

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Habakkuk was a prophet that lived in Judah, around the beginning of the 7th century B.C. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah. His message is rather unique, in that it isn't an oracle from God, directed at the nation of Israel, such as we might read in the books of Isaiah or Jeremiah. It's more the record of a personal dialogue between the prophet and God, and it only has three chapters! In the first two chapters, where our reading was taken from this morning, Habakkuk argues with God about his ways which seem unfathomable – even unjust. Then having had an encounter with God, Habakkuk responds in the third chapter with a beautiful confession of faith.

This account of Habakkuk wrestling with God isn't just a fragment from his private journal, that somehow was leaked and published – it was actually written for Israel. It would have represented the cry of the godly in Judah, struggling to understand God's ways. The answers God gave Habakkuk therefore spoke to all who shared Habakkuk's questions and troubled doubts. As we look at it, I hope that we find that God's answers speak to us just as powerfully as they did to Habakkuk.

Habakkuk was torn apart by the wickedness, and strife and oppression that he saw all around him in Judah, while God seemingly did nothing.

Let me give you a contemporary scenario... Imagine if you are caught in Aleppo at this point in time. You've fled from your home and are sheltering from the seemingly endless bombing in a makeshift shelter. You're cold by night. You're scared and hungry by day. You wake up to the sound of screaming aircraft, exploding bombs and gunfire. You pray and pray that the fighting will cease. but then all hell breaks loose, and it seems that you are living through Armageddon itself as Russia and Syria launch incendiary attacks with ferocity unknown in all the previous 6 years of fighting. The blood of the city's children flows in the streets. Food and water are scarce. Even the promised ceasefire and evacuations are being sabotaged. You and your children have done nothing to deserve this. Why? Where is God in all this?

Habakkuk cries, “How Long, Oh 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 is confused and tormented. He is distressed that evil prevails, and is agonised by the thought that God tolerates evil. His cry is “How long?” and “Why?”

Habakkuk receives an answer, but it is not the comfort of an explanation. In fact, God reveals that worse is to come. He is going to raise up a terrifying, godless nation - the Babylonians - to execute judgment on Judah for her wickedness. In one sense it's a comforting thought that the wicked in Judah won't go unpunished, but for Habakkuk, this just raises more bitter questions "why should the innocent perish in order for the wicked to be punished?"

To Habakkuk, none of this makes any sense.

At this point, I'm sure many of us can relate to how Habakkuk feels. Though our concern is often more focussed on our own personal suffering, and the suffering of those we love, we could echo Habakkuk's questions and his response – There are times we simply don't understand what God is doing.

For instance, when we pray for healing, and it doesn't come. Or we agonise over a wayward child or grandchild who just seems to just keep getting in deeper. Or when a relationship we've prayed and prayed about breaks down irrevocably. There are times when things seem to get progressively worse instead of better, and we find ourselves shaking our heads in bewilderment and confusion at the way God is working in our lives.

Habakkuk, in his anguish, decides to wait for another encounter with God. He says in 2:1: "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 he will give to my complaint."

Habakkuk really wanted to know how God was going to respond, and was prepared to wait all night during his watch, if that was what it took.

So what is God's answer? This is the insight that Habakkuk receives: "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 it will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and not delay.

What revelation? Well – it seems that Habakkuk received a vision from God at this time, but the vision itself hasn't been recorded. What we do know, is that it was a vision of the end of days. There is an answer to Habakkuk's question, but it's not an answer in terms of a verbal explanation. It's an answer that is in terms of an event that is to come. God's answer will happen. It may be some time in coming, but it will surely come, and his people should wait for it.

We wait for the same thing, as we look forward to the return of Jesus to judge the world, to end all suffering and bring in his Kingdom for eternity

But for Habakkuk and the righteous people of Judah, the waiting – the interim period – is hard to take. But another great answer is given to Habakkuk: “...the righteous will live by his faith.”

In the light of God’s revelation about the end of days, his people are to wait patiently for him, and live by faith, trusting in their sovereign God. An answer, again, not in terms of an explanation of all that is happening, but in terms of faith. Habakkuk’s attention is directed away from receiving a verbal explanation, and directed to God himself, in whom he should trust.

Habakkuk’s encounter with God, though it offers him no answers to his questions, leads him to breathe a prayer of worship to God. He says, and you can almost hear the awe in his voice, “...the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.” With his eyes on the Lord, Habakkuk then bursts into a prayer of praise and worship to the glory of God. A prayer so passionate and full of praise and thanksgiving, that it became used in the worship of the nation in the generations that followed.

Habakkuk’s response to God’s revelation was a great declaration of faith. It wasn’t part of the text this morning, so let me read it to you:

“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 will I rejoice in the Lord,
 I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

After his great prayer of praise and worship to God, Habakkuk had come to a place where he was able to trust in God regardless of his circumstances.

And there’s is a key here for us, isn’t there? It’s as we place our eyes on the Lord, and WHO he is, that we find our focus begins to change. Explanations aren’t as important. We find peace in the arms of our Lord – Like a hurt child that buries its head in its mother’s breast. Habakkuk declared that even if he experienced great suffering and loss, he would still rejoice in his Saviour God. This is one of the greatest affirmations of faith in all of scripture.

When it comes to pain and suffering, we, like Habakkuk, cry out WHY! HOW LONG? I DON’T UNDERSTAND. Our tendency, in our humanity, is to look

for an explanation. When they are not forthcoming from God, we tend to invent our own. We look for cause and effect, don't we?

We ask, "what have I done to deserve this?"

Or we ask, "what is God trying to teach me?"

Or we console ourselves and say, "there is a reason for everything"

Or "God is doing this because a greater good will come from it"

And there may be answers in part, to all of those questions. But we cannot always say that we are suffering because of a particular reason. The scriptures, both Old and New testaments are full of people's experiences of suffering - and while the reason is sometimes obvious, generally the scriptures don't often tell us "why". They tell us "who" and direct our attention to our relationship with God, not our external circumstances.

When we are in pain, or confused, or hurting, we'll inevitably find ourselves asking the same questions Habakkuk asked. We often find that what God is doing in our lives is a total mystery and we don't understand. And, incidentally, it is okay to ask. It is okay to come to God with our questions, our disillusionment and our pain. And at times there may even be an answer in part.

But the great thing Habakkuk learned from his encounter with God in his time of suffering, was that the answer to dealing with his pain was not to be found in an explanation understood by the mind, but in a relationship of trust in his God, experienced by faith.

It wasn't finding the reason that gave him peace and even joy in his suffering, it was placing his trust in an almighty God, who loved him.

It's as we stop looking for "why", and change our focus, as Habakkuk did, placing our eyes on our Lord, that we find our perspective changes. We find that we are able to face our troubles with greater peace, and greater strength.

Let me leave you with the first verse from psalm 46: **God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in times of trouble.**