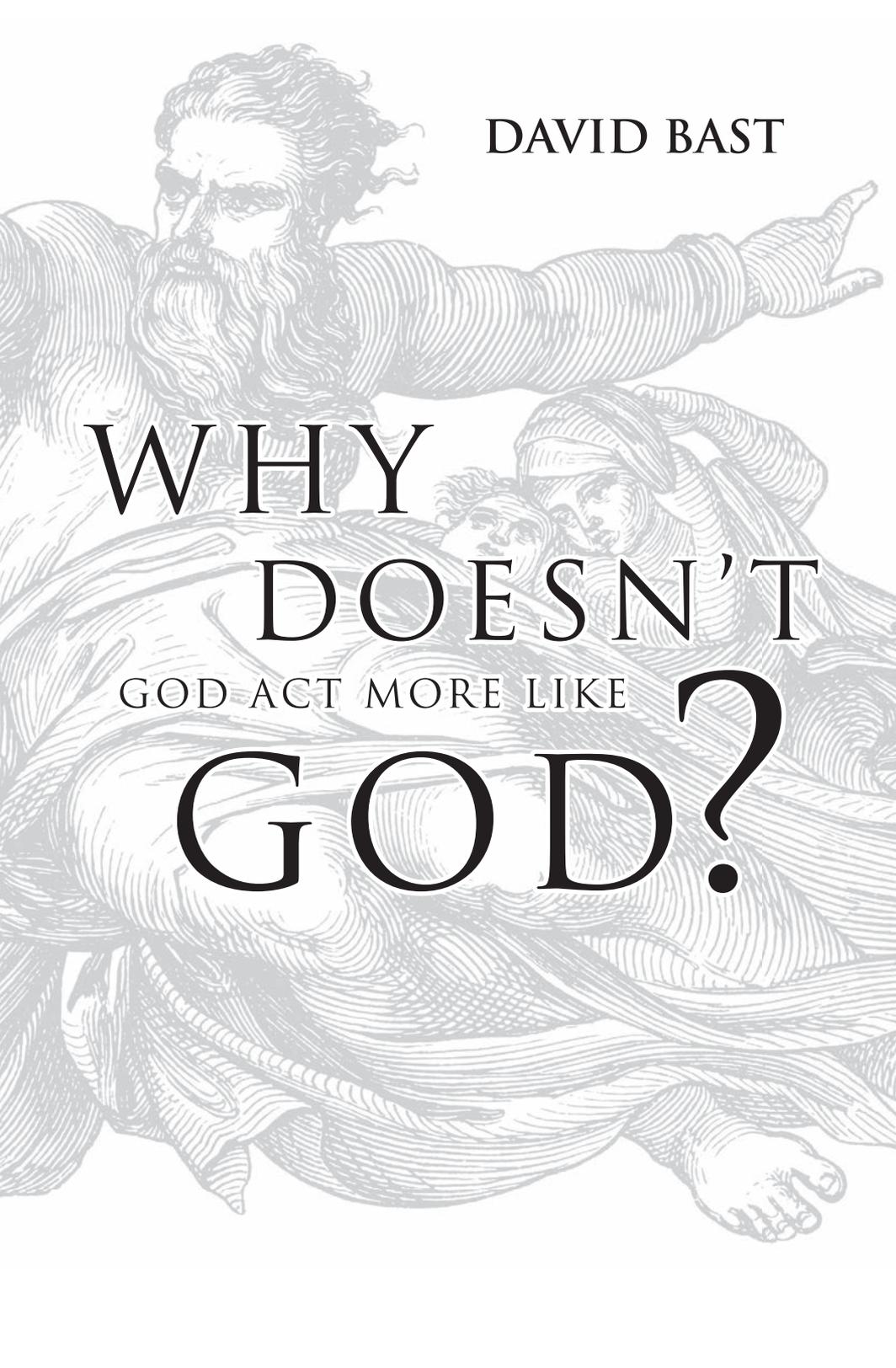


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DAVID BAST

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*Why Doesn't God Act More Like God?
Habakkuk and the Problem of Evil*

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Words of Hope's mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ by radio and literature in the languages of the world's peoples, seeking with our partners in ministry to win the uncommitted everywhere to faith in Christ and to encourage Christians in the life of discipleship.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons not to believe in a personal God. The grounds for atheism—or its more cautious cousin agnosticism—is a plot that has been plowed over many times. The modern scientific view of the world seems to be one long argument for unbelief: materialistic assumptions about the origin of the universe and of life, which challenge the notion of design (and therefore the existence of a Designer); reductionist accounts of human consciousness, which eliminate the soul; naturalistic explanations for the rise of religious faith; and so on. As a skeptical scientist once quipped when asked why he made no mention of God in his writings, “I have no need of that hypothesis.”

Then there is the difficulty of reconciling traditional Christian teaching with both our observations of the world around us and our own painful life experiences. The doctrine of the Incarnation affirms that God assumed human nature and entered our world to save us. Such an event may have been believable once upon a time, when people still thought the earth was the center of everything and man was “the crown of creation.” But set against the backdrop of a measureless

universe in which humanity plays such an infinitesimal role, the Incarnation is hard to accept any longer. Would the God of the entire universe really take that much trouble over “an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet” orbiting “a small unregarded yellow sun” in “the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of . . . the Galaxy” (Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*)? Moreover, a belief in Divine Providence would encourage us to trust that everything that happens to us is part of the master plan of a loving, all-powerful God—a view that, to say the least, is not clearly evident to a patient in the middle of chemotherapy or to the residents of a shanty town in one of the world's countless slums. And these are merely the most obvious intellectual problems that challenge faith in the God of the Bible.

But for the believing Christian, one difficulty stands above all others—the experience of unanswered prayer. This is much harder to deal with, far more painful than any atheistic argument or secularist's sneer. Experiencing the silence of God, the absence of God, threatens the very heart of faith, which is a confidence in our connectedness to God. As believers our faith is not merely a set of intellectual propositions about God, the world and ourselves. It is an experienced relationship with God, grounded in the conviction that we really have come to know the God of the universe as our Father in and through Jesus Christ. If we speak to this Father in prayer, pouring out our soul as we express to God our deepest needs and concerns, and then seem to hear no reply and receive no help, what are we to think? I'll tell you what I sometimes think. In the night, when I'm tossing in bed unable to sleep, it creeps in: the thought that my faith is all just make-believe; that when I pray I'm only playing a game with myself; that there's really no one listening, no one there.

Of course, there is nothing new about the experience of unanswered prayer. I'm not the first person to entertain doubts in the dark. How to deal with our doubts is one of the

surprising but comforting lessons of the book of Habakkuk. The thesis of that little book (as well as this one) is that faith isn't easy. Faith is not neat and clean; it's messy, with lots of gnarled knots as well as loose ends. Those of us who can identify with Habakkuk often have more questions than answers; or at least we're more certain about the questions than we are of the answers. But neither can we simply give up and walk away. As easy as it sometimes is to think there is no God, it is unthinkable to *believe* there isn't. For me, for Habakkuk, and I hope for you, there's just no viable alternative to faith in God. We ask with Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). We have no real alternative; we can't not believe.

So we struggle to answer our questions and to deal with our doubts and fears. And when suffering or hardship comes to us, we try to sing (along with Habakkuk) a song of trust in the Lord whose ways we can't explain, but whose goodness we confess and whose grace we praise, not just because of what happens to us but sometimes in spite of it.

Chapter One

“GOD, WHY DON’T YOU ANSWER?”

Have you ever wondered why God allows so much suffering in the world? Have you ever prayed for help and he didn’t seem to answer? Well, you’re not alone in struggling with those problems.

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.

How long, O LORD, must I call 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?
Why do you tolerate wrong?

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.

YOU HAVE PROBABLY HAD one of those “It’s a small world!” experiences. In the summer of 1972 I was a student traveling through Europe with my fiancée Betty Jo (now my wife for the past almost forty years). One day we happened to be in Amsterdam, wandering through the main square of the city. As I stood staring in some amazement at the rather bizarre collection of humanity that had drifted into that Mecca of the counter-culture, I exclaimed, “Look at all those hippies!” Whereupon Betty Jo, examining the crowd more closely, pointed out that one of them happened to be a college classmate of ours. It really is a small world after all!

I have a similar feeling of shocked recognition when I come to the book of Habakkuk. Here I am, among the twelve Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. It’s sort of a strange place, really. This is one of those areas that someone has called “the clean pages” of the Bible. There are a lot of books here that aren’t read very often, written by people with odd-sounding names like Obadiah and Haggai. They are talking about problems and issues in civilizations that have been dead for 2,500 years, in places I have never seen and can’t even imagine. And then, just as I’m tempted to leave, I turn a corner and bump into somebody I know. I recognize this man Habakkuk! I know what he is talking about; I understand what he is feeling. He’s asking the very same questions I ask. So then I think, maybe this isn’t such a strange place after all. Maybe I can even find some answers to my questions here.

The Hebrew prophet Habakkuk was an ancient man with a modern problem. A contemporary of the great prophet Jeremiah, Habakkuk proclaimed God’s word in the kingdom of Judah during the late seventh century B.C.—the final days of Jewish independence. It was an unstable period marked by a changing balance of power in the ancient Near East. The Empire of Assyria, which had terrorized that whole part of the world for generations, was suddenly overthrown. A coalition of peoples led by the Babylonians attacked and destroyed the

Assyrian capital of Nineveh in the year 612 B.C. Almost overnight the old bogeyman of Assyria was completely obliterated, and an entirely new and unexpected threat arose in Babylon. During this period of instability resulting from shifting alliances and the clash of empires, smaller kingdoms like Judah scrambled for advantage, while the Hebrew prophets warned of imminent judgment.

Habakkuk’s life and world could hardly have been more unlike ours. But despite the almost unimaginable differences between Habakkuk’s time and our own, between his life and yours or mine, he struggled with many of the same kinds of spiritual questions we do. The differences between Habakkuk and us are all superficial. On the deepest and most important level, we’re much the same.

QUESTIONS FOR FAITH

Habakkuk’s questions all had to do with God, with suffering and the problem of evil, and with unanswered prayer. In other words, they were all questions about the most basic issues of faith. Listen to what he says to God: “How long must I keep praying for an answer?” “Why don’t you listen?” “Why don’t you act?” “Why do you allow evil?” Does any of that sound familiar?

The book of Habakkuk (the written record of the message he preached to the people of Judah) begins with this simple introduction: “The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received” (v. 1). This phrase could also be translated, “Habakkuk’s burden.” Habakkuk had something he wanted to say, something he *had* to say; or rather, something he had to *ask*. I heard once about a Christian speaker who styles himself “The Bible Answer Man.” It’s not a title Habakkuk would have claimed for himself. He is more like the Bible Question Man. Habakkuk believed in God. He knew God. He served God. But he didn’t understand God. So he wrestled with the same

issues we struggle with when we're confronted by pain or injustice, or when we cry out to God for help and our prayers seem only to echo back to us. In the end, all the prophet's questions could be boiled down to this basic one: Why doesn't God act more like God?

Look more closely at what Habakkuk is asking God.

How long, O LORD, must I call 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?
Why do you tolerate wrong?

—Habakkuk 1:2

There are really two questions here. One is theological: attempting to reconcile the presence of evil in the world with the goodness of the God who made and governs that world. So Habakkuk asked, "Why do you tolerate wrong?" The prophet is really asking here about God's apparent inactivity. How can God go on watching all the horrible things that happen every day and not put a stop to them?

Habakkuk's second question is relational and has to do with the silence of God: "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" Like so many believers, Habakkuk agonizes over the silence and apparent inattentiveness of God. He voices a lament that echoes over and over in Scriptures: How long, O LORD?

The prophet was living in a sick and dying society, one that was increasingly filled with crime and violence, where social injustice and human rights abuses multiplied. The very authorities who ought to have been correcting these wrongs were contributing to them instead. Crime was out of control, with innocent people suffering the violent consequences every day, in addition to all the normal ills and problems of ordinary

life. And all this was happening not in some godless, pagan society, but in Judah, among God’s chosen people Israel!

As evil ran wild and misery surrounded him, Habakkuk has been praying. He’s been crying out to God for help. But God has been unaccountably silent. Not only has the Lord not answered Habakkuk’s prayers, he doesn’t even seem to have heard them. He hasn’t bothered to listen—or so it seemed. And God is also strangely inactive. In this situation of wrong that screamed for him to do something, God apparently does nothing. So Habakkuk wants to know why. He asks God what’s wrong, what is going on?

THE STRANGE INACTIVITY OF GOD

Think of it this way. What would *you* do if you were God? If you had all power and controlled everything, if you could change peoples’ minds and hearts by simply willing it, if you could literally make something out of nothing by the power of your speech, if you could just say the word and the sick would be healed and the dead raised, if you ruled over all the forces of nature, and had authority even over the evil powers, what would you do? What would you do when you saw a “crack” cocaine baby lying in an incubator in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, eyes taped shut, a tube down his throat, writhing in pain? What would you do when a cancer sufferer, wasted away from his disease and devastated by its treatment, cried out to you for healing, or just for relief from his unbearable pain? What would you do when a person who had loved and served you all her life prayed earnestly to you every day for the salvation of a child who was utterly indifferent to you? Or what about believers who are living under a totalitarian regime and experiencing harassment, imprisonment, torture and even death for their faith in Christ? What would you do when they pleaded with you day and night for deliverance? What would you do in response to the fervent prayers for revival in churches whose

influence was shrinking in the midst of societies that were increasingly turning away from their Christian heritage and sinking further and further into moral corruption? What would you do? Surely you'd do *something*, wouldn't you? If you were God.

It seems to us that if God really acted like God, there wouldn't be any more fatal accidents, no more birth defects, no more cancer or AIDS, no more killer storms, no more wars, no more suffering or pain. Churches would be full, and the righteous would prosper. The whole world would flourish with peace and happiness, faith and goodness. We could understand that. We could believe in God then. Everyone would. It would be easy.

But when we cry out to him in anguish and he just seems to do nothing, how can that be? That was Habakkuk's problem, his burden. And mine. And yours too, I imagine.

A QUESTION OF TRUST

What confronts us as believers in the experience of unanswered prayer is the issue of trust. It comes down specifically to the question of whether or not we are willing to trust in the superior wisdom of God. If we do, then we will also be willing to believe that he has reasons for what seems to us his often incomprehensible behavior.

The willingness to keep trusting God no matter what happens seems to be decreasing in our time. I regularly read about people—usually intellectuals—who report that the experience of personal tragedy has left them unable to believe in the existence of a personal, loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God. It just doesn't seem possible to them that a good God could have any purpose in allowing such things to happen. They find the very idea abhorrent; the idea of such a God no longer works for them.

By contrast, the willingness to trust God is based (in part

at least) on the not unreasonable assumption that, being God, he knows more and sees farther than we do. When Christian's son Matthew was being catechized in Part II of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Matthew was asked what he did when he came to something in the Bible he did not understand. “I think that God is wiser than I,” the boy replied. That response is equally fitting when we are confronted with events in life that we can't make sense of. Such an attitude of trust expresses the believer's humble confidence that God “will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world, for he is able to do this because he is almighty God, and he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q.26).

Let's be clear, though, about one thing. Trust in the wisdom and loving purposes of the God who is in control of all that happens is no simple matter. It's one thing to repeat the assurances of our faith when we're happy and comfortable, when the challenge to faith is still theoretical and we're only practicing how we hope we would respond to the test. But it's a different matter when the struggle to go on believing and trusting is immediate and real.

For a number of years Words of Hope assisted the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) in providing Christian radio programs in the Hmong language for tribal people in Southeast Asia. Pastor John Lee, the Hmong broadcaster, came to faith in Christ by means of gospel radio broadcasts that he heard as a boy in his native Laos. Many years later, John himself developed wonderfully effective Christian programs in the Hmong language. He had a special gift for relating the gospel to Hmong culture and expectations. Credible reports indicate that as many as a quarter million Hmong have become Christians during the past twenty years, despite persecution by the Communist governments in Southeast Asia. Most of these new believers depended upon Pastor Lee's radio messages for their spiritual sustenance. And then one day I

received an e-mail informing us that John had suddenly and unexpectedly died. A few weeks later, Jim Bowman, FEBC's international chairman, sent me another message:

OK, David, now here is a good test of our theology. The Lord tells us to go into all the world and preach the gospel. He tells us he is not willing that any should perish. So we do our best. God raises up a man who revolutionizes a whole people group, and they are then submitted to intense persecution. They say that they fear losing their faith under its brutal pressure. They say they are dependent on the broadcasts. Then, 1) the enemies intensify the campaign to force the Hmong back into the worship of evil spirits. 2) they jam the signal. 3) the broadcaster dies at a most crucial time in their discipleship. 4) almost the same day a typhoon destroys [a sister ministry's] antennas at Guam and from all I can figure removes the other Hmong broadcast [from the air]. God's ways are definitely hard to figure.

Yes they are. But what viable alternative do believers have . . . except to go on believing that our faith will ultimately be proven right, that “the judgments of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether” (Ps. 19:9 KJV)? And to go on hoping and expecting that if we “humble [our]selves beneath the mighty hand of God” our trust in the wisdom and goodness of the Lord will prove justified in the end when in due season he exalts us (1 Peter 5:6). When we are tempted to doubt this, the Word of God reminds us that our faith is based firmly on the Lord's enduring righteousness and faithfulness, not on our circumstances—no matter how painful they may be.

John Newton, the slave-ship captain turned evangelical preacher, is best known as the writer of the world's most popular hymn, “Amazing Grace.” But his greatest pastoral work has been preserved in his collected letters, a treasury of spiritual insight. On the subject of the wisdom of God's ways Newton wrote this to a friend:

I can hardly recollect a single plan of mine, of which I since have not seen reason to be satisfied, that had it taken place in season and circumstance just as I had proposed, it would, humanly speaking, have proved my ruin—or at least it would have deprived me of the greater good the Lord had designed for me. We judge things by their present appearances, but the Lord sees them in their consequences; if we could do so likewise, we should be perfectly of his mind; but as we cannot, it is an unspeakable mercy that he will manage for us, whether we are pleased with his management or not.

In other words, hindsight will convince us that God knew what he was doing all along.

Meanwhile, if circumstances make it seem otherwise, perhaps we should be willing to give God—can we say this believingly?—the benefit of the doubt.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Read Habakkuk 1, verses 1-4. What are some of the frustrations Habakkuk is complaining about to the Lord?
2. How would you describe what Habakkuk saw happening in his society?
3. Do you see similarities in our society today?
4. Have you ever wished God would re-write the ending to a situation in your life or the life of someone close to you?
5. “The willingness to keep trusting God no matter what happens. . .” (p. 16). What do we know about the nature of God that can help us do that?
6. “Hindsight will convince us that God knew what he was doing all along” (p. 19). What personal examples of this truth have you experienced in your life or observed in someone else’s life?

“God, Why Don't You Answer?”

Chapter Two

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

If you could ask God to explain just one thing to you, what would it be? And if he did explain it to you, are you sure you could accept his answer?

O LORD, are you not from everlasting?
My God, my Holy One, we will not die.
O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment;
O Rock, you have ordained them to punish.
Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you cannot tolerate wrong.
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?
Why are you silent while the wicked
swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

—Habakkuk 1:12–13

IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING that the job description for a Hebrew prophet included a line stating that the successful applicant would be possessed of a keen social conscience. Habakkuk was well qualified in that regard. He felt the horror of his society's injustices strongly. He cried out to God for answers, and was troubled by the Lord's apparent silence and inactivity.

AN ANSWER FROM THE LORD

In the opening words of his oracle Habakkuk has been complaining about God's failure to respond to his fervent pleas for help. But then, suddenly, God did answer Habakkuk's prayer. The prophet discovered by experience the truth that, in theologian Francis Schaeffer's phrase, "God is there, and he is not silent." God responds to the prophet's cries of complaint in Habakkuk 1:5:

“Look at the nations and watch—
and be utterly amazed.

For I am going to do something in your days that you
would not believe,
even if you were told.”

Here God announces that he is about to act. In fact, the thing he is planning to do is going to amaze everyone. “Wait till you see this,” God says to Habakkuk. “I am about to do something you won't believe, even when I tell you what it is.” God's statement in verse 5 reminds us again of perhaps the most basic element in the biblical worldview; namely, the conviction that God is at work in the events of history. For the writers of the Bible, God is the primary actor on the world's stage. Secondary causes and human instruments are just that: secondary and instrumental. God is the One who writes the script and directs the action. Historians talk about what King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon did around the turn of the sixth century B.C. The Bible talks about what *God* did when Nebuchadnezzar overthrew Assyria and destroyed Jerusalem.

THE GOD WHO IS IN CONTROL

From faith's perspective, God is always involved in history, whether in the public events painted on the grand canvas of the world or in the more intimate happenings of our individual

lives. God does know all that is going on, both in the macrocosm of the universe and in the microcosm of a person's own head; in fact, he is personally active everywhere, at all times, in all things. God is neither inert nor uninterested. He is neither passive nor disengaged. He doesn't take a "hands-off" approach to the world and its inhabitants.

In the Bible's view, this is what chiefly distinguishes the real God from phony gods. The psalmist describes the idols of the nations this way:

They have mouths, but they do not speak;
they have eyes, but they do not see;
they have ears, but they do not hear,
and there is no breath in their mouths.

—Psalm 135:16–17 NRSV

The God of Israel, by contrast, is the *living* God.

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, *for the living God.*

—Psalm 42:1–2 (emphasis added)

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.

—Psalm 84:1–2 (emphasis added)

Unlike idols, the living God is not deaf or dumb. He sees and hears, and he speaks. God speaks his word, whether of creation, salvation, or judgment, and all that he says comes to pass.

WHY DOESN'T GOD ACT MORE LIKE GOD?

By the word of the LORD were the heavens made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth . . .
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

☪—Psalm 33:6, 9

As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish . . .
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

☪—Isaiah 55:10–11

And unlike the idols the living God also is not helpless or inert. He acts. He *does* things. Israel's most sublime offering of praise was called forth by the psalmist's meditation upon God's acts of grace and mercy, forgiveness and salvation. He exhorts himself (and us) to praise the Lord

who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.

He made known his ways to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel:

The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.

☞ Psalm 103:3–8

But God is not just responsible for the good things that happen, the saving events, the deeds of love and mercy, the actions that establish justice and righteousness. According to the Bible, he is responsible for *everything* that happens. “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” asked Job (Job 2:10 NRSV).

All of this is to say that, in the Bible’s worldview, God governs all of life. He rules all people and brings all things to pass. The nations obey his will and carry out his purposes. The earth’s rulers—presidents and prime ministers, dictators and kings—all serve to further God’s plans, whether knowingly and willingly or not. What happens in the world happens because God chooses that it should. And finally—and most importantly—all things, good and bad, are used by God to work ultimate good for those who love him and belong to him (Rom. 8:28).

Obviously, there are difficulties in accepting this biblical view of God. One difficulty is this: How do you know it’s true? Couldn’t it just be wishful thinking? Few of us would want to face a world completely devoid of deeper meaning and purpose. We long to believe that history—whether world history or our own life story—has a rationale behind it. If it does, then even our suffering can have some purpose. Our misery is not just senseless pain. So maybe we humans have invented this idea of a great, all-knowing, all-powerful Father in the Sky who superintends everything and makes sure it all turns out OK in the end. Who is right? Skeptics who say there is no transcendent meaning in life, or believers who assert that whatever the appearances may be, God is on the throne? There is no way of *proving* the answer with absolute certainty. You can’t reason or argue your way to the truth. You can only believe, one way or the other.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

A second difficulty with the view that God is at work in and through the events of world history is what is usually referred to as the problem of evil. *Theodicy* is the theological term for attempts to resolve the problem of evil, and in John Milton's words, "justify the ways of God to man" (*Paradise Lost*). Granted we put our faith in the sovereign rule of a gracious God. Granted we go on believing in both parts of the prayer we learned as little children that "God is great *and* God is good." But then how can what we know and believe about the character of God be reconciled with all the bad things going on in the world? It's not just that God doesn't respond immediately to our cries for help, or that he permits suffering to go on. It's that he chooses means and instruments to carry out his will that seem so—to put it mildly—inappropriate.

Where was God on September 11, 2001? Was he in the twin towers of the World Trade Center, alongside innocent victims and heroic rescuers, as so many have affirmed? Was he on the airplanes, comforting passengers and inspiring brave resistance? Fine, we have no problem with that. But then, was he somehow also active in the attacks, allowing them or perhaps even inspiring them? Some Christian leaders have asserted that God was using the terrorist attacks to judge America for its spiritual waywardness, an idea I personally am not prepared to endorse. But many Muslims have gone much further than this. I was watching a television interview recently with a young Muslim woman from Yemen. She related how she wept tears of joy on September 11 as she saw pictures of the World Trade Center collapsing, because she felt that justice was being done to America. Is that what was happening? God inspired suicide bombers to wreak his vengeance by murdering 3,000 innocent people? What kind of a God would act that way? The very suggestion is obscene.

Exactly. Now we are face-to-face with the problem of evil.

This is precisely the suggestion with which Habakkuk struggled—that God was sponsoring an obscenity. The magnitude of the problem hits with much greater force and immediacy when we translate biblical instances of evil into current events. But the message revealed to Habakkuk is that ultimately *God himself* would be the One behind the horrible acts of war that were about to sweep over and destroy the kingdom of Judah.

“I am raising up the Babylonians,
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwelling places not their own.
They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.
Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.
Their cavalry gallops headlong;
their horsemen come from afar.
They fly like a vulture swooping to devour;
they all come bent on violence.
Their hordes advance like a desert wind
and gather prisoners like sand.
They deride kings
and scoff at rulers.
They laugh at all fortified cities;
they build earthen ramps and capture them.
Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty men, whose own strength is their god.”

☪—Habakkuk 1:6–11 (emphasis added)

The “good news” Habakkuk received from God is that God was going to intervene in Judah’s life in an amazing fashion. He will address the problems that Habakkuk has been so persistently calling to his attention. But before the prophet gets too excited, God explains that the amazing acts he will

perform are going to be amazingly bad for his people, not amazingly good. “I am sending the Babylonians,” God announced, “They are fierce and cruel—marching across the land, conquering cities and towns” (Hab. 1:6–7 CEV). So God’s response to all the things that are wrong in Judean society is to bring judgment. He will punish the people by causing the vicious armies of Babylon to conquer them and destroy their country, killing countless thousands of Jews and carrying most of the survivors off into captivity.

This revelation raises many more questions than it answers. *Wait a minute, God, we can imagine Habakkuk thinking. The Babylonians! You’re going to use them! Why, they’re worse than we are! They’re completely immoral. They’re cruel and heartless, and as for idolatry, well, if you think it’s a problem in Judah, have you ever been to Babylon? How can you possibly think of using them as an instrument of your justice?* Furthermore, the Babylonians could not have cared less about the Lord, the God of Israel. They did not believe they were instruments of his justice; they didn’t believe in him at all. The Babylonians thought their own strength and superior tactics and powerful armies were responsible for their military success. Babylon was a typical world power: brutal, idolatrous, and arrogant. So how could a just God not only give them success but even use them as an instrument of his policy?

NO EASY ANSWERS

If you think I’m going to solve the problem of evil, think again. For one thing, God hasn’t asked me to be his defense counsel. For another, I can’t solve it. I can’t explain God’s actions because I don’t understand them. There are no easy answers for the problem of evil. But plenty of inadequate ones are being offered. A popular response today is what might be called the “Weak God Theory.” “If God is all good, then he is not all-powerful. If God is all-powerful then he is not all

good,” said the American writer Norman Mailer. “I am a disbeliever in the omnipotence of God because of the Holocaust. But for 35 years or so I’ve been believing that God is doing the best he can” (quote in *Time* magazine). This is similar to the understanding of God proposed in books like the popular best-seller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Rabbi Harold Kushner. The reasoning behind this view goes like this:

1. God would surely prevent something as horrible as . . . [fill in the blank] if he could, otherwise he would be a monster.
2. He did not prevent it.
3. But it’s impossible to believe he is a monster.
4. Therefore, he must not have been able to prevent what happened.

Well, that is one way to solve the problem of evil. You simply say that God has nothing to do with it, and that he couldn’t really do anything about it: God doesn’t give people cancer, God doesn’t cause accidents, God would never hurt anyone, and God would heal everyone if he could. Therefore, when people do get hurt or don’t get better, it’s not God’s fault. If there is a God, he’s just doing the best he can.

Before we dismiss this point of view too casually, we ought to recognize its strengths. This view acknowledges what the Bible calls “the mystery of iniquity”; it realizes how inexplicable specific tragedies are. This view also rises out of a recognition of the profound wrongness of innocent suffering, and a commendable sensitivity to the deep pain so many have experienced. These experiences ought not to be, and they were not part of God’s original intention for his creation. There is something disgusting about pat and easy religious answers that gloss over the depths of human suffering and talk glibly about tragic events as being “God’s will.”

But in the end I myself cannot be satisfied with the Weak

God Theory. I can't help but wonder what would be the point of believing in the God suggested by this view of suffering and evil. I mean, a God who cannot prevent accidents or heal fatal illnesses? A God who is stymied by a blood clot or checkmated by a drunk driver? What kind of God is that? An innocuous, powerless, pathetic God. Why would anyone waste their time believing in or praying to a God who is just as helpless as we are? In one of his sermons, pastor-theologian John Piper relates the story of his mother's tragic death. She was killed in a freak accident while on tour in the Holy Land. A lumber truck lost its load just as it was passing the tour bus, and a board smashed through the bus window, killing Piper's mother instantly. Did God permit the accident to occur? Was he sovereign in that place at that moment? In the midst of grief and desolation, Piper nevertheless concluded that yes, God was ruling there and then. "I take little comfort," he explained, "in a God who cannot control a two-by-four."

Neither do I. But this is certainly not the biblical testimony about God. Unlike many contemporary writers on spiritual subjects (but like John Piper), the prophets and apostles consistently and persistently refuse to reduce God to an irrelevance. The Bible articulates certain basic truths about God, and Habakkuk rehearses them for us at the end of chapter 1: God is *eternal*, above and outside all time and history (while nevertheless active in them). God is *self-existent* and *sovereign*; he does rule over the whole universe. And God is *reliable* and *dependable*, "O Rock," as Habakkuk addressed him. God can be trusted. We are safe when we take refuge in him. Above all, God is *the holy one*—"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil," said the prophet. The Lord is pure goodness. God does not, in fact he cannot, compromise with evil. Humans may be corrupted but never God. He can neither do wrong nor be associated with it. This is the God whom believers know and love. "*My God, my Holy One,*" Habakkuk called him (emphasis added). He is ours and we are his.

RECONCILING FAITH AND EXPERIENCE

The prophet knows all this about God, and he believes it, but the problem was that he couldn't tell that any of those things were true just then from what was happening in his life and world. What Habakkuk *thought* about God seemed to be contradicted by what he *saw* happening around him. That's what caused his distress. As the evangelist Leighton Ford said after the death of his twenty-two-year-old son, Sandy: "Our problem is reconciling our faith with our experience." How do you do that?

Not quickly or easily. At the end of chapter 1, Habakkuk is left dangling, so to speak. God doesn't make everything clear to him immediately. But in its own way, to dangle like that produces a kind of solution, because just there Habakkuk continues to struggle with God. When your faith seems to be contradicted by your experience, the easy thing to do is to give up your faith. Just abandon it. Turn away from God in disappointment and anger. But it is far better, though more difficult, to keep on wrestling with the problem like Habakkuk did, refusing either to surrender your faith or to deny your experience.

