



When was the last time you told God how you really felt, even when how you felt was filled with doubt, fear and confusion? Have you ever been angry with God? Have you ever wondered why He allows so much evil? Have you ever dared to tell Him how you felt? Can you identify with that kind of raw, gut level prayer?

Sometimes I think we're too nice. We think God values being nice over being real and honest. A pastor friend of mine has a Jewish man in his church who constantly argues with him about his sermons. Finally my friend said, "What's the deal? Don't you ever get anything out of my sermons? Do you always have to find something to argue about?" His friend responded, "Let me explain my background. When Jews like me argue about Scripture, we're asking for a dialogue. When I tell you I disagree with something you said, I expect you to argue with me about it. We get close by arguing. Confronting each other is a sign of intimacy. So when I dish it out, I expect you to dish it right back. That's how the relationship grows."

The Jews often applied this idea to their prayer life. The Jewish Talmud even states, "Boldness is effective—even against heaven." There's a Yiddish story about a grandmother who took her grandson to the beach. As the boy played with his bucket and shovel in the sand, a huge wave came and swept him away. He was just gone. The grandmother was panic stricken and enraged. She started to pray: "Lord God of the universe, how can you allow such a thing to happen? My only grandson has been swallowed by a wave. You can't let him drown. I expect better treatment from you. This is wrong. Bring him back now!" Suddenly, another massive wave rolled in and dropped the boy unharmed on the beach. The grandmother stared at the startled boy for a moment, and then looked up and prayed, "Lord God, you know he also had a hat."

Maybe that's taking it a bit too far, but Jewish people often prayed in a confrontational way. And this was true in the life of the prophet Habakkuk. We don't know a lot about his outward circumstances. Some scholars believe he was a Temple musician because at the end of the book he says his prophecy was for the director of music. What we do know for sure is he ministered in a time of real crisis in Judah and Jerusalem. Habakkuk was one of those Jews who had no problem bringing his complaint to God.

We struggle over the problem of evil and suffering.

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. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted (1:2–4).

Habakkuk looked around at his Israelite society and culture and what did he see? He isn't encouraged by what he sees around him. He looks around and cries out, "Violence!" He feels like God is rubbing his nose in the foul mess before him: "You make me look at injustice." He bemoans strife and conflict. People that ought to get along drag each other into court. As a result of all this, "the law (of God) 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 outnumber the righteous.

It's not a pretty picture. This is what was going on in Judah. He's not looking at other nations, but at his own people. Do you ever look around and feel like Habakkuk? I was listening to the news this week and when it was over it hit me every news story was about some form of sin. A football program proud of its "success with honor" track record has been disgraced. A former coach molested who knows how many at-risk boys. For years, people knew about it and yet no one held him accountable. Why does God allow that?

Sometimes we struggle more after hearing God's plan.

Like Habakkuk, we question and complain to God about suffering and evil. But look what happens next: God answers Habakkuk, but it's not a very satisfying answer.

"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. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor" (verses 5–7).

God answers: Yes, I know all about the violence and evil, and you bet I'm going to do something about it; I'm going to do something that will amaze you; something you'd never have thought of. My plan is to raise up the Babylonians to discipline my people.

That’s right, the Babylonians. Those pagan, idol worshiping, ruthless, and power hungry Babylonians.

Sometimes we complain to God because He doesn’t seem to answer our prayers. But sometimes He **does** answer them, but not the way we want! 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 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.” I’m not saying that’s what happened at 9/11 but that’s not much different than what we see God doing here.

LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, you will never die. You, LORD, have appointed them to execute judgment; you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? (verses 12–13).

So we end up complaining about His methods. That’s what Habakkuk does in his response to God. Habakkuk doesn’t doubt God’s existence. He says, “Are you not from everlasting?” He doesn’t doubt His holiness or His right to execute judgment. So what does he question? He questions God’s fairness: “How can you stand by while these ruthless people swallow us up, Lord? That’s not fair. We may be bad, but they’re worse!”

So you can see here Habakkuk is in a bad place. He’s struggling with how God operates. It doesn’t seem right to him. Have you been there? I think we’ve all been there. I talk to single people all the time who really want to get married. They ask God to bring that person into their life. But they don’t want to get married so badly that they’re willing to compromise their standards. They’re holding out for a man or woman of God. They’re committed to staying sexually pure until marriage. Meanwhile, they don’t put their life on hold. They serve God. As they wait they watch others around them who aren’t so faithful and obedient get blessed with a spouse. And they wonder, God, what are you doing? That doesn’t seem fair.

In the end, Habakkuk rejoiced in God.

But the interesting thing about Habakkuk is this isn’t where he ends up. Nothing changed in terms of God’s plan, but by the end of the book, he’s in a very different place. Go to the end of the book.

