

# *A Conversation with God*

Habakkuk 1:1-5, 12

6/14/2020

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Today, we start a new series. This will be a three-part series in the book of Habakkuk. And this series will not be a verse by verse, chapter by chapter, per say, but we will seek to do it justice as we look at the major themes in the book of Habakkuk. The series title is belief in the midst of suffering. And nothing could be more true of the themes that we see in Habakkuk. They all center around the reality of suffering and what it looks like to trust God in the midst of it. Not only does this point to our present suffering as a church, but it also points to our present suffering as a nation and as a world.

Habakkuk is a universal book, although the dating at times is argued about, the author is known, but we know very little about the author himself. And, yet, what is clear is he's operating as a prophet at a transitional point in world politics, a transitional point with regard to the nation of Israel, and a transitional point even for the office of prophet because he's doing much more than just proclaiming. He's actually teaching you and me how to pray. He's teaching you and me how to approach God. And it is quite different than the prophets who preceded him.

But before we get there, I want to tell you a story that I have been reminded of over and over again in the last several months and weeks, and particularly as I considered this book of Habakkuk. On September 11th, 2001, it was a Tuesday as you will remember. One of the interesting things that happened on Tuesdays is I would get together with one of my elders and close friends for a coffee, a time of accountability, a time of getting deeper into each other's lives. And we had been doing this for several months at that point. On this particular Tuesday, we weren't just getting together for coffee, but we were also going to leave Starbucks and walk right up the street. And we did. We went right into the bank that would be our bank for the church, and we would have our incorporation papers notarized on September 11th, 2001.

As we left the bank that morning and we were on the corner of a major thoroughfare in Montclair, New Jersey. We walked back to Starbucks, and we said goodbye. He got into his car, and I got into mine. And as I got into mine, as was my habit, I turned on the news, and NPR was a complete odd sound to me. It was a strange mix of silence and reporters who were reporting live. And I couldn't figure out what was going on. And I pulled my car out of the parking space. And, clearly, what was happening was different than anything I had ever experienced. As I looked around me, very few cars were moving. It was like the world came to a standstill. And as I was about to make one right turn to go home, I tried to call my wife Kate at home, and I couldn't make any efforts at all being able to get through because the cell phone lines were completely inundated. I got out of my car and walked to a barber shop which was across the street, and people had begun to line the streets because inside the barber shop was a large screen TV, and everybody was surrounding the TV and we were watching what was happening in downtown New York. I got in my car and I raced home.

What began to happen over the next several hours would change the life of our congregation because although we were signing our incorporation papers on September 11th, 2001, our very first worship service would be that very next Sunday. It was going to be our launch services. And, at that moment, I didn't even know whether three of our main leaders were even alive by the end of that day because all of them worked in and around the trade towers. At the end of that day, we gathered together for prayer, and slowly but surely, the three of the four leaders in our church, all of whom I entrusted, all made the very long journey home. And, thankfully, that day they all made it home.

But I remember thinking, Lord, what are you doing? We have moved all the way up here from Florida. We're starting this church, and now this. I don't even remember what my plan was to preach on originally. But on that Sunday, I couldn't help but preach on Psalm 23, "Though I walk through the valley

of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Everything had changed. It seemed like our world was coming apart at the seams.

And I think that's where many of us find ourselves today, not just because of the pandemic but because of the cultural upheaval we are facing because of racial injustice and the strife that we're experiencing not just here but around the world. What will the next several months hold? What will our financial system look like? How will we provide for our families? What will the church look like as we gather back together? When will we be able to gather back together? There have been so many arguments this way and that way. What are we to do in the midst of this? And I thought this is a great time for us to consider the book of Habakkuk.

I must also tell you that I was inspired to really spend a few weeks here because of someone who has had a great deal of shaping power in my own life, Dr. Timothy Keller, who a little over a month ago was walking his way through some brief testimonies and teachings on the book of Habakkuk. And just right around that time, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Why, Lord? Why? Not just for Tim Keller but for his family, for the ministry of City to City, the ministry of Gospel and Life, the ministry that continues to go out from Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, but we can ask that same question. Why have we suffered as we have as a congregation? Why, Lord? And this is why we're in the book of Habakkuk.

And this morning, we begin with a conversation with God. Hear now the book of Habakkuk chapter 1, verses 1 through 5 and verse 12.

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

And God responds,

"Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told."

And then Habakkuk,

Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Lord, may you bless the preaching of your word. May you apply it to our hearts, and may you give us instruction of what it looks like to converse with you when it feels like the world around us is falling apart. Lord, help us to come before you because you are our God, and your promise says we shall not die. Help us, O Lord. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

In this conversation with God, you remember what I said just a few minutes ago, perhaps, that, in fact, the work of Habakkuk as a prophet begins to show a transition. It's a transition, as I said, in world politics. It's going from a Syrian empire to the Babylonian empire, meaning two empires that set themselves against the nation of Israel. And even as Habakkuk looked at the nation around him, not only did he see this enemy nation coming up against them, but he also saw among his own people, the nation of Judah, falling apart, those who were following the Lord and many who were not. And so Habakkuk begins to ask these questions.

