

How Long, Oh LORD?: Faith and Doubt

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[0 : 00] I was thinking about it, and I've been a Christian for almost 20 years. I became a Christian right around age 21 and 40, so I suppose technically 19 years.

And if I look back over that period of time and all that has happened, there is one consistent nagging question that has undoubtedly been the greatest source of doubt for me in my faith. And yes, pastors are full of doubt sometimes, maybe even more so than other people. And there's been one central cause behind most of my doubt, and that's the question of suffering, what we call theodicy.

Basically put this question of how, if God is all good and all powerful, can there be such suffering and evil and injustice in the world? I have wrung my hands and stayed up late many nights wondering about that question.

And if you just quickly scan the headlines, you know, I did this on Friday. I just kind of went and said, you know, what are the highlight headlines in the news? Here's what I saw at like a three-minute glance.

[1 : 14] Back-to-back hurricanes wreaking havoc, killing people and destroying homes and entire communities. A bomb explosion in the London Underground. North Korea menacingly firing missiles over Japan.

White nationalist rallies happening around the country. That's just a three-minute scan. And then I started thinking about the lives of people I know. I mean, people right here in our own community. Right now in our community, there are people struggling with loneliness, with unwanted, unchosen singleness, or with marital strife, facing unemployment or impending unemployment.

People who are struggling because they are homesick. People who are struggling because of challenges trying to parent their children. Or maybe their kids are sick.

People facing sickness themselves. People grieving the recent death of dear immediate family, loved ones. I mean, all of this is happening right now. And that's just a tiny sliver of what's going on in our greater community.

[2 : 19] And so if you think about that, you realize that if you're a Christian and you have any integrity at all, in a world like this, you have to face really tough questions.

You cannot be a Christian in a world like ours and not have to wrestle with very tough questions like this one. The good news is we are not the first people to ask these questions.

And in fact, God's people have been asking these questions for thousands of years. And if you look in the Bible, there's probably no one who asks hard questions with more brutal honesty than a man named Habakkuk.

He's one of the prophets. You can find him in the Old Testament. And Habakkuk, it's a short book, but it's packed with incredibly profound and unique writing.

Habakkuk is unique among the prophets that we see in the Bible for one major reason. Most prophets follow a similar formula. You have God, and then the prophet is aligned with God.

[3 : 25] And the prophet, on behalf of God, is questioning the people. Right? So the prophet speaks for God, and the prophet questions God's people. Why do you go on sinning?

Why don't you come and repent? Why don't you trust and put your faith in the Lord? Why are you abandoning the Lord your God? And this is the sort of central prophetic message that you see again and again and again.

Well, Habakkuk is different. Habakkuk is not questioning God's people. Habakkuk is actually aligning himself with God's people, and Habakkuk is questioning God on their behalf.

And it's a very intense dialogue that we see unfold here. And through all of this questioning of God, the pushback, the doubt, somehow Habakkuk remains faithful.

So we're going to ask, how is that possible? What do we have to learn from this amazing little book? So we're going to be spending the next few weeks in a series called, How Long, O Lord? Asking this question together.

[4 : 29] And tonight we really come to understand doubt and the role that doubt plays in our faith. So Habakkuk chapter 1 is going to show us a couple of things. First, the doubt in our faith.

And then secondly, the promise in our pain. The promise that is embedded deeply in the pain and suffering of the world. So let's pray together as we get started. Our Father, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that sometimes your word is clear and makes sense, and sometimes it's very hard to understand, or it says things that we don't want to hear.

But we know that all of it is good and profitable, and by the power of your Holy Spirit can equip us and mature us and nourish us in ways that we cannot find anywhere else.

And so we come hungry and thirsty and open-hearted, Lord, by the power of your Spirit to receive your word today. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So Habakkuk chapter 1, it really begins with a bang.

I mean, he dives right in. There's no introduction. He just gets right to it. Brass-tax kind of guy. But let me just give you a little bit of information about Habakkuk. We don't know a whole lot about him.

[5 : 42] He's one of what we call the minor prophets. Now, don't let that make you think that he's less important. You know, read the major prophets, but the minor prophets are less important. That's not what it's talking about.

