

Heroes of the Faith
Habakkuk: The Problem of Evil
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 3:17-18

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A young business executive sent this letter to this pastor:

“I see so many people around the church who have such strong faith that I feel like I don’t fit in. I would like to feel confident. I wish I didn’t have doubts, but I’ve got more questions than answers. Sometimes I wonder if I am really a Christian. Can you help me with any of this? [Signed] Bob”

Could you have written this letter? Whoever said that we should not question things surely never read the Bible. The Bible is full of questions. I hope we have created a community of faith where struggles are welcome and doubters are accepted, for there may be more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds.

COME MEET THE PROPHET HABAKKUK.

He was a contemporary of Jeremiah. He lived about 600 B.C. His book is tucked in the Old Testament between Nahum and Zephaniah, but the three chapters of Habakkuk have different material from other prophets of his time. Old Testament prophets were known as bold proclaimers of God’s Word. They called for sin to cease and justice to reign, and people to repent. Habakkuk takes another approach. Instead of delivering God’s message to the people, Habakkuk delivers the people’s complaint to God. So the book opens with a troubling question:

HOW LONG? How long, O Lord, how long? It’s the question of every child traveling on vacation. It’s the question of every mother in her ninth month of pregnancy. As I took an extended vacation at Vanderbilt hospital this week with a cough that wouldn’t stop, I found myself asking, too, how long, O Lord, how long? Of course, Habakkuk had deeper things on his mind. He wanted to know. *“How long must I cry for help, but you will not listen? How long must I cry, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save?”*

As bombs once more burst over the same territory from whence Habakkuk cried violence so long ago, and little children hold their wounded loved ones in their arms with that desperate look of angst on their faces, if there is any human cry left it surely must be “How long, O Lord, how long?”

The second question is more disconcerting than the first. Inquiring minds not only want to know how long, we want to know HOW COME? How can God tolerate wrong?

If God is omnipotent, then why does he permit earthquakes, hurricanes, and tsunamis?

If God is loving, how come he stands by while innocent children suffer at the hands of predators and starve to death as playthings of politicians? If God is just, why does hate mock the song of peace on earth?

Such questions have caused people to abandon the faith. In the 1950's, Charles Templeton was a contemporary of Billy Graham. Both of them were holding crusades across North America. Charles Templeton started the Youth for Christ movement that brought thousands of teenagers to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. One day this newspaper and magazine reporter turned evangelist had a change of heart. He went to his friend Billy Graham and confessed that he could no longer believe the Gospel. A troubled believer lamented to his friend, "How can a loving and omnipotent God allow such horrors as we have seen this century?" Charles Templeton was converted not to God, but from God. Years later in his book, Farewell to God, he explained his disbelief.

Don't let your questions do that to you, there is a better way.

HOW CAN WE LIVE THE QUESTIONS?

We can be quiet. Habakkuk 2:20 *"The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him."*

People without noise are like fish out of water. We immediately start flopping around trying to find something familiar. We can't study without music. My son can't sleep without a fan running. We won't take a walk without our Walkman or Ipod. We won't drive a car without radios blaring, horns honking, or telephones ringing. To experience silence is to go through the kind of withdrawal that drug addicts must experience. Yet, we must dare to take the trip if our souls are to find peace, and our hearts are to become calm. Only as we find that place of quiet rest will we find new life.

We can be prayerful. Chapter 3 is Habakkuk's prayer. I got an interesting note from one of our members this week. She said, "When trouble comes at BUMC, we are used to doing something to make it better. We want to fix a meal, offer some transportation, cut the grass, or at least hold a meeting to discuss the situation. When we asked how to help you through this illness, you said boldly, 'Don't do anything but pray.' I am not sure we know how to do that, but we will try." Now certainly there is a time to help. Burdens shared are halved, but let not our busyness keep us from prayerfulness.

Henri Nouwen says prayer is not our most natural response to the world. Left to our own impulses, we would always rather do something than pray. Prayer requires us to stand in God's presence with open hands, naked, vulnerable, proclaiming to

ourselves and others that without God we are nothing.

To pray for others is not to convince God of something he already knows. To pray for another is to allow their pains and sufferings, their anxieties and loneliness, their confusion and fears to resound in our innermost selves.

Pray for peace. Pray for help in time of trouble and wisdom for the days ahead. Pray for this great congregation, that we may be all God wants us to be for the glory of God and the good of people.

We can be faithful. Our bishop said to us at Annual Conference that we ministers will be rewarded according to our fruitfulness. Jesus calls us to go and bear fruit. If we bear no fruit where we are, why do we think we can bear fruit if promoted to another place? Of course, he is right. There are so many Methodist churches that have not received a single person on profession of faith in so long that no one would know how to respond if somebody did. I believe in bearing fruit for the kingdom of God.

Even more basic than fruitfulness is faithfulness. I believe one of the finest affirmations of faith in the Bible is here in Habakkuk when the prophet says:

*“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.
God, the Lord, is my strength.”*

I thank God for miracles, for His mysterious interventions into our lives, but I most greatly admire those who keep the faith when no miracles come. I thank God for successes. I have had more than I deserve. My deepest admiration goes to those who never seemed to be at the right place at the right time, yet have kept a positive spirit and bloomed where they were planted. I thank God for the mountains; I have climbed a few. I thank Him for the valleys, too, for walking through the shadows, and dealing with the struggles have given me grace unspeakable and love unknown.

So, on I go not knowing, I would not if I might.
I would rather walk in the dark with God, than walk alone in the light.
I would rather walk with God by faith, than walk alone by sight.

For we will never know that God is all we need until God is all we have and therein lies the answer to our deepest questions.