But what is interesting is as a prophet, he's teaching us something about what it looks like to converse with God. And so he begins with this great phrase, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help?" So in the beginning of this conversation, he begins with, how long, O Lord? Now, I want you to think about that for just a second. Very rarely do we hear prophets saying this. In fact, Habakkuk is unique in this sense. Although similar to Jeremiah and similar to parts of Isaiah, he starts out here crying out, and, yes, he is complaining to God about the injustice that he sees around him in a nation that is called to worship him. And he's crying out, also, about the injustice that these enemies of the nation of Judah are enacting on God's people. In addition, he's doing something more. He's not just crying out to God and complaining to God about the injustice that he sees, but he's also asking God, how long, O Lord, must I experience this injustice? Why have you allowed me to see this, your servant? And he says the evil of other nations, the evil that he sees perpetrated even among his own people, he's asking God, why have you allowed even the faithful one to endure this kind of suffering?

Now, that's remarkable. Consider this. We must hold this intention. He is a prophet of the Lord. He belongs to the Lord. He's been called by God to proclaim to the nation the truths and the promises of God and a return to the Lord in faithful trust. But he begins not with an oracle of proclamation to the nation or to the nations. He is crying out to God. So he's faithful to the Lord, but he's also complaining to the Lord.

Now, I want you to hold that intention. And I am calling you, if you are a Christian, to hold this intention because, to me, this is unique, and we must hold them together. Why do I say that? Because I remember what it was like not to believe. And I did not think Christians would ever talk to God like this. In fact, frankly, I thought all that ever came out of their mouths was just mild and bland truths and a sweet little smile. And then after I became a Christian, I have always found it remarkable how much we play spiritual bumper cars with each other on Sundays. How are you doing? Fine. How is your relationship with God? It's good. And we seem as though we're contractually obligated to be nice. It's almost like in our walk with God, we're contractually obligated not because God has put this on us, but because the culture of Christianity and religion often puts this on us, not the Bible.

What's interesting is it's almost like we're obligated to be nice and happy with each other, nice and happy with how we talk about God and how we talk to Him. And, oftentimes, we don't let our real emotions show. Can we be this honest with God to be called faithful in our trust of Him while at the same time crying out to Him saying, why, O Lord? Why me? Not because we're asking Him for pity but just because we're literally asking Him, why, Lord? Why me? Why now? And do we still ask God these questions?

Do you know some of our greatest hymns ask God these questions but many of our spiritual songs don't? Why is that? I ask you another question. Why is it that so many Christians find social media to be the place of the new confessional, the place where we're the most raw, and, yet, in our prayer life, we find our prayer lives to be very anemic? We're a little less raw.

Listen how the prophet Habakkuk wrestles with God in his conversation in prayer. I believe that one mark of maturity in our conversation and in our walk with God is that we can be frank with God because we know He is the safest place to share it because He's the one who has actually faithfully shown that He loves us. But we also know that the safety of His grace also comes with the risk of His truth. And that is something that Habakkuk holds in tension. In this conversation with God, he says, Why, Lord? "Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted." I ask you, is this not a very contemporary question? Is this not a very contemporary analysis of the culture and world around us?

And, yet, notice what Habakkuk does. He doesn't go into the social media of his time. He doesn't just go to his friends and blog or Facebook. He goes to God, and he's written it down as a form of worship. O Lord, O Lord, how long?

But while he finds God to be a safe place to complain, he's also willing and knows that because God is safe, because God is gracious, we also know that he meets with the risk of being exposed to God's truth. And that's the second part of his conversation. In verse 5, we learn something, that the answer that God gives is above our pay grade. You see, he begins the conversation with, "How long?" And God answers with, well, that's kind of above your pay grade. Notice what God says in response. "Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told." What's happening in that? This is Habakkuk recording it for the people of God. So on the one hand, he's saying, "How long?" But then he exposes himself, and he proclaims the truth of God that meets us in the midst of our complaint. And it's not saying, go, sit down, be quiet, and don't complain. God is saying if you're willing to complain to me, you need to also understand that I'm not always going to tell you what I'm doing or how I'm doing it because, quite frankly, you wouldn't be able to understand it if I were.

As one Old Testament writer said, "His justice is universal, and it can be relied upon. Faith and fact are not always compatible in the world of sense and sight." I love that. "Faith and fact are not always compatible in the world of sense and sight." He's saying that the world that we see happening in front of us, the world that we smell, that we watch, that makes us angry often leads us to the wrong conclusion that God is, in fact, not at work. We take what seems to our eyes like chaos and destruction as an example of God not being at work.