Minor prophets simply means shorter in length. So you have Isaiah, Jeremiah. They're very long. The minor prophets are a lot shorter. Habakkuk's only three chapters. So it's like book-length prophets versus blog-length prophets is maybe a better way to think of it.

And Habakkuk is an interesting word name. It's Akkadian. And quite frankly, scholars can't agree on how to pronounce it. And so I'm going to say Habakkuk.

Some people say Habakkuk. The traditional Hebrew way of saying it is Habakkuk. I tried that in the mirror, and I just couldn't do it with a straight face.

Every time I did it, I would laugh. And so I'm just not, I can't do that. I'm not a speaker of Hebrew. And so I'm just going to say Habakkuk, for lack of a better option. We don't know a lot about him personally, but I think his words immediately resonate.

[6 : 45] Just listen to how he opens his writing here. The first four verses are Habakkuk talking to God. And then verses 5 through 11 are God's response.

And then verse 12 through the end of the chapter, verse 17, that's Habakkuk responding back to God's response. So that's how it, you know, Habakkuk, God, Habakkuk. That's how it goes. So here's how it opens up.

Habakkuk says this to God. Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Now is there anybody who has not said that?

How long will I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, violence! Violence! And you will not save. You know, as I said before, I think this is a question for the ages.

God, if you're all good and all powerful, how can you look at what's happening to me, to us, and not do anything about it? Where are you? And then God, as I said, answers in verses 5 through 11.

[7 : 46] We'll look at that more in a little bit, but suffice it to say, it is not what Habakkuk expects at all. It just makes things worse. And so after that, in verse 13, listen to what Habakkuk goes on to say.

He says in verse 13, you who are of purer eyes than to see evil, and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors, and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

So what's he saying there? I mean, he's kind of being honest, right? God, I know we're not perfect. I know we deserve some judgment.

You know, nobody's saying we're perfect, but they are way worse than us. He's talking about the Chaldeans. This is one of the words in the Bible for the Babylonians. If you know anything about the Babylonians, they were, as God himself says, cruel and vicious and wicked and bloodthirsty.

They didn't even know or care about the God of the Bible. They worshipped their own strength. And Habakkuk is saying, you know, we don't have our act together.

[8 : 51] We've got some ways we need to shape up, but we're nothing like them. And then he says, how do you dare to be a God who hates evil, who claims to love goodness and justice? You claim

to love us, and yet you're going to let them sweep across the world, take us captive like a man would put sand into a jar.

And you've got to hear the desperation in his voice. You know, at the core of his questioning of God, Habakkuk is zeroing in on a disconnect that he perceives between what God has revealed and his lived experience.

That's the disconnect. Right? God, you say you're good, and yet you seem to tolerate evil just fine. God, you say you care about justice, and yet we're drowning in injustice.

God, you say that you love us, but from where I'm looking, it seems like you've abandoned us. God, you say, help us understand. That's the core of chapter one.

So you might say, he's expressing some doubt, right? So I want to stop there and just ask, what are we meant to make of this? Why is this in Scripture to begin with? And I think it shows us a couple of things just before we move on.

[10:09] I want to focus a little bit on the implications of this. The first thing it shows us is this. It shows us that doubt is extremely important. That in fact, for believers, I think doubt is extremely valuable.

It's valuable. Not only does God allow Habakkuk to doubt him, right, these are some of the strongest words leveled at God anywhere in the Bible. I mean, he is towing the line of direct accusation.

God not only allows him to do that, but then God takes this writing and he places it in his canon. This is holy inspired Scripture, right?

This is meant to be profitable for our growth. And this is, I think, a clear sign that doubt is meant to be integral to a healthy, maturing faith.

Right? So, you know, you can't really get this unless you look at the whole book. And sometimes, you know, week to week, sermon by sermon, we can lose the forest for the trees. But if you look at the whole scope of Habakkuk, commentators will say that it's not just a book on doubt.

[11:19] It's partly that. But I think one of the best commentators out there is a guy named Palmer Robertson. And he says this. He says, Remarkably, the reader is allowed the unique privilege of witnessing the progress of the prophet himself in submitting to a new concept of the Lord's purposes among Israel and the nations.

