

How Long, Oh LORD?: Living by Faith

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[0 : 00] Well, it's great to be back together this Sunday evening, beautiful Sunday evening. If you were with us last week, we began a series looking in a little-known book in the Old Testament called Habakkuk, and this is one of the minor prophets.

If you're anything like me, I had not before now really spent a whole lot of time looking at it, and yet as I've studied it, I've found it to be exceedingly relevant for where we are now.

It's known by many people as a kind of mini-Book of Job because it deals with the issue of suffering. It asks the question in the opening verses, how long, O Lord, how long, O Lord, will you let this evil and injustice happen?

How long will we cry violence and you will seemingly do nothing? I think these are questions that we have all asked. Any honest Christian who's been a Christian for any amount of time living in the world that we live in, you have to ask these questions.

This is also the reason why some of you are here or friends or people you know who are not Christians. Maybe this is the thing that keeps them away. You see, I can't make sense of a good and powerful God in the world that we live in.

[1 : 13] So this is the issue that we're exploring through Habakkuk. And this week is going to be a little different because we're looking at chapter 2, verses 1 through 4. And the question this week is not going to be so much, how do I understand evil times, but rather, how do I survive them?

How do I endure when life is extremely overwhelming and difficult and hard? Which I know for many of you, it is. A lot of people are struggling right now. It's just something is in the water.

Something is, I'm not sure what it is, but I know, I feel like a large number of people who are just really facing hardship. And so how do we endure? And the way the Bible talks about that, enduring through really challenging times, is a phrase that shows up a few different places in the Bible called living by faith.

Living by faith. And so this shows up in Habakkuk. And so we're going to look at what does it mean to live by faith when it seems like God is absent and it seems like we're on our own and facing insurmountable odds.

And Habakkuk 2, 1 through 4 is going to show us a couple of things about living by faith. It shows us that living by faith means living by God's Word and it means living by God's story. So those two things defining our life, that's what it means to live by faith.

[2 : 33] So as we get started, let's pray. Our Father, these are words that are written so long ago. How could they possibly be relevant? And yet we know that you are a God who speaks and is able to, through your Spirit, make these words come alive in a way that will reveal to us your living Word, your Son, Jesus Christ.

Lord, may we see him face to face. And in his suffering, may we find comfort for our suffering. Lord, we pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. So Habakkuk 2, verses 1 through 4, living by faith means first living by God's Word.

Living by God's Word. I want you to understand, if you're unfamiliar to this book, Habakkuk is a deeply troubled man. He's looking at his people, the kingdom of Judah in the south, and there's massive corruption.

They're facing imminent destruction. And I don't know if you remember in chapter 1, for those of you who are here, it starts out with a bang and Habakkuk asking, how is this happening, Lord?

And then God responds by saying, you think it's bad now. Things are going to get a lot worse.

You're going to all go into exile. Babylon, these wicked, bloodthirsty people, I'm going to empower them to conquer you.

[3 : 55] And then Habakkuk fires another volley of questions at God, and then the chapter ends. And so chapter 2 opens with Habakkuk waiting on the response.

What's God going to say in response? And so verse 1 says, And I want to focus in on the metaphor that he uses.

He calls himself a watchman, climbing up into the tower. So you can imagine a city surrounded by a city wall and towers that were erected as a part of the wall, and you can climb up and get the best view of everything that might be coming to get you.

And so a watchman's job is to go up into the tower and to keep watch, and to do so vigilantly. And so this is the image that he uses for his posture toward God. I'm vigilantly, with rapt attention, awaiting the word of the Lord.

I'm waiting for God to speak into my circumstances. I'm focused all my energy there. I don't know if you've ever had the opportunity to read a favorite book to a young child.

[5 : 13] But my boys, they have certain books that are their favorites. And when we pick one of those books to read at night, they scramble for the best position around me, and normally on me in some way, which I'm not complaining, it's fantastic, to try to get the best view of the book.

