



# Central Peninsula Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Catalog No. 1324-2  
Habakkuk 2:2-20  
Mark Mitchell  
June 8, 2008

## Learning To Live By Faith

SERIES: *Can You Hear Me Now?*

This is a special day for me and my family. I'll be performing a wedding ceremony this afternoon for Debbie, my sister-in-law. It's really quite a story.

Debbie is in her mid-fifties and she's never been married. She's been a major part of our family's life and has even lived with us at times. She's been a big part of our kids' lives. She's lived a full life. She's a nurse manager at Lucille Packard Children's Hospital and she's been involved in ministry. But that one piece of her life was missing. She prayed and prayed and prayed for the last 35 years! She's had opportunities to get married, but believed that God hadn't led her to the right man until recently. Her life is really a story of praying and waiting.

The guy she's marrying, whose name is Mark, has been a friend of Lynn's and mine for over 30 years. We went to college with him and his first wife, Cindy. A few years after they had their third son, Cindy developed brain cancer. There was lots of prayer for healing; there were lots of chemo treatments. Finally she got to a place where the doctors gave her two months to live. She prayed to God to let her see her sons grow up. And within the next few months, the tumors in her brain shrunk and she was in remission. God had performed a miracle in answering her prayers.

Fast forward to the time when their youngest son graduated high school, which was three years ago. That summer, after his graduation, Cindy fell and broke her arm. At the doctor's office they discovered her brain tumor had come back and within a month, she was with the Lord. That was three years ago.

A year ago Mark was at my house helping my son and I trim some trees. He's an arborist by trade. Lynn was out of town and she had suggested that Debbie, who lives nearby, stop by and provide lunch. Now we're not matchmakers, although Lynn had been praying about this for some time without even telling me! But Debbie brought a great lunch, she met Mark, and the rest is history!

Much of that story is about waiting, praying, disappointment and heartache. This is true for all of us at times. The lapse of time between promise and fulfillment, between prayers uttered and prayers answered can seem like an eternity, far too long to keep hoping and praying. But sometimes that's exactly what we have to do—keep hoping and praying, even when there doesn't seem to be reason to continue.

Last week we left the prophet Habakkuk at a time when, much like these miners and their families, he was waiting, hoping and praying. He had started out complaining to God about the violence and injustice that he saw around him in his very own nation of Judah. God then responded by telling him that he would raise up the

Babylonians to swoop down and devour Judah. Habakkuk was stunned to think God would use a people as fierce and degraded as the Babylonians to judge them. He struggled to reconcile this with what he knew about God: his holiness, his power and his love. But then at the start of chapter two he says, **"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'm reproved"** (2:1).

We don't know how long he waited but eventually God gave him a vision of what he could expect God to do about this problem. This vision is really the centerpiece of this little book. This vision is for us as well. It's a vision that will change our life, especially our prayer life. It's a vision that will help us understand not just how to pray, but what to pray and why to pray when it seems like nothing is happening above us.

### I. The vision is to be preserved and proclaimed (v.2).

But before God tells Habakkuk what the vision is, he tells him what he's to do with it. Look at v.2.

**"Then the LORD answered me and said,  
'Record the vision  
And inscribe it on tablets,  
That the one who reads it may run.'"**

In essence, God says this vision is to be preserved and proclaimed. You're to record it; you're to inscribe it on tablets, much like the Ten Commandments. It was the custom in those days to erect tablets in public places so that notices of general interest could be attached to them. It's like he's saying, "Take out an ad in the paper and print this for all to read." Whatever this vision is, it's not just for Habakkuk. It's for everyone. It's to be published and proclaimed. Notice he says, "that the one who reads it may run." Run and do what? Run and proclaim the message they've just read.

### II. The vision will be fulfilled in God's time, not ours (v.3).

When you write something down, it also can be preserved for however long you need it. Look at v.3.

**"For the vision is yet for the appointed time;  
It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail  
Though it tarries, wait for it;  
For it will certainly come, it will not delay.'"**

God says "the vision will be fulfilled in my time, not yours." This had to be a bit discouraging for Habakkuk. He wanted God to act NOW. He wanted the vision to apply to things NOW. But God says it's **"yet for the appointed time."** He says you're going to have to wait for it. It's so easy to forget that God views time differently than we do. The result is we often find ourselves waiting for

God's promises to be fulfilled. What seems like an eternity to us is a drop in the bucket to God. Peter put it this way, **"But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day"** (2 Peter 3:8).

Despite the wait, God's assurance was that the vision would come and it wouldn't be late. The **"appointed time"** toward which this vision was moving was the time of the "end." When he says **"it hastens towards the goal"** this literally means it "pants for the end." He's talking about God's own passionate commitment to bring this vision to pass. So, yes, you'll have to wait for it but don't interpret that as hesitation on God's part. God is absolutely committed to bringing this to pass. His reputation depends on it. That's why it says, **"It will not delay."**

By the way, when the Old Testament talks here about "the end" or "goal" it points to the fulfillment of the vision that would involve God's judgment on the Babylonians. But this is also pointing to another end; the ultimate end is also in view here. History has always been hastening towards this end. The apostle Paul talks about this when he says, **"Then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet."** (1 Cor.15:24-25).