The idea of growth or maturing in faith is essential to appreciating the genius of this prophecy. You hear what he's saying? This isn't just about doubt.

As he expresses doubt, we get to see Habakkuk grow and mature because he's doing that. And if you look at the book, Habakkuk begins in sorrow, but you know how it ends?

In song. The whole third chapter is a song of praise. Now, some of you grew up in religious homes and you grew up or religious churches where the culture was very much about accept what you've been taught and don't ask questions.

And if you asked hard questions, well, this seems to be an inconsistency and how do we understand this? And these two books seem to contradict each other. You know, people, parents or pastors would say, don't ask questions.

[12:32] Faith means just accepting even if you don't understand. Right? And so some of us were taught that if you ask questions or have doubts and express those, that means you have a weak faith. Well, I think that Habakkuk shows us the exact opposite is true.

That in fact, not asking questions means you have a weak faith. Because what that shows you is that your faith is like this really delicate house of cards, this sand castle, this glass sculpture and that you have to protect it from even a strong wind that might knock it over.

That's a weak faith. A strong faith is a faith that can hold up even in the storm, even when everything is breaking loose and things are falling apart.

A strong faith is that kind of faith that can be amassed in the storm that you can cling to. How do you get that? You have to weather a few storms.

It has to be challenged. So we're not called to have a blind faith. We're called to have a bold faith. Boldly facing doubt.

[13:38] Boldly asking hard questions. So that then begs the next question which is okay, well how do we get that kind of faith? How does doubt lead to that kind of faith? And I would say we need to look at Habakkuk and what he's actually doing with his doubt.

What's he doing with all these questions? Is he hiding them? Is he going off and complaining to other people about them? I can't believe. Can you believe what he's, you know. No, he's coming directly to God with them.

In prayer. He's wrestling with God over questions that he has about God. Right? He's falling on his knees before him.

And what we've got to understand is that, I mean, verse 12 is the giveaway that really shows us his posture. He says, even in the midst of his frustration and his anger, he says, O Lord, my God.

My Holy One. Right? So this isn't a man who's standing back from God saying, you better explain all this or I, you know, I'm not going to, you need to help me or, you know, the jury's still out on you. [14:39] That's not what he's doing. He's like a child. He's falling into the arms of God and saying, help. This doesn't make sense. Help.

My God. My Holy One. I know I belong to you. I know that you're holy. I'm not even questioning that. Help me. Understand this.

It's a very different posture. You see doubt expressed in different ways in the Bible. There's a great example of this, of the contrast in Luke chapter 1.

Interesting back-to-back accounts between two individuals. You have Zechariah and you have Mary. And in both accounts, Zechariah and Mary, an angel comes out of nowhere and says, you're about to have a baby.

And both people are astounded, right? Zechariah's past childbearing years, Mary's a virgin. So both Zechariah and Mary express doubt to the angel.

[15:38] What? How can this be? What's going to happen? So they both question the claim being made by the divine being. So up to that point, they're the same. But then the angel's response makes these stories radically different.

What happens to Mary? The angel is kind and loving and generous and gives her more information and helps her to understand, right? What happens to Zechariah? Right? He gets struck mute.

Right? Oh, you're asking questions. I'm going to take away your ability to speak until the baby comes, right? And you just think, well, what's going on there? Is Gabriel just kind of having a bad day?

And he's like, I'm tired of all the questions. Bam! No more words from you. You know? And it's interesting to try to make sense of that. But the answer, I think, comes from the fact that the Bible has a very nuanced understanding of doubt.

A very nuanced understanding of doubt. And this is where you see the difference. There's what you might think of as honest doubt. And there's what you might call dishonest doubt. And if you look at Mary, Mary is an honest doubter.

[16:40] Which means this. She is honestly looking for more information. She's honestly wanting to understand. Right? She knows that she's a virgin and she simply wants to understand the angel better.

So she asks literally, how will this happen since I have not known my husband? How is this going to happen? What are the mechanics of it? Because I don't, I can't, I don't know how this kind of thing works.