Here is a key fact: The whole time he is asking his questions and venting his complaints, Habakkuk is praying. He isn't just talking about all of his spiritual doubts and struggles. He's talking to God about them. And Habakkuk is willing to leave them there too, and to leave himself in the hands of a God whose ways he sometimes can't understand.

God's actions don't always make sense to us or satisfy us. We should be very careful in thinking that we have everything figured out, and that we know exactly what God is up to in any given event. We have no more right to do that than we have to dismiss God from all involvement. One of the greatest responses to the problem of suffering in all of world literature is recorded in the book of Job. Job is innocent and blameless,

yet a series of horrible calamities befalls him. His friends are sure it is God's justice ("I wept tears of joy when I saw the twin towers fall."). But we know, as did Job, that such a response is not the true explanation. Job screams for answers. He challenges God to justify what he has done. For thirty-seven chapters the dramatic tension builds, as all the pious and orthodox responses seeking to justify Job's miseries and exonerate God of any wrongdoing are exploded one by one.

And then at last in chapter 38, God himself speaks out of the storm. His answer to Job's agonized demands for an explanation is simply to throw a string of questions and observations about the mysteries and wonders of creation back at Job: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? . . . Have you ever given orders to the morning? . . . Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons? . . . Look at the behemoth, which I made . . . Can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook?" The English novelist Charles Williams remarked about this climactic encounter, "As a response to the problem of innocent suffering, 'Behold the hippopotamus' leaves something to be desired!"

But, strangely enough, God's response actually does satisfy his suffering servant. God doesn't give Job any answers, but that no longer matters to Job, because he has seen the Lord:

"Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee?
I lay my hand on my mouth . . .
"I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees thee;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes."

☞ Job 40:4; 42:5-6 RSV

That may be enough for you and me as well. Why? Because knowing God is even better than knowing all the answers to the problem of evil.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Read Habakkuk 1, verses 12-13. What is Habakkuk asking God to explain?
2. Read God's answer in Habakkuk 1, verse 5. What does this answer tell us about God and his relationship with current events and the events of history?
3. Read together the passages from the Psalms and Isaiah (pp. 25-27). How do these passages portray God and distinguish him from idols?
4. "What happens in the world happens because God chooses that it should. And . . . all things, good and bad, are used by God to work ultimate good for those who love him and belong to him (Romans 8:28)" (p. 27). Is it easy or difficult for you to believe these statements?
5. "What Habakkuk *thought* about God seemed to be contradicted by what he *saw* happening around him" (p. 33). Sometimes faith and experience collide. Think about a time and circumstance in your own life when your faith seemed to be contradicted by your experience. How did you handle the contradiction?

Chapter Three

STANDING ON THE RAMPARTS

If you want to question God, go right ahead. You are in good biblical company. But if you do raise some issues with the Lord, be sure to at least wait for an answer.

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.

Then the LORD replied:

“Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald may run with it.
For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
it will certainly come and will not delay.

“See, he is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous will live by his faith . . .”

☞ Habakkuk 2:1–4

ONE OF THE MOST powerful expressions of the spirit of modern nihilism is the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. In this drama the stage is bare except for a small, pathetic-looking tree. The structure of the play is monotonous, the action repetitive. The play consists mostly of a dialogue between two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for a man called Godot to show up. They have asked to meet with Godot, and they repeatedly call upon him in language with religious overtones, asking him to come. The characters are given to understand that Godot is considering their request. But nothing much happens during the play's two acts. The same events and dialogues recur, provoking a feeling of meaninglessness and helplessness in the audience. And in the end, a messenger arrives to announce that Godot isn't coming.

The message of the play, of course, is that God isn't coming. Vladimir and Estragon are thoroughly modern characters. They know there is no point to waiting, because there's no point to anything—no meaning, no purpose, no loving Father in heaven, no heaven (or hell); nothing, in fact, beyond the bare stage of this world. They only go on waiting because they have nothing else better to do, and because they can't muster the energy to kill themselves and end life once and for all.

FAITH VS. EXPERIENCE

Habakkuk's basic problem, as we saw at the end of the last chapter, is the same as that of thoughtful believers everywhere. It's the struggle to reconcile faith with experience. How can we square what we believe about the goodness, love and power of

God with what we see happening in the world around us—or perhaps in our own lives?

If God is good, if he's so holy he can't even bear to look on wrongdoing as Habakkuk says (1:13), and if he's also watching over and governing the world, well then, what's going on? What's wrong with this picture? Something *is* wrong because the world, in case you haven't noticed, is chock-full of tragedies and atrocities. God's silence in the face of our cries for help and his failure to act to prevent the occurrence of horrible things is difficult to understand. But it's really only difficult for those of us who believe everything about God that Habakkuk believed. After all, if God isn't all that powerful, then maybe he can't help it when bad things happen. No, says Habakkuk, the God of the Bible *is* the One in control. It is God who ordains and appoints, who raises up and casts down. Nothing happens without his involvement.

Well then, maybe God isn't as good or as kind as we think he is. What if he doesn't really care what happens to us? Or maybe God isn't all that involved in what's going on down here; maybe he is too big, or too remote, for the little lives of humans to engage his attention and care. Perhaps he is beyond the concepts of good and evil as we understand them; he just keeps grinding out his purpose, and if innocent people get crushed in the gears of Providence's machinery, well, that's the way it goes. Maybe God is long on power, but a little short on loving-kindness and tender mercy. No, says Habakkuk again. God is the Holy One, he is perfect goodness; he is the Rock, he is steadfast covenant love (1:12).

ON THE WATCHTOWER

So what's the answer? Will God respond to our struggle to understand what he is really up to in a world where all is not well? That's what Habakkuk wants to know, and in a famous passage in chapter 2 he tells how he climbs up on a watchtower

to wait for God to answer his questions. “I will stand at my watch,” he said, “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” (2:1).

The Bible speaks often of the importance of waiting for the Lord—of standing, so to speak, on the ramparts alongside Habakkuk. Some wonderful promises are made to those who are willing to watch and wait like this. Here are a few of them:

Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

—Isaiah 40:31 NRSV

For the LORD is a God of justice;
blessed are those who wait for him.

—Isaiah 30:18b NRSV

The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.

—Lamentations 3:25–26 NRSV

So there is great encouragement to obey the Psalmist's exhortation: “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” (Ps. 27:14 NRSV).

Waiting is a function of hoping. To wait for the Lord is to confidently expect God's deliverance—from pain or suffering, from sin, from material want, from sorrow, from loneliness, from all the troubles and evil that blight our life in this world (cf. Rom. 8:24–25). To wait is to refuse to give up on God, no matter how bleak the circumstances are, no matter how discouraging appearances may be. “I wait for the Lord,” cried the

psalmist, “and in his word I hope!” (Ps. 130:5). Waiting is persistent trust in both the goodness and power of God, and that equals hope—no matter what!

There is a reason why waiting for God is so important. It is because while our agenda may have the same bottom line as God’s—which is our final redemption and restoration in the perfection of glory and joy (see Eph. 1:3–10)—our timetables and methods are different. We want it all to happen right now. We want an immediate end to suffering. We want wrong to lose and right to win. We want earthly happiness and physical health and prosperity, and we want it all today. When we don’t get it, we are tempted to question God or to doubt his wisdom or power or even his goodness. And some of us reject him altogether. But God never stumbles, and God is up to *all* good. He’s just working to a different schedule. “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends,” wrote the apostle Peter, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:8–9). And God is using ways and means to accomplish his ends that differ from the ones we would choose.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”

declares the LORD.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

☞—Isaiah 55:8–9

WRITE THIS DOWN

So here’s the picture: troubled Habakkuk metaphorically standing up there on a watchtower like a sentinel in a besieged

city looking for the approach of the relief column. In the New Testament book of Revelation we read about the souls of God's martyrs calling out from under the altar, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" And they are told to wait a little longer (Rev. 6:10–11).

A few months before his death, I interviewed theologian Lewis Smedes for a Words of Hope radio program. We were talking about the problem of suffering and evil—all the usual things: war, sickness, pain, poverty. I asked Smedes how he tried as a Christian to reconcile his faith in God with the untold misery in the world. He replied, "When I pray I no longer ask 'Why?' I ask 'When?' God, when are you going to come and *fix* things?" Some may think that questioning God like that is impertinent, a sign of deficient faith. Not at all. To question God—even to pester God!—indicates a lively, healthy faith. What's deficient is to question him without waiting for an answer. Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, believers expect God to show up before the end of our little play.

In our culture, doubting the existence of absolute truth, especially absolute spiritual truth, has been raised to the status of a new orthodoxy. Such skepticism regarding objective truth is not a recent development in western society. The great nineteenth-century Catholic thinker John Henry Newman described this attitude in his spiritual autobiography, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. "Liberalism believes," wrote Newman,

that truth and falsehood in religion are but matters of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth; that we are not more acceptable to God by believing this than by believing that; that no one is answerable for his opinions; that they are a matter of necessity or accident; that it is enough if we sincerely hold what we profess; that our merit lies in seeking, not in possessing.

This view of truth, so aptly summarized by Newman 150 years ago, has today become the default position of most educated people. There could not be a greater contrast to the outlook of biblical faith. Biblical Christians believe that truth is a matter of conforming to the nature of reality, which is determined by God. Conflicting truth claims cannot all be right anymore than conflicting answers to an arithmetic problem can be. In C. S. Lewis's novel *That Hideous Strength*, one character matter-of-factly observes to another, "I suppose there are two views about everything." "Eh? Two views?" the other man replies. "There are a dozen views about everything until you know the answer. Then there's never more than one."

So here's Habakkuk, standing on his watchtower, waiting for the answer. For the believer, waiting for God is not anything like waiting for Godot. The wait of faith is as different from the wait of skepticism as hope is from despair. Habakkuk waits because he expects God to respond to him eventually. He believes both that there are answers—the right answers—to his questions and that God will reveal them to him. If our hope is that God will never give up on us, our faith means we never give up on him.

And, finally, God does answer Habakkuk.

Then the LORD told me:

"I will give you my message in the form of a vision.

Write it clearly enough to be read at a glance.

At the time I have decided, my words will come true.

You can trust what I say about the future.

It may take a long time, but keep on waiting—
it will happen!

"I, the LORD, refuse to accept anyone who is proud.

Only those who live by faith are acceptable to me."

—Habakkuk 2:2–4 CEV

God not only answers Habakkuk, but through him he speaks to us in our struggles. “Say this loud and clear,” the Lord tells the prophet. “There *is* an answer. Write it plainly so that others can read it—even at a glance.”

And the answer goes like this: At the bottom of everything the universe is not meaningless and chaotic, as it would be if God were not in control. Life is neither a horror nor an absurd comedy, as it would be if there were no God. It isn't what Shakespeare's *Macbeth* once called it—“a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” We are not left alone in our suffering, with nothing to do but weep or shrug our shoulders in resignation. Not at all. Because God is real, and really cares about us, all our sufferings have meaning. Our tears are not wasted; God bottles them up, he records them in his book (Ps. 56:8). And our questions do not meet indifferent silence; they all have answers.

But not always immediate answers. “At the time I have decided,” said the Lord, “my words will come true. You can trust what I say about the future. It may take a long time, but keep on waiting—it will happen!” (v. 3 CEV). God follows his own agenda, in his own way. He will show us the meaning of everything; he'll give us the explanations we're longing for; he'll put to rest all our doubts and give peace to all our troubled thoughts. But in his good time, not ours.

TWO WAYS OF LIVING

Habakkuk 2:4 adds an important clue to the significance of this truth for the way we live: “See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous will live by his faith . . .” This foundational verse—the key to the whole book of Habakkuk (not to mention the whole Bible)—points out that there are two basic ways of approaching life. One is the way of the “puffed up,” or proud, that is, those whose desires are not upright, who worship themselves rather than God. Such

people rely on their own power, their own strength and ability and intelligence. These are the kind of folks Habakkuk alluded to earlier when he described men who sacrifice to their own fishing nets because they think they have made themselves rich (1:16). The “proud,” in the biblical sense of that term, refers to people who believe that they are in control of their own lives, that they can dismiss God and go it alone. When things go well, the proud credit themselves. But when setbacks and reversals come, all they can do is to wait them out with the stoic’s creed: “This too shall pass.” Or, if things become too unbearable, take a quick exit from life. The proud live on their own and acknowledge nothing and no one above them; the rest of the stage is bare.

The other kind of people are those who live by faith in God: “The righteous will live by their faith” (2:4 NRSV).

The fact that life is sometimes painful beyond words and that God’s reasons for allowing it to be so are not yet clear to us presents us with a choice. On the one hand, we can lapse into cynicism. Mark Twain’s mordant wit was a cover for the despair of a man who, because of personal tragedies, had turned against God and lost all hope. “Whoever has lived long enough to find out what life is,” Twain wrote in one of his later works (*Pudd’nhead Wilson*), “knows how deep a debt we owe to Adam, the first great benefactor of our race. He brought death into the world.”

The life of the proud ends in despair. The alternative is to live by faith, that is, to go on trusting in God and hoping in his word. A friend who is a pastor was telling me about a nursing home visit he made recently. He was calling on a woman whose mind had grown feeble, and who could no longer speak after suffering a stroke. She was in a double room, and as he entered my friend noticed a visitor sitting beside the other resident’s bed. He sat down next to his parishioner, held her hand, and talked to her quietly for a while. She struggled to communicate with him, but could not manage any words. At

last, he asked if she would like him to read something to her from the Bible and pray with her. The woman nodded eagerly. As the pastor read, the comforting words of the Psalms filled the room; then they prayed together. And as he prayed, my friend heard the visitor on the other side of the room mutter, “I don’t believe any of that shit.”

Needless to say, it shocked him a bit, as it did me when he told me the story. My friend was taken aback by this weird juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, and he stumbled through the remainder of his prayer. But that moment really opened a door upon ultimate reality. In the end, those two responses are the only options. When faced with the promises of God, either we will turn away with a curse, or embrace them in faith, even if all we can manage is to nod yes.

That is the difference between the “proud” and those who live by faith.

LIVING BY FAITH

But what does it really mean to *live* by faith? It’s one thing to confess our faith, to say yes to the promises of God. But then what; what comes next? The best place to look for the answer to that question is in the lives of the people of God. Among other things, the Bible is a faith journal, showing how faith actually functions in the lives of real people—people, we discover, who are not so very different from us. The biblical “Hall of Fame” for lived-out faith is the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. The writer said there of the Old Testament believers, “These all died in faith, not having received what was promised but having seen it and greeted it from afar . . . Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God” (Heb. 11:13, 16 rsv). The point here is not how they died exactly but rather how they were living when they died. They “were still living by faith when they died” (NIV). They persevered in trusting the Lord right up to the end. They continued faithful

even unto death, whenever and however and wherever death came. Nothing deterred them from walking with God; nothing dissuaded them from believing in God. They stayed the course.

Some claim that faith in God is the secret to getting what you want out of life. If you have enough faith or know how to pray in just the right way, then you can get whatever you desire. You can have everything you are looking for. According to this view, faith is a sort of magic key that unlocks God's treasure chest of blessings.

But that just isn't true. Faith does not mean getting all you want. Biblical faith means trusting God even when you do not get what you want. Every faithful person in the Old Testament was looking forward expectantly to the coming of the promised Savior, the Messiah. It was the one thing each of them wanted more than anything else, and yet every one of them died without having received the promise. Still they went on looking, they went on hoping, they went on believing, they went on working, obeying, serving and suffering. They did not "weaken in faith" (Rom. 4:19 NRSV) or turn back from following the Lord, even when the hoped-for blessing failed to arrive.

Hebrews 11 says that men and women of faith saw the things God promised "and welcomed them from a distance" (v. 13 NIV). They "greeted [what was promised] from afar" (RSV). Just as living by faith means continuing to the very end to look forward to the things God has promised you even if you don't receive them, so it also means continuing to the very end to trust and obey God even when he seems far away.

I came across a striking quotation recently: "Adversity introduces a man to himself." That's true for believers, too. Adversity introduces us to ourselves. Adversity reveals the quality of our faith. It's not so hard to believe in God when he seems very real to you and feels very close, when your prayers are being wonderfully answered and you can see continual

evidence of God's blessing and presence in your life. But it takes great faith to believe in God and to go on serving God when he feels far away, when your prayers go unheard and unheeded (or so it seems), and when it looks for all the world as though the skeptics are right after all and the idea that there is a loving heavenly Father watching over you and caring for you is just a fantasy.

So the crucial issue is this: How do you respond to adversity? What do you reveal yourself to be, proud or humble, cynical or faithful? Pretty much everything that happens to you every day is God's way of allowing you to answer that question. You prove whether you are a person of faith especially by the way you react under the pressure of suffering. It is only when you are faced with circumstances that could lead you to question God that you are in a position to demonstrate whether or not you will wait for God in faith—or just give up. The promise is that if you *don't* give up, if you go on trusting God to the end, you will live.

This is the message of Habakkuk 2:4. Remember the opening verse of the book: "The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet *received*." Here is the characteristic assumption of all the prophetic literature, namely, that the message of the prophet is actually the word of the Lord. The idea that the righteous have to humble themselves in the face of life's mysteries and tragedies and go on living by trusting God is not Habakkuk's unique personal perspective on the problem of suffering. It is a revelation from God himself of the way things really are.

Several years ago I was listening to a discussion during a Words of Hope board meeting. One of our trustees, a nationally renowned business leader who was also a wise and valued personal mentor, paused to make a point. "I learned many years ago that at some point everyone has to answer for him- or herself this basic question: 'Is the Bible true?'" Three hundred years ago a Dutch pastor named Wilhelmus à Brakel

wrote this advice to those who were seeking spiritual light in their darkness.

Refrain from exerting yourself to have views of lofty matters, but cling humbly to the Word of God. Whenever you read it, and whenever a passage of scripture occurs to you, then think: "This is the truth." If it is a promise, esteem it as such, and do not lift your heart above that Word . . . If there is an exhortation to believe or to practice another virtue, then think: "This is my rule of conduct, and according to this I wish to walk in all simplicity."

Habbakuk's announcement that the righteous will live by faith is God's own truth; believe it! This trumpet call will be amplified in the New Testament into a universal offer of salvation.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean to “wait for the LORD”?
2. Why is waiting for God so important?
3. Have there been situations in your life when you were tempted to give up on getting an answer from God? What were the circumstances? What was the outcome?
4. Read Habakkuk 2, verse 4. Describe the two kinds of people referenced in this verse. How are their approaches to life different? What are the end results of each approach to life?
5. Name some of your favorite Bible “greats” who lived by faith. (See Hebrews 11.)
6. Can you name some contemporary examples of people you know who live by faith? What characteristics of their lives convince you it is so? How do they react to adversity?

Standing on the Ramparts

Chapter Four

JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

If you asked the apostle Paul what was the most important verse in the Bible, he probably would have answered, “The righteous will live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4).

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

☞ Romans 1:16–17

SO WHAT EXACTLY *does* the New Testament make of Habakkuk 2, verse 4?

In Paul’s understanding, this basic insight about faith that God gave to Habakkuk can be read in two ways. First of all, the righteous person will live because of his or her faith. The proud are going to disappear. They won’t endure. But the righteous who are living by faith—who go on trusting God even when they don’t understand what he’s doing—they will *live* forever. Through faith, eternal life is theirs: “The righteous *will live* by his faith” (emphasis added).

But it also works the other way around because the reverse is equally true: Those who live by faith *are righteous*. It is just this attitude of faith, this willingness to believe in God when there is little else to go by, that makes us acceptable to God, even when the evidence might seem to be against him. God is pleased to count as righteous those who trust in him. This message about the way of salvation, that is, about a way of being counted as righteous *before* God on the basis of faith *in* God, constitutes the core of the Christian gospel. It is what we mean by the theological expression, “justification by faith.”

MANY WAYS, ONE GOD

While traveling a couple of years ago on a train in India, I found myself engaged in conversation with a twelve-year-old Hindu boy. Bakshar was friendly, lively and curious—and he just wouldn't quit! After telling me all about himself and peppering me with questions about myself—who was I, where was I from, where was I staying, where was I going, how did I like India—he finally got around to my occupation. What sort of work did I do? I thought about how I could answer that in a way Bakshar could understand. “I'm a teacher,” I told him; “I teach Christianity.” “Ah,” interjected a man sitting nearby who had been listening in, “many religions, only one God; many different ways to God!”

That isn't just his opinion. It's the majority view of the human race. A remarkable number of people believe that all religions are pretty much the same and say basically similar things, adjusted for cultural and historical differences. These same people also think that any religion can provide a valid connection to God. Recently, I happened to catch part of a Phil Donahue talk show on television. The question the various guests were discussing—or, to put it more accurately, shouting at each other over—was this: “Is Jesus Christ the only way of salvation?” One of the panelists was an evangelical

Christian, who said in a polite and reasoned way, “Well, yes, actually. He is.” At which point the host began jumping up and down and yelling, “You can’t make that claim! You don’t have enough information!” But if the Bible is true, we *do* have enough information.

TWO DIFFERENT WAYS

According to the Bible, there really are only two ways of looking at salvation. One is the way of *religion*, and the other is the way of the *gospel*. The Bible—which is widely believed to be a religious textbook—is actually surprisingly critical of religion. The way religion understands salvation is neatly summed up in one of America’s favorite texts: “God helps those who help themselves.” We love this quote because it appeals to our sense of self-reliance, our famous “can-do” spirit. But this attitude is also consistent with the religious mindset wherever that is found, west or east. Religion teaches that it’s up to us to do what is required—with a little help from God, of course.

But “God helps those who help themselves” is not a biblical text. What the Bible says, in fact, is just the opposite. Listen to this statement from Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Christ died for the ungodly . . . While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6, 8). Religion says, “God saves the righteous.” The gospel says, “God saves the unrighteous.” “Christ died for the ungodly.” God helps those who *can’t* help themselves.

When I contrast the way of religion with the way of the gospel, please don’t think I’m only talking about non-Christian religions. People born and raised in the Christian tradition are just as capable as anyone else of using religion to obscure the gospel and substitute for it a program of salvation by human effort. One person who discovered this first-hand was Martin Luther. As a young man Luther had set out on a spiritual quest to find forgiveness for his sins. The church of his

day said that if salvation was his concern, the best thing he could do was to become a monk. So young Martin headed off to a monastery and became not only a monk but eventually a priest and a doctor of theology as well. He lived under the most rigorous discipline, torturing himself spiritually and physically in an effort to do penance for all his sins as the church prescribed. But he found no peace. His righteousness never seemed to be enough. He did not experience forgiveness.

Exhausted by his struggle to attain salvation, Luther gradually began to realize that the biblical gospel was drastically different from the religion he had been attempting to practice in the monastery. He was especially drawn to a verse from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans: "For in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:17). As Luther wrestled to understand this statement, the light of evangelical truth dawned on him. The righteousness that saves us does not come from the attempts to do good that we offer *to* God. No! Salvation depends upon having a different righteousness altogether: one coming *from* God and supplied to us in place of our own righteousness, to be claimed by faith alone. This gospel of a "justification by faith" became Luther's watchword; his preaching and teaching of it was the spark that set off the correcting movement in the church known as the Reformation.

PAUL'S FAVORITE TEXT

Fifteen hundred years before Luther, the apostle Paul had made a similar experiential discovery. For him, the basic principle of the gospel was best expressed in Habakkuk 2:4, a verse he loved to quote: "The righteous will live by faith" (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:17). The gospel, as Paul explained to the Christians in Rome, is the good news about Jesus' death for sin and resurrection to new life lived in and for God. This gospel is

God's power for salvation to all who believe it and put their faith in Christ. That is because in the gospel we discover the secret of being made forever right with God by means of faith alone. And this wasn't just his own idea, Paul added; this is what Scripture itself teaches, for as Habakkuk 2:4 testifies: "the righteous will live by his faith."

The truth that is summarized in the expression "justification by faith" is not just an abstract theological principle. It is a radical, life-overturning, all-transforming reality. In his most intimate letter, the letter to the Philippians, Paul offers a very personal glimpse into his own life history. He describes his ethnic and religious background: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel . . . a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil. 3:5–6). Paul's wasn't the usual testimony that we have come to expect from a convert to Christianity. No drug addiction, no prison term, no godless, downward spiral of destructive behavior suddenly stopped and reversed when he came to the Lord. Paul's conversion story wasn't like that at all. His life before he met Jesus Christ was zealously religious and scrupulously virtuous. The apostle Paul wasn't an example of humanity at its worst, but of humanity at its best!

The pre-Christian Paul was righteous, both outwardly (as far as others could see), and inwardly (as far as he knew himself). Listening to him describe himself, one gets the impression of a privileged man enjoying great success in his chosen field and quite happy with himself as a result. Paul lists a long series of things that explain his pride. The blood of Abraham flowed pure in his veins. He had been born and raised orthodox; he had the very best spiritual pedigree. But Paul did not merely rest on the privileges that were his by birth. He also cultivated his natural advantages by active commitment to the religious life. Paul kept all the rules. He went to all the right schools, he joined the right party, and he was noticed by the

right people. He became a Pharisee, the most prestigious religious group because it was the strictest. And then he became a zealous persecutor of the new sect of Christians to prove his devotion to the law of God. Even among the Pharisees Paul's reputation for orthodoxy and piety was great. Finally, the apostle sums it all up this way: "As far as keeping the Law is concerned, I kept it perfectly"—or so it seemed to him at the time. Luther once remarked that if anyone could ever have been saved by being a good monk, it was he. Paul's practice of religion was just like that. If striving to be devout and zealous for God is what it takes to please God, Paul was a clear winner.

But there came a moment when Paul's eyes were opened—literally—by a vision of the risen Jesus Christ. Paul came to reevaluate his whole life as a result of that encounter. Everything he formerly had valued and prided himself upon he now saw as worthless. His vaunted self-righteousness crumbled into nothingness. It was truly a moment of reckoning, of summing up. Paul added up all his human pluses: his birth and background and upbringing, his zeal and morality and righteousness. What he found was that all these things totaled less than zero. "Whatever was to my profit," he wrote, "I now consider loss for the sake of Christ . . . for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . ." (Phil. 3:7–8).

How can this be? Are all our attempts at pleasing God really worthless? Is every good deed just wasted effort as far as getting right with God is concerned? Is religion merely rubbish? With respect to justification, the answer is yes! The trouble is that whatever we do on our own is only *relatively* good. And God doesn't grant salvation on the basis of our giving religion a shot or making a pretty good effort at doing what's right. God is perfect goodness. Only the perfectly good can ever hope to merit God's approval. So what are less-than-perfect people to do?

Well, here's the answer, and it is "good news," *evangel*,

“gospel.” We can make a trade. A wonderful exchange is offered to us in Jesus Christ. We can give up our own poor righteousness, our performance-based semi-goodness, for a kind of righteousness that isn’t ours by nature but is credited to us by God when we put our trust in Christ. Here’s how Paul explains why he was willing to consider everything in his past as so much rubbish: “In order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:9 RSV).

There are only two options. Either you try to do it on your own, by yourself, through your own virtuous performance of religious acts and charitable deeds, or you admit your failure and cast yourself upon God’s grace. Paul surrendered his own proud religion-produced, self-defined righteousness as so much garbage, and he exchanged it for Christ’s perfect righteousness—a righteousness that is offered to anyone who puts his or her faith in the Lord Jesus. The apostle made that trade, and he never regretted it, no matter what it cost him in human terms. Because, as Habakkuk says, *the one who through faith is righteous will live*.

GOOD NEWS FOR THE TERMINALLY UNRIGHTEOUS

Does that sound like good news to you? It certainly does to me. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I’ve got what it takes to save myself. After fifty years of on-again, off-again effort, I don’t see many signs of substantial moral progress in myself, on my own. I have come to the conclusion that I’m never going to make myself righteous in God’s eyes; in fact, I’m convinced that in myself I am terminally *unrighteous*.

One of the fondest fantasies of the secular worldview is that we are gradually progressing toward human perfection. Today the materialists’ hope is better yet: that we will soon be able to give evolution a kick forward and literally perfect ourselves

through scientific and technological achievements. The latest suggestion for the self-salvation of the human race seems to be genetic engineering. Great things are promised from this new knowledge: the eradication of disease, reversal of the aging process, the ability to produce “designer children,” even to make a clone of yourself and cache the body somewhere as a source of spare parts. And eventually? Eternal life—not with God in some heaven but by ourselves right here and now on this earth. O brave new world! But though scientists may have mapped the human genome, there’s no indication that they understand human nature or that they can do anything about human sin. They haven’t been able to discover a righteousness gene.

The bad news is really a double whammy: First, we can never save ourselves, and second, we will never change our basic nature. But the good news—the gospel of grace—is that *God can* save us through Jesus Christ, and *God will* change us by transforming our nature, conforming us to the likeness of Jesus Christ. That is the real, authentic gospel. Anything else is a counterfeit. And everything depends on our believing it. Why? Because “The righteous will live *by faith*.”

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. *“If you asked the apostle Paul what was the most important verse in the Bible, he probably would have answered, “The righteous will live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4)”* (p. 53).
What do you understand that verse to mean?
2. What differences do you see in the way of religion and the way of the gospel? What examples do you see of each in the world today?
3. What aspects of Paul’s life history made him qualified to explain “justification by faith” to the Christians in Rome?
4. What was the pivotal point of change in Paul’s attitude?
5. What has justification meant to you? How does it change the way you live?

Chapter Five

WOE TO THE WORLD!

When we hear the word prophecy we think predictions. Foretelling the future is an important element in biblical prophecy, but that future isn't always a pleasant prospect.

“Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying,

“‘Woe to him who piles up stolen goods
and makes himself wealthy by extortion!
How long must this go on?’

Will not your debtors suddenly arise?
Will they not wake up and make you tremble?
Then you will become their victim.

Because you have plundered many nations,
the peoples who are left will plunder you.

For you have shed man's blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in
them.

“Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain
to set his nest on high,
to escape the clutches of ruin!

WHY DOESN'T GOD ACT MORE LIKE GOD?

You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.
The stones of the wall will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.

“Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed
and establishes a town by crime!
Has not the LORD Almighty determined
that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire,
that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?
For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory
of the LORD,
as the waters cover the sea.

“Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors,
pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk,
so that he can gaze on their naked bodies.
You will be filled with shame instead of glory.
Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed!
The cup from the LORD’s right hand is coming around to
you,
and disgrace will cover your glory.
The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm
you,
and your destruction of animals will terrify you.
For you have shed man’s blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in
them.

“Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
Or an image that teaches lies?
For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.
Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’
Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’
Can it give guidance?

It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it.”

☞ Habakkuk 2:6–19

A CERTAIN IMAGE comes to mind upon hearing the words “Old Testament prophet.” One thinks of a tall, gaunt figure with a long beard and flowing robes. His expression is stern, and when he speaks, thunder rumbles and lightning flashes. His message is doom, his words pronounce judgment. In fact, when something spectacularly bad happens in the world, we sometimes describe it as “a disaster of biblical proportions.” That’s how strongly we identify the Bible—at least its prophetic sections—with apocalyptic doom.

As with most caricatures, there is some truth underlying this one. The biblical writers, particularly the Old Testament prophets, say a lot about the coming of judgment. Prophecy, to most of us, suggests prediction, foretelling the future. And the future foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament for the people of Israel (and many others nations as well) was usually not a pleasant one. It included war, siege, disease, famine and finally conquest by foreign superpowers and exile in a far-away foreign country—for those who weren’t exterminated, that is. Israel’s prophets spoke in graphic language and vivid imagery of approaching suffering, devastation and death.