And then, even though they're not great at reading yet, when I read, and a lot of times that if I'm tired, I'll skip a sentence here, or skip a page there, you know, maybe summarize.

And, you know, the gist. And they catch me 100% of the time. Because they're hanging on my every word. And they know every word in there.

And they're paying so close attention that if I change a name, or skip an indefinite article, or anything like that, they call me out on it. Right? And that's the kind of attention that Habakkuk has. He's focused. What is God going to say? And the other thing that we need to see is that he's not only listening, but he's already poised to respond.

[6 : 10] In other words, he's saying, whatever God says, I'm going to have to respond to it. So he's ready for the response. What's it going to be? And I want to stop, and I want to ask why this is relevant.

Because, you see, this is not only the posture that prophets are called to have. You see the same image show up in Isaiah. But this is not just for the prophets. This is the kind of posture that every disciple of Jesus is called to have.

Right? A posture of listening and responding to the word of God. A regular daily rhythm of listening and responding to the word of God. That's what Jesus is talking about in the passage that Megan read, John chapter 8, when he says, if you abide in my word, then you are truly my disciples.

Right? Abiding in his word means living in his word, living by his word, which means listening and then responding. Right? So at any given time, the essence of your discipleship, for those of you who are here who are Christians, is boiled down to this.

What is God saying to you right now? What are you hearing from the Lord? And then how are you responding? What are you hearing? And how are you responding? So let's break that down a little bit because I know the idea of hearing from the Lord sounds very mystical and esoteric.

[7 : 23] And what does that actually mean? Can you hear the Lord through the circumstances of your life? I think it's possible.

Can you hear the Lord through your community, through your friends, your Christian brothers and sisters? I think that it's possible. Absolutely. Ah. Can you hear the audible voice of God?

I actually think it's possible. I know people who say they have. And I know that there have been a handful of times in my life where I was about as sure as I've ever been of anything that God was directly telling me to do something.

Right? Marrying Laura, leaving the doctoral program I was in to move to D.C. to be a part of starting Advent. There's these discrete moments where from every side, from every angle, life circumstances, doors opening and closing, the council of friends and mentors and everybody, everything was aligning.

You need to do this. So yeah, I think that that's possible. But God always speaks through Scripture. That's the foundation.

[8 : 34] That's how we are guaranteed to hear from God. The one surefire foundational way is through Scripture. So that's what Paul's talking about in his letter to Timothy, 2 Timothy, chapter 3.

When he says all Scripture is God-breathed, he's saying these pages right here, God's breath is in here. God's voice is in here. And when we read this written word that we have access to the living,

breathing voice of God.

So anytime I think God might be telling me something through my friends or through my circumstances or if I think I'm hearing the voice of God, the first thing I need to do is what? I need to check it against Scripture. I need to check it to verify it. Because I know that God has spoken here. Right? And that's important for a lot of reasons. But the main reason is this. There are a lot of voices out there. And they're saying a lot of different things. So how do you pick out God's voice from all of the other voices? Well, you have to develop an ear for it.

[9 : 38] And the more you immerse yourself in Scripture, and the more you immerse yourself in studying and learning and memorizing and understanding and applying it, the more you develop an ear for the voice of God in your life. And you can pick it out from the other voices.

That sounds like what God is saying to me. I see it right here. Now, this is why the image, I think, of a watchman is particularly helpful.

Because I don't want to sugarcoat this. It's not as easy as just picking this up, flipping to a random passage and saying, Oh, Luke 22. And immediately I hear God's voice. Of course it doesn't work that way.

In fact, sometimes it's really, really hard. And you'll wrestle. And it'll feel dry. And you're not getting anything out of it. And so what does a good watchman do?

Right? Does a watchman go up in the tower and say, No, things look pretty calm. And then just kind of head off to go watch the football game? No, that's not. A good watchman stays in his post, right?

[10 : 37] He stays there. And he's vigilant. Doesn't let things distract him. Not looking at his iPhone. Not talking to people on the... You know, he's vigilantly, with rapt attention, looking and attending to his duties.