Right? And if you look at Zechariah, what he's actually asking is subtly but very meaningfully different. Zechariah says, not how will this happen, but he says, how do I know?

It's a very different tone. So in other words, he's not saying, help me understand this better. He's saying, prove it. Maybe I'll believe you, maybe not. Prove it to me and then we'll see.

Very different kind of doubt because honest doubt comes from a place of intellectual humility.

Honest doubt is saying, you know, I know I don't understand everything. I know you know way more than I do.

[17:41] Understand things way beyond what I'll ever be able to. Help me understand. Give me wisdom. Give me knowledge. Give me understanding. That's honest doubt. It's asking questions and wanting answers.

Dishonest doubt is called dishonest doubt because it actually tends to come from a place of intellectual pride. Right? It's the posture that assumes you know most everything worth knowing and even more importantly that if you can't understand something, if something doesn't fit with your sense of how the world works, it must not be true.

See, so it's not really doubt. It's more of a kind of posture of judgment. I will decide whether this is true or false. I will decide. And if it doesn't make sense to me, it's probably not true.

And there are a number of people who say, you know, you look at Christianity and there are these mysteries and seeming inconsistencies and things that don't line up. That's a clear sign that it's not true. And I would say, if that's your way of thinking, you should really question that.

I think assuming that things can only be true if we understand them fully is the height of human arrogance. Right? Unexplained mysteries don't automatically mean something isn't true.

[18 : 59] In fact, if we're really dealing with the deepest mysteries of existence, wouldn't we expect that there would be some things that might be just beyond our vast intellectual capacity?

So I think one of the things to take away from this is, beware simplistic answers. Do you know, some of the greatest times of growth for me in my own spiritual life have come from people asking me, knowing I'm a Christian, and asking me really, really, really hard questions.

Well, how do you explain this? What do you Christians think about that? Because what it does is it drives me into prayer, and it drives me into God's Word. And it drives me to ask and seek out the advice and wisdom of people who have been believers longer than I have, who are more mature than I am.

And all of those things bring about great opportunities for rich maturity and growth. But we have to be willing to face the hard questions if we want that to be true for us.

So that's part one, the doubt in our faith and the significant role it plays in Habakkuk's life and in our life. And now, with the rest of our time, we're going to look at God's response, verses 5 through 11, and we'll see the promise to be found in our pain.

[20 : 15] Here's how God responds. Now listen, imagine that you're Habakkuk, you've just said what you've said. Now here's what God says. Look among the nations and see, wonder and be astounded, for I'm doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.

And you can imagine Habakkuk saying, I'm ready, lay it on me, this is going to be amazing. And then guess what God says? If you go on, right? I'll just summarize it for you. God essentially says, and I'm sort of putting words in his mouth, hopefully this is an accurate paraphrase, you think it's bad now?

You think this is bad? It's going to get way worse. Right? I'm going to raise up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, who are bloodthirsty and wicked and they only worship their own strength, and they're going to take all of you captive like a man piles sand into a jar.

Now that's an interesting reference considering the promise given to Abraham, right? I'm going to make your descendants as vast and as numerous as grains of sand. Right? Well now God's saying, I'm going to let this foreign nation who hates me and hates you, they're going to gather all of that sand up and put it in a jar.

They're going to take you captive. Right? And Habakkuk is horrified and so Habakkuk fires back and says essentially, Lord, as I said, I know we're not perfect but there's so much worse. How could you let this happen?

[21 : 40] And chapter 1 ends with this image of Habakkuk saying, you know, all of us are like fish in the sea and you're allowing the Babylonians to be like this fisherman who just mercilessly like a commercial fisherman just throws these big nets out and gathers everybody up and then at the end of the day they don't even give you thanks for that, God.

They worship their nets. And then he says, are you just going to let them take over the world? Is this your great plan? End scene. Right?

That's how chapter 1 ends. But fortunately, we have an advantage, I think, that Habakkuk didn't have which means we know a little bit more of the story.

This is happening in the, you know, around the 6th, 7th century BC so we have a little more perspective. All Habakkuk knows is that this wicked nation is going to conquer them and take them into exile.

