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Habakkuk 1:1-11  
Minor Leagues:  
Insights from the Minor Prophets  
Frustration With God

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The world today gives us a lot of reasons to ask God, “Why is there so much pain, violence, and destruction in the world?” Variations of that question have been asked by every person who’s walked the face of the earth, often many times in the face of events that have the world’s spotlight on them – like prison camps and genocide or in the face of more personal challenges.

And we are far from the first to ask this question of “why” in the face of these kinds of things. They’ve been asked since the dawn of humankind. Some people ask this question to no one in particular. I met someone recently who grew up as a Christian but now has kind of new-agey spirituality, and in her lifetime she has had three immediate family members murdered (father, and I think mom and a brother), and her sister recently got divorced...and this gal talked about how she just had to kind of turn things over to the Universe, as though the absolute nothingness of outer space or the stars in the night sky were going to reach out and give her answers or comfort her in her pain.

Well, about 2,625 years ago, Habakkuk was asking these very kinds of questions. And he doesn’t turn to the nothingness of space, or to humanity (not that turning to other people is wrong – God works through people all the time, of course). But the problem for him is that it’s people that are causing the problems that he’s lamenting. So he turns to God. And: **The book of Habakkuk is essentially a dialog between himself and God. This is not a prophetic book in the same sense that most prophetic books are where it’s a message to the people.** It’s Habakkuk’s prayers and the answers he gets from God. This is in the late 7<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., meaning probably around 605 B.C. plus or minus 5 years or so. This is very close in time to the prophet Nahum who we looked at last week – many scholars believe they were contemporaries, or very nearly so, along with the Jeremiah who was at work in this time-frame as well. So the northern kingdom of Israel had been under Assyrian control for some time, but the Babylonians conquered them by about 609 B.C., and then the southern kingdom of Judah – which is where

Habakkuk is – was conquered a few years later by Babylon, by 598 B.C.

And during that 10-11 year period where the north was controlled by Babylon and the south wasn't yet, the southern Kingdom of Judah was governed by Jehoiakim II – and he was not a good king. You can read about some of what he did in 2 Chronicles 36 and 2 Kings 23 and 24. But as Elizabeth Achtemeier summarizes it in her book “Preaching from the Minor Prophets” in this effort to date Habakkuk’s writings: **“The opening chapter of [Habakkuk] mirrors the injustice and violence of Jehoiakim’s despotic rule, when forced labor, syncretism, idolatry, and persecution of the prophets characterized Judah’s society.”**<sup>i</sup>

This is the context that Habakkuk is asking God about when he pleads to God:

“How long, 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 wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me;  
there is strife, and conflict abounds[... ]justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,  
so that justice is perverted” (Habakkuk 1:2-4).

**So Habakkuk is a frustrated prophet. He’s a frustrated follower of God.** He’s sick and tired of seeing all the atrocities in Judah, he’s undoubtedly aware that things are just as bad – if not worse – in the northern Kingdom under Assyrian/Babylonian rule, and so he really wants to know when God is going to smooth things out and restore order. How long until God fixes things and makes them right? Haven’t you asked that question before? God – when is this atrocity going to end? There was a 21 game stretch starting in 1994 where the UW Huskies went 4 and 17 against the Oregon Ducks on the football field – including 12 straight Husky losses at one point, and it felt like the whole universe was out of balance, and Husky fans were crying out, “How much longer until things get set right again?” But more seriously: How

long will human rights violations persist? How long will sex trafficking be tolerated? How long will homelessness persist? How long will people kill one another? How long will righteousness and holiness and just good old decency and kindness be held at bay? When are you going to take care of this, God? That's what Habakkuk is asking – he wants God to no longer be the *Patient Avenger* as we talked about last week, but to simply be the Avenger...to come in and take care of things and set them right.