### III. The vision regards two groups of people (vv.4-20).

So Habakkuk has learned what he's to do with the vision and that it will come in God's time, not his. The third thing we see here is that the vision regards two groups of people. Look at v.4.

**"Behold, as for the proud one,  
His soul is not right within him;  
But the righteous will live by his faith."**

This little verse, buried right here in the obscure book of Habakkuk, is perhaps the most important verse in the entire Bible. It's quoted in the New Testament in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews as the key verse of the Christian life, especially the latter part, **"the righteous shall live by faith."** Those words took deep root in the soul of Martin Luther. While he was yet a priest and monk, Luther was on his knees, making his way up the holy stairs in Rome when this verse came flashing into his mind. More than anything else in life, Luther hungered after righteousness. He tried with all his heart to obtain it by good behavior, by penance, by beating himself. When these words came into his mind, he realized that he could never earn righteousness, but rather it would be given to him as a gift from God by faith. He got up off his knees, walked down the stairs, returned to Germany, and began the Reformation, based on the bedrock conviction of this verse: **"The righteous shall live by faith."**

But I want you to notice that there's a contrast of two kinds of people here. Notice first that one group is proud while the other group has faith. The Babylonians of course were proud; they were arrogant, just like so many people today. The idea is that they're totally self-sufficient. They trust in themselves. They don't need God. He's just a crutch for the weak. They don't need someone else

telling them how to live their lives. So in 1:7 we're told that their **"justice and authority originate with themselves."** They make up their own rules. And in 1:11 it says **"their strength is their god."** They rely on themselves; they take pride in their ability to succeed. On the other hand, those with faith put their trust in God. He's their strength. They rely on his wisdom for how to run their lives. They can't do it themselves. Calvin said, **"This is a faith which strips us of all arrogance and leads us naked and needy to God."**

But there is a second contrast. One group is "not right" while the other group is "righteous." Of the proud, God says **"his soul is not right within him."** So pride leads to perversion. Self-sufficient people live by their own rules which leads them down a crooked path. The sad thing is they have to live a lie. Pride forces them to act like they have it all together. They can never really admit what they know deep inside and that is they're weak, vulnerable and terrified at the prospect of failing. On the other hand, the group who puts their faith in God is called "the righteous." This isn't an ethical term; it's a legal term. This means that people aren't righteous because they act righteous but because God declares them righteous. It's like a judge declares a person "not guilty" in a court of law. Remember Abraham? His wife was barren and beyond the age of childbearing but God promised him that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars of the sky. When he heard it, it says, **"Abraham believed God and it was credited him as righteousness"** (Gen. 15:6). He didn't earn it; it was credited to him. Righteousness is a gift credited to us by God. We don't earn it; we just receive it by faith.

Finally there is a third contrast between these two groups. One group will "live" while the other will be judged. The judgment of the proud is described in the rest of the chapter. He pictures the proud Babylonians surrounded by all the nations they've taken captive. And he says in v.6, **"Will not all of these take up a taunt-song against him, even mockery and insinuations against him, and say, 'Woe to him who increases what is not his — for how long — and makes himself rich with loans?'"** This is the first of six woes directed to the proud.

We don't have time to look at all of them but let's just look at one. Look at vv.15-17.

**"Woe to you who make your neighbors drink,  
Who mix in your venom even to make them drunk  
So as to look on their nakedness!  
You will be filled with disgrace rather than honor.  
Now you yourself drink and expose your own  
nakedness  
The cup in the LORD'S right hand will come around  
to you,  
And utter disgrace will come upon your glory.  
For the violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm  
you,  
And the devastation of its beasts by which you  
terrified them,  
Because of human bloodshed and violence done to  
the land,  
To the town and all its inhabitants."**

When the Babylonians invaded a country, they stripped it of everything of value. They raped its forests, pilfered the buildings and desolated its land. The Babylonians engaged in other forms of sick behavior as well; they made their neighbors drunk so they could gaze shamelessly on their nakedness. Often in the Bible the sin of drunkenness is associated with the sin of sexual impurity. As a result, God says he'll make Babylon drink out of the cup of His wrath, not an actual drink like the Babylonians had given to others, but the judgment that God hands down. God held Babylon responsible not only for the violence done to Judah, but to other nations, like Lebanon.

This is just a sample of what God would do to the proud, especially the Babylonians. In contrast to that he very simply says the righteous who have faith in God will "live." This is talking about the gift of life; what we often call salvation, and it includes eternal life. It's the same life Jesus was talking about when he said, "I am the resurrection and the life." On another occasion he said, "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly." We receive this life because Jesus drank the cup in God's right hand, which is the cup of God's wrath. And this life that he gives will one day permeate the entire earth. So God can say in v.14, **"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea."** That's not just talking about getting rid of Babylon, it's talking about completely doing away with evil once and for all. That's the "end" or the "goal" we spoke of earlier. Every nook and cranny of the earth will be filled with his glory and those he's called righteous will be caught up in that. That's the vision. That's what he was to preserve and proclaim; that's what he was to wait for.

