

Anyone ever say to you, “Cheer up, things could get worse”? Were they right? Did things get worse? Life often does get worse. Today’s prophet, Habakkuk, questions God about why things seemed to be getting worse in his day. And he asks why God isn’t doing something about it, for crying out loud.

People think that because the Bible says it, it’s true. That’s not the way it is. The Bible says it *because* it’s true. The book of Habakkuk was included in the Bible because it tells the truth about God and us. It not only allows us to complain to God; it invites us to complain to God. This is strange for people who don’t read the Bible. However, those people would probably also be shocked to realize that one third of the book of Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible, is laments and complaints to God. What does this mean for prayer? We can complain to God without being struck by lightning, no matter what our pious neighbor might have said in a threatening manner over the back fence.

One reason the Bible is our authority is that it includes the words of people brave enough to complain. They didn’t go around saying everything is wonderful. They also didn’t believe that all you can do is adjust yourself to an unchangeable destiny. They believed God is here in life and intervenes in both nature and humanity; and, pointed out to God that he needed to get to work on this situation or that problem!

Habakkuk is unique among the Minor Prophets in that he has a dialogue with the Lord about the terrible things going on at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and questions why the Lord isn’t doing something about it. We don’t get glib or easy answers in Habakkuk (or the rest of the Bible) about why there is suffering. We do, however, get an honest facing of injustice in this world and questions to God about it. Of course, if we didn’t believe that God is good there’d be no problem. We wouldn’t be any happier about slums, wars, disease, famine, or the prosperity of the wicked. But we believe God is good and that God doesn’t want this. Listen again to Habakkuk’s questions: *“How long, Lord, must I cry for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you ‘Violence!’ but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.”* Must have been an election year in Judah!

Occasionally I’ve dealt with people who’ve said that when terrible things happen to people, it’s because they’re not real Christians. Real Christians pray and everything works out perfectly. I want you to know this is a flat out lie and we don’t have to lie to protect God’s reputation. If anything, the Bible teaches us never to lie about God but instead to *question* God. Our faith gives us great blessings and God’s miracles constantly surprise us; but God doesn’t solve all our problems exactly the way we want them solved. And usually we want them solved the easy way. If a few people have enjoyed a charmed life, the Bible gives them no mandate to be falsely optimistic or boastfully cheerful in the presence of real sadness. We should rather take our cue from Paul the Apostle, who tells us, *“nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Habakkuk complains to God in the first four verses. Then, before we get to verse 12, things appear to be getting worse, and Habakkuk complains even more because God seems to be in on it. However, verses 5-11 includes an answer from the Lord. Habakkuk has put his questions to the Lord, and then, maybe standing there with his hands on his hips he resolves, *“I will stand at my watch, and station myself on the*

*ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.*” Habakkuk is up there like a forest ranger smoke spotter in a fire tower on a nearly inaccessible mountaintop. He’s going to stay there and wear out his eyes as long as he has sight to see what the Lord is going to do.

We, along with Habakkuk, are interested in an answer from the Lord. We wait and wait. Maybe we’ve waited a long time. Maybe it seems God isn’t going to respond, ever. After all, Habakkuk is being pretty testy. In the 1920s the artist Batiste Madelena was hired by the Hollywood movie mogul George Eastman to paint posters of his coming attractions to display at his theater. Madelena reported Eastman’s instructions to him: “All he told me was that he didn’t care what I did as long as the people passing the theater could read the posters from the trolley” (Judith Katten, “Paintings From A Picture Palace,” *American Heritage*, December 1983, p. 19). That’s the kind of message the Lord spoke to Habakkuk: “*Then the Lord replied: Write down the revelation; and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.*” It’s going to be big, maybe even splashy; but, the Lord will give Habakkuk an answer.

Habakkuk waited, the nation of Judah waited, and it was destroyed. This is a very tough kind of waiting. Yet the Lord also says, “*Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them,*” and certainly the proud in Habakkuk’s book were the Babylonian armies pressing down on the nation of Judah. In contrast with them, the Lord speaks a very weighty statement that has influenced the faith for the 2,600 years since it was said: “*but the righteous live by their faith.*” The faith, then as now, means living for God in a far from perfect world. It means struggling against evil and suffering along with God for the world’s sins. And this faith places us beside God and sets us right with God, because it survives on God’s faithfulness even when God’s ways don’t seem clear to us.