And yet more happens and 600 years later the Apostle Paul is preaching in a synagogue and he's preaching to a combination of Jews and God-fearers. These are people who are Gentiles who want to follow God and have a relationship with Him and so they're Gentile converts to Judaism.

[22 : 56] And so he's preaching to this mixed audience and he's talking about Jesus. And he's talking about how because of the cross and the death and resurrection of Jesus it's now possible to be saved in a way that the law didn't make possible.

And that's something that is now open to everyone. Jews and Gentiles alike, right? This is this new message of the gospel. In other words, Paul is sort of, he's just sort of laying out God's plan for salvation and then of all things he could have quoted in the Old Testament scriptures, where does he go?

He quotes Habakkuk 1.5. I mean, that's crazy, right? He quotes this passage full of doubt. And he quotes where God is saying, look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish, for I'm doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe even if one tells it to you.

He quotes Habakkuk 1.5. And the fact that he quotes it where he quotes it tells us something loud and clear. Paul is saying, when God said these words to Habakkuk, ultimately these words were pointing to the coming of Jesus.

Habakkuk never could have known that. But this is what God is actually saying. He's saying to Habakkuk, look and be astounded. Look at what's about to happen. He says, you know, I'm going to raise up Babylon and you're going to be taken into exile.

[24 : 18] But that's just the beginning. He says, then I'm going to raise up Assyria and Assyria is going to conquer Babylon. And then you're going to be set free again. And then Greece is going to take over. And because the Greeks take over, their language is going to become the dominant common language among these known people groups.

And then after that, you're going to become decentralized. And instead of the temple, you're going to develop the synagogue system. And so all of these Gentiles are going to start to come in and become familiar with the Jewish way of life and religion.

And then Rome is going to take over and establish the Pax Romana. And then the known world is going to be connected by roads and a common system of government and systems and institutions. And then this perfect storm of major political forces that Habakkuk, you're not even going to begin to understand.

This perfect storm is going to be established from all these countervailing movements in world history. And right in the midst of that perfect storm, God's Son is going to plunge Himself.

And while you, Habakkuk, may cry out, O Lord, and believe that you're alone. And while we may cry out, O Lord, and believe that we're alone. That man is going to cry out, O Lord, from the cross, and he will be alone.

[25 : 30] The only one in history that God truly abandoned. But because of that, because of that, this promise is going to ensue of a complete cosmic renewal.

Because of this death, all the injustice and hatred and cruelty, all of that stuff that you're railing against Habakkuk, all of that is going to be dealt with. And one day, justice will fill the earth again. And then the news of this is going to begin to spread. And it's going to go far and wide. And then people are going to start writing it down. In what language? Koine Greek, the common tongue. And then it's going to begin to be written down and formed into something that will be called the Bible. And then that's going to be translated into Latin. And then it's going to start to be translated into all of the various common tongues around the known world.

And that book is going to become to date the most widely read book in the history of humanity. And that book is going to contain all things necessary for any human being, regardless of their background, regardless of their ethnicity, to be reconciled to the creator God of the universe.

[26 : 37] So yes, Habakkuk, I'll try to answer your question. But even if I laid all of it out for you, you wouldn't believe me.

You wouldn't believe me. You wouldn't understand. But here's the thing, Habakkuk. It starts with exile. It's going to be hard.

Trust me. Trust me. So this is the choice, I think, that we have to make on a daily basis. Because just like Habakkuk, I think that we live lives where there's a disconnect between what God has said and who he says he is and then what our lives look like on a daily basis.

And it doesn't seem to fit together. Right? On the one hand, God promises to be our God, to work all things for our good, to never stop loving us. And yet, on the other hand, our lives are sometimes full of struggle and hardship and it seems like God is nowhere.

So this core question is put to us just as it was him. Are you going to trust only what you see with your eyes? Or are you going to trust the words of God to shape your ultimate understanding of reality?

[28 : 03] Where do you put your faith? Do I trust that God's promises might be unfolding even in the midst of my pain? Paul saw the promise in the pain and the question is presented to us.