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,... (3:17).

These six phrases describe in descending order of severity what will soon happen to Israel. Figs were a delicacy. If the fig trees didn’t blossom, you’d miss them, but it wouldn’t be a real hardship. Grapes were used mainly for wine, so again, the loss of grapes wouldn’t be the end of the world. Olives were used mostly for olive oil, which was needed for cooking and for light, so that would be a bigger problem. But then it gets worse: if the fields no longer produce the two staples—barley and wheat—he’s talking about starvation. Sheep were used for wool and food; cattle for heavy farm work. Both were foundational to their survival. Habakkuk is saying, “After the Babylonians get done, we’ll not survive.”

But now watch what happens. The turn comes with the little word at the start of v. 18 “yet.” Look at the whole verse.

...yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

Habakkuk is now rejoicing. He says “I WILL rejoice? I WILL be joyful!” He’ll trust in the person of God even when he doesn’t understand the plan of God. He’s still struggling; he still doesn’t get it; nothing has changed in terms of his circumstances, but he knows joy in the midst of the devastation.

But not only does he know joy, he also knows strength. That’s what he says in the last line of his prayer in v. 19.

The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights. For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.

He never could have rejoiced unless the Lord was present with him to give him strength. He says, “The Lord God IS my strength.” He uses a beautiful image here to reinforce that: “He has made my feet like the feet of a deer.” Have you ever seen the graceful way deer climb and run over rock fields as easily as you can run on the beach? How can they do that? It’s their feet—their tough, cloven hooves. God designed their feet for climbing. They don’t slip or fall. Habakkuk rejoices that God has made his feet like deer’s feet, designed to travel over the most difficult ground.

He says with these feet “he enables me to tread on the heights.” When we hear that today we think of taking a nice hike with a pretty view; a “back to nature” deal. But no one did that then. In his day “the heights” meant difficult, challenging places you don’t go unless you have to. He’s saying, “He enables me to walk on places I couldn’t survive without his help.” The path is dangerous. He’s not equipped for this. Yet God is his strength, and he’s confident God enables him to do what he could never do on his own.

How is this possible? How can your world collapse and you still rejoice and experience God’s strength? One thing is for sure: this isn’t just something that happens to us. It’s not like catching a cold and you have no idea where it came from. It’s something

we choose. But how do we do that? The answer is found in what happened in between the end of chapter 1 and the end of chapter 3.

Faith allows us to move from struggle to joy and strength.

Go back to chapter 2. At the start of chapter 2 Habakkuk says he’ll wait for God’s answer to his complaint about this plan to discipline his people through the Babylonians. And then in v. 2 the Lord Himself speaks and tells him to write down what He’s about to say. The first thing God wants him to know is this.

See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness (v. 4).

Another translation puts it this way, *“the righteous will live by his faith.”* When the New Testament writers quote this verse they understand it as “faith” rather than “faithfulness.” But the two really go together; they’re two sides of the same coin because if you have genuine faith, it will be shown in your faithfulness.

This was the key for Habakkuk, and it can be for us as well. Basically, what he’s saying is, “I may not understand what God is doing, I may not even like it, but I’ll trust him; I’ll be faithful to him even when nothing makes sense.” When you feel like you’ve been betrayed, remember “The righteous live by faith.” That means when you watch as somebody gets ahead by doing wrong, remember, “The righteous live by faith.” That means you don’t do the same thing they’re doing in order to catch up, but you continue to do what’s right. It takes great humility to live by faith. That’s why here in v. 4 there’s a contrast between those who are “puffed up” with those who live by faith. The Babylonians were proud. They represent all those with a worldly mindset who insist on being in control; who need to have everything figured out, but the righteous will be humble enough to trust in God.

When I say the words, “have faith in God,” what do you think? Some of you might think of that as far too elementary to be of any real help. It’s like going back and learning your ABC’s. Or some of you might think of that as a tired, overused cliché. “Yeah, yeah, I know, have faith in God.” But how important is faith? Jesus talked about faith constantly. Nothing impressed Jesus more than great faith. But nothing upset him more than a lack of faith. The writer of Hebrews said, *“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him”* (Heb 11:6). Faith may be elementary, but if you want to please God and walk closely with God, you must have it. That same writer defined faith like this, *“Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see”* (Heb 11:1). Faith requires we trust God even when we don’t see the answers.

That’s why Paul could say, *“We walk by faith, not by sight”* (2 Cor. 5:7).