And God's reply is: **“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” (Habakkuk 1:5).** Now, if you stop there, you're thinking: Sweet! It's revival time. God is going to raise up an army in Judah and it's going to be like David slaying Goliath again...or like the Israelite Exodus from Egypt nearly 1,000 years earlier. In fact, this verse has been used many times by pastors to preach a message of revival, even interpreting it as a prophecy that points to Jesus. And God certainly does bring revival and God does to amazing things that make our hearts sing, and Jesus did come and do all kinds of amazing things, not the least of which was die on the cross and be raised from the tomb on the third day.

But *this* is not *that*. This is not a prophecy about Jesus, and it's not a prophecy about revival tent meetings and people's hearts being filled with joy for the Lord. The next verse in God's reply to him says, **“I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own” (Habakkuk 1:6).** And then it goes on to describe the strength of the Babylonians and the fear that the nations have of them and so forth. This is not what Habakkuk expected. At a minimum it feels like a continuation of what they've been experiencing under Jehoiakim, and maybe even feels like going from bad to worse. The punches just keep coming.

All of this reminds me of the story about a guy who ended up in the hospital after an accident and was asked to give a written report about what happened. It's a longer story than would probably normally share but it's good and I think this sermon needs something light-hearted right now. So here's what he wrote:

“Dear Sir,

I am writing in response to your request for additional information in Block #3 of the accident reporting form. I put ‘Poor Planning’ as the cause of my accident. You asked for a fuller explanation and I trust the following details will be sufficient.

I am a bricklayer by trade. On the day of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a new six-story building. When I completed my work, I found I had some bricks left over which, when weighed later, were found to weigh 240 pounds. Rather than carry the bricks down by hand, I decided to lower them in a barrel by using a pulley which was attached to the side of the building at the sixth floor.

Securing the rope at ground level, I went up to the roof, swung the barrel out and loaded the bricks into it. Then I went down and untied the rope, holding it tightly to insure a slow descent of the 240 pounds of bricks. You will note on the accident reporting form that my weight is 135 pounds. Due to my surprise at being jerked off the ground so suddenly, I lost my presence of mind and forgot to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded at a rapid rate up the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel, which was now proceeding downward at an equally impressive speed. This explains the fractured skull, minor abrasions and the broken collarbone, as listed in Section 3 of the accident reporting form.

Slowed only slightly, I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep into the pulley. Fortunately by this time I had regained my presence of mind and was able to hold tightly to the rope, in spite of the excruciating pain I was now beginning to experience.

At approximately the same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground- and the bottom broke out of the barrel. Now devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel weighed approximately 50 pounds. I refer you again to my

weight. As you might imagine, I began a rapid descent down the side of the building. In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming up. This accounts for the two fractured ankles, broken tooth and severe lacerations of my legs and lower body.

Here my luck began to change slightly. The encounter with the barrel seemed to slow me enough to lessen my injuries when I fell into the pile of bricks and fortunately only three vertebrae were cracked. I am sorry to report, however, as I lay there on the pile of bricks, in pain, unable to move and watching the empty barrel six stories above me, I again lost my composure and presence of mind and let go of the rope.

The empty 50 pound barrel, weighing more than the rope I had let go, fell rapidly to earth, resulting in the two broken forearms and wrists when I raised my arms to protect myself.

I hope this information satisfactorily fulfills your request for further information.”<sup>ii</sup> It’s the same thing for Habakkuk and the Judean people: One blow after another. How much can a nation take, right? Going beyond where we read this morning, Habakkuk then replies to God’s answer that the Babylonians are His plan, **“O Lord, are you not from everlasting?” (Habakkuk 1:12)**. In other words: “You’re the God of eternity and the Babylonians are your answer to our problems? What kind of a plan is that! They’re hideous and evil as the others. How can you work through them?” So, it’s just one blow after another, and Habakkuk is frustrated and bordering on telling God what He ought to be doing.