#### **IV. The vision has implication for our prayer life.**

Now remember all of this took place for Habakkuk in the context of prayer. So I want to explore what all this might mean for our prayer life.

Perhaps the most important thing is what this says about the heart of true prayer. *The heart of true prayer is not one of pride and self sufficiency, but one of humble trust in God.* Another way to put this is that the heart of true prayer is helplessness; helplessness that turns to God out of desperate need. Jerry Sittser says, "The reason why we don't pray more—and probably don't see more answers to prayer—is not because we don't know how to pray, but because we don't really need to pray. We're not desperate enough. It doesn't take much, however, to make us desperate. Each of us have a raw nerve that, once touched, drives us right to our knees." What's your raw nerve? Your children? Your career? Your health? Your singleness? Your marriage? A lot of times identifying that raw nerve, that thing that drives us to our knees, can give us insight into the things within our own hearts which border on idolatry. When life threatens one of those things, we run to God.

But perhaps this also helps us understand why God doesn't answer some of our prayers. Have you ever considered that unanswered prayer might be a gift? Even when we pray out of desperation, we're often inclined to use prayer for our own selfish interests and to prop up our worthless idols. So, while it's a good thing to run to God in

prayer, it can also expose us for the fallen creatures that we are. As strange as it might sound, answered prayer might actually exacerbate the problem by feeding the sin that's within us. So there are some prayers that God won't answer for our own good. They would only reinforce our own pride. We pray for victory at someone else's expense. In the Civil War, for example, both the North and the South believed God was on their side and prayed for victory. You say, well the right side eventually won. But even if our cause is right and the other's is wrong, our victory might cause us to fall into even greater sins like pride and cruelty.

What if God really answered all of your prayers? Think about the power you'd have at your disposal. That kind of power is dangerous, not just because it produces pride but because we'd abuse it. *The Lord of the Rings* explores this idea. It's about a powerful and seductive ring. The ring is all about power that intoxicates, perverts and destroys. No matter how well intentioned, the person with the ring will eventually use it for evil purposes. In the same way, answered prayer is a dangerous gift. God answers prayer for our own good and his glory, but what we do with those answers to prayer might turn into something very different.

So when we pray, we should take into consideration that God may want to use the very thing we pray to get rid of. We pray to get rid of problems. Lord, help me with my money problems. Help me with my marriage problems. Help me find a new job. Help my kids get on track. Help me get rid of this temptation. But those are the very things that keep us coming to God. What if God said, "Well, I would love to solve that one for you but I'm afraid I'd never hear from you again if I did!" Remember Paul prayed three times to be delivered from what he called a "thorn in the flesh." Each time God said, "No! My power will be perfected in your weakness." Paul learned that these thorns create a humble desperation that is at the heart of true prayer.

Another thing we learn from this passage about prayer is that *God's delays are not always denials.* Habakkuk prayed that God would deal with the Babylonians and vindicate his people. God said, "I will. But in my own time. Meanwhile, I want you to wait." Often, God isn't saying "No," he's saying, "Wait." There is a lot to learn in the process of waiting. F. B. Myer said, "So often we mistake God and interpret his delays as denials. What a chapter might be written of God's delays! It's the mystery of the art of educating human spirits to the finest temper of which they are capable. What searchings of heart, what analyzing of motives, what testings of the Word of God, what upliftings of soul... All these are associated with those weary days of waiting, which are, nevertheless, big with spirit."

When we're waiting, it helps to remember that we're part of an epic story. We pray as if our lives are a short story—a quick and easy read with a few pages, a simple plot, and a clear story line. But God wants us to pray as if our lives are part of an epic that unfolds on a huge landscape over a long period of time. David prayed to be able to build a house for the Lord. God said "No." He said he would allow his son Solomon to build the house, but for David he had something bigger. He said, "David, I'm going to build YOU a house and your house will last forever. One

of your descendants will always be on the throne. One of them will be the Messiah." David was thinking short story; God was thinking epic story. Moses wants to go into the promised land but God said NO. Moses says, "Just let me take one step on that land. I've waited so long for this." God says, "Come up to the mountain and I'll show you the expanse of the whole thing before you die." Moses was thinking short story (just one step); God was thinking epic story. Habakkuk says, "God, you can't let these Babylonians have the last word. Somehow you have to defeat them and redeem your people." God says, "Habakkuk, I'll do more than that. I'm going to fill the whole earth with my glory." Habakkuk is thinking short story; God is thinking epic story.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, all of our prayers will be answered in that vision of the whole earth being filled with his glory. In the meantime, time of waiting between promise and fulfillment when you would love to just give up, the time when it feels like God has forgotten both you and your prayers, remember that "The righteous will live by faith." Will you do that? Even in the midst of short story prayers that are not answered, will you trust that God is writing a better story and a bigger story for your good and his glory?