



## Learning To Pray in Pain

SERIES: *Can You Hear Me Now?*

I've often been drawn to some of the more difficult questions of the Christian faith. Why does God allow pain and suffering? If God has a plan for our lives how does our free choice impact his plan? These are hard questions but for me the hardest question of all is "Why doesn't God answer many of our prayers?" Have you ever wondered that? For me it's not enough to spout off an easy answer like the one I've heard: "Oh, he always answers; sometimes he says 'No,' sometimes 'Yes,' and sometimes 'wait.'" It sounds good but it doesn't really solve my problem.

Others point the finger at the one praying: "You're praying with wrong motives." Or "You don't have enough faith." I suppose sometimes either of those things could be the problem. But do we really have to prove ourselves worthy of answered prayer by perfect motives and unwavering faith? Don't we all pray as fragile, broken, imperfect people?

This is a painful subject because over and over in the Scripture God invites us to pray. Why would he set us up for such disappointment when he doesn't respond to our requests? We often turn to God in our most vulnerable moments with a desperate need only he can meet. Why does he sometimes remain silent? If he doesn't respond, why pray at all?

I'm not talking here about superficial prayers. I've prayed many of those prayers. I've sat in the stands of a baseball game and prayed for victory. I've prayed for parking spaces. I've asked that lights turn green when I'm in a hurry. I've heard of people praying to win the lottery. I'm sure you could add a few of your own to this list.

But sometimes we pray for things that really count: the conversion of a loved one; guidance for a huge decision; healing for a sick child; getting a desperately needed job; protection for a nephew fighting overseas; a life partner. We pray with sincerity, faith and conviction for things that seem to be God's will. Why does he ignore even some of those prayers? It's not that prayer doesn't ever work. Some of our prayers are answered. I've seen many answers to prayer. But why does he answer some and not others?

My son has always loved football. He dreamed of playing high school and even college football for years. Two and a half years ago, as a freshman, he broke his arm right before the first game. He was crushed and missed the whole season, but he kept it in perspective: "I'm only a freshman. I still have three more years. I'll just work hard and get ready for next year." And that's what he did. Every once in a while he'd ask, "What if it happens again?" We told him not to worry and we encouraged him to pray. So he prayed all year long and waited for his sophomore season. He worked hard and was thrilled to make the Varsity team. His first game was like a dream

come true, but in the third quarter he was tackled and came down on his shoulder and got up slowly. After he reached the sidelines the trainer said he should get an x-ray. On the way to the hospital, I did some serious praying, to no avail. This time he broke his collarbone. This was one of those times where I felt profound disappointment in God. I wondered, what happened to all those prayers?

Now I know that in the larger scheme of things, this wasn't all that big of a deal. I just got back from Cambodia where millions of people were brutally murdered just 35 years ago in a revolution led by Pol Pot. In my son's case, at least he wasn't dying of cancer. But let's face it, many kids do, and prayers that are much more heartfelt and intense than mine have the same results. And so this launched me into a bit of a spiritual crisis. I think many of you, if you're honest, have been there.

With those questions in mind, today we begin a three week series on the little Old Testament book called Habakkuk, which is preoccupied with these very questions. This book is only three chapters and 56 verses long (I hear you all breathing a sigh of relief after an eternity in the book of Acts!). Habakkuk was a prophet who lived right around 600 B.C. We don't know much else about him. He writes in a lyrical kind of way so some scholars believe he was a musician in the Jerusalem temple. He wrote this book during troubled times. Israel had been split in two. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been taken into captivity by the Assyrians. Now the southern kingdom of Judah was being ruled by a very wicked King named Jehoiakim and they were being threatened by the Babylonians. Habakkuk saw all this and so he prayed.

**"The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.  
How long, O LORD, will I call for help,  
And You will not hear?  
I cry out to You, 'Violence!'  
Yet You do not save.  
Why do You make me see iniquity,  
And cause me to look on wickedness?  
Yes, destruction and violence are before me;  
Strife exists and contention arises.  
Therefore the law is ignored  
And justice is never upheld  
For the wicked surround the righteous;  
Therefore justice comes out perverted."**

(Hab. 1:1-4).