Of course, that’s not all they spoke of. Almost all the prophecies held out hope as well—for those who repented. This hope looked for a future restoration by God’s grace following the judgment, when the exile would be reversed and a remnant of the people would be returned. Then the knowledge of the Lord would fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, and the peaceable kingdom—the kingdom of *shalom* (“peace”) where lions would lie down with lambs and children would put their hands in the viper’s den—would be established on the earth.

SPEAKING OF JUDGMENT

So it is tempting, when reading the Bible, to skip over the unpleasant Old Testament passages about judgment and just focus on the hopeful parts. Or even to skip the Prophets altogether, strange books that they are, and limit our Bible reading to a few familiar Psalms and comforting passages from the Gospels. As a preacher, I can think of a lot of reasons why I would rather not talk about judgment. For one thing, it's a very unpleasant subject. For another, it is as unpopular as it is unpleasant. The idea of judgment runs directly contrary to the dominant mood of our culture. Many today don't accept the notion of personal accountability for their actions. If something goes wrong, we want someone else to blame. As for the idea that our sin calls forth punishment, or that our suffering could be a temporal form of judgment, of God disciplining us, that seems outlandish. The typical American's response to personal suffering is to look for somebody to sue—preferably a corporation or insurance company with deep pockets. As if all that were not enough to deter any talk of judgment, there is also the fact that such messages play to the common stereotypes both of preachers (“Turn or burn . . . here's some more fire and brimstone!”) and of God (“He's gonna get ya! It's ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ time!”)

Of course, once again there's some truth to the stereotypes. God *is* angry about sin. If we attempt to strip God of his wrath, that is, his righteous abhorrence and blazing rejection of sin and evil, we trivialize him and turn him into a tame creature of our own imagination. And some preachers *do* speak about judgment in inappropriate ways. They talk about it with relish, almost gloating over the prospect of hellfire, and angrily denounce “sinners” as if that were some alien category of humans, as if judgment applied only to them and not all of us, preacher and congregation alike.

So it's easy to see why many thoughtful people just avoid

the subject altogether. In fact, I can only think of one good reason to talk about judgment at all: because the Bible does. It would have been hard for me, in good conscience, to write about the message of Habakkuk and skip the one third of the book (most of chapter 2) that describes the prospect of God's judgment upon the sins of the wicked.

But there is a much more positive reason for talking about judgment as well. Judgment is not just about the negative work of destroying evil and punishing sin. The judgment of God is a function of his determination to establish justice once and for all, to vindicate all that is good, true and beautiful. "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" asked Abraham long ago? (Gen. 18:25) The answer most emphatically is yes! And God's judgment upon all that is wrong will prove it once and for all.

Think for a moment about how crucial this insight into God's character is. God is righteous. His intent is to expose and punish evil in order to make all things well. There is no inherent reason why that has to be so. The ultimate power in the universe could be evil, or capricious, or just plain indifferent to moral concerns. In fact, the deities of the ancient world, the Greek and Canaanite and Egyptian gods and goddesses, were exactly like that. But the true God, the God who revealed himself through Israel, is none of those things. He is good. He is upright. He is moral.

WOE TO THE WORLD

The corollary of a moral God is a God who executes judgment upon human sin. And that inevitably means trouble for human sinners. God's judgment upon the sins of the world necessarily involves punitive action toward the particular people who are guilty of them. The temptation is to soften the idea of judgment by thinking of it as some sort of rectifying move taken by God against abstractions called sin or evil.

Judgment is not that; or if it is, it is also more. Sin may be an abstract principle (at times the New Testament almost personifies it). But *sins* are specific evil deeds done by specific people. And, as the prophets make abundantly clear, God's promised judgment is his announced intention of visiting retribution upon all those who are guilty of such things. Judgment is not a kind of spiritual surgery in which God uses anesthesia so as to remove the cancer of sin without causing undue discomfort to the patient. We may well believe, as the saying goes, that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. But judging the sin inevitably entails pain for the sinner too. In the biblical view, divine judgment in this world involves the personal punishment of the guilty by means of physical and temporal suffering visited upon them by a righteous God. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord" (Rom. 12:18, quoting Deut. 32:35). "If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish . . . because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God" (Deut. 8:19–20). And because God does not always choose to express his judgment fully in this world (see Ps. 73:1–15), its ultimate expression is reserved for the world to come (see Ps. 73:16–22). In the end, judgment means eternal punishment for the unrepentant.

We love to sing "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." But in connection with the Lord's coming, the Old Testament is more likely to say, "Woe to the world." Habakkuk's second chapter, for example, consists mostly of a series of "woes"—warnings about approaching disasters in store for a wide variety of wrongdoers. The biblical exclamation translated here as "Woe to . . ." means something like "Alas for . . ." It is used to express the pitiable condition of those who, whether they realize it or not, are about to be overwhelmed by disaster. *Woe* is not a very appealing word with which to start out a message. When is the last time you heard a sermon that began, "Woe to you . . . ?" But the Bible uses the word frequently, especially

when it talks about the future. The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, is full of woes. And Jesus also employed the word. In fact, there is a chapter in the Gospels (Matt. 23) that's very similar to Habakkuk 2. It consists of a string of woes pronounced by Jesus against the religious leaders of his day. Running through this chapter is the somber refrain: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" Over and over this terrible judgment is pronounced upon the proud and spiritually blind leaders of Israel. That such language could come from the lips of Jesus Christ ought to make anyone think long and hard before dismissing the reality of judgment, both in this world and the world to come.

The prophet Habakkuk is equally blunt. He pronounces God's sentence of doom upon wicked people in a series of five woes. The first woe is a condemnation of thieves and robbers, those who steal from or cheat others in order to enrich themselves. God says to them in effect: It's payback time. "You robbed cities and nations . . . Now [others] will be as cruel to you" (Hab. 2:8 CEV). One of God's common forms of judgment in this world is to cause people to experience the same kind of things they've done to others. Those who live by the sword die by the sword is how Jesus expressed it. Or as we like to say nowadays, "What goes around comes around."

The second woe is pronounced against rich and powerful people who have exploited and taken advantage of those who are weaker:

You're doomed! You made your family rich at the expense
of others.

You even said to yourself, "I'm above the law."

But you will bring shame on your family
and ruin to yourself for what you did to others.

☞ Habakkuk 2:9-10 CEV

Think, for example, of a drug lord or a greedy business owner

who mistreats his employees. Such people think their wealth and power allow them to do anything they want. They build huge and lavish houses and put walls around them and hire guards and install sophisticated security systems, but those things can't keep out the judgment of a righteous God. "The very stones and wood in your home will testify against you," said the prophet (v. 11 CEV). (Something we might want to bear in mind when contemplating the next home improvement project.)

The third kind of people who are doomed are those who resort to violence to achieve their ambitions, men who will hurt or even kill others to get what they want. "Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed" (v. 12a). They may get things that way but God says they won't be allowed to keep them, for he will take away all ill-gotten gains.

Then comes a woe pronounced on a different type of abuser, one who takes advantage of others, not economically, but physically.

"Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors . . .
 till they are drunk,
 so that he can gaze on their naked bodies.
 You will be filled with shame . . .
 The cup from the LORD's right hand is coming around to
 you . . ."

☞ Verses 15–16

Here Habakkuk is talking about people who seduce and corrupt the innocent, or who prey upon the weaknesses of others and turn them to their own profit or advantage. Once again, his words of judgment have an amazingly contemporary ring to them. Think, for example, of the purveyors of filthy and violent entertainment in our own society. Think of modern technology such as computers and the Internet, supposed wonderful tools for the sharing of knowledge and information,

but often used for things like the dissemination of child pornography. God's judgment is upon those who abuse and exploit their neighbors. And it also includes those who abuse and pollute the earth or ravage the environment.

You destroyed trees and animals . . .
you were ruthless to towns and people everywhere.
Now you will be terrorized.

~ Verse 17 CEV

The fifth and final woe God pronounces upon the sin of idolatry.

“Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’
Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
[but] there is no breath in it.”

~ Verse 19

All the other sins in Habakkuk's list have a very modern ring to them. They are social sins. They are sins that the rich and the powerful perpetrate against the poor and defenseless. Most of these sins involve activities that are clearly unjust. So we can understand God's judgment because these sins are all about hurting people. It is a very contemporary-sounding catalogue of evil; even ecology is mentioned. Anyone with a conscience can agree that the kinds of things mentioned in Habakkuk's list of woes are very bad and deserve some kind of punishment, particularly if the punishment means receiving exactly what the guilty party has inflicted on others. So when a murderous terrorist is gunned down, or when a thief loses all his money, or when a corrupt tyrant is overthrown and imprisoned, we can understand and appreciate that sort of justice.

But when it comes to idolatry, many people can't see why

this is such a serious sin. After all, an idol in the literal sense—an object of wood or stone that people bow down before and worship—is something most of us see only in museums or maybe on a trip to some exotic country. Idolatry in this form simply isn't part of our daily experience. But we forget that what idolatry really involves is putting something ahead of God in your life. Any time you love some thing or some one more than you love God, you have created an idol. Idolatry means to worship part of the creation instead of the Creator (Rom. 1:21–23).

This is one reason why it is the most serious sin of all. Other sins are committed against things (or people) God has made, but idolatry is a sin against the Maker himself. More than that, every other sin stems from this fundamental sin of dethroning our Creator in favor of some self-chosen substitute. What you worship determines what you do. People who worship gods of their own making tend to develop morals of their own choosing.

WHAT ABOUT US?

So how does all of this apply to us? Commentaries on the book of Habakkuk point out that the catalogue of woes in chapter 2 is primarily directed at the Babylonians. Babylon is the empire that “gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples” (v. 5). The woes that follow constitute a “taunt song” aimed at the conquerors by their victims. So part of the Lord’s answer to Habakkuk’s questions about the injustice of using Babylon to judge Judah is to say, in effect, “Just wait and see. Their day of reckoning is coming too.” God assures the prophet that *all* sin will be punished; no one, no matter how powerful, is exempt from the demands of justice. “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against *all* ungodliness and wickedness” (Rom. 1:18 NRSV, emphasis added)—against the sins of pagans and believers alike!

This truth suggests that one way we might profit from Scripture's judgment pronouncements is to take them as warnings addressed first to ourselves. I said in an earlier chapter that we cannot always know just what God's purpose is in any particular calamity or tragedy that occurs. The story of Job ought to warn us against drawing the automatic conclusion that suffering equals judgment. But as Habakkuk's woes make clear, sinful actions will eventually draw down disaster upon those who practice them. It is easy to read about God's impending wrath and dismiss it, assuming these woes must be directed at other kinds of (exceptionally wicked) people. After all, you and I aren't Babylonians. We aren't gangsters or thieves or drug lords. We aren't rich. We don't resort to violence. We're not exploiting the poor. We don't own Chinese sweat shops or sneaker factories in Vietnam. We're not operating pornographic internet websites or bowing down before the images of Sumerian fertility gods.

But before we dismiss the thought of God's judgment and move on to more upbeat parts of Scripture, perhaps it would be good for us to dig a little deeper and reflect on some of the ways we may be involved in many of these very sins. We need to ask with Peter, "Lord, are you telling this . . . to us, or to others?" (Lk. 12:41).

Let's start with the question of wealth. Personal wealth, of course, is always relative; how rich you think you are depends on whether you are looking up or down. When I think about how wealthy I am, I tend to compare myself to the millionaires living on the mansion-lined streets of the neighborhood a few miles to the north of my house rather than to the people who live in the inner-city neighborhood a few miles to the west. So how rich is rich? According to the latest data provided by the United States Census Bureau, the 2011 poverty threshold for a family of four is around \$22,000. In 2009 almost 44 million people in the U.S.—including one of every five children—was living below that threshold. But that's just America. If we

widen our comparative horizon to take in the rest of the world, the numbers become staggering. According to the most recent edition of theologian Ron Sider's influential book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, a majority of the world's population is living on the equivalent of less than two dollars per day, and a huge number (1.3 billion people) are living on only a dollar a day. So if your family's gross household is much above \$22,000 you are not poor in the United States, no matter what it feels like at the end of the month. And with respect to the rest of the world, you are very, *very* rich. Think about that when you're deciding how much money to give away this year versus how much you are going to spend on re-decorating.

Or consider the sins of violence. Perhaps we are not individually guilty of such behavior, but what about the society we live in? What about the institutions of which we are a part? What does it mean for us to be living in the richest and most powerful country in the world? Our country can and does invade and conquer weaker countries. We justify our actions by saying that we are punishing terrorists, or preempting further attacks, or eliminating weapons of mass destruction, or overthrowing brutal dictatorships. And no doubt we are doing some of those things. But God's warning woe ought to at least make us look long and hard at our actions and engage in serious debate about our motives. I'm a Calvinist. We Calvinists tend to be mistrustful, because we know that depravity is total, and sin is everywhere. And the people we most mistrust are ourselves. So we're big on continual self-examination, and the need for ongoing critical assessment of both ourselves and our own institutions. I am willing to believe that even the best institutions—my church, my school, my community, and my country—are capable of evil and liable to judgment, because I know that I am, too.

Another of Habakkuk's woes related to the exploitation of the poor. If sins of violence seem to be far from us, it is easier

to see how you and I might be caught up in guilt for the mistreatment of the poor. Even if you don't run a notoriously exploitive business, you may very well own stock in a corporation that does. And you almost certainly purchase goods and products made by people who are being unfairly taken advantage of in their work. Are you a coffee drinker? (I happen to be enjoying a cup as I'm writing these words.) Most of the world's coffee is produced by multi-national corporations that pay the poor farmers who grow it around forty to fifty cents a pound for it. That is not enough for the farmers to live on, so they have to over-produce, which only makes the price drop even lower. One response to this particular instance of exploitation has been the establishment of a more direct link between the coffee grower and the coffee drinker through what is called "Fair Trade Coffee." Organizations of fair trade certifiers are guaranteeing the farmers a living wage for their crop (currently a price of \$1.26 per pound of beans). You can buy coffee labeled "Fair Trade Certified" online or at selected grocery stores and even at your local Starbucks. Of course, you pay a little more, but you also know that the grower is being treated fairly. Is this a tiny, insignificant act? Tiny, yes. But maybe not so insignificant, in light of God's judgment.

Finally, think about the sin of idolatry. Idols today come in many shapes—and in no shape at all. Luther said that whatever you give your heart to is your god. A flag can be an idol. A sports team can be an idol. (In counseling a couple some years ago it quickly became apparent to me that their real religion was the Chicago Blackhawks!) A house can be an idol. A gossip magazine can be an idol. An academic degree can be an idol. An investment portfolio can be an idol. Your refrigerator can be your god. Your wonderful spouse, your terrific children, your beautiful grandkids, can be your god. One of John Coltrane's greatest recordings is called "A Love Supreme." You can only have one of those. If it's God, that's good. If it is anything else, that is woe.

THE GOOD NEWS OF JUDGMENT

Do Habakkuk's ancient words of woe apply to our contemporary society? Does God still intend judgment for the sins of the world? Is he yet today a God of wrath and vengeance?

The answer, thankfully, is yes. I say "thankfully" because the message of God's impending judgment is actually good news for those who hear it and respond appropriately. Let me try to convince you of this.

One of the most remarkable chapters in the Bible is 2 Samuel 11, which tells the story of King David's adultery with Bathsheba and its immediate aftermath. The chapter reads like a modern screenplay. It's got everything: a handsome and heroic leading man, a beautiful woman, smoldering passion, intrigue and suspense to go along with the sex, battlefield action, and finally, betrayal and murder. David had first noticed Bathsheba when her husband Uriah, one of David's leading soldiers, was off fighting for king and country. Their affair resulted in Bathsheba becoming pregnant. With Uriah away at the front, the timing of the baby's birth would prove to be embarrassing. So David ordered that Uriah be sent home on leave, and after wining and dining him on the pretext of hearing his report on the progress of the war, David sent Uriah home to his wife's bed, assuming he would do what soldiers visiting their beautiful wives while on leave tend to do. And that would solve the problem. Only Uriah didn't cooperate. His sense of duty to his comrades in the field made him refuse to go home. David—we can imagine his frustration—had to think of something else. He wrote an order directing his general in the field to make sure that Uriah was killed in action in the next skirmish with the enemy and then, sealing the letter, gave it to Uriah himself to deliver to his commanding officer. Nice touch, that. It's worthy of the Godfather himself. By the end of the chapter everything seems to have been resolved.

Uriah is out of the way, the war is going well, and David has taken Bathsheba into the palace as his own wife.

Except for one thing. The single most important sentence in the whole story is the very last one: “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD” (2 Sam. 11:27). And because of that nothing has been resolved yet, nor will it be until God has exposed David’s sin and punished him for it. To understand what a good thing the reality of God’s justice is, we need only imagine its absence. Picture a world where the Bathshebas are exploited and the Uriahs murdered—and the Davids get away scot-free. Think what life would be like if there were no justice, either now or in eternity. The innocent would suffer and no one would care; often, no one would even know. The guilty would profit, realizing that crime *does* pay. The rich and powerful would take what they wanted, and nothing would ever stand in their way. The poor would be mistreated and their oppressors would prosper, forever and ever. Righteousness would be laughed at. The poet’s lament would be accurate: “Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne” (James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis*). Worst of all would be the fact that all the evil deeds done in secret would never come to the light of day, would never awaken any cry for justice.

But that’s not how it is in God’s world, because the horrible things we do to each other displease him. So here are three reasons to be thankful for the prophetic message of woe to the world.

First, judgment is God’s unwavering reaction toward sin and evil. Nothing has changed about the character of God. He feels exactly the same way about human rights abuses and idolatry today as he did when he pronounced woe through his servants the prophets. God may express his judgment within history through natural disasters or calamitous reversals, as he did with the people of Israel and has continued to do throughout history. But God *will* express his judgment fully and finally

at the end of history when the Lord Jesus Christ comes again “to judge the living and the dead.” And no one is exempt from that tribunal. Wealth, power and position are no shield from the wrath of the God before whom all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hid (Heb. 4:12–13). As the old spiritual says, when the Lord returns to judge the earth, “There’s no hidin’ place down there.”

Second, judgment is not God’s final word to the world. There will come a time in every life, and for the world itself, when the door of salvation will be shut and it will be too late to enter (Matt. 25:10–13). But that time has not yet come for any of us. A biblical pronouncement of approaching doom is always implicitly an invitation to repent. (Recall Jonah’s message to the people of Ninevah and their response.) So the warnings of coming judgment are really an expression of God’s mercy, intended to alert us before it is too late so that we may turn away from sin and seek his face. This is why the Bible is so insistent on the need for us to respond to God’s word right now, without delay: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Ps. 95:7–8, cf. Isa. 55:6–7). A continual awareness of the holiness and justice of God will make us treasure all the more the gospel of God’s grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. Remember, the person who through faith is righteous will live! “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 5:1; 8:1 *NRSV*).

Third, God’s determination to judge all sin and overthrow all evil is a function of his unswerving commitment to establish righteousness throughout the world. The kind of world we live in now isn’t going to last. This world—where God is insulted, where people’s dignity and rights are abused (which amounts to the same thing), where lying and cheating are commonplace, where violence and bloodshed stain our streets, where moral and physical filth blot every landscape—this is

not the world as God wants it to be. This is not the world as God will make it to be. He will not put up with evil forever. Or even for very much longer. Judgment is coming. Justice will be done. Secret crimes will be revealed. Wrongs will be righted. Evildoers will be punished. And righteousness, truth, beauty, and peace will be established.

Now whether or not that sounds like good news depends to a great extent on whether you are one of the exploiters or one of the exploited. If you read Habakkuk and find yourself on the wrong side of the woes, it would be a very good idea to turn away from sin right now and look for the mercy of God.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. When you hear the word *prophecy*, what comes to mind?
2. Read Habakkuk 2, verses 6-19. What is your overall impression of the future described in these verses?
3. Why is the subject of judgment so unpopular in our culture?
4. What is the “one good reason to talk about judgment” (p. 67)?
5. What is a biblical view of judgment?
6. Think about the five woes described by Habakkuk. Do you see examples of these woes in the world today? In your own life?
7. What would the world be like without God's justice?

Woe to the World!

Chapter Six

THE COMING FLOOD

There is a world-wide flood coming someday soon, but it won't be destructive. Rather it will be a flood of the knowledge and glory of God.

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,
as the waters cover the sea.”

—Habakkuk 2:14

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—
and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the
earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

☞—Isaiah 11:1–9

IN *BEYOND TRAGEDY*, Reinhold Niebuhr explained the difference between human optimism about the future and Christian faith that includes the hope of a future salvation.

Ultimate confidence in the goodness of life cannot rest upon confidence in the goodness of man. If that is where it rests, it is an optimism which will suffer ultimate disillusionment. Romanticism will be transmuted into cynicism, as it always has been in the world's history. The faith of a Christian is something quite different from this optimism. It is trust in God, in a good God who created a good world, though the world is not now good; in a good God, powerful and good enough finally to destroy the evil that men do and redeem them of their sins. This kind of faith is not optimism. It does not, in fact, arise until optimism breaks down and men cease to trust in themselves that they are righteous.

One of the reasons it is important for us to listen to the message of judgment in God's Word is that it helps to break down the naive optimism that is based on belief in the goodness and perfectibility of human nature. The Bible serves up a healthy plateful of realism to us on that question. But the alternative to optimism need not be cynical pessimism. Rather, it is biblical hope in the future salvation of the world by the power of God.

THE WORLD TO COME

The news that God is going to judge the world is bad news for evildoers. But it is good news for all who hate their sins and pray to be delivered from them. It is good news for everyone who loves what is right and longs to see goodness, beauty and truth reestablished on earth. Why? Because just as surely as the good and powerful God in whom we trust will "destroy the evil that men do and redeem them of their sins," so he will also remake the world and restore its harmony and peace. The Bible speaks clearly of a new order of things, of new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13). Jesus taught us to pray for God's kingdom to come here on earth: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Habakkuk tells us that one day our prayers are going to be answered. Once, long ago in the days of Noah, God sent a great flood to cover the earth in judgment. But some day there will be a different kind of flood—a flood of salvation.

Habakkuk prophesies of a day when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). What a beautiful promise, and what a glorious image! Some day only God and those who know and love God will be left in the world. The New Testament speaks of a time to come when God will be all and in all. This is the consummation to which Habakkuk looks forward. How full of water is the ocean? That is how full of God the

creation will be! Everywhere everyone will know him. Every hill and tree and stream, every home and family, every tribe and nation, every person left on earth will be filled with the life of God, reflecting his glory.

Notice two significant details about this flood foreseen by Habakkuk. First, it is a vision of the future that is distinctly terrestrial, not celestial. It is focused upon the earth rather than heaven. Habakkuk says that it is the *earth* that will be filled with the knowledge of God's glory. Contrary to many popular images of eternity—people with harps sitting around on clouds forever and ever—the future salvation the Bible promises will be experienced on the earth. It is a new earth, to be sure; a whole new universe, in fact, transformed by the power of God into a place of unimaginable goodness and beauty. But it will be the real, visible, audible, smellable, tastable, tangible world nonetheless. Biblical hope is physical as well as spiritual. It is hope for our bodies, for our planet, for the sun, moon, and all the stars of all the galaxies in the universe. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end,” declares the Lord God; “Behold, I make *all things* new” (Rev. 21:6, 5 RSV, emphasis added).

Second, Habakkuk's vision emphasizes *glory*—the indescribable glory, the unimaginable wonder of a new creation made perfect by divine power. Habakkuk prophesies that the whole earth will be filled not just with the knowledge of God, but with the knowledge of the *glory* of God. That idea suggests a creation-wide experience of blessing. It will be a world of incredible bounty and endless delight, a world of safety and harmony, free of discord, where ancient animosities are overcome and all divisions are healed—not just human enmities but even those within the animal kingdom. The great eighteenth-century evangelist George Whitefield once remarked that a barking dog is a testimony to the fallenness of the world. Nature itself feels the disruptive, alienating consequences of sin. In Romans 8, the apostle Paul spoke of the whole creation

groaning in painful—yet ultimately hope-filled—expectation of final redemption:

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

☞—Romans 8:20–21

At the beginning of the last chapter, I alluded to the moving passage from the prophecy of Isaiah in which the prophet suggests through a series of vivid images the wonders of the new creation. When at last the Lord spreads peace throughout the world then

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

☞—Isaiah 11:6–9

Here is the same image again in Isaiah, the coming glorious flood of the knowledge and presence of God. Only poetry can begin to convey the glories of the world to come. In his book *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, theologian Neil Plantinga quotes a metaphor from the early church father Irenaeus to evoke the blessedness of life in the restored creation when God's kingdom

has finally come. Writing two generations or so after the close of the New Testament, Irenaeus described the fullness of the kingdom by the picture of a fantastically fruitful grapevine.

The days will come, in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes . . . and when any of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out, "I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me."

—Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*

SHALOM

There is a single word in the Old Testament that best sums up all these wonders of the new creation. It is the Hebrew word *shalom*, or "peace." Plantinga explains the meaning of the great biblical hope expressed by this word.

[The] prophets . . . dreamed of a time when the deserts would flower, the mountains would run with wine, weeping would cease, and people could go to sleep without weapons on their laps . . . All nature would be fruitful, benign, and filled with wonder upon wonder; all humans would be knit together in brotherhood and sisterhood; and all nature and all humans would look to God, walk with God, lean toward God, and delight in God . . .

The webbing together of God, humans and all creation in justice, fulfillment and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight* . . . *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

—Neil Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*

But you and I know very well that things aren't the way they ought to be, not anywhere, not yet. Where is God's shalom today? How can we experience it, where can we find it in the midst of our broken world? A Palestinian suicide bomber walks into a crowded Jerusalem restaurant at lunch time and blows himself up, killing more than a dozen innocent people and wounding scores more. The terrorist group responsible issues a statement explaining that the bombing was an act of revenge for Israeli assassinations of Palestinian guerilla leaders. So Israel retaliates with still more attacks. Did you know that Arabs and Jews use the very same word for their everyday greeting? It is an expression of blessing: *Salaam . . . Shalom . . . Peace*. The irony is too painful to contemplate.

The truth is, we are never going to achieve shalom by ourselves, through our own unaided efforts. It is beyond the capacity of human nature to make the world a place of universal justice, blessing and peace. When the prophet Isaiah described his vision of the new creation in chapter 11 he introduced it with another prophecy:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him . . .

with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the
earth.

☞—Isaiah 11:1–4

Isaiah's prophecy speaks of a great Prince, a descendant of David, who will arise to rule the world long after the royal house of Judah will seem to be extinct—a fresh shoot from a dead stump. This mighty King will establish righteousness and justice in the earth. He will do for us what we could never have done for ourselves. And we now know his name—it is

Jesus Christ. He came once to atone for sin and to reconcile people to God and to one another. He will come again to complete the salvation of the whole world. Christ's glorious reign in the new creation will usher in the kingdom of God in all its fullness, and then shalom will fill the universe.

Of course, in a sense the universe is already full of God right now. God is here in the world today. But the tragedy is that so many people either do not realize this or refuse to acknowledge it. The world is full of people who were made by God, who are loved by God, who should be living for God, but who do not know God. They never even seem to think about him. Or they have gotten themselves entangled with substitute gods of one kind or another. But some day that is all going to change.

And the change is beginning even now, wherever we see signs of the kingdom. In reading Habakkuk we are confronted squarely with the problem of evil, and forced to think about it. It is, as I have tried to acknowledge, a difficult problem; perhaps the most difficult problem, especially for those who believe in the biblical God. But thoroughly secular people have a problem, too. They face the problem of good. If there is no God, where does all the goodness and beauty in the world come from? Are we supposed to believe mere *chance* is responsible—"the assumed impersonal purposeless determiner of unaccountable happenings" (in *Merriam-Webster's* fine definition)? If everyone and everything is nothing more than the product of time plus random movement, what gave birth to love? To whom are we to give thanks

For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth over and around us lies?

For make no mistake; as much as we are troubled by the suffering and wrong in the world we ought also, in fairness, to be filled with grateful awe at all that is right. If we believers

struggle to reconcile our faith in God with the experience of evil, shouldn't the experience of unearned beauty and undeserved goodness make even the most hardened atheist at least stop and wonder a bit?

Those of us who identify ourselves as Christians—that is to say, as followers of Jesus—can help make the problem of good even harder for non-believers. We ought to be spending our lives in adding steadily to the world's visible stock of shalom. In every area of life—in our jobs and vocations, our civic responsibilities, our friendships and family relationships, our outside interests and leisure activities—we should be furthering the spread of the peaceable kingdom. Here's a question for you. Is your life supplying at least a trickle to swell the coming flood, when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea?

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Read Habakkuk 2, verse 14 and Isaiah 11, verses 1-9 (pp. 83-84). What picture of the world, following God's judgment and justice, is portrayed in these passages?
2. Read the explanation of "shalom" by Neil Plantinga (p. 88). How does this description of the biblical hope of shalom seem contrary to what we experience in our world today?
3. How can shalom be achieved?
4. What signs of the kingdom do you see today to reassure you that God is here in the world?
5. How are you contributing to the growth of shalom in the world? For example: in your job, civic responsibilities, friendships, family, outside interests, and leisure activities?

Chapter Seven

WHERE IS GOD?

Where in the world is God? The ancient prophet Habakkuk has a profound answer to that question.

“Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
Or an image that teaches lies?
For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.
Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’
Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it.
But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him.”

—Habakkuk 2:18–20

ACCORDING TO A U.S. government study entitled “Noise and Its Effects,” the excessive noise in our environment is hurting us. Noise is everywhere today; in fact, if you live in a city it’s almost inescapable. Traffic noise, the rumble of heavy

equipment and machinery, buzzing lawn mowers and growling snow blowers, airplanes roaring overhead, televisions blaring and car stereos thumping; the din is deafening—sometimes literally.

But hearing loss is only one of the harmful consequences of being bombarded with excessive decibels. The government study listed a number of other damaging effects that noise can have. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, exposure to noise interferes with human communication, lowers scholastic performance, disrupts sleep, and results in various adverse health consequences, including physical and psychological reactions like increased stress levels, raised blood pressure and hypertension. My favorite finding from the report was the final effect of noise they reported: It's annoying. They didn't have to pay for a research study to find that out; I would have told them that myself for nothing.

When I was a boy, the Sunday morning service in our church often opened with the choir singing softly in reverent tones these words from the second chapter of the book of Habakkuk: "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (v. 20 NRSV). This is an invitation by the prophet to step back from the noisy world around us and contemplate a deeper truth about ultimate reality. Habakkuk suggests that we stop our own noise-making for a bit—all the wrangling, the jarring discord, the complaining, the boasting, the hype, the sales pitches, the endless "spinning"—and fall silent before God the Lord. Habakkuk's statement consists of a declaration followed by a directive.

"THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE"

Let's consider the declaration first: "The LORD is in his holy temple." What exactly does it mean to say that the Lord is in his temple? Did Habakkuk and his fellow Jews think that the God of all heaven and earth resided in a stone building on

a hilltop in the ancient city of Jerusalem? Of course not. When King Solomon, who had built the spectacular temple building three centuries before Habakkuk's day, presided over its dedication, he prayed these words: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built" (1 Kings 8:27). Old Testament believers understood just as well as New Testament believers that God could not be contained within any man-made structures. God is a spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). The real God, the true and living God of heaven and earth, is infinitely, immeasurably greater than the whole universe. He does not live in temples made by human hands, as the New Testament also says (Acts 17:24). If God cannot be contained even by the whole universe, how could one tiny spot within it possibly be his home? No. The correct answer to the question "Where is God?" is "Everywhere." Or we might ask, "Where isn't he?" Listen to the testimony, for example, of Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

—Verses 8–10

So when Habakkuk tells us that the Lord is in his holy temple, he is not making a geographical statement. He is making a theological one. The prophet is not trying to locate God for us. Rather, he is testifying to a profound truth; in this case, a double truth about both God and the world. When the Bible says that the Lord is in his temple, whether the reference

is to the earthly temple in Jerusalem or to the heavenly sanctuary that is his “dwelling place” (1 Kings 8:30), it does not mean that God’s presence is localized in one particular place. This is rather a metaphorical statement of the truth that the sovereign Lord is ruling over the whole creation. This phrase is a symbolic way of expressing the truth that God is exercising authority over everything and everyone, right now. He is exalted, he is lifted up, he is “enthroned upon the cherubim” whose wings stretched over the ark of the covenant in the temple’s Holy of Holies (Ps. 80:1 NRSV). This means that God is above all things, “the LORD Most High” as the Bible calls him (Ps. 47:2). Because God is enthroned, he is in charge, sovereign, in control over everything. I read an article recently by an army general whose title, in a good example of the military’s love of acronyms, was “SACEUR.” That stood for “Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.” Well, by that system the Lord’s title would be “S[A]CU”—“Supreme Commander, Universe”! This is the truth that the Psalms especially love to sing out:

The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty . . .
girded with strength.

Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!”

The LORD reigns; let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!

For thou, O LORD, art most high over all the earth;
thou art exalted far above all gods.

The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth
quake!

☪—Psalm 93:1; 96:10; 97:1, 9; 99:1 RSV

And this is the truth that God means for us to understand

about him when Habakkuk tells us that the Lord is in his holy temple. It's a truth that ought to make us celebrate!

To say that the Lord is in his holy temple not only conveys a truth about the sovereign reign of God over the creation. It also points to another truth about the universe itself. The Jerusalem temple was patterned after the tabernacle, the tent for worship constructed under Moses' leadership in the wilderness during the Exodus. God had instructed Moses very carefully to make everything according to the pattern the Lord had given him. So the temple on earth was built according to plan, and the plan reflected the true sanctuary of God in heaven, just as the temple rituals and sacrifices were symbolic *pre-enactments* of the true offering Jesus made on the cross.

But if the temple in Jerusalem was an earthly copy of the heavenly sanctuary, the Bible also suggests that the earth itself was a sort of copy of the temple. Scripture declares that "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it . . . for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters" (Ps. 24:1–2). And again, "When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm" (Ps. 75:3). Biblical scholars tell us that this language about the earth having foundations and pillars is meant to suggest a picture of the temple to the reader's mind. It's as if to say the whole world is a temple, a kind of sanctuary, full of the presence of God. So when we are told that the Lord is in his holy temple, we aren't just to think of God being *over* the world, high above it, but of God being *in* the world at the same time. In theological terms, this verse refers not only to God's transcendence but to his immanence. The Jerusalem temple with the ark of the covenant in its Holy of Holies was itself a symbol of God's presence, his dwelling place in the midst of his people. The Lord is not a distant sovereign, far off, remote, and untouched by all that goes on far below him. No! He is a present God, intimately involved in the world and in the lives of the people over whom he rules. God is not only above us in power and authority; he is with us in love and care.

BE SILENT BEFORE HIM

So this is the prophet's great declaration: "The LORD is in his holy temple." God is both reigning over us and abiding with us. Next comes the directive: "Be silent before him" (Hab. 2:20). Why are we enjoined to keep silence in the face of this truth about the ever ruling and very present Lord of the universe? What does it mean to be silent before him? I think that first of all our silence is a token of our submission. It is the silence of humility and reverence, of awe and—to use the biblical word—fear. "The fear of the LORD," says the Bible, "is the beginning of wisdom" (Pr. 9:10). Biblical scholar Alec Motyer has defined the *fear of the Lord* as "a filial dread of offending God." When I think about what it means to fear the Lord, I often call to mind the scene in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when the Pevensy children first learned about Aslan shortly after arriving in Narnia. "Is he safe?" one of them asked. "Of course he isn't safe!" came the reply. "But he is good." Aslan was not a tame lion, and God is not a tame God.

So to be silent before the Lord God means to fear him rightly. It means to bow before him in humility, to place ourselves consciously under his sovereign authority, under his rule. It means to confess that we and all we have belong to God alone for the Lord is God and there is no other. In humbling ourselves before the Lord we acknowledge both his love for us and his claim upon us. Habakkuk's directive to be silent before the living God is offered in the context of a sarcastic denunciation of the idolatry of many of his contemporaries.

"Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
Or an image that teaches lies?

For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.

Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!'

Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it.
But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him.”

—Habakkuk 2:18–20

Notice the contrast that the prophet stresses. Here are all these idols—lifeless, useless, helpless, man-made things. People who look to idols for help are worshiping nothing but the creations of their own imagination. *But the Lord* is in his holy temple. In contrast to worthless idols, God rules and acts, God lives and speaks. Idols come in all shapes and sizes, not all of them visible to the eye. But they all have this in common: They are the products of the human mind, the projections of our own desires. They are false gods. Only the God of the Bible is real. As John Calvin once remarked, God doesn’t have any associate gods. This is the fundamental truth we acknowledge when we bow before the Lord in silent submission.

But it is also important to recognize that our silence before God is the silence of faith. When we are silent in the presence of God, we affirm the truth about God’s sovereignty—God’s goodness and his power—even when we can’t see these things plainly displayed around us. Let’s face it. The fact that a good and loving God rules the world is not always obvious. This is one reason why the Bible so strongly proclaims that, in fact, he *is* reigning on the throne of the world. Habakkuk himself, as we have seen, struggled with questions about God’s failure to act in the face of evil, and his apparent willingness to allow terrible things to go on without any divine intervention. Believing in God does not answer all the questions raised by the tragedies of life or end all of our struggles with doubt and fear. But it can cause us finally, at some point, to put an end to our cries and complaints and fall silent before God in trusting

faith. "Let us learn," said Calvin, "to glorify God by our silence."

When I was a junior in college, I returned to my room late one winter night to find a note taped to my door. The message instructed me to go immediately to my brother Tom's apartment, no matter what the hour. When I got there I learned that our older brother Paul had been killed in action in the Vietnam War. The next evening our immediate family was home together, sitting around the kitchen table after supper. My father sat in his customary place, at the head of the table. He suffered from Parkinson's disease, and with the added burden of shock and grief, he slumped in his chair, looking old and weak. Nobody said much, but nobody made a move to leave either. Then, before the dishes were cleared away, my father reached for the Bible as he always did at the close of the meal. He held it for a moment, then passed it to me and told me to read. As I looked back at him, all I could think of was bereaved Job mourning the death of his children. I opened the Bible to Job chapter 1 and read, "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." And then something led me to turn to Psalm 103, and I continued, "Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that . . ." Someone cried out to stop. But my father looked up and said sharply, "No! Go on reading." So I continued: ". . . and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." And as I read, my father, like Job before him, bowed his head and worshiped.

I learned then what it means to glorify God with our silence.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What does Habakkuk mean when he says, “The LORD is in his holy temple”?
2. What significance does this truth have for your life?
3. What does it mean to be silent before God?
4. Habakkuk contrasts man-made idols with the Lord. What points of contrast does he mention?
5. “Our silence before God is the silence of faith” (p. 101). In what kinds of circumstances is the silence of faith often required?
6. John Calvin is quoted as saying, “Let us learn to glorify God by our silence.” Explain how we might glorify God by our silence.

Chapter Eight

LEARNING TO SING AGAIN

Life may have beaten you up or knocked you down, but it is possible for you to learn to sing again.

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On *shigionoth*.

LORD, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD.
Renew them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy.

—Habakkuk 3:1–2

I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.
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;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.

For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.

—Habakkuk 3:16–19

PERELANDRA, THE SECOND NOVEL in C. S. Lewis's science fiction trilogy, is set on the planet Venus, an unfallen world that has never known the blight of evil. The book's main character is an English university professor named Elwin Ransom, who is sent to Perelandra to foil Satan's attempt to seduce that planet's "Eve" into rebelling against God and thus repeating the tragedy of the Fall. As Ransom tracked the Unman—the once-human body that Satan has taken over—across one of Perelandra's floating islands, he stumbled upon a hideous sight. One of that world's beautiful creatures had been savaged. The Unman had ripped open the animal's small body and then left it for dead.

On earth it would have been merely a nasty sight, but up to this moment Ransom had as yet seen nothing dead or spoiled in Perelandra, and it was like a blow in the face. It was like the first spasm of a well-remembered pain warning a man who had thought he was cured that his family have deceived him and he is dying after all. It was like the first lie from the mouth of a friend on whose truth one was willing to stake a thousand pounds. It was irrevocable . . . The thing was an intolerable obscenity which afflicted him with shame. It would have been better, or so he thought at that moment, for the whole universe never to have existed than for this one thing to have happened.

If we were not so inured to the presence of evil by long familiarity with it, if gratuitous cruelty and casual violence were not woven so thoroughly into the fabric of our daily life and news reports, if indifference to every kind of suffering was not so routinely a part of our psychological defenses, we might react the same way whenever we saw examples of Satan's handiwork.

In the brief prophecy that bears his name, we have seen Habakkuk reacting feelingly to the problem of evil. He would have agreed with the words of the book of Ecclesiastes, "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve" (8:14). As he begins to unburden himself, Habakkuk's questions spill out, one after another. Why are the people of God suffering so much? How could we, the chosen people of God, have produced such a corrupt and wicked society? Why doesn't God seem to answer our prayers and rescue us? How come the evil are prospering while the innocent are being destroyed? Why don't things ever seem to change or get better?

In the middle of all this questioning, the prophet had a vision. Habakkuk saw in prospect the future triumph of God's justice and truth. He heard God's promise that the answers to all his questions were forthcoming. He affirmed the greatest lesson of life: that those who trust in God are made righteous by their faith, and they will live forever. And finally, Habakkuk remembered that the Lord is ruling over the world right now, and that we should all bow before him in silent submission and faith, believing that God is both with us and for us and that therefore all things must work together for our salvation.

HABAKKUK'S SONG

Habakkuk has the answer to most of his questions, at least in an intellectual sense. But he needs more than that. God has responded to him, and Habakkuk understands and accepts

that response. But now *he* needs to respond to *God* in a way that is emotionally satisfying. So Habakkuk decides to pray once more, and the third and final chapter of his book is the result. Actually, Habakkuk 3 is more than just a prayer. It's a song. The Bible introduces it this way: "A prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet. On *shigionoth*" (3:1). No one knows exactly what the Hebrew term transliterated *shigionoth* means, but it could be the name of a tune. Later on, at the end of the chapter, there's another note about the stringed instruments that should accompany this song (v. 19). So even if we don't recognize the tune, we can follow along with the words, as this servant of God teaches us how to sing again when life's experiences may have shaken our faith in God.

Habakkuk's song begins on a quiet note. "LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy" (3:2). The best way to begin when you want to speak to God is with a note of humility, even awe. It's good to realize that God is high and we are low. God is big and we are little. God is holy and we are not. So we stand in awe of him.

Next the prophet gets down to business by looking backwards: "I have heard . . . of your deeds, O LORD." Habakkuk then starts to recite them. If you're having trouble singing the song of faith because of what's going on in your life at present, the best thing to do is to start remembering. Look back into the past, call to mind all the things that God has done for you. Recite them over again, and don't limit yourself just to the things God has done for you since you've been born. Remember all the things he did for you long before your life even began, stretching all the way back to Bible times—and beyond.

REMEMBERING

What the biblical writers most often recalled were God's mighty saving acts, the moments in world history when God

personally and decisively intervened to redeem or deliver his people. In the Old Testament the greatest of these acts was the Exodus, the story of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. In the New Testament, of course, the mighty act of God was the Cross, when the true Passover Lamb was sacrificed in order to shield God's people by his blood, and where the Son of Man was lifted up in order to save the lives of all who looked to him in faith. These are the stories that Israel and the Church never tire of repeating and reliving.

Tell me the old, old story, for those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.

It is simply astonishing how often the Old Testament writers liked to re-tell the story of the Exodus. What is even more remarkable is that, in their retelling, the Old Testament writers so often put their readers right into the middle of the narrative. When Moses addressed the people of Israel on the brink of the Promised Land just before his death, he reminded them of some of the mistakes they had made along the way.

Then I said to you, "You have reached the hill country of the Amorites, which the LORD our God is giving us. See, the LORD your God has given you the land. Go up and take possession of it as the LORD, the God of your fathers, told you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged . . ."

But you were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, "The LORD hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us . . ."

Then I said to you, "Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them. The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you . . ."

In spite of this, you did not trust in the LORD your God . . .

—Deuteronomy 1:20–32

Notice that Moses consistently uses the second person throughout this historical account: “I said this to you, then you said this, then I said this, and you did that.” But the events he was describing had occurred 38 years before, to the parents and grandparents of the people he was at that moment addressing. None of them were there at all; they were either very young children or not even born! Every single person who had actually participated in that interchange with Moses was dead! (except Caleb and Joshua; cf. Deut. 2:14–15 and Num. 26:65). Yet Moses addresses the current generation of God’s people as if they were all there personally.

The same pattern occurs with respect to the more positive aspects of the Exodus experience as well. A bit later in his speech Moses said,

Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire . . . The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain . . .

—Deuteronomy 4:32–36; 5:2–4

When the Lord first instituted the Passover and commanded that it should be kept throughout all future generations, he added this instruction: “When your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians’” (Ex. 12:26–27). There it is once more, this identification of every generation of God’s people with the first generation that actually lived through the salvation events. The great act of deliverance commemorated by the Passover was not when [the Lord] “passed over the houses of the Israelites and spared their homes,” but “when he spared *our* homes.” Moses reiterates and expands on this instruction in Deuteronomy 6:

In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers.

—Deuteronomy 6:20–23

So when a Bible writer recounts the story of salvation, he is not merely reminiscing about great events that happened long ago to other people. To remember, in the biblical sense, means more than just call to mind. To remember is to identify with, to relive. This is what Habakkuk is doing again here in poetic form in chapter 3.

God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran. *Selah*
His glory covered the heavens

and his praise filled the earth.
His splendor was like the sunrise;
rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden.
Plague went before him;
pestilence followed his steps.
He stood, and shook the earth;
he looked, and made the nations tremble.
The ancient mountains crumbled
and the age-old hills collapsed.
His ways are eternal.
I saw the tents of Cushan in distress,
the dwellings of Midian in anguish . . .

In wrath you strode through the earth
and in anger you threshed the nations.
You came out to deliver your people,
to save your anointed one.
You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness,
you stripped him from head to foot. *Selah*
With his own spear you pierced his head
when his warriors stormed out to scatter us,
gloating as though about to devour
the wretched who were in hiding.
You trampled the sea with your horses,
churning the great waters.

—Habakkuk 3:3–7, 12–15

Habakkuk is offering here his own stylized retelling of the Exodus story. *Teman* and *Mount Paran* refer to the desert region south of Judah—the Sinai peninsula, where God revealed his Law in earthquake and lightning. Other references recall the parting of the Red Sea and the Jordan, and victories along the way over the tribes of the Negev. Habakkuk remembers all that God did for his people, and he invites his readers to remember as well. Did you notice the little word *selah* in

the margin of his song? You may be familiar with that term from the book of Psalms, where it occurs often. This song in Habakkuk 3 is the only other place in Scripture that uses it. As in the Psalms, *selah* is some sort of direction or musical term. It indicates that something is expected of the singer here, some sort of change or pause. Maybe it means to kick up the volume, or raise the pitch a step, or just to shout “Amen!” Perhaps *selah* just marks the spot to take a brief time out to stop and remember—that is, relive—the salvation history you’ve just sung about.

God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt when they had no hope. He made a way out of no way (to quote the title of a sermon by Fleming Rutledge). He brought Israel into the Promised Land when the way was barred. God did all that for his people. You and I have an advantage over Habakkuk because we know the next part of the salvation story. It involves a stable in Bethlehem, and a cross on Golgotha, and an empty garden tomb, and tongues of fire in an Upper Room, and the gospel going out to the ends of the earth. God did all that, too.

Remembering, in the biblical sense of the term, is at the heart of New Testament as well as Old Testament faith: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). The Lord’s Supper is not a mere memorial, where we try to call to mind devout thoughts of Jesus’ suffering and death. When we come to the table, he is with us there in the Spirit. We meet him, we relive his passion and death, we feed upon him in our heart by faith with thanksgiving, we as certainly receive Christ in our souls as our bodies receive bread and wine. When I was a young boy I got hooked on a series of historical novels called “We Were There”—*We Were There at Pearl Harbor*, *We Were There with the Wright Brothers*, and so forth. If we belong to the people of God, we really *were* there for all the mighty acts by which God has redeemed us. The believing person’s response to the question raised by the familiar spiritual is, simply, “Yes. I was there when they crucified my Lord.”

So the first thing to do when you are frightened or discouraged is to sing a song of God's salvation, and remember all the things he has done for you in the past.

REMEMBER US

"I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy" (Hab. 3:2). The gist of what Habakkuk prays is simple: "God," he is saying, "I've heard all about your mighty acts in the past—how you saved our people out of Egypt, and led them by Moses, and did all those great miracles. But what about today? What about us? Do the same things for us that you did for them!" It almost sounds presumptuous, as if Habakkuk is saying to God, "Salvation history is all well and good, but how about a contemporary miracle or two? I want to see you save us right here and now."

I think what Habakkuk really means is something like this: "Lord, what I really want is to experience your presence in my life for myself, just as the great saints did in the past. Please do your work in me, even though it may hurt sometimes. I don't ask to be let off easily. I only ask that if you judge me, if you discipline me, if you use painful experiences to make me grow, that you will also show me your mercy."

That's the key thing, isn't it? Anyone can ask God for his blessings. Even an agnostic may cry out to be delivered from a crisis. But God's work of salvation in us involves more than just getting us out of trouble. We not only need to be saved from our sins; we actually need to be delivered from them, to have our lives so transformed that our character and behavior begin to mirror the likeness of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29). That requires a long, sometimes painful process of spiritual discipline and personal change (cf. Phil. 1:6). We have all asked God to work according to our plans; to prove that he is real when we are finding it hard to believe, or maybe to perform a

miracle to help us escape a painful ordeal. But spiritual maturity means coming to the point where I can ask God to work out *his* plan for my life, whatever that may entail for me.

“In wrath remember mercy.” When the Scottish Puritan divine David Dickson lay dying, someone asked him how he did. Dickson replied, “I have taken all of my bad works and all of my good works and cast them together in a heap, and fled from both to my Savior Jesus Christ, in whom I find sweet peace.” Sin calls forth wrath, and rightly so. I would not want to live in a world where sin—including my own sin—went unpunished. I would not want to worship a God who was indifferent to wrong, an innocuous deity who dismissed the monstrosity of evil as if it did not matter. The God of the Bible is not innocuous. “Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you . . . For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deut. 4:23–24). So God’s wrath is real, but his mercy and peace are found in Jesus Christ.

We have seen how important it is for biblical faith to remember God. But even more critical is that God remember us. That is our ultimate prayer. When the penitent thief cried out to the man dying on the cross next to his, he didn’t ask for much. I doubt that he even knew fully what to ask for, or who it really was he was addressing. All he said was, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). And it was enough. Near the end of his life John Newton said this: “I am 82 years old, and my memory is nearly gone. But I still remember two things—that I am a great sinner, and that I have a great Savior.” I hope that I never forget those two things either.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Habakkuk 3 is a prayer and a song. Read verses 1-2 and 16-19. What is Habakkuk's attitude as he begins his prayer/song?
2. Next, Habakkuk begins to recite the deeds of the Lord. How does remembering what God has done for us in the past help us cope with the present?
3. Read Habakkuk 3, verses 3-7 and 12-15. Habakkuk lived before the Cross—the culmination of the salvation story. We know the whole story. How is remembering at the heart of the New Testament?
4. How do we exercise remembering in our worship experiences?
5. What is the gist of Habakkuk's prayer?
6. What does Habakkuk really want from God?
7. Is it difficult for you give up your plan for God's plan when you are in the midst of a problem? How do you get past the difficulty?

Learning to Sing Again

Chapter Nine

FAITH IN HARD TIMES

It is one thing to praise God when his blessings are flowing into your life. But if yours is the kind of faith that also praises him when things are bad, then it's the genuine article.

I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.
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;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.

For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.

WHEN JESUS FACED his final hour, he was frightened. Filled with anguished foreboding during his last night on earth, Jesus shrank in horror from the trial that confronted him. How else are we to interpret the gospel accounts that describe Jesus' behavior in the Garden of Gethsemane? After leaving the Upper Room in Jerusalem where he had shared in the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus moved to the olive garden just across the Kidron Valley. There he asked his friends to watch with him, and pray. The Lord who so often had gone off by himself to spend entire nights in prayer did not want to be alone that night. The disciples all failed him, of course, just as they would all run away and hide when the moment of crisis came, as Jesus predicted (Matt. 26:31). So Jesus found himself praying alone, while his heavy-eyed followers slumbered nearby. As he prayed, Jesus struggled to steel himself for the ordeal of suffering that loomed ahead. "My Father," he cried repeatedly, "if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me" (Matt. 26:39). That is to say, "Please don't make me do this!" Luke said Jesus' spiritual struggle in Gethsemane was so severe that he sweat blood. "And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

But in the end, Jesus accepted the necessity of doing what had to be done for the salvation of the world. The gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke all report that Jesus signified his decision with the prayer, "Not my will, but yours be done." But in John's gospel Jesus expresses his submission to the painful will of God with a rhetorical question: "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11).

This is how faith meets suffering. However bitter the experience, we believe that it is still given to us from our Father's hand—the cup has not spun out of his control. And so we accept it as coming from God. Among Johann Sebastian Bach's most magnificent compositions are his two surviving Passions, the St. Matthew Passion and the Passion According to St. John.

In these monumental works, which were written for the Good Friday worship services in Leipzig, Germany, where Bach was music director, the composer set the story of Jesus' final hours to music. The framework of each Passion is simply the text of the relevant section from the Gospels. The scriptural narrative is sung by a tenor soloist (Evangelist), with the various characters in the story (Jesus, Peter, Pilate, the crowd, etc.) singing their lines. Interspersed among the Scripture are various musical interludes that offer commentary and reflection on the biblical story. These interludes include a number of German chorales, or hymns, which Bach inserted at key points to express the reaction of the church to what is happening. In the St. John Passion, when Jesus sings the words, "Shall I not drink the cup my Father has given me?" a brief pause follows. Bach allows the question to hang in the air for a moment. Then he responds with a chorale. The choir, speaking for all Christian believers, sings a stanza based on the Lord's Prayer:

May your will be done, Lord God,
On earth, as in heaven.
Make us patient in suffering,
Obedient in everything.
Overpower the flesh and blood
That would rebel against your will.

Bach, with unerring spiritual insight, is asking us here to see our own suffering the way Jesus saw his. He invites us, when faced with affliction, to say with our Lord, "Shall *I* not drink the cup my Father has given *me*?" Our suffering, like Jesus' suffering, is a bitter cup that comes to us by the will of our heavenly Father, but with this difference (as John Newton explains):

[Our afflictions] are honourable, as they advance our conformity to Jesus our Lord, who was a man of sorrows for our sake.

Methinks if we might go to heaven without suffering we should be unwilling to desire it. Why should we ever wish to go by any other path than that which he has consecrated . . . especially as his people's sufferings are not penal; there is no wrath in them; the cup he puts in [our] hands is very different from that which he drank for [our] sakes, and it is only medicinal, to promote our chief good.

There is no wrath of God in any sufferings he may send to his people; Christ has drained that cup dry on our behalf. God does not punish us for our sins. Our sins have already been punished in full. Here is the gospel truth: for all who belong to Jesus Christ, the judgment of God's wrath against sin is transformed into the discipline of a loving Father. It is tough love, to be sure. But it's love, nevertheless, not wrath. Whatever painful trials or afflictions may come to us who are in Christ, we are assured that God intends them for our ultimate good. The medicine may have a bitter taste, but it will work our healing in the end.

FAITH IN HARD TIMES

So we believe, and so we confess. In the closing verses of his prophecy Habakkuk writes one of the most moving confessions of faith in all of Scripture. We must not forget his situation. He is writing on the eve of Jerusalem's complete destruction by a powerful enemy. He had asked all his questions of God and had received some answers. He has been praying and singing and rehearsing God's great deeds of salvation, and he has started to feel better. His faith is being renewed. But when Habakkuk turns from his devotions back to the everyday world he is living in, nothing external has changed. The threat of invasion still looms on the horizon. He, together with his family and all his friends, are still facing the violent conquest of their home and city, the loss of all their

possessions (including their freedom), and for many of them, even the loss of their lives. Things have not somehow miraculously turned around. Life hasn't suddenly become sunny and cheerful.

So what does Habakkuk do? Well, the first thing he does is shake with fear! "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled" (Hab. 3:16). Trusting in God is great, but it isn't magic. It does not automatically make all our problems go away—or remove our very natural reactions to them. You can still be faithful and fearful, too.

But then Habakkuk offers this magnificent confession of faith:

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.

—Verses 17–18

What Habakkuk is describing here is a very graphic picture of hard times. These verses paint a picture of life at its most desolate point. There are no buds on the fig tree, only dry, lifeless branches. No grapes on the vine, no crop from the olive orchard, no produce from the fields, no sheep or cattle in the barns. All of which adds up to no money or even any food for the coming year.

What if that is your situation today? No income, no resources, no prospects; the cupboard is bare, the paycheck is gone, and the food pantry's just closed down. What then? What do you say when you pray and believe and trust God

and try to live a decent life, but still you're lying in a hospital bed, sick and frightened and in pain, and the doctor tells you he's sorry but there's nothing more they can do for you? What do you say when your husband informs you he's just plain tired of being married to you and he's found real love for the first time in his life—with someone else? Or your boss tells you that the company has been downsizing and he's sorry but you no longer fit in with their plans for the future? Or your investment turns sour and the security you were counting on for your retirement suddenly has evaporated? Or you miscarry the baby you've been trying to have for ten years? Or you don't get the job or the promotion or the girl or the award or the prize? What do you say when the fig tree does not bud?

A lot of people say, quite literally, "To hell with it," and turn their backs on God. But Habakkuk says this: Even though the crops have failed and there's no livestock in my barn, "*yet* I will rejoice in the LORD. I will be joyful in God my Savior" (v. 18, emphasis added). Habakkuk is still singing his faith, even his joy, no matter what his circumstances.

SINGING JOY IN A MINOR KEY

I was listening to a Russian believer speak about what it was like to be a follower of Jesus Christ during the bad days of Soviet communism. "We learned to sing our joy in a minor key," he explained. Habakkuk's song was like that. It's easy to sing praises to God when everything is great. "I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free." Sometimes that is so. But a better measure of our faith is whether or not we can still sing when life stinks, when every tune is in a minor key. Habakkuk doesn't sing because he's happy or because things are so great. Habakkuk sings *even though* things are the way they are because he is rejoicing in the Lord, because he is joyful in God his Savior. When Jesus first sent his disciples out on a mission, they returned full of excitement because they had experienced

some success. Jesus, of course, knew what was ahead for them: great ministries, yes, and also martyrdom. So he cautioned them: “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). Don’t rejoice because you’re wealthy, or comfortable and happy, or in love with a wonderful guy. Those things can all disappear in a hurry. Rejoice because you know the Lord, because in Jesus Christ you have personally met and been adopted by the Creator of the whole universe. Then you can sing even if your crops (or efforts in life) have failed and your barns (or bank accounts) are empty.

You know, the real test of faith is how you meet loss. A number of years ago I spent a summer filling in at a small town church whose pastor was on leave. One week I was asked to visit a lady in the community, a stranger to me, whose husband had just died. As we talked for a while, it became obvious that she wasn’t a Christian. I found it difficult to speak about comfort or hope, because she didn’t have any. She told me that her one consolation was reading. *Reading the Bible?* I wondered. No, she said she liked to read the novels of the bleak, nineteenth-century English writer, Thomas Hardy. Something light or escapist I could have understood, but Thomas Hardy? As if there isn’t enough suffering in real life; you need to read grim, pessimistic stories in addition? But, you see, when people don’t know God, the best they can do in the face of suffering is to muster a sort of dull resignation. Resignation is when you give up hope. You accept the inevitable, because there’s nothing else you can do about it. You simply resign, the way a chess player resigns when he sees that the game is lost.

Biblical faith is not resignation. Faith is different. Faith sings. Faith even leaps. It climbs like a deer. “The Sovereign LORD is my strength,” sang Habakkuk; “he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights” (Hab. 3:19). His life just then was down in the dumps, but Habakkuk himself could run up the mountains because he

knows God will be his strength. What was it that the apostle Paul said? “We are more than conquerors through [Christ] who loved us.” Not just conquerors; we’re *hyper*-conquerors. Believers don’t just win over all the troubles of life. We win with style! “Faith is the victory that overcomes the world.”

WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE BY FAITH

Dr. Paul Harrison was a missionary of the Reformed Church in America during the first half of the twentieth century. He spent his entire career serving in the American Mission in the Persian Gulf region, where he established pioneering medical work in the years before the development of the oil fields, when the Arab world was poor and had little access to health care. Dr. Harrison invested his life in sharing the love of Jesus Christ by deed and word in places and among people where he saw few visible responses. Near the end of his career he addressed a group of young Reformed Church pastors while back in the United States on furlough. He explained to them just what it means to live by faith:

It means that nothing is too high to be attained, too good to be hoped for, too hard to be endured, or too precious to be given away.

Habakkuk would have agreed.

