

May 18, 2008

“Habakkuk: Arguing with God”

Habakkuk 1:1-2:1

FCF: Our understanding of God not matching with our experience of God > change in understanding

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because of the security we have in the Son,
(magnet) we can approach the Father with anything – even arguing with Him.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Life is full of what are called “rude awakenings.” ([READ The Problem of Pain](#)):

We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven – a senile benevolence who, as they say, “liked to see young people enjoying themselves,” and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, “a good time was had by all.” Not many people, I admit, would formulate a theology in precisely those terms: but a conception not very different lurks at the back of many minds. I do not claim to be an exception: I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don’t, and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless, that God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction.

C. S. Lewis and his book, [The Problem of Pain](#). What was he saying? That when our understanding of how things are, of how we expected God to work, and our experience of His actual workings meet, there is often a collision. Something’s got to give. And that something is us – our understanding, our expectations. It’s the only way to go forward.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Habakkuk 1:1-2:1](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

What is it to make a complaint? We just returned from a road trip to Virginia and I can’t tell you how many tractor trailers I saw with the sign, “*How’s my driving?*” And I wanted to call and just say, “*Well, you asked.*” We were taken to a swank restaurant where the servers waited on our every need. And part of the conversation at the table had to do with the poor experience at another place and the comments carried back to the kitchen. Why? “*Well, it was paid for.*” I heard a child (no mention of names) justly protest the change of plans thrust upon them. Why? “*Because you promised.*”

What’s the underlying theme in each of these cases – the trucker, the restaurant, and the child? Simply this - the assumption that one party had the ability to do something to change a situation. And that the other party felt the security to ask them to do it.

There’s something of that dynamic here in our text. But before we go any further, we need some preliminary introductions. Who is this man, Habakkuk? We really know very little about him. Where is he from? Who was his daddy? What’s behind his name? It’s Hebrew but reflects influence from Mesopotamia, referring to a plant or a fruit tree. We do know this. He was a prophet, an intermediary between the LORD and His people.

He’s writing from Judah, southern Israel, in the late 7th century, between 612 and 605 B.C. – a time of change. Egypt is still in the south but the real power is in the north. Assyria, the nation that conquered the northern part of Israel over a century before, is on the decline. Babylon, the Chaldeans, is on the rise. In Judah, it’s the reign of King Jehoiakim, an oppressive, covetous ruler whose ways were described by the Jewish historian, Josephus. ([READ quote](#)) Jehoiakim was “*unjust and wicked by nature, and was neither reverent toward God, nor kind to man.*” All of which is reflected here.

Therein, Habakkuk’s concern, questions, and complaint. Which brings me back to the assumptions I mentioned earlier. One party has the ability to do something. And the other has the security to ask. What can we learn from this? What would it mean for us to approach God this way, even arguing with Him? And how is that even possible?

I. HABAKKUK'S COMPLAINT

Let's look at the text (**READ Habakkuk 1:2-4**). This is Habakkuk's complaint.

A) *The Longing for Action*

In this, we see a longing for action, for something to happen, to change.

1. What he wants

Specifically, he wants God to do something, to intervene.

2. What he assumes

Which, of course, assumes what? That He can. That the LORD is powerful to save.

B) *The Reason for Concern*

But what has Habakkuk so upset? What is the reason for his concern?

1. What he describes

He's troubled by his circumstances – not just in the world at large but in Judah itself. I mentioned earlier the historical, social, and political context of the times. Injustice was unchecked, righteousness thwarted. Things were not the way they were supposed to be.

2. What he assumes

And so he cries out, "*How long? Why?*" Which, again, assumes what? Not only that God can but that He cares. Not only that He is powerful to save but passionate as well.

Habakkuk is wrestling with a dilemma. He sees what is happening within Judah. At the same time, he sees what is not happening with the LORD. And so, the complaint.

Application:

Now, surely, we can identify with this, with wrestling with the chasm between how things are supposed to be and how they are. We see the news – just in recent years, our worst terrorist attack (9/11), natural disaster (Katrina), and mass murder (Virginia Tech). We know what it is to cry, "*How long?*" and "*Why?*" And we don't have to look that far. We look at struggles within us, our relationships, and in the church. No change – not in the circumstances, in other people, in us. And we ask, "*Why?*" and "*When?*"

Look, Habakkuk is a contemporary book. Don't let anyone tell you the Bible is irrelevant. They haven't got a clue what they're talking about. Just read this complaint.

II. THE LORD'S ANSWER

But what does the LORD say in response? (**READ Habakkuk 1:5-11**)

Illustration:

Traveling down the interstate, you see these bright yellow signs "Men at Work." Now, there's two ways you can respond to this. One would be, "*Oh, I'm so glad they're out here. This is just what we've needed.*" That's the thought of comfort. But then there's the confounding. "*Argh, not this. Why now? This is going to mess it all up.*"

It's something like that with another sign – "God at work." It can be comforting. But in candor, it can be confounding. For, as is said in Narnia, Aslan is not a tame lion.

A) *The Assurance of an Answer*

Make no mistake about it. Habakkuk is given the assurance of an answer.

1. A stirring announcement

A stirring announcement – this will be unlike anything you've ever seen.

2. An answer to prayer

And in the phrasing used in vv.5-6, it's clear this is in answer to Habakkuk's prayer.

B) *The Surprising Form of the Answer*

But the form of this answer is surprising. The LORD is raising up the Chaldeans.

1. The Chaldeans – who they were

Who were they? The rapidly rising superpower, well known for their ferociousness.