Habakkuk had to wait for this vision to be realized. He had to trust that God’s plans do have a goal no matter how murky the present. Christians believe that the vision was realized in Jesus. We must be careful not to be arrogant about it. The Lord says to Habakkuk, “*Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them.*” Instead, we trust that the Lord has kept faith with us in Jesus and we look to the message on Golgotha’s hill, plain to see by those passing by outside Jerusalem on that first Good Friday. It’s the message that through tough times and difficulties God is faithful to us. Amid all life’s confusions and wonderings, when we do not see exactly what God is doing, at least we do see Jesus. Thus, no matter the troubles within or around us, we can trust God’s faithfulness even when we have many questions.

An article by Andy Blanks\* reminds us that “One of the major aspects of teenagers owning their faith is dealing with doubts, or questions they have about God or some aspect of their faith.” Questions about the essentials of their faith, and to a lesser extent, doubts, are a healthy part of faith development. As church leaders, we should encourage students to wrestle with the questions they have. Even when this makes us uneasy, it’s important to help students walk down this road.

I love a quote from Scottish evangelist Henry Drummond: “*Christ distinguished between doubt and unbelief. Doubt says, ‘I can’t believe.’ Unbelief says, ‘I won’t believe.’ Doubt is honest. Unbelief is defiant.*” Honest doubt and honest questioning is how children and teenagers begin to own a faith that is theirs, not their parents’ or grandparents’ faith. In the past, I have told Confirmation students that if they are not asking questions of their faith, they’re not trying hard enough. They’re not thinking about it enough. They’re not digging deeply enough. That’s why questioning is part of owning our faith. But what

do we do with our questions? What is the right attitude or approach toward having these questions or doubts? Here are a few things to do:

1. **LOOK TO SCRIPTURE FOR EXAMPLES.** There are dozens of examples of people questioning or doubting God in Scripture. Of course, Habakkuk questioned God's intentions and God's goodness. One hundred-year-old Abraham questioned God's ability to give him a son. David questioned God dozens of times, especially in the Psalms. John the Baptist doubted his mission and God's call on his life. And God didn't smite any of them. God didn't call down fire on them. God walked with them through their doubts and questions. And in the end, their faith was strengthened.

2. **PURSUE ANSWERS.** The second way to deal with our questions comes from a writer that I appreciate, Dr. Tim Keller. He writes a great deal about faith and doubt. Keller has said: "A person's faith can collapse overnight if he or she has failed over the years to listen patiently to his or her own doubts. As Christians, we should acknowledge and wrestle with our doubt." We have to encourage students to verbalize their questions. To acknowledge them. To look at them from every angle. To discover as much as they can about their questions until they are satisfied that they have taken it as far as they can take it. Many of our questions don't have answers that make us feel good. But, all of our questions, all of our doubts, can be answered in God. Which leads to my third point . . .

3. **BE COMFORTABLE KNOWING GOD, BUT NOT KNOWING ALL THERE IS TO KNOW OF GOD.** In the end, while we can know much about God and his ways, we will never know all of him and his ways. That God made himself knowable to us is amazing. But God will always remain in some ways unknowable. In Isaiah 55:9 God says: "*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*" Exodus 15:11 asks: "*Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?*"

There will always be aspects of God that we can't fully know. But in seeking to understand God and his ways, we will grow to know him more than we can ever imagine. There is tension in this, for sure, but there is assurance as well.

4. **OUR BIGGEST DOUBTS AND QUESTIONS ABOUT GOD DON'T CHANGE WHO GOD IS.** **We may question** God and we might find that what we found doesn't solve our need for nice neat answers. But this doesn't change who God is. **We may question** why God allows suffering, but we can't deny that God is a loving God who goes to great lengths to save us. **We may question** God's plan, but God is still sovereign. **We may question** God allowing bad things to happen to good people, but God is still compassionate. **We may question** why we don't feel close to God, but it doesn't change the fact that God is always near to us, eternally attentive, and deeply in love with each one of his children.

**Our questions and our doubts can never change who God is.**

Habakkuk knew this. We should know this too. Amen.

\*<http://youthministry360.com/blog/dealing-our-students-doubt-and-questions/>