. The sun and moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear.

Oh, God has power over nature and nations, over mountains and oceans, over disease and death. He has power over all things, and God is sovereign in all things; all of nature, all

nations at His fingertips to use for His purposes. There is not one ounce of creation, not one event in history that God is not totally sovereign over. When the hurricane came into New Orleans and water began to pour in, there is not one drop of that water that was not under the sovereignty of God. Just in the same way we've seen these floods in Pakistan, sovereign God over all of that.

When you heard, or maybe one day when you hear, that diagnosis from the doctor that you dread, know this: In that moment God is absolutely on His throne, and He is not surprised. When you got that call, or when you get that call that changes everything, know this: God was, is, will be on His throne, sovereign over all of that. This is really, really, really good, and you realize this next thing: God is the protector of His people.

Verse 12 says, *"You marched through the earth in fury; you threshed the nations in anger. You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck."* It is good to have this God on your side. You really want this God to be on your side. Let me rephrase that: you really want to be on His side. Isn't it good to know that God who...just let this soak in right where you are sitting, child of God...the God who has power over all things in the universe, the God who is sovereign over all things in the universe is your protector. No fear. Bring what may, no fear. God is our protector, and He is the deliverer of His people.

Verses 14 and 15, 16 go on to talk about how God delivered His people from the hands of Egypt. Verse 16 is one of those imprecatory prayers, like imprecatory psalms where, basically, Habakkuk is praying for justice to be doled out on his enemies. So, kind of hard to interpret sometimes and explain, but here's the picture: All of this leads to the last three verses; three stunningly beautiful verses.

So, get the scene. Habakkuk has wrestled with God. Circumstances around him are dark. Bleak is not even enough; they're dark on every side; suffering and pain and no sign of anything changing. This is Habakkuk's conclusion: *"Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls..."* Everything gone; nothing left, *"yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places."*

Wow. Habakkuk concludes God is our satisfaction. Not just, "Yet I will trust the Lord"; he says, "I will rejoice in the Lord. I will take joy in the God of my salvation." He doesn't just sustain; He satisfies. This is not some trite happiness that he just says, "Oh, I'm supposed to be happy." This is a true happiness, a depth of happiness, a joy, a rejoicing that says, "Everything is taken from me, and yet I still have God, and so I still have joy."

So, satisfaction...He is our strength. *"GOD, the Lord, is my strength..."* Verse 19. He upholds me, *"makes my feet like the deer's: he makes me tread on my high places."* High places: You are in battle; you want to be in the high places. The high places are the places where you conquer from, the places where you rule and reign. You want to be in the high places. So, in the midst of suffering, Habakkuk said, "With His strength and His satisfaction He leads me to the high place, where no matter what is raging around me, I not only survive; I thrive. God is our victory. He puts us on the mountaintop, the victor and a conqueror amidst suffering.

The Comforting Reality of the Cross

It does seem weird to us, this hard truth of Habakkuk, that God would use painful experiences to accomplish His sovereign purposes. I want to remind us of something far, far, far weirder; something far more difficult to comprehend: the comforting reality of the cross, that God would use His Son's suffering to accomplish His people's salvation. That is hard to understand. One writer put it this way: "God is always at work in human history to achieve His ultimate goal, and the means by which He chooses to pursue that goal may be as astounding as the destruction of a nation or as incomprehensible as the blood dripping from the figure of a man on a cross."

Yes, God's ways in Habakkuk may seem strange and, yes, God's ways in our lives may seem strange, but look to the cross, for there God takes the penalty of our sin to our lives and pours it out on His Son, and takes the pain of His Son to bring us peace. God, the Father on high, wills the crushing death of His Son...the cruel, torturous, otherwise unexplainable death of His Son...to bring us life. His pain brings us peace, His death brings us life, and we find salvation in His suffering, and because of His sufferings for our sins in our place, because of His victory over sins on our behalf, because of Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from the grave, we can know this...put your faith, put your trust in this: Our suffering is temporary. Cancer is temporary, and tumors are temporary, and trials are temporary, and pain is temporary, and hurt is temporary, and disease: temporary, disaster: temporary. Death itself is temporary. Christ is eternal.

So, thrust yourself upon Him. Thrust yourself upon the eternal God who reigns sovereign over all things, and realize your suffering is temporary, and your God is trustworthy. He will lead us all to conclude, though there are no figs on the vine, and there is no fruit in the field, we can rejoice in our God. Take joy in His salvation, and stand strong on the high places because of His glory. Praise be to God.

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