But this tells us God's saying, guess what? Oftentimes, when what seems to you like chaos and division and turmoil is when I am most at work for you cannot comprehend were I to tell you what I am doing. And as this commentator says, "Faith and fact are not always compatible," which means, he says, "There is a world of justice that only God can fully comprehend. And we, his people, are called to accept that he knows and we don't by faith even though we cannot always confirm it as fact." It isn't that we shut our brains down. It isn't that we shut our senses down. It means that when we go to God in conversation, how long, O Lord? We need to be open that He might respond in saying, I've got this, and if I were to tell you how I have this, you still wouldn't be able to understand it. So I'm calling you to trust me even though everything in your sense and your sight are calling out to not trust me.

And, see, there we are given the two opposite responses. On the one hand, we can not be honest with God and just go blithely about and not really go to Him as a safe place, or we can say, I'm not going there because I'm cynical because what I see around me says God's not at work. We can avoid both, and the prophet Habakkuk tells us how to do it. We can go to God, say, how long? And we can complain and cry out to Him but also know that His truth and His grace will meet us reminding us that what we can't see and can't smell doesn't mean it isn't present.

And although I cannot always confirm how God is working and whether God is working, I know His word reminds us that He is because - and this is something I have to get over in my faith, in my life, and in my relationships, and so do you - there are so many places in our lives that both the questions and answers are way above our pay grade. And what we learn here is that God reminds Habakkuk and you and me that He has this. This means we can go to Him all the more knowing that His answer is to trust Him by faith.

This continues to be a biblical theme over and over and over again until the point of Good Friday afternoon when His disciples could not believe that Jesus was giving Himself over to death because of sin, nor could they believe the testimony of the women when they came back from the tomb on Easter Sunday morning. This is a truth that again and again and again, when the world seems upside down, God continues to surprise us. But are we open to His surprise and knowing that God in His grace meets us with an answer that we cannot comprehend but only receive as a gift by faith that the Lord has us and He is with us?

The third part of this conversation isn't just wondering how long. It isn't just learning that God has us because it is above our pay grade. There is also peace in the promise. There is peace in the

promise. I am grateful for the writer and blogger Seth Godin. He is an excellent writer. He works with wonderful metaphors. And over the last several weeks, he's been writing some great things. And this one idea that he had is "Stuck on enormity." Seth Godin writes this.

"When a problem appears too large, too intractable, too unspeakable to deal with, it's easy to give up. There never seems to be enough time, enough resources, or enough money to make the big problems go away. Perhaps we can start with a very small part of it, one person, one opportunity, one connection, drip by drip with commitment. These are the two hard parts: the insight to do this thing drip by drip and the persistence to commit to it."

Oftentimes, we get stuck on the enormity of the problem or our circumstances and the difficulties of our world. But I think what Seth is calling us to, and most importantly what Habakkuk is calling us to, is to one small step in one way as we approach God in His grace, and we commit ourselves drip by drip to hear the peace of His promise because that is what Habakkuk does. Notice what he says in verse 12, "Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof." In that one verse is a world of truths.

On the one hand, there's the way he appeals to God for he says, "Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God?" So in that one question, what Habakkuk is doing is he's asking God, aren't you the one who is everlasting? He's asking a rhetorical question in a way that almost seems like he's calling God's character into question. But, in fact, he's not because he does it all inside the language of intimacy. Notice what he says. He says, "My God." This is the language of intimacy that Habakkuk uses when he appeals to the Lord. And in so doing, he's tapping into the promise that God has said, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." This is the language of God's covenant people. You are our God, and we are your people. It is very similar to what Paul says to the church in Rome when he says, "You can call him Abba Father." Habakkuk knows that he can appeal to the Lord even calling out to the Lord, aren't you the one who is everlasting, O Lord, my God? There's peace in the promise because he's calling on God's intimate name.

But then notice what he says. "We will not die." My friends, God invites us into a relationship with Him. That does not give us the escape hatch from suffering. It does not mean that our lives get easier. In fact, oftentimes, the life of faith is very much difficult and is paved with a great deal of suffering, injustice, and challenge we can't even begin to fill books with. But what we see wedded here in this one verse is there is peace in the promise that although we may find ourselves in very difficult circumstances, for those who call upon the name of the Lord, I can say to you nothing ever will touch you because we will not die. We belong to Him, and the promise is those who walk by faith and trust in the Lord's redemption will never die. Although they may be able to take our body and our flesh, we will not die because of the promise of the resurrection. "Nothing can separate us from his love," as Paul says. We will not die.