And that's what we need to do. We need to hang in there. When we don't feel like we're hearing from the Lord, keep at it. Be a good watchman, right? I want to give just an example of this from my life just this past week, because I want to demystify it.

This is not some mystical, esoteric experience that only certain Christians have. This is what's available to all Christians. If you have the Spirit in you, which all Christians do, then you have this ability to hear from the Lord.

So just this week, I was away with some guys at a retreat, an overnight. And I have to be totally honest, I was kind of grumbling about having to be there. And I had a pretty bad attitude, because I was just like, I don't have the time to devote to this.

And yet, one of the things we had to do was to go away and spend an hour with our Bibles and just reflect and think. Don't talk to anybody. Turn all your devices off.

[11 : 41] And the first thing I thought was, I could get so much done in this hour. Right? But I had these other guys, and we all agreed to do it. So I say, okay. And I put all my stuff away. And I go, and I open, and we're supposed to read Psalm 46.

So I open my Bible, start reading Psalm 46. Now, if you're not familiar with the psalm, it's actually a fantastic psalm. It's about how when chaos seems to be swallowing everything up in your life, how God is still a present, available refuge who can provide strength and safety, despite whatever chaos may be swallowing you up.

And I read that, and quite honestly, as I start reading it, the first thought I have is, man, I have not experienced God as a refuge in a while. And I was kind of frustrated at that.

And then it was almost as though the Spirit just kind of drew my attention down to, I'm reading, reading, reading. And then verse 10 just kind of jumped off the page at me. It was almost as though it just kind of like lifted off the page, and I just immediately focused in on it.

And verse 10 is, be still and know that I am God. Right? Be still and know that I am the Lord. And immediately, it was almost like that verse was turned around like a spotlight.

[12 : 51] And the next sensation I had was a sense of clear conviction that I can't remember the last time I was still before the Lord simply to be in His presence.

It's been a long time. And it was this moment of conviction. And I realized, why do I have so much chaos in my life? Why am I so busy that I'm grumbling about being on this retreat? Well, it's because I've, have you ever, do you grow up in, if you've grown up in the South, you know what kudzu is?

Anybody know what kudzu is? It's just this like ivy-like vine that just takes over everything. And you wake up one morning, your entire yard just covered in kudzu. Well, my life is like that with

busyness.

Just lots of little stupid menial things that are unnecessary, but it's so cluttered that I have no time to be still. And I realized in that moment, God is telling me I need to repent of that busyness. How can I expect to know Him as a refuge if I can't sit still with Him for five minutes?

And so if you were to ask me, Tommy, in your life following Christ, what is God telling you? I would say, well, right now, here's what I'm hearing from the Lord. I need to repent of my busyness. I'm sinning in my busyness, right?

[13:55] But that's not enough. It's not good for me to be like, okay, I'm going to write that down in my prayer journal and move on, right? I have to actually respond. I have to do something about it. I have to turn that into active obedience.

So that's the next part of what it means to live by God's Word, is to hear and then respond. And responding to God, converting this into active obedience, it's really great to talk about this in the context of Habakkuk.

And here's a point I want to make. Habakkuk is not hearing what he wants to hear from the Lord. He's, you know, the Lord is not saying, hey, I think to obey me you should go get ice cream. Or, you know, he's not hearing these nice, peaceful, wonderful things that he gets to do. He's hearing that God is going to come and destroy his nation. And they're going to become exiles for literally God knows how long.

And that's what he's hearing. And yet, in the end, his desire is to live under God's Word, to respond faithfully, whatever God says.

[14:58] Even if he disagrees. Even if he disagrees. Now, this is an important point. Because I think it's very common in our circles for people to talk about decisions that they're making and to say, well, you know, I prayed about it and I feel a sense of peace.

I prayed about it and I feel a sense of peace. And I just kind of want to go on record and say, I have not yet found in the Bible where it says that that's how we hear God's voice and discern his will.