### I. Habakkuk complains to God over the moral condition of Judah.

**A. He observes what is happening around him:**  
Habakkuk isn't encouraged by what he sees around him. He

looks around and as a result he cries out to God, "Violence!" He feels like God is rubbing his nose in the foul mess before him: **"You make me see iniquity. You cause me to look on wickedness."** He bemoans strife and contention. People that ought to get along are dragging each other into court. As a result of all this, **"the law (of God) is ignored."** Literally the torah is paralyzed. The one thing that could get them back on course had lost its power in their life. So justice isn't upheld and the wicked so outnumber the righteous that they trap them like tiny flies in a massive spider web.

It's not a pretty picture. This is what was going on in Judah. The prophet isn't looking at other nations; he's looking at his own people; God's people. Do you ever look around and feel like Habakkuk? Some of us never look beyond our own comfortable lives. As long as we can control our environment and keep the mess away from us we don't think much about it. It's so depressing. Why focus on the negative? But we really should look around. It was just a couple of weeks ago that the California Supreme Court decided same sex couples have the right to be married. Like Habakkuk says, **"Justice comes out perverted."** But it's not just that. How about the numbers on violent crime: In 2006 there were 17,034 murders in our nation, 92,455 rapes and 862,947 cases of assault. How many children have we heard of recently who've been killed or injured by random gunfire? And it's not just "out there." It's in the church as well. The Barna Research Group says, "We rarely find substantial differences between the moral behavior of Christians and non-Christians." Divorce rates among so-called born again Christians are the same or even higher than others. Does that bother you? It should.

**B. He asks two important questions:** In light of this, Habakkuk directs two questions to God. First, how long? How long will I cry out for help and get no response from you? I pray and pray but nothing seems to change. And then the second question: Why? Why do you let all this go on and on when you have the power to stop it? What kind of person would stand there with his hands in his pockets and watch a helpless victim getting mugged and not lift a finger to help? Why does God sit up there in heaven and watch and not do a thing?

When you see the kinds of things Habakkuk saw and it touches a raw nerve within you, what do you do? How do you handle that? You can try to suppress the emotion. That doesn't work for long. You can lash out at innocent bystanders. But there is a better way, and that's to take all you feel to God. Habakkuk reminds us that you don't have to be in a good place emotionally to pray. He and others in the Old Testament offer us a prayer language of complaint; they invite us to spit our accusations at God, knowing that he's able to absorb our emotion and wrap his arms around us even when we rage against him. He's like a good parent who isn't put off when his frustrated child screams, "I hate you" at his dad because he won't give him what he wants. God allows us to pour out our hearts to him and get rid of the poison.

I tell young couples preparing for marriage that one thing is worse than fighting, and that's not communicating and dealing with your issues at all. Sometimes conflict is necessary if there is to be true growth in intimacy. For that

reason, I believe God values our honesty. Jesus himself was our model. On the cross he prayed Psalm 22, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** I'm sure he knew the next line too: **"Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but find no rest."** This is an expression of struggle and even doubt, but it's not sin. The worst thing would be to experience all of this and turn away from God; but instead he invites us to come to him and work it through.

## **II. God replies to Habakkuk about how he would intervene.**

Sometimes God does answer prayer but in doing so he seems to make things even worse. That's what happened to Habakkuk. Look at vv.5-11.

**"Look among the nations! Observe!**

**Be astonished! Wonder!**

**Because I am doing something in your days--  
You would not believe if you were told.**

**For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,**

**That fierce and impetuous people**

**Who march throughout the earth**

**To seize dwelling places which are not theirs.**

**They are dreaded and feared;**

**Their justice and authority originate with  
themselves.**

**Their horses are swifter than leopards**

**And keener than wolves in the evening**

**Their horsemen come galloping,**

**Their horsemen come from afar;**

**They fly like an eagle swooping down to devour.**

**All of them come for violence.**

**Their horde of faces moves forward.**

**hey collect captives like sand.**

**They mock at kings**

**And rulers are a laughing matter to them**

**They laugh at every fortress**

**And heap up rubble to capture it.**

**Then they will sweep through like the wind and  
pass on**

**But they will be held guilty,**

**They whose strength is their god."**

The essence of what God says here is this: "Look around, Habakkuk, beyond your own little corner of the world. Look what I'm doing on a wider canvas. I'm raising up the Chaldeans (Babylonians) and they're going to sweep through Judah so swiftly and fiercely that you won't know what hit you. You want the violence and injustice in Judah stopped? Well, I'm going to use these Babylonians to do it."

One of the things Habakkuk had to admit was that God heard his prayer. God responds to Habakkuk, but not in the way he wanted or expected. The Babylonian's reputation was terrifying. Habakkuk is stunned to think that God would use people as fierce and degraded as these to judge his own people.