The church of Jesus Christ, although nations come and rise up and fall, although injustice seems to multiply, the Lord says we will not die. Even though Habakkuk is saying, Lord, you seem to be using an enemy nation to teach us a lesson, meaning you're using suffering to teach us something about our need of you, means that we can look at our present suffering and, while we may not be satisfied with it, we can call out to Him for justice to come down and for strife and division to be healed. And, yet, we know that the strife and the division and the suffering will not snuff us out. The church of Jesus Christ can and will flourish. This is the peace of the promise that the Lord is with us.

But if we take what Habakkuk is saying here, and I want to circle back to where we began, how is it that we can wed together complaining with God and also recognizing that it is His promise that holds us? We can even ask God on the appeal of His character, of His purity, of His holiness, as Habakkuk does here, on reminding God of what He already knows about Himself? Are you not the God of everlasting power?

Are you not the God of justice? Although we can do all of that, I want to remind you how is it that we're able to do this?

And for this, I am grateful for the reminder from pastor Keller. It is because we worship a God of grace. It is God's grace that reminds us that because of the work of His matchless redemption through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, we can go before the throne of grace boldly. We can ask. We can cry out. We can complain because He is the safest place to do it. Do you trust God enough to know that He receives you this morning just like that, complaints and all?

Let me tell you this story. I heard a story this last week from Carly Johnstone. She's just a fellow American. Carly Johnstone had grown up in the foster care system. And one particular time where she was taken to a foster care home in Fort Myers that belonged to a Baptist church there. She became a resident there, and it didn't take her too long to understand the ways of this foster care home.

There was an elaborate point system where everything you did was assessed and you either gained points or you had them subtracted. And throughout the week, you would see the points added up on a giant whiteboard in the middle of the home with everybody's name and the point system. And it would be added up by the end of the week. And by the end of the week, based on your point system, you were able to have a medal grading. Either you got platinum, gold, silver, bronze, or copper. And they denoted your level of freedom whether you could go outside for that particular day, whether you could use the phone, whether you could stay in your room, have an extra five minutes in the shower. Everything was graded. And her goal was to ride her bike. But that required getting enough points to be either platinum or gold. And she talked about how devastatingly difficult it was to see every one of your actions graded on a whiteboard.

Friends, I want to ask you a question. Is this how you think God grades you? If you think God is the big teacher in the sky with a giant whiteboard with your name on it and is grading you and how you come to Him, and whether you come to Him, and whether you talk to Him, and how you're talking to Him, if you think He's grading you on that system, you're never going to be able to be as raw as Habakkuk. And you're never going to know the peace of His grace that Habakkuk began to experience.

Thanks be to God this is not how God grades us. Because of Jesus Christ, the God of grace does not grade whatsoever for Christ is our redeemer. Christ has gone before us. Christ has taken our sin which then enables us, because of Him, to go before our heavenly Father and call Him Abba Father, dad. Why is this happening? We can cry out to Him. We can complain to Him knowing He's not grading us, but He's only welcoming us. And in His grace, He receives us.

But He also tells us that as He receives us and He hears us without grade, without a whiteboard, He does greet us with His truth. And if we are willing and bold enough to trust Him with the complaints that we have in our hearts, then we also need to be open enough to hear that His truth tells us that He has us, and that we will not die, and that He is with us. And that gives us the freedom and the boldness to complain. But it also gives us the freedom and peace of His and only His comfort that comes by His grace alone.

Let us wail. Let us mourn. Let us cry. And let us complain, for our God hears us. And we cannot always stretch out and measure what He is doing. But surely, as His word declares here, He is at work. And may His justice roll down. May His healing come about. And may the church of Jesus Christ and all those who call upon His name, and even if this morning you call upon His name for the first time, may you flourish because of His grace because He has you. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we now pray that you would receive our complaints, our prayers, and may you receive us. We thank you, O Lord, that you do not grade us and assess us according to our behavior, for Jesus Christ is our redeemer. And in Him we can come before you with all sorts of complaints and say, why, Lord? Why? And, Lord, we thank you for the ministry of Dr. Timothy Keller. And so many are praying for him today and in these weeks. And he has called us to pray. And we would say, why, Lord?

Why this, your servant? But, Lord, we ask for his healing and his complete healing from this cancer. And, Lord, while he waits the answer to that through this treatment, we also know that he's asked us to pray that you would sanctify him and Kathy, that you would loosen their hearts and their hands on any idols of this life and find their comfort alone in you. And may they see this time of suffering as a time of teaching and a time of being able to give testimony of your faithfulness. Lord, he is showing us what it looks like to follow in the way of Habakkuk. Habakkuk calls us to cry out but also know that the one that we cry out to is the same one who meets us. Tim will never die. We will not die because you are the Lord, the Lord of redemption and resurrection, the Lord of justice and mercy. And you are good. You are good all the time. Help us to believe. In Jesus's name. Amen.