I just can't find the verse. It may be in there, but I can't find it. And I think that if you were to tell that to Habakkuk, he would laugh in your face. You know? Can you imagine Habakkuk saying, you know, God said he's going to send us all into exile and we're going to die and suffer.

And, you know, I'm feeling pretty peaceful about that. You know? You know? No, no. If you're really hearing from God, here's the thing. If you're really hearing from God in your life, chances are a lot of what you hear you're not going to agree with.

God's going to call you to do hard things, not things that you want to do. And you're going to come to this fork in the road again and again and again where God is calling you in this direction and your heart and guts and cells and everything wants to go in this direction.

[16:04] And you have to decide what faithfulness is going to look like for you. This is the reality of actually hearing and responding to the God of the universe rather than the God of our imagination. Right?

So, you know, a couple of examples. You know, somebody says, Hey, I know I have a good job now, but I've just decided that I'm going to take this other job offer that came down the way. And it's great because I'm going to make a lot more money.

Well, tell me about it. Well, I am going to be on the road more. Well, how much more? Well, I'm probably going to be traveling 75, 80% of the year. Okay. What does your spouse think about that? Well, my spouse isn't really very supportive. Yeah, we have a couple of young kids, and my spouse is not really excited about it. But, I prayed about it, and I feel a sense of peace.

So, I'm going to take it. Right? So, what would you say to that person? I think you need to go back up in the watchtower. I think you left a little early, and you need to go back up and finish your post and do a little more listening.

[17:04] Right? A little more attention. You know, read Hebrews 13. Read Luke 12. Right? Is this about loving the Lord and your family? Is this about faithfulness and trust that God is going to provide?

Or is this about the love of money? Is this because you actually believe that if you don't scrap and make it happen, that you're going to be destitute? What's really going on here? You know?

Or another kind of common example. Somebody says, Hey, you know, I'm dating this person.

They're really great. And they're not a Christian. They don't really have any interest in my faith. But we really love each other.

We have a great time. We've decided. We're sleeping together. We've decided to move in together. And I think it's going to be really great. And, okay, well, has anybody talked to you about this? And are your friends supportive? Most of my friends are supportive.

A couple of people are being judgmental. But most people are supportive. And what about your parents? Oh, my parents aren't too excited. But they're fundamentalists. And I just really don't. You know, I mean, I listen to them. But I mean, but I prayed about it.

[17:59] And I feel a sense of peace about this. I think God is blessing this. Really? I think you need to go back up in the tower. Because here's why. The one thing we know about God's will is he's not going to give you a sense of peace when you're actively sinning against him.

That's not going to happen. In fact, it's going to be the opposite. Right? God is going to convict you. He's going to, if the spirit is in you, the spirit is going to convict you.

Maybe that's why you get so defensive when people question your relationship. Because you're already feeling deep conviction. And you're trying to press it down. And ignore it. Right?

So go back up into the tower. Listen. What is God actually saying to you about this situation in your life? And we can give example after example after example. So living by faith means first that we live by God's word.

Which means hearing and responding to what God is saying with active obedience. But then there's more to the story. Because I don't want to just leave us thinking, okay, enduring hard times means doing what the Bible says.

[19:02] Because the Bible is much more than just a set of standards for how to live. And that's why we've got to talk about the story as a whole. That we're not just called to live by God's word.

But we're called to live by and within and live out of this grand story of God's saving work in history. And you say, okay, well that sounds nice.

But where do you get that from Habakkuk? The word story is not in here. Well, look at verse 2. It says, Now what's going on there?

God is saying, what I'm telling you Habakkuk. And he's getting ready to kind of lay out this vision for what's going to happen. And the ultimate unveiling of the righteous and the unrighteous.

And he says, I want you to write this down. Because it's not just about you and me Habakkuk. This is for everybody. And to the one who reads it is referring to a herald. So write this down. Give it to a herald.

[20:06] Make copies of it. Send it out so that everybody hears what I'm about to say. Because I want everybody to know my story. This is the story of the world that I'm going to tell you. And everybody needs to hear it.