Let me offer a modern equivalent. What if in the Summer of 2001 you found yourself much like Habakkuk complaining to God about the evil you saw in our nation? What if God revealed to you that he was going to raise up Islamic terrorists to unleash a vicious strike against your

country. How would you feel about that? You'd say, "That's not fair! They're the ones who should be judged." But we see here that's a real possibility. I'm not saying that's what happened on 9/11 but I am saying that's not a whole lot different than what we see God doing here.

Sometimes we ask "How long?" Sometimes we ask "Why?" But sometimes we ask "Is this fair? Is this right?" Have you ever asked that question? One of the things we have to remember is that God's ways are not our ways. That means that his ways won't always make sense to us. He can use evil for good. I spoke to a woman recently who had an abortion several years ago. Today she has a powerful ministry to women contemplating the choice to keep or abort a baby. God is using a bad decision for good. It's been years since I was in youth ministry. But I recall several kids who were the victims of divorce. They hoped and prayed that mom and dad would stay together but it didn't happen. And yet today several of them would also say that it was that very pain that caused them to actually become genuine followers of Christ. And I've come to see that God was doing something far deeper and far better in my son's life giving him a successful football season.

We wonder how could God use evil to accomplish something good? How could a holy God accomplish justice through what is unjust? Is that even right? But recall God had warned his people that judgment was coming. They didn't believe it and continued to rebel. Finally, God said, "Enough! I'll raise up an evil people to judge your evil." By the way, how could he use anyone else? Who else is really available?

Some years ago Oswald Chambers likened believers to grapes that are crushed to make fine wine. He said, "God can never make us wine if we object to the fingers he uses to crush us with. If God would only use his own fingers and make me poured-out wine in a special way! But when he uses someone whom we dislike, or some set of circumstances to which we said we would never submit, we object. We can never choose the scene of our own martyrdom. If ever we're going to be made wine to drink, we'll have to be crushed. You cannot drink grapes. Grapes become wine only when they've been squeezed."

God will use any means to squeeze his people. This doesn't mean he's the author of evil; he just uses it for his purposes. But notice that God also says in v.11, "**They will be held guilty.**" In other words, their time will come. God will judge them for the very evil he's using!

### III. Habakkuk complains to God about his use of the wicked.

Still, Habakkuk doesn't get it. So he now responds to God in vv.12-17.

**"Are You not from everlasting,  
O LORD, my God, my Holy One?  
We will not die  
You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge;  
And You, O Rock, have established them to correct.  
Your eyes are too pure to approve evil,  
And You can not look on wickedness with favor  
Why do You look with favor  
On those who deal treacherously?  
Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up**

**Those more righteous than they?  
Why have You made men like the fish of the sea,  
Like creeping things without a ruler over them?  
The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook,  
Drag them away with their net,  
And gather them together in their fishing net.  
Therefore they rejoice and are glad.  
Therefore they offer a sacrifice to their net  
And burn incense to their fishing net;  
Because through these things their catch is large,  
And their food is plentiful.  
Will they therefore empty their net  
And continually slay nations without sparing?"**

What he says to start out with is important. The first thing he does is rehearse the unchanging nature of God. "Are you not from everlasting? I mean, these Babylonians are just a blip on the screen of eternity to you. You see what's behind and before. You're not bound by time." He calls the Lord, "**my God, my Holy One.**" He's not just the God, he's my God; my Holy one. He has a personal relationship with him. "I'm yours and you're mine. Besides, you're holy. How can a holy God do this?" And then he calls him a "rock." The idea is, "You're an unchanging source of security to me and all your people."

When you're walking across a river or a stream you try to find a solid place to put your feet. You search for footholds. It's the same way in a spiritual crisis. You have to look for footholds and you find those in the character of God. When we're driven to our knees with questions we can't answer we need examine afresh who God is and what God really is to us. Do I know him as "my God"? Do I know what it means to hold on for my life to his holiness even though what is happening around me seems to contradict it? Can I stand upon him or hide in him as "my rock"?

I think doing that allowed Habakkuk to take a deep breath. I almost get a feeling he's turning a corner when he says, "We will not die. You've appointed them to judge...You've established them to correct." He sees there is hope in this. God is using this. He's not destroying us; he's correcting us. He recalls this is exactly what the Lord said would happen if his people rebelled against him. In Dt. 28:49-50 Moses warned Israel, "**The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand, a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young.**" Habakkuk understood this.