The prophet Habakkuk shows us what faith looks like in this book. In his journey from struggle and doubt to joy and strength he shows us how faith works. *First, he shows us that people of faith pray through their doubts and struggle.* They pray through their pain. They bring their questions to God. When you see the kinds of things Habakkuk saw and it touches a raw nerve in you, what do you do? You can try to suppress the emotion. You can lash out at innocent bystanders. But there’s a better way, and that’s to take all you feel to God. You don’t have to be in a good place emotionally to pray.

Here is a prayer language of complaint, knowing that like a wise father He’s willing and able to absorb your emotion and wrap His arms around you even when you rage against Him. I tell young couples preparing for marriage one thing is worse than fighting, and that’s not dealing with your issues at all. Conflict is necessary if there’s to be true growth in intimacy. God wants honesty. Jesus Himself was our model. On the cross He prayed Psalm 22, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* 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. That’s faith.

The second thing he shows us is that people of faith are willing to wait. Before Habakkuk makes this great statement about the righteous living by faith he says in chapter 2,

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 (v. 1).

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” (verses 2–3).

Did you see what the Lord said? “Though it linger, wait for it. It will certainly come.” Nobody likes to wait. Anybody here enjoy waiting? Waiting for an apology? Waiting for a paycheck? Waiting for the results of a test? Nobody does. But faith and waiting often go together. Faith is what we do while we wait. One of the things we need to understand is God’s delays are not always denials. Often, God isn’t saying “No,” he’s saying, “Wait.” 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’re capable. What searching’s of heart, what analyzing of motives, what testings of the Word of God, what upliftings of soul. All these are associated with those

weariness of waiting, which are, nevertheless, big with spirit." Faith is willing to wait.

The third thing Habakkuk teaches us about faith is it's fueled by remembering. In chapter 3 Habakkuk is praying again and he speaks of how in the past God came to the aid of His people.

LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy (v. 2).

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—but he marches on forever. I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish (verses 5–7).

He's thinking of God's deeds in the past and praying He'll do it again. There are a lot of allusions here to the Exodus and to God's work in Israel's past. God routed the Egyptians through pestilence and plagues. Both Cushan and Midian tried to invade Israel during the days of the Judges but God delivered them. So this is looking back to the great saving acts of God.

Habakkuk remembered Moses and the Exodus, but we have an advantage over him. We remember God's ultimate deliverance through Jesus at the cross. Moses was a great leader who risked his life for the people, but Jesus is the ultimate Moses who gave His life for the people. Moses slew a lamb, but Jesus is the Lamb.

The only way we can live by faith is by fueling our faith through remembering what God has done for us through Christ. That's why we need to spend time alone with the Lord each day, rehearsing in our minds who God is and what He's done for us. That's why we come to church! You came today. That's good! Come next week, too. Come the week after that. What do we do in church? We sing. The Bible says, *"Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs"* (Eph 5:19). We usually think of our singing as to the Lord, and it is, but we're also singing to each other. We're encouraging each other when we sing. We also hear the Word. Col 3:16 says, *"Let the Word of God dwell in you richly."* The preaching of the Word helps us remember. And we celebrate communion. The whole point of that is to remember. That's what Jesus said: "Do this in remembrance of me."

How can you know joy and strength in the midst of doubt and struggle and pain and loss? You live by faith. By faith you pray through your doubts and struggles. By faith you wait on God.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

And your faith is fueled by remembering what He's done for you. Like Habakkuk, we wrestle with why God does what He does. I heard a story that brought all this into perspective for me:

At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly—not with cringing shame, but with rage.

"Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?" snapped a young woman from Pakistan who'd spent sixteen hours a day making soccer balls. An elderly woman with a hunched back murmured, "I was so alone. Everyone abandoned me. And where were you, God?" A tenth-grade girl lowered her eyes and said, "Why, God? Why did you allow him to abuse me? It ruined my life, God! No, you ruined my life!" A ragged street child from Rio de Janeiro groaned, "The hunger! I was always so hungry. Every day I scrounged through hotel dumpsters while the tourists ate like kings. Why?"

Far out across the plain, there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the suffering he'd permitted in his world. God was lucky: he lived in heaven where everything was safe and sweet. What did God know of human pain and agony? They all agreed: God leads a sheltered life.

So they decided to confront God. They selected a group of people who'd suffered the most: a Cuban poet tortured for more than 20 years in a damp cell; a refugee from Darfur whose hands had been chopped off; a hungry crack baby from Chicago; and a teenage orphan from Iraq. In the center of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their argument to God against God.

In order to qualify to judge others, God must endure human anguish. So they sentenced God to live on the earth as a human being. "Let him be born a wandering, poor refugee," they shouted. "Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a demanding job. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. At the last, let him be tortured and whipped, and then let God die naked and alone, a victim of abuse and injustice."

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. And when they had finished pronouncing the sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. Everyone knew that God had already served his sentence.

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