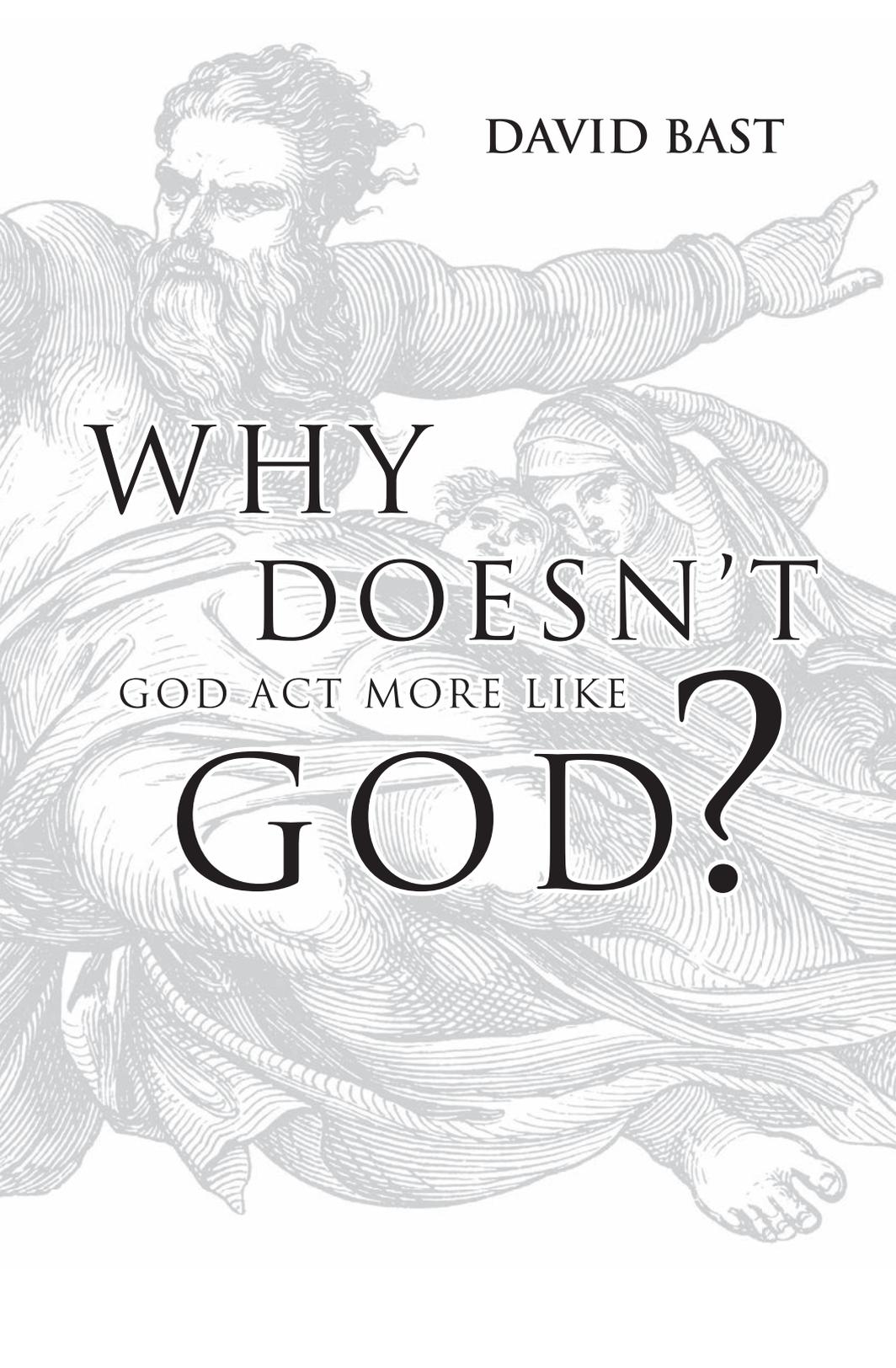


O my Lord and Saviour, in Thy arms I am safe; keep me and I have nothing to fear; give me up and I have nothing to hope for. I know not what will come upon me before I die. I know nothing about the future, but I rely upon Thee. I pray Thee to give me what is good for me; I pray Thee to take from me whatever may imperil my salvation . . . I leave it all to Thee, because Thou knowest and I do not. If Thou bringest pain or sorrow on me, give me grace to bear it well—keep me from fretfulness and selfishness. If Thou givest me health and strength and success in this world, keep me ever on my guard lest these great gifts carry me away from Thee . . . [G]ive me to know Thee, to believe on Thee, to love Thee, to serve Thee; ever to aim at setting forth Thy glory; to live to and for Thee; to set a good example to all around me; give me to die just at that time and in that way which is most for Thy glory, and best for my salvation. Amen.

— A Prayer of John Henry Newman

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. How can a person be faithful to God in the midst of having real feelings of fear?
2. What is the picture of hard times Habakkuk describes in verses 17-18?
3. If you were to write a contemporary version of Habakkuk's confession of faith in verses 17-18, what might you say?
4. Have you ever been in a situation where you had to sing your joy in a minor key? Explain.
5. Have you observed ways various people met loss? Describe some.
6. RCA missionary Dr. Paul Harrison explains what it means to live by faith: "It means that nothing is too high to be attained, too good to be hoped for, too hard to be endured, or too precious to be given away." How has Habakkuk helped you understand this perspective?



DAVID BAST

WHY
DOESN'T
GOD ACT MORE LIKE
GOD?

*Why Doesn't God Act More Like God?
Habakkuk and the Problem of Evil*

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Words of Hope's mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ by radio and literature in the languages of the world's peoples, seeking with our partners in ministry to win the uncommitted everywhere to faith in Christ and to encourage Christians in the life of discipleship.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons not to believe in a personal God. The grounds for atheism—or its more cautious cousin agnosticism—is a plot that has been plowed over many times. The modern scientific view of the world seems to be one long argument for unbelief: materialistic assumptions about the origin of the universe and of life, which challenge the notion of design (and therefore the existence of a Designer); reductionist accounts of human consciousness, which eliminate the soul; naturalistic explanations for the rise of religious faith; and so on. As a skeptical scientist once quipped when asked why he made no mention of God in his writings, “I have no need of that hypothesis.”

Then there is the difficulty of reconciling traditional Christian teaching with both our observations of the world around us and our own painful life experiences. The doctrine of the Incarnation affirms that God assumed human nature and entered our world to save us. Such an event may have been believable once upon a time, when people still thought the earth was the center of everything and man was “the crown of creation.” But set against the backdrop of a measureless

universe in which humanity plays such an infinitesimal role, the Incarnation is hard to accept any longer. Would the God of the entire universe really take that much trouble over “an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet” orbiting “a small unregarded yellow sun” in “the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of . . . the Galaxy” (Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*)? Moreover, a belief in Divine Providence would encourage us to trust that everything that happens to us is part of the master plan of a loving, all-powerful God—a view that, to say the least, is not clearly evident to a patient in the middle of chemotherapy or to the residents of a shanty town in one of the world's countless slums. And these are merely the most obvious intellectual problems that challenge faith in the God of the Bible.

But for the believing Christian, one difficulty stands above all others—the experience of unanswered prayer. This is much harder to deal with, far more painful than any atheistic argument or secularist's sneer. Experiencing the silence of God, the absence of God, threatens the very heart of faith, which is a confidence in our connectedness to God. As believers our faith is not merely a set of intellectual propositions about God, the world and ourselves. It is an experienced relationship with God, grounded in the conviction that we really have come to know the God of the universe as our Father in and through Jesus Christ. If we speak to this Father in prayer, pouring out our soul as we express to God our deepest needs and concerns, and then seem to hear no reply and receive no help, what are we to think? I'll tell you what I sometimes think. In the night, when I'm tossing in bed unable to sleep, it creeps in: the thought that my faith is all just make-believe; that when I pray I'm only playing a game with myself; that there's really no one listening, no one there.

Of course, there is nothing new about the experience of unanswered prayer. I'm not the first person to entertain doubts in the dark. How to deal with our doubts is one of the

surprising but comforting lessons of the book of Habakkuk. The thesis of that little book (as well as this one) is that faith isn't easy. Faith is not neat and clean; it's messy, with lots of gnarled knots as well as loose ends. Those of us who can identify with Habakkuk often have more questions than answers; or at least we're more certain about the questions than we are of the answers. But neither can we simply give up and walk away. As easy as it sometimes is to think there is no God, it is unthinkable to *believe* there isn't. For me, for Habakkuk, and I hope for you, there's just no viable alternative to faith in God. We ask with Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). We have no real alternative; we can't not believe.

So we struggle to answer our questions and to deal with our doubts and fears. And when suffering or hardship comes to us, we try to sing (along with Habakkuk) a song of trust in the Lord whose ways we can't explain, but whose goodness we confess and whose grace we praise, not just because of what happens to us but sometimes in spite of it.

Chapter One

“GOD, WHY DON’T YOU ANSWER?”

Have you ever wondered why God allows so much suffering in the world? Have you ever prayed for help and he didn’t seem to answer? Well, you’re not alone in struggling with those problems.

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.

How long, O LORD, must I call 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?
Why do you tolerate wrong?

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.

YOU HAVE PROBABLY HAD one of those “It’s a small world!” experiences. In the summer of 1972 I was a student traveling through Europe with my fiancée Betty Jo (now my wife for the past almost forty years). One day we happened to be in Amsterdam, wandering through the main square of the city. As I stood staring in some amazement at the rather bizarre collection of humanity that had drifted into that Mecca of the counter-culture, I exclaimed, “Look at all those hippies!” Whereupon Betty Jo, examining the crowd more closely, pointed out that one of them happened to be a college classmate of ours. It really is a small world after all!

I have a similar feeling of shocked recognition when I come to the book of Habakkuk. Here I am, among the twelve Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. It’s sort of a strange place, really. This is one of those areas that someone has called “the clean pages” of the Bible. There are a lot of books here that aren’t read very often, written by people with odd-sounding names like Obadiah and Haggai. They are talking about problems and issues in civilizations that have been dead for 2,500 years, in places I have never seen and can’t even imagine. And then, just as I’m tempted to leave, I turn a corner and bump into somebody I know. I recognize this man Habakkuk! I know what he is talking about; I understand what he is feeling. He’s asking the very same questions I ask. So then I think, maybe this isn’t such a strange place after all. Maybe I can even find some answers to my questions here.

The Hebrew prophet Habakkuk was an ancient man with a modern problem. A contemporary of the great prophet Jeremiah, Habakkuk proclaimed God’s word in the kingdom of Judah during the late seventh century B.C.—the final days of Jewish independence. It was an unstable period marked by a changing balance of power in the ancient Near East. The Empire of Assyria, which had terrorized that whole part of the world for generations, was suddenly overthrown. A coalition of peoples led by the Babylonians attacked and destroyed the

Assyrian capital of Nineveh in the year 612 B.C. Almost overnight the old bogeyman of Assyria was completely obliterated, and an entirely new and unexpected threat arose in Babylon. During this period of instability resulting from shifting alliances and the clash of empires, smaller kingdoms like Judah scrambled for advantage, while the Hebrew prophets warned of imminent judgment.

Habakkuk’s life and world could hardly have been more unlike ours. But despite the almost unimaginable differences between Habakkuk’s time and our own, between his life and yours or mine, he struggled with many of the same kinds of spiritual questions we do. The differences between Habakkuk and us are all superficial. On the deepest and most important level, we’re much the same.

QUESTIONS FOR FAITH

Habakkuk’s questions all had to do with God, with suffering and the problem of evil, and with unanswered prayer. In other words, they were all questions about the most basic issues of faith. Listen to what he says to God: “How long must I keep praying for an answer?” “Why don’t you listen?” “Why don’t you act?” “Why do you allow evil?” Does any of that sound familiar?

The book of Habakkuk (the written record of the message he preached to the people of Judah) begins with this simple introduction: “The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received” (v. 1). This phrase could also be translated, “Habakkuk’s burden.” Habakkuk had something he wanted to say, something he *had* to say; or rather, something he had to *ask*. I heard once about a Christian speaker who styles himself “The Bible Answer Man.” It’s not a title Habakkuk would have claimed for himself. He is more like the Bible Question Man. Habakkuk believed in God. He knew God. He served God. But he didn’t understand God. So he wrestled with the same

issues we struggle with when we're confronted by pain or injustice, or when we cry out to God for help and our prayers seem only to echo back to us. In the end, all the prophet's questions could be boiled down to this basic one: Why doesn't God act more like God?

Look more closely at what Habakkuk is asking God.

How long, O LORD, must I call 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?
Why do you tolerate wrong?

—Habakkuk 1:2

There are really two questions here. One is theological: attempting to reconcile the presence of evil in the world with the goodness of the God who made and governs that world. So Habakkuk asked, "Why do you tolerate wrong?" The prophet is really asking here about God's apparent inactivity. How can God go on watching all the horrible things that happen every day and not put a stop to them?

Habakkuk's second question is relational and has to do with the silence of God: "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" Like so many believers, Habakkuk agonizes over the silence and apparent inattentiveness of God. He voices a lament that echoes over and over in Scriptures: How long, O LORD?

The prophet was living in a sick and dying society, one that was increasingly filled with crime and violence, where social injustice and human rights abuses multiplied. The very authorities who ought to have been correcting these wrongs were contributing to them instead. Crime was out of control, with innocent people suffering the violent consequences every day, in addition to all the normal ills and problems of ordinary

life. And all this was happening not in some godless, pagan society, but in Judah, among God’s chosen people Israel!

As evil ran wild and misery surrounded him, Habakkuk has been praying. He’s been crying out to God for help. But God has been unaccountably silent. Not only has the Lord not answered Habakkuk’s prayers, he doesn’t even seem to have heard them. He hasn’t bothered to listen—or so it seemed. And God is also strangely inactive. In this situation of wrong that screamed for him to do something, God apparently does nothing. So Habakkuk wants to know why. He asks God what’s wrong, what is going on?

THE STRANGE INACTIVITY OF GOD

Think of it this way. What would *you* do if you were God? If you had all power and controlled everything, if you could change peoples’ minds and hearts by simply willing it, if you could literally make something out of nothing by the power of your speech, if you could just say the word and the sick would be healed and the dead raised, if you ruled over all the forces of nature, and had authority even over the evil powers, what would you do? What would you do when you saw a “crack” cocaine baby lying in an incubator in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, eyes taped shut, a tube down his throat, writhing in pain? What would you do when a cancer sufferer, wasted away from his disease and devastated by its treatment, cried out to you for healing, or just for relief from his unbearable pain? What would you do when a person who had loved and served you all her life prayed earnestly to you every day for the salvation of a child who was utterly indifferent to you? Or what about believers who are living under a totalitarian regime and experiencing harassment, imprisonment, torture and even death for their faith in Christ? What would you do when they pleaded with you day and night for deliverance? What would you do in response to the fervent prayers for revival in churches whose

influence was shrinking in the midst of societies that were increasingly turning away from their Christian heritage and sinking further and further into moral corruption? What would you do? Surely you'd do *something*, wouldn't you? If you were God.

It seems to us that if God really acted like God, there wouldn't be any more fatal accidents, no more birth defects, no more cancer or AIDS, no more killer storms, no more wars, no more suffering or pain. Churches would be full, and the righteous would prosper. The whole world would flourish with peace and happiness, faith and goodness. We could understand that. We could believe in God then. Everyone would. It would be easy.

But when we cry out to him in anguish and he just seems to do nothing, how can that be? That was Habakkuk's problem, his burden. And mine. And yours too, I imagine.

A QUESTION OF TRUST

What confronts us as believers in the experience of unanswered prayer is the issue of trust. It comes down specifically to the question of whether or not we are willing to trust in the superior wisdom of God. If we do, then we will also be willing to believe that he has reasons for what seems to us his often incomprehensible behavior.

The willingness to keep trusting God no matter what happens seems to be decreasing in our time. I regularly read about people—usually intellectuals—who report that the experience of personal tragedy has left them unable to believe in the existence of a personal, loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God. It just doesn't seem possible to them that a good God could have any purpose in allowing such things to happen. They find the very idea abhorrent; the idea of such a God no longer works for them.

By contrast, the willingness to trust God is based (in part

at least) on the not unreasonable assumption that, being God, he knows more and sees farther than we do. When Christian's son Matthew was being catechized in Part II of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Matthew was asked what he did when he came to something in the Bible he did not understand. “I think that God is wiser than I,” the boy replied. That response is equally fitting when we are confronted with events in life that we can't make sense of. Such an attitude of trust expresses the believer's humble confidence that God “will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world, for he is able to do this because he is almighty God, and he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q.26).

Let's be clear, though, about one thing. Trust in the wisdom and loving purposes of the God who is in control of all that happens is no simple matter. It's one thing to repeat the assurances of our faith when we're happy and comfortable, when the challenge to faith is still theoretical and we're only practicing how we hope we would respond to the test. But it's a different matter when the struggle to go on believing and trusting is immediate and real.

For a number of years Words of Hope assisted the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) in providing Christian radio programs in the Hmong language for tribal people in Southeast Asia. Pastor John Lee, the Hmong broadcaster, came to faith in Christ by means of gospel radio broadcasts that he heard as a boy in his native Laos. Many years later, John himself developed wonderfully effective Christian programs in the Hmong language. He had a special gift for relating the gospel to Hmong culture and expectations. Credible reports indicate that as many as a quarter million Hmong have become Christians during the past twenty years, despite persecution by the Communist governments in Southeast Asia. Most of these new believers depended upon Pastor Lee's radio messages for their spiritual sustenance. And then one day I

received an e-mail informing us that John had suddenly and unexpectedly died. A few weeks later, Jim Bowman, FEBC's international chairman, sent me another message:

OK, David, now here is a good test of our theology. The Lord tells us to go into all the world and preach the gospel. He tells us he is not willing that any should perish. So we do our best. God raises up a man who revolutionizes a whole people group, and they are then submitted to intense persecution. They say that they fear losing their faith under its brutal pressure. They say they are dependent on the broadcasts. Then, 1) the enemies intensify the campaign to force the Hmong back into the worship of evil spirits. 2) they jam the signal. 3) the broadcaster dies at a most crucial time in their discipleship. 4) almost the same day a typhoon destroys [a sister ministry's] antennas at Guam and from all I can figure removes the other Hmong broadcast [from the air]. God's ways are definitely hard to figure.

Yes they are. But what viable alternative do believers have . . . except to go on believing that our faith will ultimately be proven right, that “the judgments of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether” (Ps. 19:9 KJV)? And to go on hoping and expecting that if we “humble [our]selves beneath the mighty hand of God” our trust in the wisdom and goodness of the Lord will prove justified in the end when in due season he exalts us (1 Peter 5:6). When we are tempted to doubt this, the Word of God reminds us that our faith is based firmly on the Lord's enduring righteousness and faithfulness, not on our circumstances—no matter how painful they may be.

John Newton, the slave-ship captain turned evangelical preacher, is best known as the writer of the world's most popular hymn, “Amazing Grace.” But his greatest pastoral work has been preserved in his collected letters, a treasury of spiritual insight. On the subject of the wisdom of God's ways Newton wrote this to a friend:

I can hardly recollect a single plan of mine, of which I since have not seen reason to be satisfied, that had it taken place in season and circumstance just as I had proposed, it would, humanly speaking, have proved my ruin—or at least it would have deprived me of the greater good the Lord had designed for me. We judge things by their present appearances, but the Lord sees them in their consequences; if we could do so likewise, we should be perfectly of his mind; but as we cannot, it is an unspeakable mercy that he will manage for us, whether we are pleased with his management or not.

In other words, hindsight will convince us that God knew what he was doing all along.

Meanwhile, if circumstances make it seem otherwise, perhaps we should be willing to give God—can we say this believingly?—the benefit of the doubt.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Read Habakkuk 1, verses 1-4. What are some of the frustrations Habakkuk is complaining about to the Lord?
2. How would you describe what Habakkuk saw happening in his society?
3. Do you see similarities in our society today?
4. Have you ever wished God would re-write the ending to a situation in your life or the life of someone close to you?
5. “The willingness to keep trusting God no matter what happens. . .” (p. 16). What do we know about the nature of God that can help us do that?
6. “Hindsight will convince us that God knew what he was doing all along” (p. 19). What personal examples of this truth have you experienced in your life or observed in someone else’s life?

“God, Why Don't You Answer?”

Chapter Two

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

If you could ask God to explain just one thing to you, what would it be? And if he did explain it to you, are you sure you could accept his answer?

O LORD, are you not from everlasting?

My God, my Holy One, we will not die.

O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment;

O Rock, you have ordained them to punish.

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;

you cannot tolerate wrong.

Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?

Why are you silent while the wicked

swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

—Habakkuk 1:12–13

IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING that the job description for a Hebrew prophet included a line stating that the successful applicant would be possessed of a keen social conscience. Habakkuk was well qualified in that regard. He felt the horror of his society's injustices strongly. He cried out to God for answers, and was troubled by the Lord's apparent silence and inactivity.

AN ANSWER FROM THE LORD

In the opening words of his oracle Habakkuk has been complaining about God's failure to respond to his fervent pleas for help. But then, suddenly, God did answer Habakkuk's prayer. The prophet discovered by experience the truth that, in theologian Francis Schaeffer's phrase, "God is there, and he is not silent." God responds to the prophet's cries of complaint in Habakkuk 1:5:

"Look at the nations and watch—
and be utterly amazed.

For I am going to do something in your days that you
would not believe,
even if you were told."

Here God announces that he is about to act. In fact, the thing he is planning to do is going to amaze everyone. "Wait till you see this," God says to Habakkuk. "I am about to do something you won't believe, even when I tell you what it is." God's statement in verse 5 reminds us again of perhaps the most basic element in the biblical worldview; namely, the conviction that God is at work in the events of history. For the writers of the Bible, God is the primary actor on the world's stage. Secondary causes and human instruments are just that: secondary and instrumental. God is the One who writes the script and directs the action. Historians talk about what King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon did around the turn of the sixth century B.C. The Bible talks about what *God* did when Nebuchadnezzar overthrew Assyria and destroyed Jerusalem.

THE GOD WHO IS IN CONTROL

From faith's perspective, God is always involved in history, whether in the public events painted on the grand canvas of the world or in the more intimate happenings of our individual

lives. God does know all that is going on, both in the macrocosm of the universe and in the microcosm of a person's own head; in fact, he is personally active everywhere, at all times, in all things. God is neither inert nor uninterested. He is neither passive nor disengaged. He doesn't take a "hands-off" approach to the world and its inhabitants.

In the Bible's view, this is what chiefly distinguishes the real God from phony gods. The psalmist describes the idols of the nations this way:

They have mouths, but they do not speak;
they have eyes, but they do not see;
they have ears, but they do not hear,
and there is no breath in their mouths.

—Psalm 135:16–17 NRSV

The God of Israel, by contrast, is the *living* God.

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, *for the living God.*

—Psalm 42:1–2 (emphasis added)

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.

—Psalm 84:1–2 (emphasis added)

Unlike idols, the living God is not deaf or dumb. He sees and hears, and he speaks. God speaks his word, whether of creation, salvation, or judgment, and all that he says comes to pass.

WHY DOESN'T GOD ACT MORE LIKE GOD?

By the word of the LORD were the heavens made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth . . .
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

☞ Psalm 33:6, 9

As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish . . .
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

☞ Isaiah 55:10–11

And unlike the idols the living God also is not helpless or inert. He acts. He *does* things. Israel's most sublime offering of praise was called forth by the psalmist's meditation upon God's acts of grace and mercy, forgiveness and salvation. He exhorts himself (and us) to praise the Lord

who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.

He made known his ways to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel:

The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.

☞ Psalm 103:3–8

But God is not just responsible for the good things that happen, the saving events, the deeds of love and mercy, the actions that establish justice and righteousness. According to the Bible, he is responsible for *everything* that happens. “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” asked Job (Job 2:10 NRSV).

All of this is to say that, in the Bible’s worldview, God governs all of life. He rules all people and brings all things to pass. The nations obey his will and carry out his purposes. The earth’s rulers—presidents and prime ministers, dictators and kings—all serve to further God’s plans, whether knowingly and willingly or not. What happens in the world happens because God chooses that it should. And finally—and most importantly—all things, good and bad, are used by God to work ultimate good for those who love him and belong to him (Rom. 8:28).

Obviously, there are difficulties in accepting this biblical view of God. One difficulty is this: How do you know it’s true? Couldn’t it just be wishful thinking? Few of us would want to face a world completely devoid of deeper meaning and purpose. We long to believe that history—whether world history or our own life story—has a rationale behind it. If it does, then even our suffering can have some purpose. Our misery is not just senseless pain. So maybe we humans have invented this idea of a great, all-knowing, all-powerful Father in the Sky who superintends everything and makes sure it all turns out OK in the end. Who is right? Skeptics who say there is no transcendent meaning in life, or believers who assert that whatever the appearances may be, God is on the throne? There is no way of *proving* the answer with absolute certainty. You can’t reason or argue your way to the truth. You can only believe, one way or the other.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

A second difficulty with the view that God is at work in and through the events of world history is what is usually referred to as the problem of evil. *Theodicy* is the theological term for attempts to resolve the problem of evil, and in John Milton's words, "justify the ways of God to man" (*Paradise Lost*). Granted we put our faith in the sovereign rule of a gracious God. Granted we go on believing in both parts of the prayer we learned as little children that "God is great *and* God is good." But then how can what we know and believe about the character of God be reconciled with all the bad things going on in the world? It's not just that God doesn't respond immediately to our cries for help, or that he permits suffering to go on. It's that he chooses means and instruments to carry out his will that seem so—to put it mildly—inappropriate.

Where was God on September 11, 2001? Was he in the twin towers of the World Trade Center, alongside innocent victims and heroic rescuers, as so many have affirmed? Was he on the airplanes, comforting passengers and inspiring brave resistance? Fine, we have no problem with that. But then, was he somehow also active in the attacks, allowing them or perhaps even inspiring them? Some Christian leaders have asserted that God was using the terrorist attacks to judge America for its spiritual waywardness, an idea I personally am not prepared to endorse. But many Muslims have gone much further than this. I was watching a television interview recently with a young Muslim woman from Yemen. She related how she wept tears of joy on September 11 as she saw pictures of the World Trade Center collapsing, because she felt that justice was being done to America. Is that what was happening? God inspired suicide bombers to wreak his vengeance by murdering 3,000 innocent people? What kind of a God would act that way? The very suggestion is obscene.

Exactly. Now we are face-to-face with the problem of evil.

This is precisely the suggestion with which Habakkuk struggled—that God was sponsoring an obscenity. The magnitude of the problem hits with much greater force and immediacy when we translate biblical instances of evil into current events. But the message revealed to Habakkuk is that ultimately *God himself* would be the One behind the horrible acts of war that were about to sweep over and destroy the kingdom of Judah.

“I am raising up the Babylonians,
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwelling places not their own.
They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.
Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.
Their cavalry gallops headlong;
their horsemen come from afar.
They fly like a vulture swooping to devour;
they all come bent on violence.
Their hordes advance like a desert wind
and gather prisoners like sand.
They deride kings
and scoff at rulers.
They laugh at all fortified cities;
they build earthen ramps and capture them.
Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty men, whose own strength is their god.”

☪—Habakkuk 1:6–11 (emphasis added)

The “good news” Habakkuk received from God is that God was going to intervene in Judah’s life in an amazing fashion. He will address the problems that Habakkuk has been so persistently calling to his attention. But before the prophet gets too excited, God explains that the amazing acts he will

perform are going to be amazingly bad for his people, not amazingly good. “I am sending the Babylonians,” God announced, “They are fierce and cruel—marching across the land, conquering cities and towns” (Hab. 1:6–7 CEV). So God’s response to all the things that are wrong in Judean society is to bring judgment. He will punish the people by causing the vicious armies of Babylon to conquer them and destroy their country, killing countless thousands of Jews and carrying most of the survivors off into captivity.

This revelation raises many more questions than it answers. *Wait a minute, God, we can imagine Habakkuk thinking. The Babylonians! You’re going to use them! Why, they’re worse than we are! They’re completely immoral. They’re cruel and heartless, and as for idolatry, well, if you think it’s a problem in Judah, have you ever been to Babylon? How can you possibly think of using them as an instrument of your justice?* Furthermore, the Babylonians could not have cared less about the Lord, the God of Israel. They did not believe they were instruments of his justice; they didn’t believe in him at all. The Babylonians thought their own strength and superior tactics and powerful armies were responsible for their military success. Babylon was a typical world power: brutal, idolatrous, and arrogant. So how could a just God not only give them success but even use them as an instrument of his policy?

NO EASY ANSWERS

If you think I’m going to solve the problem of evil, think again. For one thing, God hasn’t asked me to be his defense counsel. For another, I can’t solve it. I can’t explain God’s actions because I don’t understand them. There are no easy answers for the problem of evil. But plenty of inadequate ones are being offered. A popular response today is what might be called the “Weak God Theory.” “If God is all good, then he is not all-powerful. If God is all-powerful then he is not all

good,” said the American writer Norman Mailer. “I am a disbeliever in the omnipotence of God because of the Holocaust. But for 35 years or so I’ve been believing that God is doing the best he can” (quote in *Time* magazine). This is similar to the understanding of God proposed in books like the popular best-seller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Rabbi Harold Kushner. The reasoning behind this view goes like this:

1. God would surely prevent something as horrible as . . . [fill in the blank] if he could, otherwise he would be a monster.
2. He did not prevent it.
3. But it’s impossible to believe he is a monster.
4. Therefore, he must not have been able to prevent what happened.

Well, that is one way to solve the problem of evil. You simply say that God has nothing to do with it, and that he couldn’t really do anything about it: God doesn’t give people cancer, God doesn’t cause accidents, God would never hurt anyone, and God would heal everyone if he could. Therefore, when people do get hurt or don’t get better, it’s not God’s fault. If there is a God, he’s just doing the best he can.

Before we dismiss this point of view too casually, we ought to recognize its strengths. This view acknowledges what the Bible calls “the mystery of iniquity”; it realizes how inexplicable specific tragedies are. This view also rises out of a recognition of the profound wrongness of innocent suffering, and a commendable sensitivity to the deep pain so many have experienced. These experiences ought not to be, and they were not part of God’s original intention for his creation. There is something disgusting about pat and easy religious answers that gloss over the depths of human suffering and talk glibly about tragic events as being “God’s will.”

But in the end I myself cannot be satisfied with the Weak

God Theory. I can't help but wonder what would be the point of believing in the God suggested by this view of suffering and evil. I mean, a God who cannot prevent accidents or heal fatal illnesses? A God who is stymied by a blood clot or checkmated by a drunk driver? What kind of God is that? An innocuous, powerless, pathetic God. Why would anyone waste their time believing in or praying to a God who is just as helpless as we are? In one of his sermons, pastor-theologian John Piper relates the story of his mother's tragic death. She was killed in a freak accident while on tour in the Holy Land. A lumber truck lost its load just as it was passing the tour bus, and a board smashed through the bus window, killing Piper's mother instantly. Did God permit the accident to occur? Was he sovereign in that place at that moment? In the midst of grief and desolation, Piper nevertheless concluded that yes, God was ruling there and then. "I take little comfort," he explained, "in a God who cannot control a two-by-four."

Neither do I. But this is certainly not the biblical testimony about God. Unlike many contemporary writers on spiritual subjects (but like John Piper), the prophets and apostles consistently and persistently refuse to reduce God to an irrelevance. The Bible articulates certain basic truths about God, and Habakkuk rehearses them for us at the end of chapter 1: God is *eternal*, above and outside all time and history (while nevertheless active in them). God is *self-existent* and *sovereign*; he does rule over the whole universe. And God is *reliable* and *dependable*, "O Rock," as Habakkuk addressed him. God can be trusted. We are safe when we take refuge in him. Above all, God is *the holy one*—"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil," said the prophet. The Lord is pure goodness. God does not, in fact he cannot, compromise with evil. Humans may be corrupted but never God. He can neither do wrong nor be associated with it. This is the God whom believers know and love. "*My God, my Holy One,*" Habakkuk called him (emphasis added). He is ours and we are his.

RECONCILING FAITH AND EXPERIENCE

The prophet knows all this about God, and he believes it, but the problem was that he couldn't tell that any of those things were true just then from what was happening in his life and world. What Habakkuk *thought* about God seemed to be contradicted by what he *saw* happening around him. That's what caused his distress. As the evangelist Leighton Ford said after the death of his twenty-two-year-old son, Sandy: "Our problem is reconciling our faith with our experience." How do you do that?

Not quickly or easily. At the end of chapter 1, Habakkuk is left dangling, so to speak. God doesn't make everything clear to him immediately. But in its own way, to dangle like that produces a kind of solution, because just there Habakkuk continues to struggle with God. When your faith seems to be contradicted by your experience, the easy thing to do is to give up your faith. Just abandon it. Turn away from God in disappointment and anger. But it is far better, though more difficult, to keep on wrestling with the problem like Habakkuk did, refusing either to surrender your faith or to deny your experience.