But right when it looks like he has his head above water and will swim to safety, he sinks again. In v.13 the question WHY? is back on his lips: "**Why do you look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are you silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?**" There is even a note of blame when he asks, "Why have YOU made men like the fish of the sea, like creeping things without a ruler over them?" He's saying "It's your fault. You made us this way."

Then he goes into this long drawn out analogy from the world of fishing. He compares the Babylonians to greedy fishermen who sweep the seas and bring in a net full

of fish. They've caught all they need, but they're not satisfied. They cast their net again and again and bring back more fish and stack them on the bank until they rot in the sun. They conquer people after people, country after country. Nothing stands in their way. And then when it's all over they rejoice over their huge catch and offer a sacrifice to their net! They congratulate themselves and worship their own technology: "My, aren't we great! Look what we can do with our nets!" I get concerned about how impressed we are these days with our own technology. We really are impressed with all we can accomplish. It's not a whole lot different from what we see here.

#### IV. Habakkuk waits for God's reply.

You have to ignore the chapter division here because v.1 records the last part of Habakkuk's prayer.

**"I will stand on my guard post  
And station myself on the rampart;  
And I will keep watch to see what He will speak to  
me,  
And how I may reply when I am reproved."**

This is where Habakkuk's prayer ends for now. His struggle isn't completely over but he runs out of breath and decides to be like the watchman who stations himself high on the ramparts, ready to report anything he sees and hears to the people of the city. He comes to a place where he just decides to wait for God to sort it all out. He realizes he doesn't know everything so he'll wait for more information. It's almost like a place of surrender. It's not like the crisis is over, but he's come to a place where he's done fighting and he is going to watch and wait to see what God will say and do next. That's a good place to be, but it's not easy. Watching and waiting is hard.

Watching and waiting is hard because it takes time. We want answers now. It's hard because we'd rather do something. It feels so unproductive to just wait. And it's often such a lonely job; the watchman normally waits and watches by himself. It's hard because we have to stay focused and there is so much to distract us. Waiting and watching is hard because it means we have to be open to correction. At the end of 2:1 he even anticipates being reproved. Our big problem is we want God's thinking to be in line with ours, but when we wait and watch we're ready to get our thinking in line with God's.

## CONCLUSION

We started by talking about the problem of unanswered prayer. We've looked at how Habakkuk brought his complaints about this right to the feet of God. But then when God answered his prayer he found he had even more to complain about. Then he began to rehearse in his mind who God is and that brought him some relief, but he still struggled to reconcile that with what was happening. So finally he decided to just wait. He decided he didn't know everything and he'd just wait for God to show him more. One thing is clear, Habakkuk has changed.

It reminds me of something I read in a book called *Peace like a River* by Leif Enger. He tells the story of an unusual family of four: Jeremiah, the father, and his three children, Davy, Swede, and Rueben, who narrates the story. Davy gets himself into serious trouble. He's arrested and put on trial. Knowing that the jury is about to convict him, he breaks out of a county jail and flees. A few weeks later the rest of the family piles into an Airstream trailer and goes in search of him.

Jeremiah, the father, is a praying man. He's humble and discerning. But he can't understand what God is up to. He senses God wants him to cooperate with a federal agent who is hunting for Davy, but he resents the idea, because he doesn't want to betray his son. So he decides to have it out with God. He stays up all night and wrestles with God in prayer. While this was happening, a friend named Roxanna sat in the hallway and overheard the argument. She, of course, only heard Jeremiah. She wasn't privy to God's voice, though she sensed God was speaking and fighting back. Enger writes:

"At this Roxanna covered her mouth, for it occurred to her with Whom he wrestled. Having long ago accepted the fact of God, Roxanna had not conceived of going toe to toe with Him over a particular concern. Make me willing if you can, Dad cried, a challenge it still shakes me to think of. What Roxanna heard next was a tumble like man thrown.

"So the conflict between God and Jeremiah continued through the night. Roxanna eventually fell asleep in the hallway. When she awoke in the morning all was quiet. She went into the kitchen and found her dad sitting at the kitchen table. He was at perfect peace."

Someone has said that prayer can do one of three things. First, prayer can change things. It really can make a difference in what happens. Second, prayer can change God. It won't change his nature, but it can change what he chooses to do. But, finally, and perhaps most importantly, prayer can change us. One thing I'm certain about; what we call unanswered prayer changes us. We may not like that, but it works.