Can we have eyes to see the promise unfolding even in the midst of our pain? The world's groaning in pain. You know, in our northeast congregation, our pediatrician, Dr. Reese, you know, Kristen Reese Hall, she's our boys pediatrician and she's a wonderful woman and wonderful doctor. But every so often we have to take our boys to see her and we have to break the news to them in the car that when we get there you're going to have to get a shot. And they freak out because that's what kids do, right?

And then there ensues a kind of theological debate, right? Well, if Dr. Reese is all-knowing and if she's good and if she's loving and she wants the best for us then how when this random nurse comes in and sticks a piece of metal in my leg why does she sit idly by?

Why does she not hear our cries? Right? Why does she do nothing? And we say everybody can hear your cries. That's not the problem, right? And we say, you know, we could try to explain it to them but they can't really understand immunizations and all that because they're five, right?

[29 : 31] And seven. And so at the end of the day we say trust us. Now this is nowhere near the scale that we're dealing with in Habakkuk but it's a, it's at the core of it the same question, right?

Are you going to trust me that this is ultimately going to turn out for your good? Are you going to trust me with this? You know, some of you know the story of, you know, my wife and I, we met years ago in 1999 and we got, fell in love and got engaged and everything was great and then as we got engaged and started approaching the wedding I just began to lock down and I can't really explain it but essentially I can only describe it as a kind of profound emotional, spiritual, psychological block where I just could not move forward.

I was utterly terrified and this resulted in us having to call off our engagement and it was bad because it was only a few months before the wedding so we're talking thousands and thousands of dollars of deposits lost, trying to sell bridesmaids dresses on eBay, you know, the whole nine yards. Laura was utterly devastated, you know, I was so devastated and depressed that I started taking antidepressants and going to counseling and trying to figure out what's wrong with me. I felt like I was a massive failure and we were apart for five years and much of that early time, first two or three years was just wrestling with God over what happened, what, I felt so called to this and she felt so called to this and it all seemed right, what happened to me?

You know, and it's weird when there's something in your own soul that you can't understand.

There's a part of you that's doing something that you can't even make sense of. You feel like you've betrayed yourself, at least I did.

[31 : 18] And then through this whole series of events, five years later, we reconnect, we realize we're more in love than ever, we get back together, we get engaged, we get married and now we've been married for ten years, we have three beautiful kids and I may be biased but I think we have one of the best marriages around.

I'm absolutely crazy about her and she likes me okay as well and it works great. And you know, the funny thing about that story is, again, it's just a small example, it's nothing like Habakkuk, but the funny thing is that two things are simultaneously true that don't really seem to fit together.

On the one hand, would I wish that on anyone? Absolutely not. Absolutely not. It was a dark night of the soul for both of us. And yet on the other hand, when I ask her, and this comes up every now and then, would you change anything?

If you could, would you change it? She says, absolutely not. And that's a weird thing to say. But when we look at that, somehow that is a part of who we are as people and it's a part, I think, of why our marriage is so strong now.

Now, if you had tried to tell me any of that in 2002, I would have laughed you out of my house. I don't even want to hear that. But now, looking back, God was somehow mysteriously at work.

[32 : 38] Now, I don't understand everything about it. I certainly have a lot of questions. I can't wait to ask God about it. A lot of other stuff in life. But I can tell you that we see God's goodness in it.

In other words, we're able to see the promise in the pain. God's will unfolding in some amazing way that we wouldn't even believe even if he told us. Right?

So the most amazing thing about Habakkuk, and this is where we need to stop for this week, the most amazing thing about Habakkuk is that Habakkuk doesn't have any of this perspective bear in mind.

He doesn't know what's on the other side of exile. He doesn't know anything about the coming of Jesus. He doesn't know any of that. All he knows is he's staring exile in the face like looking down the barrel of a gun.

And yet, even without that perspective, he trusts God. And he falls into his arms. So how much more then can we who have the perspective of Jesus Christ trust God?
[33 : 40] even if things are hard and don't make sense. Because we're able to look at the cross and see the promise in the pain that the greatest pain and suffering ever experienced by a human being could produce the greatest hope the world has ever known.
In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.