

Hard Times: Hope From The Prophets
THE HOPE OF FAITH

Habakkuk 2:1-4, 3:17-19
Hebrews 10:35-39

*When redemption seems far away,
faith brings it near.*

A sermon preached by
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Most of us are no strangers to impatience. We live by the creed of instant gratification. What we want, we want now. We don't like to wait for anything.

The Timex Corporation did a study to determine how long people would wait before taking action in a wide variety of situations. The researchers discovered that we will consent to wait only:

- thirteen seconds before we honk at a car in front of us that's stopped at a green light;
- twenty-six seconds before we shush people who are talking in a movie theater;
- twenty-six seconds before we take the seat of someone who's walked away;
- forty-five seconds before we ask someone who's talking too loud on a cell phone to "keep it down";
- thirteen minutes for a table at a restaurant;
- twenty minutes for a blind date to show up before we leave;
- and twenty minutes for the last person to show up for Thanksgiving dinner before we dig in.¹

Many of us are getting impatient (or beyond so) with the coronavirus pandemic. We are now in the sixth month of having our lives disrupted by this highly contagious and dangerous little bug, and we're tired of it! We are frustrated by precautions we have to take, activities we can't do, schools and businesses that are disrupted. Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House coronavirus response director, was in Little Rock on Monday and told the governor that people are suffering from "virus fatigue," frustrated and anxious over the longevity of the pandemic.² I'm sure he appreciated the information.

If you find yourself impatient, frustrated, and anxious today, I believe the prophet Habakkuk has a word of hope for you. Habakkuk is not one of the better-known prophets, but he was a contemporary of Jeremiah in those years when Judah was failing and the Babylonian threat was accelerating. His writing probably comes just before Jerusalem fell and the people went away into exile. His three chapters are a dialog between himself and God, followed by a closing prayer. Habakkuk is none too happy with the situation. First he complains about the wickedness and injustice he sees in the Judean leaders. God responds that the Babylonians will soon take care of that. Then Habakkuk complains that the Babylonians are ransacking the land. His cry goes up, and his question rings out, "*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?*"³

Maybe that's your question today: "How long, O Lord?" How long will this pandemic last? How long will we suffer the loss of jobs and businesses? How long

will the injustice of racism plague our country? How long will we be in political turmoil? How long until we can worship together again? If these are your questions, Habakkuk has an answer.

The first answer is in the dialog itself. Habakkuk talks to God. Habakkuk is open and honest with God about his frustration and anxiety. The prophet is not unique in that; Abraham, Moses, Job, and the other prophets engaged God in dialog that sometimes sounded harsh and self-pitying. The Psalms are full of these complaints against God: “*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*”⁴

The point is, you can talk to God. You can open up your heart to the One who made you. God knows what’s going on with you, so you don’t have to sugarcoat anything. Just lay it all out there. God understands. Sometimes you may be mad at God. When we suffer, and when our loved ones suffer, it’s natural to feel that way. You can be sure of this: God can take whatever you can dish out, and God will still love you like crazy. His compassion and grace are everlasting. So do like the old hymn says: “Take it to the Lord in prayer.”⁵

The second answer Habakkuk has to your questions is the assurance that God has a plan. God has a vision for the future. God will establish God’s Kingdom, despite the troubles we experience in the present moment. Habakkuk and God have been going back and forth, so the prophet goes up to a high place, maybe the rampart on the wall of Jerusalem, and he vows to stay there and watch until the Lord gives him an answer. But the answer is forthcoming. God says, “*Write the vision,*” write it in big letters so that someone running by can read it. “*For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.*”⁶ Then God draws a contrast between the proud—their spirit is not right in them—and the righteous—they live by their faith.⁷

This is the answer to the prophet’s complaint. God has a plan. It’s a plan like the one seen by Habakkuk’s contemporary Jeremiah, who wrote, “*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*”⁸ It’s a good plan. It’s a plan for a day when all will be made right again—no more sorrow, no more tears, no more suffering, no more death. Maybe we can’t see that day yet, but it is coming as sure as the sun comes up in the morning.

So we wait, sure in God’s providence, and we know that “*the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.*”⁹ Paul said that. He knew. Even in our defeats and trials and troubles, we hear the sound of victory in the distance, because we know God is in control.

On a balmy October afternoon in 1982, there was a football game going on. The game was being played at Badger stadium on the campus of the University of Wisconsin. Wisconsin was really bad that year. Nevertheless, sixty thousand die-hard Badger fans had jammed the stadium to see their team sacrificed to the Michigan State Spartans. As the score became more lopsided, a strange thing began to happen. At odd moments, a cheer and applause would erupt from the Wisconsin crowd. With no apparent connection to the game, there would be shouts of joy from the stands.

How could they cheer when their team was losing miserably? Because seventy miles away, the Milwaukee Brewers were beating the St. Louis Cardinals in game three of the 1982 World Series. Half the football fans were listening to the baseball game on transistor radios, and they were responding to what was happening in Milwaukee, not in Madison. They were not limited by their present circumstances; they were celebrating an invisible victory.⁶

That's what faith does. Faith listens to a different broadcast. Faith hears a different story. No matter what is going on right now, it's a story of victory and hope, because we know God has a plan.