Here is a key fact: The whole time he is asking his questions and venting his complaints, Habakkuk is praying. He isn't just talking about all of his spiritual doubts and struggles. He's talking to God about them. And Habakkuk is willing to leave them there too, and to leave himself in the hands of a God whose ways he sometimes can't understand.

God's actions don't always make sense to us or satisfy us. We should be very careful in thinking that we have everything figured out, and that we know exactly what God is up to in any given event. We have no more right to do that than we have to dismiss God from all involvement. One of the greatest responses to the problem of suffering in all of world literature is recorded in the book of Job. Job is innocent and blameless,

yet a series of horrible calamities befalls him. His friends are sure it is God's justice ("I wept tears of joy when I saw the twin towers fall."). But we know, as did Job, that such a response is not the true explanation. Job screams for answers. He challenges God to justify what he has done. For thirty-seven chapters the dramatic tension builds, as all the pious and orthodox responses seeking to justify Job's miseries and exonerate God of any wrongdoing are exploded one by one.

And then at last in chapter 38, God himself speaks out of the storm. His answer to Job's agonized demands for an explanation is simply to throw a string of questions and observations about the mysteries and wonders of creation back at Job: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? . . . Have you ever given orders to the morning? . . . Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons? . . . Look at the behemoth, which I made . . . Can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook?" The English novelist Charles Williams remarked about this climactic encounter, "As a response to the problem of innocent suffering, 'Behold the hippopotamus' leaves something to be desired!"

But, strangely enough, God's response actually does satisfy his suffering servant. God doesn't give Job any answers, but that no longer matters to Job, because he has seen the Lord:

"Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee?
I lay my hand on my mouth . . .
"I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees thee;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes."

☞ Job 40:4; 42:5-6 RSV

That may be enough for you and me as well. Why? Because knowing God is even better than knowing all the answers to the problem of evil.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Read Habakkuk 1, verses 12-13. What is Habakkuk asking God to explain?
2. Read God's answer in Habakkuk 1, verse 5. What does this answer tell us about God and his relationship with current events and the events of history?
3. Read together the passages from the Psalms and Isaiah (pp. 25-27). How do these passages portray God and distinguish him from idols?
4. "What happens in the world happens because God chooses that it should. And . . . all things, good and bad, are used by God to work ultimate good for those who love him and belong to him (Romans 8:28)" (p. 27). Is it easy or difficult for you to believe these statements?
5. "What Habakkuk *thought* about God seemed to be contradicted by what he *saw* happening around him" (p. 33). Sometimes faith and experience collide. Think about a time and circumstance in your own life when your faith seemed to be contradicted by your experience. How did you handle the contradiction?

Chapter Three

STANDING ON THE RAMPARTS

If you want to question God, go right ahead. You are in good biblical company. But if you do raise some issues with the Lord, be sure to at least wait for an answer.

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.

Then the LORD replied:

“Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald may run with it.
For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
it will certainly come and will not delay.

“See, he is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous will live by his faith . . .”

☞ Habakkuk 2:1–4

ONE OF THE MOST powerful expressions of the spirit of modern nihilism is the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. In this drama the stage is bare except for a small, pathetic-looking tree. The structure of the play is monotonous, the action repetitive. The play consists mostly of a dialogue between two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for a man called Godot to show up. They have asked to meet with Godot, and they repeatedly call upon him in language with religious overtones, asking him to come. The characters are given to understand that Godot is considering their request. But nothing much happens during the play's two acts. The same events and dialogues recur, provoking a feeling of meaninglessness and helplessness in the audience. And in the end, a messenger arrives to announce that Godot isn't coming.

The message of the play, of course, is that God isn't coming. Vladimir and Estragon are thoroughly modern characters. They know there is no point to waiting, because there's no point to anything—no meaning, no purpose, no loving Father in heaven, no heaven (or hell); nothing, in fact, beyond the bare stage of this world. They only go on waiting because they have nothing else better to do, and because they can't muster the energy to kill themselves and end life once and for all.

FAITH VS. EXPERIENCE

Habakkuk's basic problem, as we saw at the end of the last chapter, is the same as that of thoughtful believers everywhere. It's the struggle to reconcile faith with experience. How can we square what we believe about the goodness, love and power of

God with what we see happening in the world around us—or perhaps in our own lives?

If God is good, if he's so holy he can't even bear to look on wrongdoing as Habakkuk says (1:13), and if he's also watching over and governing the world, well then, what's going on? What's wrong with this picture? Something *is* wrong because the world, in case you haven't noticed, is chock-full of tragedies and atrocities. God's silence in the face of our cries for help and his failure to act to prevent the occurrence of horrible things is difficult to understand. But it's really only difficult for those of us who believe everything about God that Habakkuk believed. After all, if God isn't all that powerful, then maybe he can't help it when bad things happen. No, says Habakkuk, the God of the Bible *is* the One in control. It is God who ordains and appoints, who raises up and casts down. Nothing happens without his involvement.

Well then, maybe God isn't as good or as kind as we think he is. What if he doesn't really care what happens to us? Or maybe God isn't all that involved in what's going on down here; maybe he is too big, or too remote, for the little lives of humans to engage his attention and care. Perhaps he is beyond the concepts of good and evil as we understand them; he just keeps grinding out his purpose, and if innocent people get crushed in the gears of Providence's machinery, well, that's the way it goes. Maybe God is long on power, but a little short on loving-kindness and tender mercy. No, says Habakkuk again. God is the Holy One, he is perfect goodness; he is the Rock, he is steadfast covenant love (1:12).

ON THE WATCHTOWER

So what's the answer? Will God respond to our struggle to understand what he is really up to in a world where all is not well? That's what Habakkuk wants to know, and in a famous passage in chapter 2 he tells how he climbs up on a watchtower

to wait for God to answer his questions. “I will stand at my watch,” he said, “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” (2:1).

The Bible speaks often of the importance of waiting for the Lord—of standing, so to speak, on the ramparts alongside Habakkuk. Some wonderful promises are made to those who are willing to watch and wait like this. Here are a few of them:

Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

—Isaiah 40:31 NRSV

For the LORD is a God of justice;
blessed are those who wait for him.

—Isaiah 30:18b NRSV

The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.

—Lamentations 3:25–26 NRSV

So there is great encouragement to obey the Psalmist's exhortation: “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” (Ps. 27:14 NRSV).

Waiting is a function of hoping. To wait for the Lord is to confidently expect God's deliverance—from pain or suffering, from sin, from material want, from sorrow, from loneliness, from all the troubles and evil that blight our life in this world (cf. Rom. 8:24–25). To wait is to refuse to give up on God, no matter how bleak the circumstances are, no matter how discouraging appearances may be. “I wait for the Lord,” cried the

psalmist, “and in his word I hope!” (Ps. 130:5). Waiting is persistent trust in both the goodness and power of God, and that equals hope—no matter what!

There is a reason why waiting for God is so important. It is because while our agenda may have the same bottom line as God’s—which is our final redemption and restoration in the perfection of glory and joy (see Eph. 1:3–10)—our timetables and methods are different. We want it all to happen right now. We want an immediate end to suffering. We want wrong to lose and right to win. We want earthly happiness and physical health and prosperity, and we want it all today. When we don’t get it, we are tempted to question God or to doubt his wisdom or power or even his goodness. And some of us reject him altogether. But God never stumbles, and God is up to *all* good. He’s just working to a different schedule. “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends,” wrote the apostle Peter, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:8–9). And God is using ways and means to accomplish his ends that differ from the ones we would choose.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”

declares the LORD.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

☞—Isaiah 55:8–9

WRITE THIS DOWN

So here’s the picture: troubled Habakkuk metaphorically standing up there on a watchtower like a sentinel in a besieged

city looking for the approach of the relief column. In the New Testament book of Revelation we read about the souls of God's martyrs calling out from under the altar, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" And they are told to wait a little longer (Rev. 6:10–11).

A few months before his death, I interviewed theologian Lewis Smedes for a Words of Hope radio program. We were talking about the problem of suffering and evil—all the usual things: war, sickness, pain, poverty. I asked Smedes how he tried as a Christian to reconcile his faith in God with the untold misery in the world. He replied, "When I pray I no longer ask 'Why?' I ask 'When?' God, when are you going to come and *fix* things?" Some may think that questioning God like that is impertinent, a sign of deficient faith. Not at all. To question God—even to pester God!—indicates a lively, healthy faith. What's deficient is to question him without waiting for an answer. Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, believers expect God to show up before the end of our little play.

In our culture, doubting the existence of absolute truth, especially absolute spiritual truth, has been raised to the status of a new orthodoxy. Such skepticism regarding objective truth is not a recent development in western society. The great nineteenth-century Catholic thinker John Henry Newman described this attitude in his spiritual autobiography, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. "Liberalism believes," wrote Newman,

that truth and falsehood in religion are but matters of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth; that we are not more acceptable to God by believing this than by believing that; that no one is answerable for his opinions; that they are a matter of necessity or accident; that it is enough if we sincerely hold what we profess; that our merit lies in seeking, not in possessing.

This view of truth, so aptly summarized by Newman 150 years ago, has today become the default position of most educated people. There could not be a greater contrast to the outlook of biblical faith. Biblical Christians believe that truth is a matter of conforming to the nature of reality, which is determined by God. Conflicting truth claims cannot all be right anymore than conflicting answers to an arithmetic problem can be. In C. S. Lewis's novel *That Hideous Strength*, one character matter-of-factly observes to another, "I suppose there are two views about everything." "Eh? Two views?" the other man replies. "There are a dozen views about everything until you know the answer. Then there's never more than one."

So here's Habakkuk, standing on his watchtower, waiting for the answer. For the believer, waiting for God is not anything like waiting for Godot. The wait of faith is as different from the wait of skepticism as hope is from despair. Habakkuk waits because he expects God to respond to him eventually. He believes both that there are answers—the right answers—to his questions and that God will reveal them to him. If our hope is that God will never give up on us, our faith means we never give up on him.

And, finally, God does answer Habakkuk.

Then the LORD told me:

"I will give you my message in the form of a vision.

Write it clearly enough to be read at a glance.

At the time I have decided, my words will come true.

You can trust what I say about the future.

It may take a long time, but keep on waiting—
it will happen!

"I, the LORD, refuse to accept anyone who is proud.

Only those who live by faith are acceptable to me."

—Habakkuk 2:2–4 CEV

God not only answers Habakkuk, but through him he speaks to us in our struggles. “Say this loud and clear,” the Lord tells the prophet. “There *is* an answer. Write it plainly so that others can read it—even at a glance.”

And the answer goes like this: At the bottom of everything the universe is not meaningless and chaotic, as it would be if God were not in control. Life is neither a horror nor an absurd comedy, as it would be if there were no God. It isn't what Shakespeare's *Macbeth* once called it—“a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” We are not left alone in our suffering, with nothing to do but weep or shrug our shoulders in resignation. Not at all. Because God is real, and really cares about us, all our sufferings have meaning. Our tears are not wasted; God bottles them up, he records them in his book (Ps. 56:8). And our questions do not meet indifferent silence; they all have answers.

But not always immediate answers. “At the time I have decided,” said the Lord, “my words will come true. You can trust what I say about the future. It may take a long time, but keep on waiting—it will happen!” (v. 3 CEV). God follows his own agenda, in his own way. He will show us the meaning of everything; he'll give us the explanations we're longing for; he'll put to rest all our doubts and give peace to all our troubled thoughts. But in his good time, not ours.

TWO WAYS OF LIVING

Habakkuk 2:4 adds an important clue to the significance of this truth for the way we live: “See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous will live by his faith . . .” This foundational verse—the key to the whole book of Habakkuk (not to mention the whole Bible)—points out that there are two basic ways of approaching life. One is the way of the “puffed up,” or proud, that is, those whose desires are not upright, who worship themselves rather than God. Such

people rely on their own power, their own strength and ability and intelligence. These are the kind of folks Habakkuk alluded to earlier when he described men who sacrifice to their own fishing nets because they think they have made themselves rich (1:16). The “proud,” in the biblical sense of that term, refers to people who believe that they are in control of their own lives, that they can dismiss God and go it alone. When things go well, the proud credit themselves. But when setbacks and reversals come, all they can do is to wait them out with the stoic’s creed: “This too shall pass.” Or, if things become too unbearable, take a quick exit from life. The proud live on their own and acknowledge nothing and no one above them; the rest of the stage is bare.

The other kind of people are those who live by faith in God: “The righteous will live by their faith” (2:4 NRSV).

The fact that life is sometimes painful beyond words and that God’s reasons for allowing it to be so are not yet clear to us presents us with a choice. On the one hand, we can lapse into cynicism. Mark Twain’s mordant wit was a cover for the despair of a man who, because of personal tragedies, had turned against God and lost all hope. “Whoever has lived long enough to find out what life is,” Twain wrote in one of his later works (*Pudd’nhead Wilson*), “knows how deep a debt we owe to Adam, the first great benefactor of our race. He brought death into the world.”

The life of the proud ends in despair. The alternative is to live by faith, that is, to go on trusting in God and hoping in his word. A friend who is a pastor was telling me about a nursing home visit he made recently. He was calling on a woman whose mind had grown feeble, and who could no longer speak after suffering a stroke. She was in a double room, and as he entered my friend noticed a visitor sitting beside the other resident’s bed. He sat down next to his parishioner, held her hand, and talked to her quietly for a while. She struggled to communicate with him, but could not manage any words. At

last, he asked if she would like him to read something to her from the Bible and pray with her. The woman nodded eagerly. As the pastor read, the comforting words of the Psalms filled the room; then they prayed together. And as he prayed, my friend heard the visitor on the other side of the room mutter, “I don’t believe any of that shit.”

Needless to say, it shocked him a bit, as it did me when he told me the story. My friend was taken aback by this weird juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, and he stumbled through the remainder of his prayer. But that moment really opened a door upon ultimate reality. In the end, those two responses are the only options. When faced with the promises of God, either we will turn away with a curse, or embrace them in faith, even if all we can manage is to nod yes.

That is the difference between the “proud” and those who live by faith.

LIVING BY FAITH

But what does it really mean to *live* by faith? It’s one thing to confess our faith, to say yes to the promises of God. But then what; what comes next? The best place to look for the answer to that question is in the lives of the people of God. Among other things, the Bible is a faith journal, showing how faith actually functions in the lives of real people—people, we discover, who are not so very different from us. The biblical “Hall of Fame” for lived-out faith is the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. The writer said there of the Old Testament believers, “These all died in faith, not having received what was promised but having seen it and greeted it from afar . . . Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God” (Heb. 11:13, 16 rsv). The point here is not how they died exactly but rather how they were living when they died. They “were still living by faith when they died” (NIV). They persevered in trusting the Lord right up to the end. They continued faithful

even unto death, whenever and however and wherever death came. Nothing deterred them from walking with God; nothing dissuaded them from believing in God. They stayed the course.

Some claim that faith in God is the secret to getting what you want out of life. If you have enough faith or know how to pray in just the right way, then you can get whatever you desire. You can have everything you are looking for. According to this view, faith is a sort of magic key that unlocks God's treasure chest of blessings.

But that just isn't true. Faith does not mean getting all you want. Biblical faith means trusting God even when you do not get what you want. Every faithful person in the Old Testament was looking forward expectantly to the coming of the promised Savior, the Messiah. It was the one thing each of them wanted more than anything else, and yet every one of them died without having received the promise. Still they went on looking, they went on hoping, they went on believing, they went on working, obeying, serving and suffering. They did not "weaken in faith" (Rom. 4:19 NRSV) or turn back from following the Lord, even when the hoped-for blessing failed to arrive.

Hebrews 11 says that men and women of faith saw the things God promised "and welcomed them from a distance" (v. 13 NIV). They "greeted [what was promised] from afar" (RSV). Just as living by faith means continuing to the very end to look forward to the things God has promised you even if you don't receive them, so it also means continuing to the very end to trust and obey God even when he seems far away.

I came across a striking quotation recently: "Adversity introduces a man to himself." That's true for believers, too. Adversity introduces us to ourselves. Adversity reveals the quality of our faith. It's not so hard to believe in God when he seems very real to you and feels very close, when your prayers are being wonderfully answered and you can see continual

evidence of God's blessing and presence in your life. But it takes great faith to believe in God and to go on serving God when he feels far away, when your prayers go unheard and unheeded (or so it seems), and when it looks for all the world as though the skeptics are right after all and the idea that there is a loving heavenly Father watching over you and caring for you is just a fantasy.

So the crucial issue is this: How do you respond to adversity? What do you reveal yourself to be, proud or humble, cynical or faithful? Pretty much everything that happens to you every day is God's way of allowing you to answer that question. You prove whether you are a person of faith especially by the way you react under the pressure of suffering. It is only when you are faced with circumstances that could lead you to question God that you are in a position to demonstrate whether or not you will wait for God in faith—or just give up. The promise is that if you *don't* give up, if you go on trusting God to the end, you will live.

This is the message of Habakkuk 2:4. Remember the opening verse of the book: "The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet *received*." Here is the characteristic assumption of all the prophetic literature, namely, that the message of the prophet is actually the word of the Lord. The idea that the righteous have to humble themselves in the face of life's mysteries and tragedies and go on living by trusting God is not Habakkuk's unique personal perspective on the problem of suffering. It is a revelation from God himself of the way things really are.

Several years ago I was listening to a discussion during a Words of Hope board meeting. One of our trustees, a nationally renowned business leader who was also a wise and valued personal mentor, paused to make a point. "I learned many years ago that at some point everyone has to answer for him- or herself this basic question: 'Is the Bible true?'" Three hundred years ago a Dutch pastor named Wilhelmus à Brakel

wrote this advice to those who were seeking spiritual light in their darkness.

Refrain from exerting yourself to have views of lofty matters, but cling humbly to the Word of God. Whenever you read it, and whenever a passage of scripture occurs to you, then think: "This is the truth." If it is a promise, esteem it as such, and do not lift your heart above that Word . . . If there is an exhortation to believe or to practice another virtue, then think: "This is my rule of conduct, and according to this I wish to walk in all simplicity."

Habbakuk's announcement that the righteous will live by faith is God's own truth; believe it! This trumpet call will be amplified in the New Testament into a universal offer of salvation.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean to “wait for the LORD”?
2. Why is waiting for God so important?
3. Have there been situations in your life when you were tempted to give up on getting an answer from God? What were the circumstances? What was the outcome?
4. Read Habakkuk 2, verse 4. Describe the two kinds of people referenced in this verse. How are their approaches to life different? What are the end results of each approach to life?
5. Name some of your favorite Bible “greats” who lived by faith. (See Hebrews 11.)
6. Can you name some contemporary examples of people you know who live by faith? What characteristics of their lives convince you it is so? How do they react to adversity?

Standing on the Ramparts

Chapter Four

JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

If you asked the apostle Paul what was the most important verse in the Bible, he probably would have answered, “The righteous will live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4).

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

—Romans 1:16–17

SO WHAT EXACTLY *does* the New Testament make of Habakkuk 2, verse 4?

In Paul’s understanding, this basic insight about faith that God gave to Habakkuk can be read in two ways. First of all, the righteous person will live because of his or her faith. The proud are going to disappear. They won’t endure. But the righteous who are living by faith—who go on trusting God even when they don’t understand what he’s doing—they will *live* forever. Through faith, eternal life is theirs: “The righteous *will live* by his faith” (emphasis added).

But it also works the other way around because the reverse is equally true: Those who live by faith *are righteous*. It is just this attitude of faith, this willingness to believe in God when there is little else to go by, that makes us acceptable to God, even when the evidence might seem to be against him. God is pleased to count as righteous those who trust in him. This message about the way of salvation, that is, about a way of being counted as righteous *before* God on the basis of faith *in* God, constitutes the core of the Christian gospel. It is what we mean by the theological expression, “justification by faith.”

MANY WAYS, ONE GOD

While traveling a couple of years ago on a train in India, I found myself engaged in conversation with a twelve-year-old Hindu boy. Bakshar was friendly, lively and curious—and he just wouldn't quit! After telling me all about himself and peppering me with questions about myself—who was I, where was I from, where was I staying, where was I going, how did I like India—he finally got around to my occupation. What sort of work did I do? I thought about how I could answer that in a way Bakshar could understand. “I'm a teacher,” I told him; “I teach Christianity.” “Ah,” interjected a man sitting nearby who had been listening in, “many religions, only one God; many different ways to God!”

That isn't just his opinion. It's the majority view of the human race. A remarkable number of people believe that all religions are pretty much the same and say basically similar things, adjusted for cultural and historical differences. These same people also think that any religion can provide a valid connection to God. Recently, I happened to catch part of a Phil Donahue talk show on television. The question the various guests were discussing—or, to put it more accurately, shouting at each other over—was this: “Is Jesus Christ the only way of salvation?” One of the panelists was an evangelical

Christian, who said in a polite and reasoned way, “Well, yes, actually. He is.” At which point the host began jumping up and down and yelling, “You can’t make that claim! You don’t have enough information!” But if the Bible is true, we *do* have enough information.

TWO DIFFERENT WAYS

According to the Bible, there really are only two ways of looking at salvation. One is the way of *religion*, and the other is the way of the *gospel*. The Bible—which is widely believed to be a religious textbook—is actually surprisingly critical of religion. The way religion understands salvation is neatly summed up in one of America’s favorite texts: “God helps those who help themselves.” We love this quote because it appeals to our sense of self-reliance, our famous “can-do” spirit. But this attitude is also consistent with the religious mindset wherever that is found, west or east. Religion teaches that it’s up to us to do what is required—with a little help from God, of course.

But “God helps those who help themselves” is not a biblical text. What the Bible says, in fact, is just the opposite. Listen to this statement from Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Christ died for the ungodly . . . While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6, 8). Religion says, “God saves the righteous.” The gospel says, “God saves the unrighteous.” “Christ died for the ungodly.” God helps those who *can’t* help themselves.

When I contrast the way of religion with the way of the gospel, please don’t think I’m only talking about non-Christian religions. People born and raised in the Christian tradition are just as capable as anyone else of using religion to obscure the gospel and substitute for it a program of salvation by human effort. One person who discovered this first-hand was Martin Luther. As a young man Luther had set out on a spiritual quest to find forgiveness for his sins. The church of his

day said that if salvation was his concern, the best thing he could do was to become a monk. So young Martin headed off to a monastery and became not only a monk but eventually a priest and a doctor of theology as well. He lived under the most rigorous discipline, torturing himself spiritually and physically in an effort to do penance for all his sins as the church prescribed. But he found no peace. His righteousness never seemed to be enough. He did not experience forgiveness.

Exhausted by his struggle to attain salvation, Luther gradually began to realize that the biblical gospel was drastically different from the religion he had been attempting to practice in the monastery. He was especially drawn to a verse from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans: "For in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:17). As Luther wrestled to understand this statement, the light of evangelical truth dawned on him. The righteousness that saves us does not come from the attempts to do good that we offer *to* God. No! Salvation depends upon having a different righteousness altogether: one coming *from* God and supplied to us in place of our own righteousness, to be claimed by faith alone. This gospel of a "justification by faith" became Luther's watchword; his preaching and teaching of it was the spark that set off the correcting movement in the church known as the Reformation.

PAUL'S FAVORITE TEXT

Fifteen hundred years before Luther, the apostle Paul had made a similar experiential discovery. For him, the basic principle of the gospel was best expressed in Habakkuk 2:4, a verse he loved to quote: "The righteous will live by faith" (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:17). The gospel, as Paul explained to the Christians in Rome, is the good news about Jesus' death for sin and resurrection to new life lived in and for God. This gospel is

God's power for salvation to all who believe it and put their faith in Christ. That is because in the gospel we discover the secret of being made forever right with God by means of faith alone. And this wasn't just his own idea, Paul added; this is what Scripture itself teaches, for as Habakkuk 2:4 testifies: "the righteous will live by his faith."

The truth that is summarized in the expression "justification by faith" is not just an abstract theological principle. It is a radical, life-overturning, all-transforming reality. In his most intimate letter, the letter to the Philippians, Paul offers a very personal glimpse into his own life history. He describes his ethnic and religious background: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel . . . a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil. 3:5–6). Paul's wasn't the usual testimony that we have come to expect from a convert to Christianity. No drug addiction, no prison term, no godless, downward spiral of destructive behavior suddenly stopped and reversed when he came to the Lord. Paul's conversion story wasn't like that at all. His life before he met Jesus Christ was zealously religious and scrupulously virtuous. The apostle Paul wasn't an example of humanity at its worst, but of humanity at its best!

The pre-Christian Paul was righteous, both outwardly (as far as others could see), and inwardly (as far as he knew himself). Listening to him describe himself, one gets the impression of a privileged man enjoying great success in his chosen field and quite happy with himself as a result. Paul lists a long series of things that explain his pride. The blood of Abraham flowed pure in his veins. He had been born and raised orthodox; he had the very best spiritual pedigree. But Paul did not merely rest on the privileges that were his by birth. He also cultivated his natural advantages by active commitment to the religious life. Paul kept all the rules. He went to all the right schools, he joined the right party, and he was noticed by the

right people. He became a Pharisee, the most prestigious religious group because it was the strictest. And then he became a zealous persecutor of the new sect of Christians to prove his devotion to the law of God. Even among the Pharisees Paul's reputation for orthodoxy and piety was great. Finally, the apostle sums it all up this way: "As far as keeping the Law is concerned, I kept it perfectly"—or so it seemed to him at the time. Luther once remarked that if anyone could ever have been saved by being a good monk, it was he. Paul's practice of religion was just like that. If striving to be devout and zealous for God is what it takes to please God, Paul was a clear winner.

But there came a moment when Paul's eyes were opened—literally—by a vision of the risen Jesus Christ. Paul came to reevaluate his whole life as a result of that encounter. Everything he formerly had valued and prided himself upon he now saw as worthless. His vaunted self-righteousness crumbled into nothingness. It was truly a moment of reckoning, of summing up. Paul added up all his human pluses: his birth and background and upbringing, his zeal and morality and righteousness. What he found was that all these things totaled less than zero. "Whatever was to my profit," he wrote, "I now consider loss for the sake of Christ . . . for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . ." (Phil. 3:7–8).

How can this be? Are all our attempts at pleasing God really worthless? Is every good deed just wasted effort as far as getting right with God is concerned? Is religion merely rubbish? With respect to justification, the answer is yes! The trouble is that whatever we do on our own is only *relatively* good. And God doesn't grant salvation on the basis of our giving religion a shot or making a pretty good effort at doing what's right. God is perfect goodness. Only the perfectly good can ever hope to merit God's approval. So what are less-than-perfect people to do?

Well, here's the answer, and it is "good news," *evangel*,

“gospel.” We can make a trade. A wonderful exchange is offered to us in Jesus Christ. We can give up our own poor righteousness, our performance-based semi-goodness, for a kind of righteousness that isn’t ours by nature but is credited to us by God when we put our trust in Christ. Here’s how Paul explains why he was willing to consider everything in his past as so much rubbish: “In order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:9 RSV).

There are only two options. Either you try to do it on your own, by yourself, through your own virtuous performance of religious acts and charitable deeds, or you admit your failure and cast yourself upon God’s grace. Paul surrendered his own proud religion-produced, self-defined righteousness as so much garbage, and he exchanged it for Christ’s perfect righteousness—a righteousness that is offered to anyone who puts his or her faith in the Lord Jesus. The apostle made that trade, and he never regretted it, no matter what it cost him in human terms. Because, as Habakkuk says, *the one who through faith is righteous will live*.

GOOD NEWS FOR THE TERMINALLY UNRIGHTEOUS

Does that sound like good news to you? It certainly does to me. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I’ve got what it takes to save myself. After fifty years of on-again, off-again effort, I don’t see many signs of substantial moral progress in myself, on my own. I have come to the conclusion that I’m never going to make myself righteous in God’s eyes; in fact, I’m convinced that in myself I am terminally *unrighteous*.

One of the fondest fantasies of the secular worldview is that we are gradually progressing toward human perfection. Today the materialists’ hope is better yet: that we will soon be able to give evolution a kick forward and literally perfect ourselves

through scientific and technological achievements. The latest suggestion for the self-salvation of the human race seems to be genetic engineering. Great things are promised from this new knowledge: the eradication of disease, reversal of the aging process, the ability to produce “designer children,” even to make a clone of yourself and cache the body somewhere as a source of spare parts. And eventually? Eternal life—not with God in some heaven but by ourselves right here and now on this earth. O brave new world! But though scientists may have mapped the human genome, there’s no indication that they understand human nature or that they can do anything about human sin. They haven’t been able to discover a righteousness gene.

The bad news is really a double whammy: First, we can never save ourselves, and second, we will never change our basic nature. But the good news—the gospel of grace—is that *God can* save us through Jesus Christ, and *God will* change us by transforming our nature, conforming us to the likeness of Jesus Christ. That is the real, authentic gospel. Anything else is a counterfeit. And everything depends on our believing it. Why? Because “The righteous will live *by faith*.”

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. *“If you asked the apostle Paul what was the most important verse in the Bible, he probably would have answered, “The righteous will live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4)”* (p. 53).
What do you understand that verse to mean?
2. What differences do you see in the way of religion and the way of the gospel? What examples do you see of each in the world today?
3. What aspects of Paul’s life history made him qualified to explain “justification by faith” to the Christians in Rome?
4. What was the pivotal point of change in Paul’s attitude?
5. What has justification meant to you? How does it change the way you live?

Chapter Five

WOE TO THE WORLD!

When we hear the word prophecy we think predictions. Foretelling the future is an important element in biblical prophecy, but that future isn't always a pleasant prospect.

“Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying,

“‘Woe to him who piles up stolen goods
and makes himself wealthy by extortion!
How long must this go on?’

Will not your debtors suddenly arise?
Will they not wake up and make you tremble?
Then you will become their victim.

Because you have plundered many nations,
the peoples who are left will plunder you.

For you have shed man's blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in
them.

“Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain
to set his nest on high,
to escape the clutches of ruin!

WHY DOESN'T GOD ACT MORE LIKE GOD?

You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.
The stones of the wall will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.

“Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed
and establishes a town by crime!
Has not the LORD Almighty determined
that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire,
that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?
For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory
of the LORD,
as the waters cover the sea.

“Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors,
pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk,
so that he can gaze on their naked bodies.
You will be filled with shame instead of glory.
Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed!
The cup from the LORD’s right hand is coming around to
you,
and disgrace will cover your glory.
The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm
you,
and your destruction of animals will terrify you.
For you have shed man’s blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in
them.

“Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
Or an image that teaches lies?
For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.
Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’
Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’
Can it give guidance?

It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it.”

☞ Habakkuk 2:6–19

A CERTAIN IMAGE comes to mind upon hearing the words “Old Testament prophet.” One thinks of a tall, gaunt figure with a long beard and flowing robes. His expression is stern, and when he speaks, thunder rumbles and lightning flashes. His message is doom, his words pronounce judgment. In fact, when something spectacularly bad happens in the world, we sometimes describe it as “a disaster of biblical proportions.” That’s how strongly we identify the Bible—at least its prophetic sections—with apocalyptic doom.

