

“Surely, God, You Meant...”

Reading: Habakkuk 1:1-11; Romans 1:16-17

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There was a man who lived a very long time ago in a land a very long way from here. His name was Habakkuk, and we think he lived about two thousand six hundred years ago in the land of Judah. Judah was the southern part of the kingdom of Israel, and while Habakkuk was alive, Judah was stuck right in the middle of the world's great empires of those days: the ancient and powerful Egyptians to the southwest, the cruel and oppressive Assyrians to the north, and the up-and-coming superpower, Babylon, to the northeast. But Judah was just a little kingdom, a runt in the midst of a pack of big dogs, hardly a speed bump for the armies of those empires as they moved back and forth in their wars. And there were certainly lots of wars in those days: the Assyrians were declining and the Babylonians were rising, and the Egyptians were always getting in the middle and stirring things up.

Occasionally, Judah would decide that the runt was tired of being the runt and would take a few bites at the big dogs, trying to maneuver for position among their struggles. Usually it didn't work, and in Habakkuk's time, things were particularly low. The great strength of the Israelites had always been their God, the one who had led them out of slavery in Egypt in generations past and had established them as a nation in their land. They had never been a great empire like the Egyptians or Babylonians, but God had rescued them many times from being destroyed. Habakkuk knew that; after all, he was a prophet, which meant that he was one of the people in Judah who had the burden of speaking God's word to the people and making sure that they knew how to remain as God's people. He knew all about God's great actions on their behalf in the past, and he knew that God had been faithful to the promises he had given the Israelites. But he also knew that the people of Judah had not, for the most part, been faithful in response. He looked around at his country and saw that though there were some good people there, they were few and far between, and they lived at the mercy of the wicked, those who ignored God and lived greedily and selfishly and seemed to be prospering at the expense of those who were following God.

Habakkuk was no fool. He understood what was happening around him, and he understood what might happen as a result. He knew that if the people of Judah were rebelling against God, then God would be faithful to his promise of punishing them by giving them over to the consequences of their sins. And he knew that the Babylonians were taking their place on the stage of world events, and like the Assyrians, they didn't play nice. They could be cruel, and they had more than enough power at their disposal to make a little nation like Judah miserable. Habakkuk knew that things were looking grim for the people of Judah, and the world looked like it was on a path that would lead to untold suffering for the Israelites.

And so Habakkuk did what any good prophet should do in a situation like that: he asked God what was going on. He cried out to God that he saw wicked people committing violence against the righteous, he saw justice being perverted and the poor being trampled, he saw massive sins being committed right at the heart of the nation that God had founded. He poured out his breaking heart to God, laying these things at God's feet, hoping that God would respond and defend the righteous. Habakkuk was doing a good thing: he wanted God to act on behalf of justice so that the unjust would be punished and the upright would be vindicated. And he waited on God to reply.

God replied, but I suspect Habakkuk would have almost preferred it if he hadn't. God told the prophet that he was going to act, but he was going to act in a way that even Habakkuk could hardly believe. God's plan was to bring the Babylonians, the arrogant pagans and idolaters and foreigners, to enact his justice. The unjust would be punished, to be sure, but they would be punished by the hands and the swords and the spears of the Babylonian army. God said that they were the ones who mocked the mighty kings of other nations, who laughed at fortifications, whose captives were like sand on the beach, who would move in and conquer as quickly as the wind blows: they were the ones God had chosen as his hand of justice.

Habakkuk had trouble believing what he was hearing. That's not what he thought God would say; God was supposed to say that he was going to rescue his people if they called out to him like he had done in the past. After all, this is God he was talking to, the same God who had sent his angels to defeat the Assyrian army single-handedly without a shot being fired when the Assyrians had been at the very gates of Jerusalem a few years earlier. God was more than capable of saving Judah again. Surely God hadn't meant what he was saying. Surely God had meant to say that he was going to save his people and establish justice and peace in his kingdom again.

And so Habakkuk went back to God, this time more than a little confused, and he said, "Surely, Lord, that can't be right. We all know that the Babylonians are horrible people. They aren't even close to being righteous. We Israelites might have done some bad things, but what we've done doesn't even begin to compare with the Babylonians. They're arrogant! They worship their own strength as their god! It's bad enough that bad things are happening to good people, but surely, Lord, you can't send evil people to punish righteous people, because that would be *beyond* unjust."

Habakkuk was asking that question that has been asked so many times in so many ways: if God is good, and if God is powerful, how can he let bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people? How can he let children die of cancer while corrupt CEOs get fat and rich off of peoples' retirement savings? How can he let terrorists roam the earth while innocent women and children are being brutalized and murdered? Habakkuk was asking that same question: how can a good God let evil things happen?

Of course, Habakkuk was probably familiar with the story of Job. It was an old story, one that someone as familiar in the ways of the Lord as Habakkuk would probably have heard. It's a story that many of us are familiar with, too: a prosperous and righteous man named Job has his property, his livelihood, and his family all destroyed overnight, and then on top of it all, his own body is afflicted with sores and boils. He and his friends ask how all of this could have happened, since if God is just and Job has been a good man, surely God could not have let such evil befall Job. And then God appears to Job and his friends and tells them, in essence, that he is not going to tell them why he let all this happen, because he is God and he is the one who controls everything. And through it all, Job is faithful and refuses to curse God, and so God restores the blessings that were taken from him.