So the final answer of Habakkuk to our questions of faith is that faith endures despite the evidence. Our strength, our peace, our assurance is not dependent on our present circumstances, because our God transcends our trouble and promises us victory. That's how we get by. Habakkuk said, "*The righteous live by their faith.*"¹⁰ Elizabeth Achtemeier, in her commentary on Habakkuk, said that the word "faith" there should really be translated "faithfulness." She wrote, "Faithfulness here means trust, dependence, clinging to God; it means living and moving and having one's being in him alone; it means relying on him for the breath one draws, for the direction one takes, for the decisions one makes, for the goals one sets, and for the outcome of one's living.... Faithfulness means placing one's whole life in God's hands and trusting him to fulfill it, despite all outward and inward circumstances; despite all personal sin and guilt; despite all psychological and social and physical distortions. Faithfulness is living by God's power rather than by one's own; and therefore it is truly life, because it draws its vitality from the living God who is the source of life."¹¹

The people of God live by their faithfulness, living life God's way until the obstacles are overcome and the victory is won. That's how you endure.

This little statement from Habakkuk took on a life of its own in the Christian era. Paul quoted it twice in his letters. The place where he quoted it in Romans—"in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" ¹²—became the light bulb that came on for Martin Luther and ignited the Protestant Reformation, which in turn ignited John Wesley and the Methodists in England.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews recalled Habakkuk when the early Church was facing their own trials. They were being persecuted for their faith; they were finding out how hard it was to follow Jesus; and many of them were becoming weary and discouraged, not sure if the journey was worth it. So the author of Hebrews reached back into the prophetic tradition for a word of hope and wrote this powerful passage: “*Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet ‘in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.’ But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.*”¹³ Faith endures in spite of the evidence.

In 1981, Stuart McAllister was part of a mission whose primary task was to help the church in Eastern Europe by transporting Bibles, hymn books, and Christian literature to believers. The Communist countries at that time had outlawed Christianity. On one occasion, while attempting to cross the border from Austria into what was then Communist-ruled Czechoslovakia, Stuart and his colleague were arrested and thrown into jail after guards discovered their concealed cargo.

Without any idea when or if he might be released—it ended up being only a two-week confinement—Stuart's empty time and restricted space began to bring to the surface feelings, questions, and doubts. He reflected later on the experience:

In such circumstances, we are forced to face what we mean when we speak of faith. Do we have to believe in spite of the evidence to the contrary? Do we believe no matter what? How do we handle the deep and pressing questions our own minds bring as our expectations and reality do not match? For me, in my time in prison, I expected God to do certain things, and to do them in a sensible way and time. I expected that God would act fairly quickly and that I would sense his intervention. My reading of Scripture, my grasp of God's promises, my trust in the reliability of God's Word, the teaching I had received, and the message I had embraced, had led me to expect certain things, and in a particular way. When this did not occur in the way I expected, or in the timing that I thought it should, I was both confused and angry. ...From the perspective of time, I can now answer these questions meaningfully, but I needed the experience of doubt and hardship to show me how much I did not know or was not rooted in the biblical answers to these core questions.¹⁴

Habakkuk ends his marvelous little book with a prayer of faith, and the closing words are as poignant and meaningful as any in Scripture:

*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 exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.¹⁵*

Even though there is no proof from empirical evidence, even when everything goes haywire, even when nothing is going right, yet Habakkuk can rejoice in the Lord and exult in the God of his salvation, because the Lord God is his strength. That's faith.

Today hear this word of hope. Though the pandemic rages across our land and the world, though our economy is in tatters, though people are still judged by the color of their skin and not the content of their character, though we are not experiencing church like we always have, yet you can rejoice in the Lord. Yet you can exult in the God of your salvation, because God, the Lord is your strength. God will set your feet like a deer on the mountaintop, far above the reach of despair and depression and anxiety and fear. Have hope. Have patience. Just have faith.

¹ Rick Lawrence, *Skin in the Game* (Kregel Publications, 2015), pp. 105-107.

² <https://www.nwaonline.com/news/2020/aug/18/birx-notes-harm-virus-fatigue-nerves-fraying-she/>.

³ Habakkuk 1:2.

⁴ Psalm 13:1-2.

⁵ Joseph M. Scriven, "What A Friend We Have In Jesus," *United Methodist Hymnal* #526.

⁶ Habakkuk 2:2-3.

⁷ Habakkuk 2:4.

⁸ Jeremiah 29:11.

⁹ Romans 8:18.

⁶ Greg Asimakoupoulos, *Leadership*, Vol. 15, no. 4.

¹⁰ Habakkuk 2:4.

¹¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi (Interpretation Commentaries)* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), p.46.

¹² Romans 1:17.

¹³ Hebrews 10:35-39.

¹⁴ Ravi Zacharias, *Beyond Opinion: Living the Faith We Defend* (Thomas Nelson, 2007), pp. 258-261.

¹⁵ Habakkuk 3:17-19.