And then live by this story. Right? And this is what the Bible really is. I mean, this book is really the story of the world. It's written by poets and fishermen and scholars.

And nobles and prophets and ex-slaves. It's written by a whole, all different kinds of people. All different cultures. But it contains the unified story of God's saving work in history.

And he's saying this is the story of the world. And of us. And of God. And so he says this in verse 2. And then in verse 3, God encourages Habakkuk.

He says, you know, you're going to tell people this story. And they're going to be tempted to doubt it. And a lot of this is going to take a lot longer to unfold than you think. And there are going to be times when you think this can't possibly be true.

[21:11] And you're going to want to walk away from it. And God is essentially saying, stay with it. Keep believing the story. Because then in verse 4 he says, because the day is going to come.

Where no matter how unlikely it may seem now. The day is going to come when everyone who has rejected God. And started to live by another story. That those people are going to be exposed.

And the people who despite what things seemed to be. The people who held on to the story. Who continued living by the story of the gospel. Those people are going to be declared righteous.

Because they were living by faith. That's what verse 4 is all about. So why does this matter so much? Over the last few decades.

In diverse fields of study. From philosophy to neurobiology. To psychology. To theology. There's a consensus that has emerged. About our identities. And where identity comes from.

[22:09] Our identity primarily comes from the stories that we inhabit. And you say, well I don't inhabit a story. I've never thought about that before. Well, actually what you find is that we do.

Now we're not aware that we do. It's a kind of subconscious thing that sinks in over time. But we all inhabit stories. So you have a way of thinking about the world. Right?

This is what all reasonable people think. Right? Whatever it is you say that about. Well all reasonable people think this. That's a reflection of the story that you're living in.

Right? And so there's one story or version of reality. That says the only thing that really matters is being true to who I am.

And I have to make sure that my sense of self isn't unduly impacted by any outside corrupting influences. And the way I figure out who I am is by looking inside.

[23 : 04] And whatever I feel, I need to be true to that. And the only real virtue is just to be authentic. Be authentic to that. Right? Now, 500 years ago, if you laid that out to somebody, they would have laughed.

That would be laughable. But nowadays, most people think that way. Right? At least most of the people in the circles that I'm in. That's their default assumption.

Why? Because that's a prevailing story in our culture. Right? There's another story that says that life is really about finding happiness.

We have a moral obligation to seek happiness. And anything or anyone or any status or anything that makes you happy, you should pursue that. Because happiness is its own justification. And woe be to anyone who gets in the way of that.

Who impedes that. Because that's the most important thing. So these are stories that float around. And in Habakkuk's day, it was the same way. You know, people said, here's the real, Habakkuk, here's what's really going on.

[24 : 10] There is no God. Habakkuk, here's what's really going on. There was a God and he used to love us, but now he's totally abandoned us. Habakkuk, here's what's really going on.

It was never the God that we thought it was. It was Baal. It was Moloch. Do you know by this time in their history, it's easy to feel bad for the kingdom of Judah, for God's people. God's about to send them into exile.

We say, that's so awful, I can't imagine that. But we also have to remember, they had become pretty corrupt by this point. Most people in Judah, by the time Habakkuk's writing, were regularly sacrificing kids to Moloch.

So child sacrifice was widespread. They were more Baal worshippers, really, than worshippers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were dedicating their horses to the sun god.

And they had completely neglected the temple. Temple upkeep and temple worship. So all this is going on. It's very dire. And so a lot of people have said, or here's the story.

[25 : 08] We've fallen too far, Habakkuk. It's beyond the pale. And God has given up on us. That's what's happening. All these competing stories.

And we have the same thing. Right? I'm so tired of being single. I've got to take things into my own hands. You know, pull out all the stops. All restrictions gone. Whatever I need to do to solve this problem.

Because God obviously doesn't care. Right? There's versions of stories floating around all the time. And so the question is, which story is the true story? Are you living out of a true version of the world or a false one?

And Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, is talking about, and this is much later. This is 600, 700 years after Habakkuk. Paul's talking about, again, what it means to live by faith.

Shows up again and again and again. What does it mean to live by faith? And he actually quotes Habakkuk chapter 2, verse 4. The righteous shall live by faith. And Paul's essentially saying that God's story, you know, the story that's hinted at in Habakkuk, that that story has actually come true.

[26 : 20] You know, you thought it was a fairy tale. You thought, you know, fairy tales aren't real. They never come true. And Paul's saying, this one did, actually. It actually came true. And how do we know?

And then he points to Jesus Christ. He says in verse 13, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. So what's he saying? He's saying, Habakkuk, you are on the brink of believing that the real story of your life is that God is bringing ultimate judgment on you.

He's done with you. He's fed up. You cross the line. And God is done with Israel. And you're going into exile. And now he's backing the Babylonians. They're his current favorite.

You're done. Right? You were on the brink of believing that, Habakkuk. But if you had just hung in there, you would see how things actually played out. You would see that this story of God's saving work in history culminates with Jesus Christ.

That exile wasn't judgment. It felt like it at the time. But it was a part of this plan of redemption and salvation. And it led, ultimately, to the one who would experience ultimate judgment.

[27 : 33] Ultimate judgment happened not in Judah, but on the cross, right? Jesus became the curse for us. He took that judgment, took the punishment. And Paul's saying, what this shows us is that here's the true story.

God is not a God of merciless judgment. He's a God of merciful redemption. And everything he's done up to this point is a part of that story.

And he's saying, if you want proof, look at Jesus. Look at his life. Look at his death. Look at his resurrection. This is proof that the Christian story of the gospel is true.

And here's the thing. If Jesus is true, and if we could believe in Jesus, that means the rest of it is true. It means that God's version of history is true. That he created everything to be good and beautiful.

And that it got broken when we rebelled against God. But that ultimately Jesus came to restore creation. And us. And that one day it's all going to be put right again.

[28 : 39] And every tear will be wiped away. That's the real story. And so the invitation is to live within that story. All of the suffering and all the waiting on God and all the wondering where God is.

It has to be placed in the context of that story. You look back at Jesus on the cross. And you look forward to the promise of restoration and renewal. And you say, I'm living between the cross and the consummation.

I can survive this. Because I know how the story ends. I know that God doesn't abandon us. I know that it will all be okay. Just like it says to back, it may take longer than we hope.

It may seem at times like God is silent. It may not happen the way we want it to. But it's going to happen. Right? So living by faith means not only believing the gospel story.

But it means placing ourselves in it and living by it. And what this shows us is these other stories. You know, life is about being true to yourself. No, it's about being true to Christ.

[29 : 42] Right? And finding our identity in Him. Life's not about finding personal happiness. It's about the joy of the Lord. That comes, believe it or not, through personal holiness.

Right? This is why we gather, by the way. Every week we gather. And you say, why do we do this? Why all the liturgy? And why all the... And people say, I'm not really a big fan of ceremony. And why do we do all this?

We're telling a story. From beginning to end, from the first word and the first sound, to the last word where we send you out. We're telling a story.

We're inhabiting a story. We're enacting a story. I have a part. Dan has a part. You have parts. Our readers have parts. There are lots of parts, just like a play.

And all the parts have kind of been assigned out every week. We all play our part. And what we're actually doing is reenacting salvation history. Again and again and again.

[30 : 39] Because all week, all these other stories get written into your heart. And then we come here to have those stories erased, washed away, and have the story of the gospel rewritten again and again and again and again.

Until it's in our marrow and our bones and our cells and our instincts. And we just naturally emanate the gospel story in everything we say and do. So every week we need to be reminded of this great story.

That God actually hates suffering more than we do. And that he was willing to suffer more than we ever will. To ensure that one day suffering will be no more.

And that's a good story. It's the best story there is. Because it's true. Let's pray. Let's pray.