Habakkuk probably knew that story, and that was fine for Job; it was understandable that God didn't owe anyone any answers because he's God and we're not. But what do we do when God *does* answer us and his answer is the opposite of what we expect him to say? What do we do when God doesn't make sense, and nothing is working out the way we expect it to, and in fact God is doing the exact opposite of what we think is right? Surely, God, you wouldn't do that! That can't be *right*!

Habakkuk the prophet was bewildered; he asked God if he really meant that he was going to use the evil Babylonians as his instrument of righteous justice, and then like a sentry or a guard on the wall of a city, he waited and watched for God to respond.

God responded. He told Habakkuk to wait, because God was going to show him something. But until then, God tells him that those who are arrogant and worship themselves – like the Babylonians – will be their own undoing, and so even if God uses them as his instrument, they will not go free from the consequences of their arrogance. Even when God *uses* evil people, he doesn't *approve* of their evil. God's answer begins by reassuring Habakkuk that the wicked will not endure, even when it seems like injustice rules the day and it looks like liars and thieves are coming out on top, eventually their wickedness will lead to their destruction. Those who are proud will fall in their pride, but those who are righteous will live by faith.

The righteous will live by faith: those are powerful words that stand unshakably like a mountain right at the heart of Habakkuk's book. Those words echoed throughout history, so that in the days of the early church when new Christians were trying to grasp what had happened in the life and death of Jesus, those words of prophecy given to Habakkuk would form the bedrock of the Apostle Paul's proclamation in his letter to the Romans. Paul said that the things Jesus did were the power of God that were the salvation of everyone who believes, and that this Jewish man who was crucified and raised from the dead is the revelation of God's righteousness, and as his reason for saying that, he uses Habakkuk's prophecy that *the righteous will live by faith*.

They're powerful words, but how do they answer Habakkuk's questions? What did God mean by *the righteous will live by faith*? The faith God was talking about was everything that is opposed to what those arrogant, wicked Babylonians were like. That faith is many things; it's not blind acceptance or an unquestioning leap in spite of all the evidence. It's trust that God will do what he says he will do, it's belief that God is whom he says he is, it's *faithfulness*, living a life that is obedient to God and honors him as the king of all creation. Rather than a selfish life lived for wealth and power and glory, rather than a life lived trusting in an idol or weapons or political power, God accepts a life lived humbly, selflessly, quietly obedient to God. It may appear as though injustice and corruption are rewarded, but in reality life comes only from God, and God gives life to those who have faith.

And then Habakkuk sings a song, or prays a prayer, or sees a vision that tells him *why* the righteous will live by faith. He sings of the Lord God, the terrible King, the overwhelming Warrior, who makes the hills quiver when he marches by. He is so powerful and so magnificent that the earth itself can barely hold itself together when he approaches; his paths are eternal, but the most ancient mountains collapse before his power. The sun and moon forget to move, he is so fantastic to behold, and the never ending chaos of the sea calms itself to obey him. But he's not just out for a stroll – he has come out to make war against those who oppress his people. He has come out with his weapons to throw down the house of evil, and evil is split from thigh to neck.

God answers Habakkuk's questions with a vision of himself so that Habakkuk can see just who it is that he should have faith in. God shows Habakkuk that he is not only all-powerful, he is the great warrior-king who fights for the salvation of his people. God is active; he is on the move, marching to battle against evil and darkness, and his power is unstoppable. When Habakkuk sees this vision, he trembles from the inside out, and he closes his prophecy by saying, "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.”

Habakkuk has faith in God not just because of what God did for Habakkuk – because God did use the Babylonians to destroy Judah – but rather because of who God is. When we come to times of darkness, when God isn't making sense and he's giving us answers that can't possibly be right, when we begin to wonder how it is that a God who claims to be good and just seems to stand idly by while terrible tragedies happen to us and we feel like we're rag dolls in the hands of evil, then those powerful words – *the righteous will live by faith* – are at their most powerful. We live because we trust in God, and we trust in God because he is active.

Very often you'll hear people argue that there is no God because a good, powerful God would not allow evil to continue and it's obvious that evil is all over the place in our world. But the truth is that God has not allowed evil to continue in our world. He reminded Habakkuk that even though the wicked Babylonians were on their way to conquer God's chosen people, God is a God who is fighting to overthrow the evil in the world, and he will certainly triumph. And in his letter to the Romans, Paul says the same thing, except that he goes beyond even what Habakkuk said: Paul had seen with his own eyes the risen Christ, and he knew that since Jesus was raised from the dead, evil's days on this earth were numbered. God *has* acted to stop evil and suffering, and even though we must endure it for a while, it will not be allowed to continue forever. Even when God's answers don't make sense to us and we seem overcome by pain and suffering and loss, we can have faith in our God because of Christ, because he crucified sin and death, he marched out to meet them head-on and crushed them under his heel, and he has promised us that one day his kingdom will return in its fullness so that no more darkness will ever be allowed. And until that day, we must remember that the righteous will live by faith.



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