2. The Chaldeans – what they were like

And the LORD's answer speaks to this. He knew they were dreaded and feared. Look at the imagery of their cavalry sweeping through the plains and the brutality of a city siege.

And Habakkuk knew this as well. These were a powerful and prideful people.

Illustration:

And it so seemed the cure was worse than the disease. Like when chemotherapy treatments are stopped because the ravaging to the immune system has become more dangerous than the cancer itself. Such is what Habakkuk recognized in this response.

Application:

The LORD's answer to the prayers of His prophet were surprising. But, again, Aslan is no tame lion. And his claws, when they are unsheathed, are sharp. Or, to use another image, the LORD has the skill of a surgeon – knowing exactly how and when to cut. But he has not only the skill. He has the determination as well. And to bring the healing that is needed, there are times when the cutting has to go yet further and deeper.

Such is His devotion to us. Such is the security we then have. He will not let us go. Which, think with me here, frees us to approach Him with anything – even arguing.

III. HABAKKUK'S SECOND COMPLAINT

Which brings us to Habakkuk's second complaint. (**READ Habakkuk 1:12-2:1**)

A) Laying It All Out

Habakkuk is laying it all out here, holding nothing back, making two lists.

1. What he knew to be true

On the one hand, there were the things he knew to be true – vv.12-13. He knew God to be eternal, holy, a Rock, at work, faithful to His people. These are the things that he knew to be true, things consistent and unchanging to God's character. That's one list.

2. What he could not understand

Then there is the other list. On one side, he has the things he knows to be true – God's character in all things. And then, on the other side, he has the things he could not understand – God's workings in the circumstances. And he puts these two lists together.

B) Waiting for an Answer

And note this. He does not give up. He wrestles with these two things – “*You cannot tolerate evil but you are tolerating evil.*” He wrestles with these things, lists it and lays it all out, but does not give up or abandon his faith. And he waits for an answer.

1. Vivid image

(**READ Habakkuk 2:1**) It's a vivid image. He speaks in military terms – standing watch, taking position. He is resolutely determined to wait for an answer from the LORD.

2. Striking change

A vivid image. And a striking change. For the posture of the prophet was traditionally to be turned towards the people, watching them to ensure they did not depart from the terms of the covenant. But where is Habakkuk turned? Who is he watching? The LORD.

Such is what the LORD is setting before us even as we read this all these years later. There are times when He says we are to lay it all out and wait for Him to answer.

Application:

Which leads us to a very straightforward application. We need to do this very thing – to make our own lists of the things we understand and the things we don't and then lay it before Him. Lay it before Him and trust Him with what He will do. Clearly,

this is showing us the need to keep ever before us the reality that His ways are so much “higher” than our own. We cannot fathom all He is doing. But we can trust in where it will take us, in where He is taking us. How? Why? Because we know and trust Him (**READ Habakkuk 1:12a**). Notice how all this is taking place in a relational context.

Illustration:

Picture a young father at home with his newborn child. His wife has gone out for a quick shopping trip. But she’s been gone for hours. He doesn’t know where she is, the baby needs to be nursed, and he’s a rookie dad. No cell phone. And irrational worries start coming. Has she gone on shopping spree? Is she at a bar with her friends? Has she left him? What should he do? Remember what he knows. Remember what he knows and trust in their history. Trust and know the type of person she is and her love for him and this child. Know that wherever she is, however long she’s gone, there’s a reason.

There’s a history, a relational context. That’s what freed Habakkuk to speak so boldly. And that’s what frees us to do the same. A relationship with the One whose coming Habakkuk longed for and One whose finished work we rely upon even now.

CONCLUSION:

This is unlike any other religion. All others are driven by performance, with the good outweighing the bad. Which really means that, if someone is really listening, you’d better keep your complaints to yourself. Think of the earthquake in China this past week – buildings collapsed, landslides, buckled roads, damaged dams. As of Friday, 20,000 declared dead, forecasts of 50,000. Appeals for tools and equipment. And, as a sign of the scale of the tragedy, admission of foreign relief workers. This earthquake has been damaging. And revealing. Local officials ordered to keep social stability. “*Malicious rumourmongers*” are spreading “*false information, sensational statements and sapping public confidence.*” Most dare not speak. But some do. Why? They have to cry out.

They have to cry out. And so do we. So did Jesus. His words from the cross, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” You don’t think that’s a complaint? His prayer in Gethsemane, Psalm 22 upon His lips (**READ Psalm 22:1-11**). Mourning His circumstances, grieving the felt absence of His Father. Such was His prayer.

But what sent Him to that cross? His love for us. His love for us and His desire to free us from the penalty and power of sin and to open up the way between God and man. You see, the “what we can say” is shaped by “what He has done.” How real is His love for us? How far is He willing to go? How secure are we in His care? You want to know? Look to the cross. Look to the cross and there you will find your answers.

Which then brings us to some more questions to consider as we go. Where are the expectations you’ve held colliding with the experience you’ve had? Are you comfortable in praying this way? Where are you hesitant? And why? Do you see? What is your image of God? This is an appeal to us all. To the unbeliever – look to the cross for everlasting security in God’s presence. To the believer – a reminder of how radical is this love. And to slap down the damnable lies. “*Make sure your attitude is right before you approach God.*” What? How is that going to happen? Such counsel hurts far more than it helps for we’ll either not come at all or simply fake it as we do. God wants us to approach Him even when our hearts are troubled. Especially when our hearts are troubled. We can come just as we are. Just as we are. Circumstances may not be what He’ll change. They might be. Or might not. But praise God, it may well be us.

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