As with most caricatures, there is some truth underlying this one. The biblical writers, particularly the Old Testament prophets, say a lot about the coming of judgment. Prophecy, to most of us, suggests prediction, foretelling the future. And the future foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament for the people of Israel (and many others nations as well) was usually not a pleasant one. It included war, siege, disease, famine and finally conquest by foreign superpowers and exile in a far-away foreign country—for those who weren’t exterminated, that is. Israel’s prophets spoke in graphic language and vivid imagery of approaching suffering, devastation and death.

Of course, that’s not all they spoke of. Almost all the prophecies held out hope as well—for those who repented. This hope looked for a future restoration by God’s grace following the judgment, when the exile would be reversed and a remnant of the people would be returned. Then the knowledge of the Lord would fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, and the peaceable kingdom—the kingdom of *shalom* (“peace”) where lions would lie down with lambs and children would put their hands in the viper’s den—would be established on the earth.

SPEAKING OF JUDGMENT

So it is tempting, when reading the Bible, to skip over the unpleasant Old Testament passages about judgment and just focus on the hopeful parts. Or even to skip the Prophets altogether, strange books that they are, and limit our Bible reading to a few familiar Psalms and comforting passages from the Gospels. As a preacher, I can think of a lot of reasons why I would rather not talk about judgment. For one thing, it's a very unpleasant subject. For another, it is as unpopular as it is unpleasant. The idea of judgment runs directly contrary to the dominant mood of our culture. Many today don't accept the notion of personal accountability for their actions. If something goes wrong, we want someone else to blame. As for the idea that our sin calls forth punishment, or that our suffering could be a temporal form of judgment, of God disciplining us, that seems outlandish. The typical American's response to personal suffering is to look for somebody to sue—preferably a corporation or insurance company with deep pockets. As if all that were not enough to deter any talk of judgment, there is also the fact that such messages play to the common stereotypes both of preachers (“Turn or burn . . . here's some more fire and brimstone!”) and of God (“He's gonna get ya! It's 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' time!”)

Of course, once again there's some truth to the stereotypes. God *is* angry about sin. If we attempt to strip God of his wrath, that is, his righteous abhorrence and blazing rejection of sin and evil, we trivialize him and turn him into a tame creature of our own imagination. And some preachers *do* speak about judgment in inappropriate ways. They talk about it with relish, almost gloating over the prospect of hellfire, and angrily denounce “sinners” as if that were some alien category of humans, as if judgment applied only to them and not all of us, preacher and congregation alike.

So it's easy to see why many thoughtful people just avoid

the subject altogether. In fact, I can only think of one good reason to talk about judgment at all: because the Bible does. It would have been hard for me, in good conscience, to write about the message of Habakkuk and skip the one third of the book (most of chapter 2) that describes the prospect of God's judgment upon the sins of the wicked.

But there is a much more positive reason for talking about judgment as well. Judgment is not just about the negative work of destroying evil and punishing sin. The judgment of God is a function of his determination to establish justice once and for all, to vindicate all that is good, true and beautiful. "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" asked Abraham long ago? (Gen. 18:25) The answer most emphatically is yes! And God's judgment upon all that is wrong will prove it once and for all.

Think for a moment about how crucial this insight into God's character is. God is righteous. His intent is to expose and punish evil in order to make all things well. There is no inherent reason why that has to be so. The ultimate power in the universe could be evil, or capricious, or just plain indifferent to moral concerns. In fact, the deities of the ancient world, the Greek and Canaanite and Egyptian gods and goddesses, were exactly like that. But the true God, the God who revealed himself through Israel, is none of those things. He is good. He is upright. He is moral.

WOE TO THE WORLD

The corollary of a moral God is a God who executes judgment upon human sin. And that inevitably means trouble for human sinners. God's judgment upon the sins of the world necessarily involves punitive action toward the particular people who are guilty of them. The temptation is to soften the idea of judgment by thinking of it as some sort of rectifying move taken by God against abstractions called sin or evil.

Judgment is not that; or if it is, it is also more. Sin may be an abstract principle (at times the New Testament almost personifies it). But *sins* are specific evil deeds done by specific people. And, as the prophets make abundantly clear, God's promised judgment is his announced intention of visiting retribution upon all those who are guilty of such things. Judgment is not a kind of spiritual surgery in which God uses anesthesia so as to remove the cancer of sin without causing undue discomfort to the patient. We may well believe, as the saying goes, that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. But judging the sin inevitably entails pain for the sinner too. In the biblical view, divine judgment in this world involves the personal punishment of the guilty by means of physical and temporal suffering visited upon them by a righteous God. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord" (Rom. 12:18, quoting Deut. 32:35). "If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish . . . because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God" (Deut. 8:19–20). And because God does not always choose to express his judgment fully in this world (see Ps. 73:1–15), its ultimate expression is reserved for the world to come (see Ps. 73:16–22). In the end, judgment means eternal punishment for the unrepentant.

We love to sing "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." But in connection with the Lord's coming, the Old Testament is more likely to say, "Woe to the world." Habakkuk's second chapter, for example, consists mostly of a series of "woes"—warnings about approaching disasters in store for a wide variety of wrongdoers. The biblical exclamation translated here as "Woe to . . ." means something like "Alas for . . ." It is used to express the pitiable condition of those who, whether they realize it or not, are about to be overwhelmed by disaster. *Woe* is not a very appealing word with which to start out a message. When is the last time you heard a sermon that began, "Woe to you . . . ?" But the Bible uses the word frequently, especially

when it talks about the future. The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, is full of woes. And Jesus also employed the word. In fact, there is a chapter in the Gospels (Matt. 23) that's very similar to Habakkuk 2. It consists of a string of woes pronounced by Jesus against the religious leaders of his day. Running through this chapter is the somber refrain: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" Over and over this terrible judgment is pronounced upon the proud and spiritually blind leaders of Israel. That such language could come from the lips of Jesus Christ ought to make anyone think long and hard before dismissing the reality of judgment, both in this world and the world to come.

The prophet Habakkuk is equally blunt. He pronounces God's sentence of doom upon wicked people in a series of five woes. The first woe is a condemnation of thieves and robbers, those who steal from or cheat others in order to enrich themselves. God says to them in effect: It's payback time. "You robbed cities and nations . . . Now [others] will be as cruel to you" (Hab. 2:8 CEV). One of God's common forms of judgment in this world is to cause people to experience the same kind of things they've done to others. Those who live by the sword die by the sword is how Jesus expressed it. Or as we like to say nowadays, "What goes around comes around."

The second woe is pronounced against rich and powerful people who have exploited and taken advantage of those who are weaker:

You're doomed! You made your family rich at the expense
of others.

You even said to yourself, "I'm above the law."

But you will bring shame on your family
and ruin to yourself for what you did to others.

☞ Habakkuk 2:9-10 CEV

Think, for example, of a drug lord or a greedy business owner

who mistreats his employees. Such people think their wealth and power allow them to do anything they want. They build huge and lavish houses and put walls around them and hire guards and install sophisticated security systems, but those things can't keep out the judgment of a righteous God. "The very stones and wood in your home will testify against you," said the prophet (v. 11 CEV). (Something we might want to bear in mind when contemplating the next home improvement project.)

The third kind of people who are doomed are those who resort to violence to achieve their ambitions, men who will hurt or even kill others to get what they want. "Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed" (v. 12a). They may get things that way but God says they won't be allowed to keep them, for he will take away all ill-gotten gains.

Then comes a woe pronounced on a different type of abuser, one who takes advantage of others, not economically, but physically.

"Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors . . .
 till they are drunk,
 so that he can gaze on their naked bodies.
 You will be filled with shame . . .
 The cup from the LORD's right hand is coming around to
 you . . ."

☞ Verses 15–16

Here Habakkuk is talking about people who seduce and corrupt the innocent, or who prey upon the weaknesses of others and turn them to their own profit or advantage. Once again, his words of judgment have an amazingly contemporary ring to them. Think, for example, of the purveyors of filthy and violent entertainment in our own society. Think of modern technology such as computers and the Internet, supposed wonderful tools for the sharing of knowledge and information,

but often used for things like the dissemination of child pornography. God's judgment is upon those who abuse and exploit their neighbors. And it also includes those who abuse and pollute the earth or ravage the environment.

You destroyed trees and animals . . .
you were ruthless to towns and people everywhere.
Now you will be terrorized.

~ Verse 17 CEV

The fifth and final woe God pronounces upon the sin of idolatry.

“Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’
Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
[but] there is no breath in it.”

~ Verse 19

All the other sins in Habakkuk's list have a very modern ring to them. They are social sins. They are sins that the rich and the powerful perpetrate against the poor and defenseless. Most of these sins involve activities that are clearly unjust. So we can understand God's judgment because these sins are all about hurting people. It is a very contemporary-sounding catalogue of evil; even ecology is mentioned. Anyone with a conscience can agree that the kinds of things mentioned in Habakkuk's list of woes are very bad and deserve some kind of punishment, particularly if the punishment means receiving exactly what the guilty party has inflicted on others. So when a murderous terrorist is gunned down, or when a thief loses all his money, or when a corrupt tyrant is overthrown and imprisoned, we can understand and appreciate that sort of justice.

But when it comes to idolatry, many people can't see why

this is such a serious sin. After all, an idol in the literal sense—an object of wood or stone that people bow down before and worship—is something most of us see only in museums or maybe on a trip to some exotic country. Idolatry in this form simply isn't part of our daily experience. But we forget that what idolatry really involves is putting something ahead of God in your life. Any time you love some thing or some one more than you love God, you have created an idol. Idolatry means to worship part of the creation instead of the Creator (Rom. 1:21–23).

This is one reason why it is the most serious sin of all. Other sins are committed against things (or people) God has made, but idolatry is a sin against the Maker himself. More than that, every other sin stems from this fundamental sin of dethroning our Creator in favor of some self-chosen substitute. What you worship determines what you do. People who worship gods of their own making tend to develop morals of their own choosing.

WHAT ABOUT US?

So how does all of this apply to us? Commentaries on the book of Habakkuk point out that the catalogue of woes in chapter 2 is primarily directed at the Babylonians. Babylon is the empire that “gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples” (v. 5). The woes that follow constitute a “taunt song” aimed at the conquerors by their victims. So part of the Lord’s answer to Habakkuk’s questions about the injustice of using Babylon to judge Judah is to say, in effect, “Just wait and see. Their day of reckoning is coming too.” God assures the prophet that *all* sin will be punished; no one, no matter how powerful, is exempt from the demands of justice. “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against *all* ungodliness and wickedness” (Rom. 1:18 NRSV, emphasis added)—against the sins of pagans and believers alike!

This truth suggests that one way we might profit from Scripture's judgment pronouncements is to take them as warnings addressed first to ourselves. I said in an earlier chapter that we cannot always know just what God's purpose is in any particular calamity or tragedy that occurs. The story of Job ought to warn us against drawing the automatic conclusion that suffering equals judgment. But as Habakkuk's woes make clear, sinful actions will eventually draw down disaster upon those who practice them. It is easy to read about God's impending wrath and dismiss it, assuming these woes must be directed at other kinds of (exceptionally wicked) people. After all, you and I aren't Babylonians. We aren't gangsters or thieves or drug lords. We aren't rich. We don't resort to violence. We're not exploiting the poor. We don't own Chinese sweat shops or sneaker factories in Vietnam. We're not operating pornographic internet websites or bowing down before the images of Sumerian fertility gods.

But before we dismiss the thought of God's judgment and move on to more upbeat parts of Scripture, perhaps it would be good for us to dig a little deeper and reflect on some of the ways we may be involved in many of these very sins. We need to ask with Peter, "Lord, are you telling this . . . to us, or to others?" (Lk. 12:41).

Let's start with the question of wealth. Personal wealth, of course, is always relative; how rich you think you are depends on whether you are looking up or down. When I think about how wealthy I am, I tend to compare myself to the millionaires living on the mansion-lined streets of the neighborhood a few miles to the north of my house rather than to the people who live in the inner-city neighborhood a few miles to the west. So how rich is rich? According to the latest data provided by the United States Census Bureau, the 2011 poverty threshold for a family of four is around \$22,000. In 2009 almost 44 million people in the U.S.—including one of every five children—was living below that threshold. But that's just America. If we

widen our comparative horizon to take in the rest of the world, the numbers become staggering. According to the most recent edition of theologian Ron Sider's influential book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, a majority of the world's population is living on the equivalent of less than two dollars per day, and a huge number (1.3 billion people) are living on only a dollar a day. So if your family's gross household is much above \$22,000 you are not poor in the United States, no matter what it feels like at the end of the month. And with respect to the rest of the world, you are very, *very* rich. Think about that when you're deciding how much money to give away this year versus how much you are going to spend on re-decorating.

Or consider the sins of violence. Perhaps we are not individually guilty of such behavior, but what about the society we live in? What about the institutions of which we are a part? What does it mean for us to be living in the richest and most powerful country in the world? Our country can and does invade and conquer weaker countries. We justify our actions by saying that we are punishing terrorists, or preempting further attacks, or eliminating weapons of mass destruction, or overthrowing brutal dictatorships. And no doubt we are doing some of those things. But God's warning woe ought to at least make us look long and hard at our actions and engage in serious debate about our motives. I'm a Calvinist. We Calvinists tend to be mistrustful, because we know that depravity is total, and sin is everywhere. And the people we most mistrust are ourselves. So we're big on continual self-examination, and the need for ongoing critical assessment of both ourselves and our own institutions. I am willing to believe that even the best institutions—my church, my school, my community, and my country—are capable of evil and liable to judgment, because I know that I am, too.

Another of Habakkuk's woes related to the exploitation of the poor. If sins of violence seem to be far from us, it is easier

to see how you and I might be caught up in guilt for the mistreatment of the poor. Even if you don't run a notoriously exploitive business, you may very well own stock in a corporation that does. And you almost certainly purchase goods and products made by people who are being unfairly taken advantage of in their work. Are you a coffee drinker? (I happen to be enjoying a cup as I'm writing these words.) Most of the world's coffee is produced by multi-national corporations that pay the poor farmers who grow it around forty to fifty cents a pound for it. That is not enough for the farmers to live on, so they have to over-produce, which only makes the price drop even lower. One response to this particular instance of exploitation has been the establishment of a more direct link between the coffee grower and the coffee drinker through what is called "Fair Trade Coffee." Organizations of fair trade certifiers are guaranteeing the farmers a living wage for their crop (currently a price of \$1.26 per pound of beans). You can buy coffee labeled "Fair Trade Certified" online or at selected grocery stores and even at your local Starbucks. Of course, you pay a little more, but you also know that the grower is being treated fairly. Is this a tiny, insignificant act? Tiny, yes. But maybe not so insignificant, in light of God's judgment.

Finally, think about the sin of idolatry. Idols today come in many shapes—and in no shape at all. Luther said that whatever you give your heart to is your god. A flag can be an idol. A sports team can be an idol. (In counseling a couple some years ago it quickly became apparent to me that their real religion was the Chicago Blackhawks!) A house can be an idol. A gossip magazine can be an idol. An academic degree can be an idol. An investment portfolio can be an idol. Your refrigerator can be your god. Your wonderful spouse, your terrific children, your beautiful grandkids, can be your god. One of John Coltrane's greatest recordings is called "A Love Supreme." You can only have one of those. If it's God, that's good. If it is anything else, that is woe.

THE GOOD NEWS OF JUDGMENT

Do Habakkuk's ancient words of woe apply to our contemporary society? Does God still intend judgment for the sins of the world? Is he yet today a God of wrath and vengeance?

The answer, thankfully, is yes. I say "thankfully" because the message of God's impending judgment is actually good news for those who hear it and respond appropriately. Let me try to convince you of this.

One of the most remarkable chapters in the Bible is 2 Samuel 11, which tells the story of King David's adultery with Bathsheba and its immediate aftermath. The chapter reads like a modern screenplay. It's got everything: a handsome and heroic leading man, a beautiful woman, smoldering passion, intrigue and suspense to go along with the sex, battlefield action, and finally, betrayal and murder. David had first noticed Bathsheba when her husband Uriah, one of David's leading soldiers, was off fighting for king and country. Their affair resulted in Bathsheba becoming pregnant. With Uriah away at the front, the timing of the baby's birth would prove to be embarrassing. So David ordered that Uriah be sent home on leave, and after wining and dining him on the pretext of hearing his report on the progress of the war, David sent Uriah home to his wife's bed, assuming he would do what soldiers visiting their beautiful wives while on leave tend to do. And that would solve the problem. Only Uriah didn't cooperate. His sense of duty to his comrades in the field made him refuse to go home. David—we can imagine his frustration—had to think of something else. He wrote an order directing his general in the field to make sure that Uriah was killed in action in the next skirmish with the enemy and then, sealing the letter, gave it to Uriah himself to deliver to his commanding officer. Nice touch, that. It's worthy of the Godfather himself. By the end of the chapter everything seems to have been resolved.

Uriah is out of the way, the war is going well, and David has taken Bathsheba into the palace as his own wife.

Except for one thing. The single most important sentence in the whole story is the very last one: “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD” (2 Sam. 11:27). And because of that nothing has been resolved yet, nor will it be until God has exposed David’s sin and punished him for it. To understand what a good thing the reality of God’s justice is, we need only imagine its absence. Picture a world where the Bathshebas are exploited and the Uriahs murdered—and the Davids get away scot-free. Think what life would be like if there were no justice, either now or in eternity. The innocent would suffer and no one would care; often, no one would even know. The guilty would profit, realizing that crime *does* pay. The rich and powerful would take what they wanted, and nothing would ever stand in their way. The poor would be mistreated and their oppressors would prosper, forever and ever. Righteousness would be laughed at. The poet’s lament would be accurate: “Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne” (James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis*). Worst of all would be the fact that all the evil deeds done in secret would never come to the light of day, would never awaken any cry for justice.

But that’s not how it is in God’s world, because the horrible things we do to each other displease him. So here are three reasons to be thankful for the prophetic message of woe to the world.

First, judgment is God’s unwavering reaction toward sin and evil. Nothing has changed about the character of God. He feels exactly the same way about human rights abuses and idolatry today as he did when he pronounced woe through his servants the prophets. God may express his judgment within history through natural disasters or calamitous reversals, as he did with the people of Israel and has continued to do throughout history. But God *will* express his judgment fully and finally

at the end of history when the Lord Jesus Christ comes again “to judge the living and the dead.” And no one is exempt from that tribunal. Wealth, power and position are no shield from the wrath of the God before whom all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hid (Heb. 4:12–13). As the old spiritual says, when the Lord returns to judge the earth, “There’s no hidin’ place down there.”

Second, judgment is not God’s final word to the world. There will come a time in every life, and for the world itself, when the door of salvation will be shut and it will be too late to enter (Matt. 25:10–13). But that time has not yet come for any of us. A biblical pronouncement of approaching doom is always implicitly an invitation to repent. (Recall Jonah’s message to the people of Ninevah and their response.) So the warnings of coming judgment are really an expression of God’s mercy, intended to alert us before it is too late so that we may turn away from sin and seek his face. This is why the Bible is so insistent on the need for us to respond to God’s word right now, without delay: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Ps. 95:7–8, cf. Isa. 55:6–7). A continual awareness of the holiness and justice of God will make us treasure all the more the gospel of God’s grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. Remember, the person who through faith is righteous will live! “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 5:1; 8:1 NRSV).

Third, God’s determination to judge all sin and overthrow all evil is a function of his unswerving commitment to establish righteousness throughout the world. The kind of world we live in now isn’t going to last. This world—where God is insulted, where people’s dignity and rights are abused (which amounts to the same thing), where lying and cheating are commonplace, where violence and bloodshed stain our streets, where moral and physical filth blot every landscape—this is

not the world as God wants it to be. This is not the world as God will make it to be. He will not put up with evil forever. Or even for very much longer. Judgment is coming. Justice will be done. Secret crimes will be revealed. Wrongs will be righted. Evildoers will be punished. And righteousness, truth, beauty, and peace will be established.

Now whether or not that sounds like good news depends to a great extent on whether you are one of the exploiters or one of the exploited. If you read Habakkuk and find yourself on the wrong side of the woes, it would be a very good idea to turn away from sin right now and look for the mercy of God.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. When you hear the word *prophecy*, what comes to mind?
2. Read Habakkuk 2, verses 6-19. What is your overall impression of the future described in these verses?
3. Why is the subject of judgment so unpopular in our culture?
4. What is the “one good reason to talk about judgment” (p. 67)?
5. What is a biblical view of judgment?
6. Think about the five woes described by Habakkuk. Do you see examples of these woes in the world today? In your own life?
7. What would the world be like without God's justice?

Woe to the World!

Chapter Six

THE COMING FLOOD

There is a world-wide flood coming someday soon, but it won't be destructive. Rather it will be a flood of the knowledge and glory of God.

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,
as the waters cover the sea.”

—Habakkuk 2:14

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—
and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the
earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

—Isaiah 11:1–9

IN *BEYOND TRAGEDY*, Reinhold Niebuhr explained the difference between human optimism about the future and Christian faith that includes the hope of a future salvation.

Ultimate confidence in the goodness of life cannot rest upon confidence in the goodness of man. If that is where it rests, it is an optimism which will suffer ultimate disillusionment. Romanticism will be transmuted into cynicism, as it always has been in the world's history. The faith of a Christian is something quite different from this optimism. It is trust in God, in a good God who created a good world, though the world is not now good; in a good God, powerful and good enough finally to destroy the evil that men do and redeem them of their sins. This kind of faith is not optimism. It does not, in fact, arise until optimism breaks down and men cease to trust in themselves that they are righteous.

One of the reasons it is important for us to listen to the message of judgment in God's Word is that it helps to break down the naive optimism that is based on belief in the goodness and perfectibility of human nature. The Bible serves up a healthy plateful of realism to us on that question. But the alternative to optimism need not be cynical pessimism. Rather, it is biblical hope in the future salvation of the world by the power of God.

THE WORLD TO COME

The news that God is going to judge the world is bad news for evildoers. But it is good news for all who hate their sins and pray to be delivered from them. It is good news for everyone who loves what is right and longs to see goodness, beauty and truth reestablished on earth. Why? Because just as surely as the good and powerful God in whom we trust will "destroy the evil that men do and redeem them of their sins," so he will also remake the world and restore its harmony and peace. The Bible speaks clearly of a new order of things, of new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13). Jesus taught us to pray for God's kingdom to come here on earth: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Habakkuk tells us that one day our prayers are going to be answered. Once, long ago in the days of Noah, God sent a great flood to cover the earth in judgment. But some day there will be a different kind of flood—a flood of salvation.

Habakkuk prophesies of a day when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). What a beautiful promise, and what a glorious image! Some day only God and those who know and love God will be left in the world. The New Testament speaks of a time to come when God will be all and in all. This is the consummation to which Habakkuk looks forward. How full of water is the ocean? That is how full of God the

creation will be! Everywhere everyone will know him. Every hill and tree and stream, every home and family, every tribe and nation, every person left on earth will be filled with the life of God, reflecting his glory.

Notice two significant details about this flood foreseen by Habakkuk. First, it is a vision of the future that is distinctly terrestrial, not celestial. It is focused upon the earth rather than heaven. Habakkuk says that it is the *earth* that will be filled with the knowledge of God's glory. Contrary to many popular images of eternity—people with harps sitting around on clouds forever and ever—the future salvation the Bible promises will be experienced on the earth. It is a new earth, to be sure; a whole new universe, in fact, transformed by the power of God into a place of unimaginable goodness and beauty. But it will be the real, visible, audible, smellable, tastable, tangible world nonetheless. Biblical hope is physical as well as spiritual. It is hope for our bodies, for our planet, for the sun, moon, and all the stars of all the galaxies in the universe. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end,” declares the Lord God; “Behold, I make *all things* new” (Rev. 21:6, 5 RSV, emphasis added).

Second, Habakkuk's vision emphasizes *glory*—the indescribable glory, the unimaginable wonder of a new creation made perfect by divine power. Habakkuk prophesies that the whole earth will be filled not just with the knowledge of God, but with the knowledge of the *glory* of God. That idea suggests a creation-wide experience of blessing. It will be a world of incredible bounty and endless delight, a world of safety and harmony, free of discord, where ancient animosities are overcome and all divisions are healed—not just human enmities but even those within the animal kingdom. The great eighteenth-century evangelist George Whitefield once remarked that a barking dog is a testimony to the fallenness of the world. Nature itself feels the disruptive, alienating consequences of sin. In Romans 8, the apostle Paul spoke of the whole creation

groaning in painful—yet ultimately hope-filled—expectation of final redemption:

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

☞—Romans 8:20–21

At the beginning of the last chapter, I alluded to the moving passage from the prophecy of Isaiah in which the prophet suggests through a series of vivid images the wonders of the new creation. When at last the Lord spreads peace throughout the world then

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

☞—Isaiah 11:6–9

Here is the same image again in Isaiah, the coming glorious flood of the knowledge and presence of God. Only poetry can begin to convey the glories of the world to come. In his book *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, theologian Neil Plantinga quotes a metaphor from the early church father Irenaeus to evoke the blessedness of life in the restored creation when God's kingdom

has finally come. Writing two generations or so after the close of the New Testament, Irenaeus described the fullness of the kingdom by the picture of a fantastically fruitful grapevine.

The days will come, in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes . . . and when any of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out, "I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me."

—Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*

SHALOM

There is a single word in the Old Testament that best sums up all these wonders of the new creation. It is the Hebrew word *shalom*, or "peace." Plantinga explains the meaning of the great biblical hope expressed by this word.

[The] prophets . . . dreamed of a time when the deserts would flower, the mountains would run with wine, weeping would cease, and people could go to sleep without weapons on their laps . . . All nature would be fruitful, benign, and filled with wonder upon wonder; all humans would be knit together in brotherhood and sisterhood; and all nature and all humans would look to God, walk with God, lean toward God, and delight in God . . .

The webbing together of God, humans and all creation in justice, fulfillment and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight* . . . *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

—Neil Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*

But you and I know very well that things aren't the way they ought to be, not anywhere, not yet. Where is God's shalom today? How can we experience it, where can we find it in the midst of our broken world? A Palestinian suicide bomber walks into a crowded Jerusalem restaurant at lunch time and blows himself up, killing more than a dozen innocent people and wounding scores more. The terrorist group responsible issues a statement explaining that the bombing was an act of revenge for Israeli assassinations of Palestinian guerilla leaders. So Israel retaliates with still more attacks. Did you know that Arabs and Jews use the very same word for their everyday greeting? It is an expression of blessing: *Salaam . . . Shalom . . . Peace*. The irony is too painful to contemplate.

The truth is, we are never going to achieve shalom by ourselves, through our own unaided efforts. It is beyond the capacity of human nature to make the world a place of universal justice, blessing and peace. When the prophet Isaiah described his vision of the new creation in chapter 11 he introduced it with another prophecy:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him . . .

with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the
earth.

—Isaiah 11:1–4

Isaiah's prophecy speaks of a great Prince, a descendant of David, who will arise to rule the world long after the royal house of Judah will seem to be extinct—a fresh shoot from a dead stump. This mighty King will establish righteousness and justice in the earth. He will do for us what we could never have done for ourselves. And we now know his name—it is

Jesus Christ. He came once to atone for sin and to reconcile people to God and to one another. He will come again to complete the salvation of the whole world. Christ's glorious reign in the new creation will usher in the kingdom of God in all its fullness, and then shalom will fill the universe.

Of course, in a sense the universe is already full of God right now. God is here in the world today. But the tragedy is that so many people either do not realize this or refuse to acknowledge it. The world is full of people who were made by God, who are loved by God, who should be living for God, but who do not know God. They never even seem to think about him. Or they have gotten themselves entangled with substitute gods of one kind or another. But some day that is all going to change.

And the change is beginning even now, wherever we see signs of the kingdom. In reading Habakkuk we are confronted squarely with the problem of evil, and forced to think about it. It is, as I have tried to acknowledge, a difficult problem; perhaps the most difficult problem, especially for those who believe in the biblical God. But thoroughly secular people have a problem, too. They face the problem of good. If there is no God, where does all the goodness and beauty in the world come from? Are we supposed to believe mere *chance* is responsible—"the assumed impersonal purposeless determiner of unaccountable happenings" (in *Merriam-Webster's* fine definition)? If everyone and everything is nothing more than the product of time plus random movement, what gave birth to love? To whom are we to give thanks

For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth over and around us lies?

For make no mistake; as much as we are troubled by the suffering and wrong in the world we ought also, in fairness, to be filled with grateful awe at all that is right. If we believers

struggle to reconcile our faith in God with the experience of evil, shouldn't the experience of unearned beauty and undeserved goodness make even the most hardened atheist at least stop and wonder a bit?

Those of us who identify ourselves as Christians—that is to say, as followers of Jesus—can help make the problem of good even harder for non-believers. We ought to be spending our lives in adding steadily to the world's visible stock of shalom. In every area of life—in our jobs and vocations, our civic responsibilities, our friendships and family relationships, our outside interests and leisure activities—we should be furthering the spread of the peaceable kingdom. Here's a question for you. Is your life supplying at least a trickle to swell the coming flood, when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea?

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Read Habakkuk 2, verse 14 and Isaiah 11, verses 1-9 (pp. 83-84). What picture of the world, following God's judgment and justice, is portrayed in these passages?
2. Read the explanation of "shalom" by Neil Plantinga (p. 88). How does this description of the biblical hope of shalom seem contrary to what we experience in our world today?
3. How can shalom be achieved?
4. What signs of the kingdom do you see today to reassure you that God is here in the world?
5. How are you contributing to the growth of shalom in the world? For example: in your job, civic responsibilities, friendships, family, outside interests, and leisure activities?

Chapter Seven

WHERE IS GOD?

Where in the world is God? The ancient prophet Habakkuk has a profound answer to that question.

“Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
Or an image that teaches lies?
For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.
Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’
Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it.
But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him.”

—Habakkuk 2:18–20

ACCORDING TO A U.S. government study entitled “Noise and Its Effects,” the excessive noise in our environment is hurting us. Noise is everywhere today; in fact, if you live in a city it’s almost inescapable. Traffic noise, the rumble of heavy

equipment and machinery, buzzing lawn mowers and growling snow blowers, airplanes roaring overhead, televisions blaring and car stereos thumping; the din is deafening—sometimes literally.

But hearing loss is only one of the harmful consequences of being bombarded with excessive decibels. The government study listed a number of other damaging effects that noise can have. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, exposure to noise interferes with human communication, lowers scholastic performance, disrupts sleep, and results in various adverse health consequences, including physical and psychological reactions like increased stress levels, raised blood pressure and hypertension. My favorite finding from the report was the final effect of noise they reported: It's annoying. They didn't have to pay for a research study to find that out; I would have told them that myself for nothing.

When I was a boy, the Sunday morning service in our church often opened with the choir singing softly in reverent tones these words from the second chapter of the book of Habakkuk: "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (v. 20 NRSV). This is an invitation by the prophet to step back from the noisy world around us and contemplate a deeper truth about ultimate reality. Habakkuk suggests that we stop our own noise-making for a bit—all the wrangling, the jarring discord, the complaining, the boasting, the hype, the sales pitches, the endless "spinning"—and fall silent before God the Lord. Habakkuk's statement consists of a declaration followed by a directive.

"THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE"

Let's consider the declaration first: "The LORD is in his holy temple." What exactly does it mean to say that the Lord is in his temple? Did Habakkuk and his fellow Jews think that the God of all heaven and earth resided in a stone building on

a hilltop in the ancient city of Jerusalem? Of course not. When King Solomon, who had built the spectacular temple building three centuries before Habakkuk's day, presided over its dedication, he prayed these words: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built" (1 Kings 8:27). Old Testament believers understood just as well as New Testament believers that God could not be contained within any man-made structures. God is a spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). The real God, the true and living God of heaven and earth, is infinitely, immeasurably greater than the whole universe. He does not live in temples made by human hands, as the New Testament also says (Acts 17:24). If God cannot be contained even by the whole universe, how could one tiny spot within it possibly be his home? No. The correct answer to the question "Where is God?" is "Everywhere." Or we might ask, "Where isn't he?" Listen to the testimony, for example, of Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

—Verses 8–10

So when Habakkuk tells us that the Lord is in his holy temple, he is not making a geographical statement. He is making a theological one. The prophet is not trying to locate God for us. Rather, he is testifying to a profound truth; in this case, a double truth about both God and the world. When the Bible says that the Lord is in his temple, whether the reference

is to the earthly temple in Jerusalem or to the heavenly sanctuary that is his “dwelling place” (1 Kings 8:30), it does not mean that God’s presence is localized in one particular place. This is rather a metaphorical statement of the truth that the sovereign Lord is ruling over the whole creation. This phrase is a symbolic way of expressing the truth that God is exercising authority over everything and everyone, right now. He is exalted, he is lifted up, he is “enthroned upon the cherubim” whose wings stretched over the ark of the covenant in the temple’s Holy of Holies (Ps. 80:1 NRSV). This means that God is above all things, “the LORD Most High” as the Bible calls him (Ps. 47:2). Because God is enthroned, he is in charge, sovereign, in control over everything. I read an article recently by an army general whose title, in a good example of the military’s love of acronyms, was “SACEUR.” That stood for “Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.” Well, by that system the Lord’s title would be “S[A]CU”—“Supreme Commander, Universe”! This is the truth that the Psalms especially love to sing out:

The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty . . .
girded with strength.

Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!”

The LORD reigns; let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!

For thou, O LORD, art most high over all the earth;
thou art exalted far above all gods.

The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth
quake!

☪—Psalm 93:1; 96:10; 97:1, 9; 99:1 RSV

And this is the truth that God means for us to understand

about him when Habakkuk tells us that the Lord is in his holy temple. It's a truth that ought to make us celebrate!

To say that the Lord is in his holy temple not only conveys a truth about the sovereign reign of God over the creation. It also points to another truth about the universe itself. The Jerusalem temple was patterned after the tabernacle, the tent for worship constructed under Moses' leadership in the wilderness during the Exodus. God had instructed Moses very carefully to make everything according to the pattern the Lord had given him. So the temple on earth was built according to plan, and the plan reflected the true sanctuary of God in heaven, just as the temple rituals and sacrifices were symbolic *pre-enactments* of the true offering Jesus made on the cross.

But if the temple in Jerusalem was an earthly copy of the heavenly sanctuary, the Bible also suggests that the earth itself was a sort of copy of the temple. Scripture declares that "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it . . . for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters" (Ps. 24:1–2). And again, "When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm" (Ps. 75:3). Biblical scholars tell us that this language about the earth having foundations and pillars is meant to suggest a picture of the temple to the reader's mind. It's as if to say the whole world is a temple, a kind of sanctuary, full of the presence of God. So when we are told that the Lord is in his holy temple, we aren't just to think of God being *over* the world, high above it, but of God being *in* the world at the same time. In theological terms, this verse refers not only to God's transcendence but to his immanence. The Jerusalem temple with the ark of the covenant in its Holy of Holies was itself a symbol of God's presence, his dwelling place in the midst of his people. The Lord is not a distant sovereign, far off, remote, and untouched by all that goes on far below him. No! He is a present God, intimately involved in the world and in the lives of the people over whom he rules. God is not only above us in power and authority; he is with us in love and care.

BE SILENT BEFORE HIM

So this is the prophet's great declaration: "The LORD is in his holy temple." God is both reigning over us and abiding with us. Next comes the directive: "Be silent before him" (Hab. 2:20). Why are we enjoined to keep silence in the face of this truth about the ever ruling and very present Lord of the universe? What does it mean to be silent before him? I think that first of all our silence is a token of our submission. It is the silence of humility and reverence, of awe and—to use the biblical word—fear. "The fear of the LORD," says the Bible, "is the beginning of wisdom" (Pr. 9:10). Biblical scholar Alec Motyer has defined the *fear of the Lord* as "a filial dread of offending God." When I think about what it means to fear the Lord, I often call to mind the scene in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when the Pevensie children first learned about Aslan shortly after arriving in Narnia. "Is he safe?" one of them asked. "Of course he isn't safe!" came the reply. "But he is good." Aslan was not a tame lion, and God is not a tame God.

So to be silent before the Lord God means to fear him rightly. It means to bow before him in humility, to place ourselves consciously under his sovereign authority, under his rule. It means to confess that we and all we have belong to God alone for the Lord is God and there is no other. In humbling ourselves before the Lord we acknowledge both his love for us and his claim upon us. Habakkuk's directive to be silent before the living God is offered in the context of a sarcastic denunciation of the idolatry of many of his contemporaries.

"Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
Or an image that teaches lies?

For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.

Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!'

Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it.
But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him.”

—Habakkuk 2:18–20

Notice the contrast that the prophet stresses. Here are all these idols—lifeless, useless, helpless, man-made things. People who look to idols for help are worshiping nothing but the creations of their own imagination. *But the Lord* is in his holy temple. In contrast to worthless idols, God rules and acts, God lives and speaks. Idols come in all shapes and sizes, not all of them visible to the eye. But they all have this in common: They are the products of the human mind, the projections of our own desires. They are false gods. Only the God of the Bible is real. As John Calvin once remarked, God doesn’t have any associate gods. This is the fundamental truth we acknowledge when we bow before the Lord in silent submission.

But it is also important to recognize that our silence before God is the silence of faith. When we are silent in the presence of God, we affirm the truth about God’s sovereignty—God’s goodness and his power—even when we can’t see these things plainly displayed around us. Let’s face it. The fact that a good and loving God rules the world is not always obvious. This is one reason why the Bible so strongly proclaims that, in fact, he *is* reigning on the throne of the world. Habakkuk himself, as we have seen, struggled with questions about God’s failure to act in the face of evil, and his apparent willingness to allow terrible things to go on without any divine intervention. Believing in God does not answer all the questions raised by the tragedies of life or end all of our struggles with doubt and fear. But it can cause us finally, at some point, to put an end to our cries and complaints and fall silent before God in trusting

faith. "Let us learn," said Calvin, "to glorify God by our silence."

When I was a junior in college, I returned to my room late one winter night to find a note taped to my door. The message instructed me to go immediately to my brother Tom's apartment, no matter what the hour. When I got there I learned that our older brother Paul had been killed in action in the Vietnam War. The next evening our immediate family was home together, sitting around the kitchen table after supper. My father sat in his customary place, at the head of the table. He suffered from Parkinson's disease, and with the added burden of shock and grief, he slumped in his chair, looking old and weak. Nobody said much, but nobody made a move to leave either. Then, before the dishes were cleared away, my father reached for the Bible as he always did at the close of the meal. He held it for a moment, then passed it to me and told me to read. As I looked back at him, all I could think of was bereaved Job mourning the death of his children. I opened the Bible to Job chapter 1 and read, "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." And then something led me to turn to Psalm 103, and I continued, "Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that . . ." Someone cried out to stop. But my father looked up and said sharply, "No! Go on reading." So I continued: ". . . and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." And as I read, my father, like Job before him, bowed his head and worshiped.

I learned then what it means to glorify God with our silence.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What does Habakkuk mean when he says, “The LORD is in his holy temple”?
2. What significance does this truth have for your life?
3. What does it mean to be silent before God?
4. Habakkuk contrasts man-made idols with the Lord. What points of contrast does he mention?
5. “Our silence before God is the silence of faith” (p. 101). In what kinds of circumstances is the silence of faith often required?
6. John Calvin is quoted as saying, “Let us learn to glorify God by our silence.” Explain how we might glorify God by our silence.

Chapter Eight

LEARNING TO SING AGAIN

Life may have beaten you up or knocked you down, but it is possible for you to learn to sing again.

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On *shigionoth*.

LORD, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD.
Renew them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy.

—Habakkuk 3:1–2

I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.
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;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.

For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.

—Habakkuk 3:16–19

PERELANDRA, THE SECOND NOVEL in C. S. Lewis's science fiction trilogy, is set on the planet Venus, an unfallen world that has never known the blight of evil. The book's main character is an English university professor named Elwin Ransom, who is sent to Perelandra to foil Satan's attempt to seduce that planet's "Eve" into rebelling against God and thus repeating the tragedy of the Fall. As Ransom tracked the Unman—the once-human body that Satan has taken over—across one of Perelandra's floating islands, he stumbled upon a hideous sight. One of that world's beautiful creatures had been savaged. The Unman had ripped open the animal's small body and then left it for dead.

On earth it would have been merely a nasty sight, but up to this moment Ransom had as yet seen nothing dead or spoiled in Perelandra, and it was like a blow in the face. It was like the first spasm of a well-remembered pain warning a man who had thought he was cured that his family have deceived him and he is dying after all. It was like the first lie from the mouth of a friend on whose truth one was willing to stake a thousand pounds. It was irrevocable . . . The thing was an intolerable obscenity which afflicted him with shame. It would have been better, or so he thought at that moment, for the whole universe never to have existed than for this one thing to have happened.

If we were not so inured to the presence of evil by long familiarity with it, if gratuitous cruelty and casual violence were not woven so thoroughly into the fabric of our daily life and news reports, if indifference to every kind of suffering was not so routinely a part of our psychological defenses, we might react the same way whenever we saw examples of Satan's handiwork.

In the brief prophecy that bears his name, we have seen Habakkuk reacting feelingly to the problem of evil. He would have agreed with the words of the book of Ecclesiastes, "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve" (8:14). As he begins to unburden himself, Habakkuk's questions spill out, one after another. Why are the people of God suffering so much? How could we, the chosen people of God, have produced such a corrupt and wicked society? Why doesn't God seem to answer our prayers and rescue us? How come the evil are prospering while the innocent are being destroyed? Why don't things ever seem to change or get better?

In the middle of all this questioning, the prophet had a vision. Habakkuk saw in prospect the future triumph of God's justice and truth. He heard God's promise that the answers to all his questions were forthcoming. He affirmed the greatest lesson of life: that those who trust in God are made righteous by their faith, and they will live forever. And finally, Habakkuk remembered that the Lord is ruling over the world right now, and that we should all bow before him in silent submission and faith, believing that God is both with us and for us and that therefore all things must work together for our salvation.

HABAKKUK'S SONG

Habakkuk has the answer to most of his questions, at least in an intellectual sense. But he needs more than that. God has responded to him, and Habakkuk understands and accepts

that response. But now *he* needs to respond to *God* in a way that is emotionally satisfying. So Habakkuk decides to pray once more, and the third and final chapter of his book is the result. Actually, Habakkuk 3 is more than just a prayer. It's a song. The Bible introduces it this way: "A prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet. On *shigionoth*" (3:1). No one knows exactly what the Hebrew term transliterated *shigionoth* means, but it could be the name of a tune. Later on, at the end of the chapter, there's another note about the stringed instruments that should accompany this song (v. 19). So even if we don't recognize the tune, we can follow along with the words, as this servant of God teaches us how to sing again when life's experiences may have shaken our faith in God.

Habakkuk's song begins on a quiet note. "LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy" (3:2). The best way to begin when you want to speak to God is with a note of humility, even awe. It's good to realize that God is high and we are low. God is big and we are little. God is holy and we are not. So we stand in awe of him.

Next the prophet gets down to business by looking backwards: "I have heard . . . of your deeds, O LORD." Habakkuk then starts to recite them. If you're having trouble singing the song of faith because of what's going on in your life at present, the best thing to do is to start remembering. Look back into the past, call to mind all the things that God has done for you. Recite them over again, and don't limit yourself just to the things God has done for you since you've been born. Remember all the things he did for you long before your life even began, stretching all the way back to Bible times—and beyond.

REMEMBERING

What the biblical writers most often recalled were God's mighty saving acts, the moments in world history when God

personally and decisively intervened to redeem or deliver his people. In the Old Testament the greatest of these acts was the Exodus, the story of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. In the New Testament, of course, the mighty act of God was the Cross, when the true Passover Lamb was sacrificed in order to shield God's people by his blood, and where the Son of Man was lifted up in order to save the lives of all who looked to him in faith. These are the stories that Israel and the Church never tire of repeating and reliving.

Tell me the old, old story, for those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.

It is simply astonishing how often the Old Testament writers liked to re-tell the story of the Exodus. What is even more remarkable is that, in their retelling, the Old Testament writers so often put their readers right into the middle of the narrative. When Moses addressed the people of Israel on the brink of the Promised Land just before his death, he reminded them of some of the mistakes they had made along the way.

Then I said to you, "You have reached the hill country of the Amorites, which the LORD our God is giving us. See, the LORD your God has given you the land. Go up and take possession of it as the LORD, the God of your fathers, told you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged . . ."

But you were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, "The LORD hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us . . ."

Then I said to you, "Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them. The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you . . ."

In spite of this, you did not trust in the LORD your God . . .

—Deuteronomy 1:20–32

Notice that Moses consistently uses the second person throughout this historical account: “I said this to you, then you said this, then I said this, and you did that.” But the events he was describing had occurred 38 years before, to the parents and grandparents of the people he was at that moment addressing. None of them were there at all; they were either very young children or not even born! Every single person who had actually participated in that interchange with Moses was dead! (except Caleb and Joshua; cf. Deut. 2:14–15 and Num. 26:65). Yet Moses addresses the current generation of God’s people as if they were all there personally.

The same pattern occurs with respect to the more positive aspects of the Exodus experience as well. A bit later in his speech Moses said,

Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire . . . The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain . . .

—Deuteronomy 4:32–36; 5:2–4

When the Lord first instituted the Passover and commanded that it should be kept throughout all future generations, he added this instruction: “When your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians’” (Ex. 12:26–27). There it is once more, this identification of every generation of God’s people with the first generation that actually lived through the salvation events. The great act of deliverance commemorated by the Passover was not when [the Lord] “passed over the houses of the Israelites and spared their homes,” but “when he spared *our* homes.” Moses reiterates and expands on this instruction in Deuteronomy 6:

In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers.

—Deuteronomy 6:20–23

So when a Bible writer recounts the story of salvation, he is not merely reminiscing about great events that happened long ago to other people. To remember, in the biblical sense, means more than just call to mind. To remember is to identify with, to relive. This is what Habakkuk is doing again here in poetic form in chapter 3.

God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens

Selah

and his praise filled the earth.
His splendor was like the sunrise;
rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden.
Plague went before him;
pestilence followed his steps.
He stood, and shook the earth;
he looked, and made the nations tremble.
The ancient mountains crumbled
and the age-old hills collapsed.
His ways are eternal.
I saw the tents of Cushan in distress,
the dwellings of Midian in anguish . . .

In wrath you strode through the earth
and in anger you threshed the nations.
You came out to deliver your people,
to save your anointed one.
You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness,
you stripped him from head to foot. *Selah*
With his own spear you pierced his head
when his warriors stormed out to scatter us,
gloating as though about to devour
the wretched who were in hiding.
You trampled the sea with your horses,
churning the great waters.

—Habakkuk 3:3–7, 12–15

Habakkuk is offering here his own stylized retelling of the Exodus story. *Teman* and *Mount Paran* refer to the desert region south of Judah—the Sinai peninsula, where God revealed his Law in earthquake and lightning. Other references recall the parting of the Red Sea and the Jordan, and victories along the way over the tribes of the Negev. Habakkuk remembers all that God did for his people, and he invites his readers to remember as well. Did you notice the little word *selah* in

the margin of his song? You may be familiar with that term from the book of Psalms, where it occurs often. This song in Habakkuk 3 is the only other place in Scripture that uses it. As in the Psalms, *selah* is some sort of direction or musical term. It indicates that something is expected of the singer here, some sort of change or pause. Maybe it means to kick up the volume, or raise the pitch a step, or just to shout “Amen!” Perhaps *selah* just marks the spot to take a brief time out to stop and remember—that is, relive—the salvation history you’ve just sung about.

God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt when they had no hope. He made a way out of no way (to quote the title of a sermon by Fleming Rutledge). He brought Israel into the Promised Land when the way was barred. God did all that for his people. You and I have an advantage over Habakkuk because we know the next part of the salvation story. It involves a stable in Bethlehem, and a cross on Golgotha, and an empty garden tomb, and tongues of fire in an Upper Room, and the gospel going out to the ends of the earth. God did all that, too.

Remembering, in the biblical sense of the term, is at the heart of New Testament as well as Old Testament faith: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). The Lord’s Supper is not a mere memorial, where we try to call to mind devout thoughts of Jesus’ suffering and death. When we come to the table, he is with us there in the Spirit. We meet him, we relive his passion and death, we feed upon him in our heart by faith with thanksgiving, we as certainly receive Christ in our souls as our bodies receive bread and wine. When I was a young boy I got hooked on a series of historical novels called “We Were There”—*We Were There at Pearl Harbor*, *We Were There with the Wright Brothers*, and so forth. If we belong to the people of God, we really *were* there for all the mighty acts by which God has redeemed us. The believing person’s response to the question raised by the familiar spiritual is, simply, “Yes. I was there when they crucified my Lord.”

So the first thing to do when you are frightened or discouraged is to sing a song of God's salvation, and remember all the things he has done for you in the past.

REMEMBER US

"I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy" (Hab. 3:2). The gist of what Habakkuk prays is simple: "God," he is saying, "I've heard all about your mighty acts in the past—how you saved our people out of Egypt, and led them by Moses, and did all those great miracles. But what about today? What about us? Do the same things for us that you did for them!" It almost sounds presumptuous, as if Habakkuk is saying to God, "Salvation history is all well and good, but how about a contemporary miracle or two? I want to see you save us right here and now."

I think what Habakkuk really means is something like this: "Lord, what I really want is to experience your presence in my life for myself, just as the great saints did in the past. Please do your work in me, even though it may hurt sometimes. I don't ask to be let off easily. I only ask that if you judge me, if you discipline me, if you use painful experiences to make me grow, that you will also show me your mercy."

That's the key thing, isn't it? Anyone can ask God for his blessings. Even an agnostic may cry out to be delivered from a crisis. But God's work of salvation in us involves more than just getting us out of trouble. We not only need to be saved from our sins; we actually need to be delivered from them, to have our lives so transformed that our character and behavior begin to mirror the likeness of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29). That requires a long, sometimes painful process of spiritual discipline and personal change (cf. Phil. 1:6). We have all asked God to work according to our plans; to prove that he is real when we are finding it hard to believe, or maybe to perform a

miracle to help us escape a painful ordeal. But spiritual maturity means coming to the point where I can ask God to work out *his* plan for my life, whatever that may entail for me.

“In wrath remember mercy.” When the Scottish Puritan divine David Dickson lay dying, someone asked him how he did. Dickson replied, “I have taken all of my bad works and all of my good works and cast them together in a heap, and fled from both to my Savior Jesus Christ, in whom I find sweet peace.” Sin calls forth wrath, and rightly so. I would not want to live in a world where sin—including my own sin—went unpunished. I would not want to worship a God who was indifferent to wrong, an innocuous deity who dismissed the monstrosity of evil as if it did not matter. The God of the Bible is not innocuous. “Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you . . . For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deut. 4:23–24). So God’s wrath is real, but his mercy and peace are found in Jesus Christ.

We have seen how important it is for biblical faith to remember God. But even more critical is that God remember us. That is our ultimate prayer. When the penitent thief cried out to the man dying on the cross next to his, he didn’t ask for much. I doubt that he even knew fully what to ask for, or who it really was he was addressing. All he said was, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). And it was enough. Near the end of his life John Newton said this: “I am 82 years old, and my memory is nearly gone. But I still remember two things—that I am a great sinner, and that I have a great Savior.” I hope that I never forget those two things either.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Habakkuk 3 is a prayer and a song. Read verses 1-2 and 16-19. What is Habakkuk's attitude as he begins his prayer/song?
2. Next, Habakkuk begins to recite the deeds of the Lord. How does remembering what God has done for us in the past help us cope with the present?
3. Read Habakkuk 3, verses 3-7 and 12-15. Habakkuk lived before the Cross—the culmination of the salvation story. We know the whole story. How is remembering at the heart of the New Testament?
4. How do we exercise remembering in our worship experiences?
5. What is the gist of Habakkuk's prayer?
6. What does Habakkuk really want from God?
7. Is it difficult for you give up your plan for God's plan when you are in the midst of a problem? How do you get past the difficulty?

Learning to Sing Again

Chapter Nine

FAITH IN HARD TIMES

It is one thing to praise God when his blessings are flowing into your life. But if yours is the kind of faith that also praises him when things are bad, then it's the genuine article.

I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.

Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.

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;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.

For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.

WHEN JESUS FACED his final hour, he was frightened. Filled with anguished foreboding during his last night on earth, Jesus shrank in horror from the trial that confronted him. How else are we to interpret the gospel accounts that describe Jesus' behavior in the Garden of Gethsemane? After leaving the Upper Room in Jerusalem where he had shared in the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus moved to the olive garden just across the Kidron Valley. There he asked his friends to watch with him, and pray. The Lord who so often had gone off by himself to spend entire nights in prayer did not want to be alone that night. The disciples all failed him, of course, just as they would all run away and hide when the moment of crisis came, as Jesus predicted (Matt. 26:31). So Jesus found himself praying alone, while his heavy-eyed followers slumbered nearby. As he prayed, Jesus struggled to steel himself for the ordeal of suffering that loomed ahead. "My Father," he cried repeatedly, "if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me" (Matt. 26:39). That is to say, "Please don't make me do this!" Luke said Jesus' spiritual struggle in Gethsemane was so severe that he sweat blood. "And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

But in the end, Jesus accepted the necessity of doing what had to be done for the salvation of the world. The gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke all report that Jesus signified his decision with the prayer, "Not my will, but yours be done." But in John's gospel Jesus expresses his submission to the painful will of God with a rhetorical question: "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11).

This is how faith meets suffering. However bitter the experience, we believe that it is still given to us from our Father's hand—the cup has not spun out of his control. And so we accept it as coming from God. Among Johann Sebastian Bach's most magnificent compositions are his two surviving Passions, the St. Matthew Passion and the Passion According to St. John.

In these monumental works, which were written for the Good Friday worship services in Leipzig, Germany, where Bach was music director, the composer set the story of Jesus' final hours to music. The framework of each Passion is simply the text of the relevant section from the Gospels. The scriptural narrative is sung by a tenor soloist (Evangelist), with the various characters in the story (Jesus, Peter, Pilate, the crowd, etc.) singing their lines. Interspersed among the Scripture are various musical interludes that offer commentary and reflection on the biblical story. These interludes include a number of German chorales, or hymns, which Bach inserted at key points to express the reaction of the church to what is happening. In the St. John Passion, when Jesus sings the words, "Shall I not drink the cup my Father has given me?" a brief pause follows. Bach allows the question to hang in the air for a moment. Then he responds with a chorale. The choir, speaking for all Christian believers, sings a stanza based on the Lord's Prayer:

May your will be done, Lord God,
On earth, as in heaven.
Make us patient in suffering,
Obedient in everything.
Overpower the flesh and blood
That would rebel against your will.

Bach, with unerring spiritual insight, is asking us here to see our own suffering the way Jesus saw his. He invites us, when faced with affliction, to say with our Lord, "Shall *I* not drink the cup my Father has given *me*?" Our suffering, like Jesus' suffering, is a bitter cup that comes to us by the will of our heavenly Father, but with this difference (as John Newton explains):

[Our afflictions] are honourable, as they advance our conformity to Jesus our Lord, who was a man of sorrows for our sake.

Methinks if we might go to heaven without suffering we should be unwilling to desire it. Why should we ever wish to go by any other path than that which he has consecrated . . . especially as his people's sufferings are not penal; there is no wrath in them; the cup he puts in [our] hands is very different from that which he drank for [our] sakes, and it is only medicinal, to promote our chief good.

There is no wrath of God in any sufferings he may send to his people; Christ has drained that cup dry on our behalf. God does not punish us for our sins. Our sins have already been punished in full. Here is the gospel truth: for all who belong to Jesus Christ, the judgment of God's wrath against sin is transformed into the discipline of a loving Father. It is tough love, to be sure. But it's love, nevertheless, not wrath. Whatever painful trials or afflictions may come to us who are in Christ, we are assured that God intends them for our ultimate good. The medicine may have a bitter taste, but it will work our healing in the end.

FAITH IN HARD TIMES

So we believe, and so we confess. In the closing verses of his prophecy Habakkuk writes one of the most moving confessions of faith in all of Scripture. We must not forget his situation. He is writing on the eve of Jerusalem's complete destruction by a powerful enemy. He had asked all his questions of God and had received some answers. He has been praying and singing and rehearsing God's great deeds of salvation, and he has started to feel better. His faith is being renewed. But when Habakkuk turns from his devotions back to the everyday world he is living in, nothing external has changed. The threat of invasion still looms on the horizon. He, together with his family and all his friends, are still facing the violent conquest of their home and city, the loss of all their

possessions (including their freedom), and for many of them, even the loss of their lives. Things have not somehow miraculously turned around. Life hasn't suddenly become sunny and cheerful.

So what does Habakkuk do? Well, the first thing he does is shake with fear! "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled" (Hab. 3:16). Trusting in God is great, but it isn't magic. It does not automatically make all our problems go away—or remove our very natural reactions to them. You can still be faithful and fearful, too.

But then Habakkuk offers this magnificent confession of faith:

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.

—Verses 17–18

What Habakkuk is describing here is a very graphic picture of hard times. These verses paint a picture of life at its most desolate point. There are no buds on the fig tree, only dry, lifeless branches. No grapes on the vine, no crop from the olive orchard, no produce from the fields, no sheep or cattle in the barns. All of which adds up to no money or even any food for the coming year.

What if that is your situation today? No income, no resources, no prospects; the cupboard is bare, the paycheck is gone, and the food pantry's just closed down. What then? What do you say when you pray and believe and trust God

and try to live a decent life, but still you're lying in a hospital bed, sick and frightened and in pain, and the doctor tells you he's sorry but there's nothing more they can do for you? What do you say when your husband informs you he's just plain tired of being married to you and he's found real love for the first time in his life—with someone else? Or your boss tells you that the company has been downsizing and he's sorry but you no longer fit in with their plans for the future? Or your investment turns sour and the security you were counting on for your retirement suddenly has evaporated? Or you miscarry the baby you've been trying to have for ten years? Or you don't get the job or the promotion or the girl or the award or the prize? What do you say when the fig tree does not bud?

A lot of people say, quite literally, "To hell with it," and turn their backs on God. But Habakkuk says this: Even though the crops have failed and there's no livestock in my barn, "*yet* I will rejoice in the LORD. I will be joyful in God my Savior" (v. 18, emphasis added). Habakkuk is still singing his faith, even his joy, no matter what his circumstances.

SINGING JOY IN A MINOR KEY

I was listening to a Russian believer speak about what it was like to be a follower of Jesus Christ during the bad days of Soviet communism. "We learned to sing our joy in a minor key," he explained. Habakkuk's song was like that. It's easy to sing praises to God when everything is great. "I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free." Sometimes that is so. But a better measure of our faith is whether or not we can still sing when life stinks, when every tune is in a minor key. Habakkuk doesn't sing because he's happy or because things are so great. Habakkuk sings *even though* things are the way they are because he is rejoicing in the Lord, because he is joyful in God his Savior. When Jesus first sent his disciples out on a mission, they returned full of excitement because they had experienced

some success. Jesus, of course, knew what was ahead for them: great ministries, yes, and also martyrdom. So he cautioned them: “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). Don’t rejoice because you’re wealthy, or comfortable and happy, or in love with a wonderful guy. Those things can all disappear in a hurry. Rejoice because you know the Lord, because in Jesus Christ you have personally met and been adopted by the Creator of the whole universe. Then you can sing even if your crops (or efforts in life) have failed and your barns (or bank accounts) are empty.

You know, the real test of faith is how you meet loss. A number of years ago I spent a summer filling in at a small town church whose pastor was on leave. One week I was asked to visit a lady in the community, a stranger to me, whose husband had just died. As we talked for a while, it became obvious that she wasn’t a Christian. I found it difficult to speak about comfort or hope, because she didn’t have any. She told me that her one consolation was reading. *Reading the Bible?* I wondered. No, she said she liked to read the novels of the bleak, nineteenth-century English writer, Thomas Hardy. Something light or escapist I could have understood, but Thomas Hardy? As if there isn’t enough suffering in real life; you need to read grim, pessimistic stories in addition? But, you see, when people don’t know God, the best they can do in the face of suffering is to muster a sort of dull resignation. Resignation is when you give up hope. You accept the inevitable, because there’s nothing else you can do about it. You simply resign, the way a chess player resigns when he sees that the game is lost.

Biblical faith is not resignation. Faith is different. Faith sings. Faith even leaps. It climbs like a deer. “The Sovereign LORD is my strength,” sang Habakkuk; “he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights” (Hab. 3:19). His life just then was down in the dumps, but Habakkuk himself could run up the mountains because he

knows God will be his strength. What was it that the apostle Paul said? “We are more than conquerors through [Christ] who loved us.” Not just conquerors; we’re *hyper*-conquerors. Believers don’t just win over all the troubles of life. We win with style! “Faith is the victory that overcomes the world.”

WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE BY FAITH

Dr. Paul Harrison was a missionary of the Reformed Church in America during the first half of the twentieth century. He spent his entire career serving in the American Mission in the Persian Gulf region, where he established pioneering medical work in the years before the development of the oil fields, when the Arab world was poor and had little access to health care. Dr. Harrison invested his life in sharing the love of Jesus Christ by deed and word in places and among people where he saw few visible responses. Near the end of his career he addressed a group of young Reformed Church pastors while back in the United States on furlough. He explained to them just what it means to live by faith:

It means that nothing is too high to be attained, too good to be hoped for, too hard to be endured, or too precious to be given away.

Habakkuk would have agreed.



O my Lord and Saviour, in Thy arms I am safe; keep me and I have nothing to fear; give me up and I have nothing to hope for. I know not what will come upon me before I die. I know nothing about the future, but I rely upon Thee. I pray Thee to give me what is good for me; I pray Thee to take from me whatever may imperil my salvation . . . I leave it all to Thee, because Thou knowest and I do not. If Thou bringest pain or sorrow on me, give me grace to bear it well—keep me from fretfulness and selfishness. If Thou givest me health and strength and success in this world, keep me ever on my guard lest these great gifts carry me away from Thee . . . [G]ive me to know Thee, to believe on Thee, to love Thee, to serve Thee; ever to aim at setting forth Thy glory; to live to and for Thee; to set a good example to all around me; give me to die just at that time and in that way which is most for Thy glory, and best for my salvation. Amen.

— A Prayer of John Henry Newman

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. How can a person be faithful to God in the midst of having real feelings of fear?
2. What is the picture of hard times Habakkuk describes in verses 17-18?
3. If you were to write a contemporary version of Habakkuk's confession of faith in verses 17-18, what might you say?
4. Have you ever been in a situation where you had to sing your joy in a minor key? Explain.
5. Have you observed ways various people met loss? Describe some.
6. RCA missionary Dr. Paul Harrison explains what it means to live by faith: "It means that nothing is too high to be attained, too good to be hoped for, too hard to be endured, or too precious to be given away." How has Habakkuk helped you understand this perspective?