And then God’s reply comes, and the key phrase is in 2:4, **“See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4)**. It’s a challenge, in some ways, from God to Habakkuk to turn his frustrations into faith. God is saying: Who are you going to be like: The oppressor, who is full of himself, or are you going to live a life of righteousness fueled by faith? Now, when we speak of faith in the Church, we can sometimes mean different but related things. Faith can reference doctrinal beliefs, like the Apostles Creed: I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only

Son, Our Lord....and on it goes. Is that faith? To just know doctrine and believe it to be true? It's part of it, for sure, and sometimes we mean that by the word, "faith." Is faith trusting God in all things, like Indiana Jones stepping out in faith off the rock ledge, trusting that he's not going to fall? That's certainly an element of it as well.

**Here, living by faith means more like, "Believe God's promises and live as though they will be fulfilled."** Live faithfully to God's Word, to his promises, to what he says he will do. And although Habakkuk doesn't reflect on examples of this throughout Israel's history, there were many that he undoubtedly was aware of that could inspire him and the people, such as Abram (later called Abraham) who is known as one who lived by faith as he stepped out into a new land trusting God to fulfill his promises for him, and then later he trust God's promise that when it seemed he wouldn't have any descendants that in fact God promised his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Or Gideon who led an army into the land of the Midianites, but the army he was leading was "too big" at 32,000 and after a couple elimination rounds to get the army at the right size, they attacked with 300 and were victorious as they lived into that promise of God. Those guys were living faithfully into God's promises.

630 years or so after Habakkuk, Jesus asked essentially the same question as he hung on the cross: "Why Oh God, have you forsaken me?" And yet God had promised him earlier, in his baptism that Jesus was his Son, with Him God is well-pleased, the Holy Spirit came in the form of a dove signifying God's blessing and spirit upon Jesus in his humanity, and we see God's anointing upon him throughout his earthly life. He's the chosen one, the Messiah. That is God's promise. And yet there He was, crucified. He could have quoted these words from Habakkuk: "How long, 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 wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me..."

**But if God had saved Jesus *from* the cross, he couldn't have saved us *through* the cross. And the cross of Christ is what brings about true justice and righteousness.** God had a mission and a purpose for it all, and Jesus had to live faithfully and wait for God's timing for redemption and revival and ultimately even something more astounding: resurrection. But it took living by faith in God's promises for that to happen.

And that's the kind of faith God is calling Habakkuk to, and is calling His people of Judah to as well. And now He calls us to that kind of faith as well. To trust that even when things look bleak and tough and the odds are stacked against us, to remember that God is faithful to His promises, and we can live in faith and faithfulness as well, trusting in those promises and living into them and growing closer to God in the process.

**Where do things look bleak and unfair and unjust in your life or in the world around you?** Disease, death, brokenness, gossip, lies, slander...maybe at times it even feels like the whole world is tilted against you. Where are you frustrated with God? Remember God's promises in the midst of those challenges: That God loves you, he never fails, his grace is sufficient, that he is with you in the darkest valley and is working to bring justice and righteousness even now...but in the end it all gets taken care of through the cross because Jesus is enough and his death and resurrection are sufficient. Like Habakkuk, let your frustrations drive you *to* God, not away from him. Habakkuk is a more positive model for us of this than Jonah was a few weeks ago. Remember – Jonah ran from God, not to God, and even when Jonah finally did what God asked him to, it was with a bad attitude, and he had a pity party when God fulfilled his promise. Think about that: God fulfilled the promise and Jonah lived as though God would, but Jonah didn't really want God's promise to be fulfilled! Jonah really kept God at a distance.

Habakkuk shows us to turn to God in faith, to draw close to Him...and he closes with these words at the end that show his positive response to God's challenge to live by faith, when he writes:

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 tread on the heights (Habakkuk 3:17-19).  
May you and I, even in the face of personal or global violence,  
disappointment, and more...may we turn not to “the universe” but to  
God...because His promises are sure and certain, and He invites us to live  
into those promises today. Let’s pray...Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Minor Prophets*, p. 87.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://gregburdine.com/dont-let-go-of-the-rope/>