

### 3.6.22 What Does it Mean to Live By Faith Habakkuk 2.1-4, 2.18-3.2

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As we've journeyed through the Bible, especially if you've been doing the reading as we move through each book or if you're watching our daily devotional videos, perhaps you've noticed a topic that comes up repeatedly – if God exists, if God is loving, good and powerful as the Bible says, then how can God allow evil to triumph over good? Why do the wicked often prosper while the righteous and faithful suffer? How can God allow wars to take place when so many innocent people are killed, wounded, and traumatized and creation itself suffers greatly? In recent days, some of you have asked me questions like these ancient ones as well as others. How could God stand by while horrors like the Holocaust took place, and millions were killed? Why doesn't God intervene to stop the suffering in Ukraine, which is just the most visible situation in the world, but not the only one crying out for the intervention of God and humanity.

We aren't the first people to wrestle with tough questions about God and the problem of evil. In his book, **the prophet Habakkuk** asks a series of questions that troubled him and many of us. Why does a good God allow evil? Why are the just and faithful beaten down? Why does God appear indifferent and inactive in the face of wickedness, exploitation, violence, and greed? Can you relate to any of his questions? Do they seem ancient and out of touch to you? They sound relevant and timely to me.

Writing probably around the year 607 BC, Habakkuk looks at his own country of Judah, as well as the growing threat of attack from the nation of Babylon, and he begins his book with three pleading questions, ones that our Christian brothers and sisters in Ukraine may be asking right now, and people of faith in many other places around the world and in our nation, depending on what issuing is burdening their heart or afflicting them.

The prophet pours out his heartfelt complaint to God asking (**Habakkuk 1.2-3**),  
***“O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?***  
***Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?***  
***Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?”***

Do any of Habakkuk's questions resonate with you? The prophet wants to know why God, who is both powerful and good, is not listening and is allowing evil to go unpunished because Habakkuk sees wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, violence, strife, contention, and injustice everywhere he looks. Habakkuk is unknown except through his book. He's thought to have lived in the days of good King Josiah (639–597 B.C.). Habakkuk was troubled by the sins he saw in Judah despite the religious revival led by Josiah's reforms.

God's reply to Habakkuk's questions is shocking. In 1.5-11, God assures the prophet He is doing something. The Babylonians – a people even more corrupt than God's chosen people – are about to descend as an instrument of God's judgment. Last week, the prophet Nahum shared the rejoicing of the nation's when Assyria was finally defeated. That rejoicing didn't last long because when the Babylonians came to power King Nebuchadnezzar wasted little time in advancing west into Palestine and Egypt in 605 BC the first year of his reign. He deported ten thousand of Jerusalem's leaders to Babylon. The nobles who had oppressed and extorted from the poor were the first to be carried away. Habakkuk responds to this surprising news from God in 1:12-17, and raises another searching question (1.13), ***“Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?”*** That leads to today's passage which includes the conclusion of Habakkuk's statement and the Lord's answer. **Habakkuk 2:1-4 (NRSV)**

*“I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart;  
I will keep watch to **see** what he will say to me,  
and what he will answer **concerning my complaint.***

*Then the LORD answered me and said:  
Write **the vision; make it plain** on tablets, so that a runner may read it.  
For there is still **a vision for the appointed time;**  
it speaks **of the end**, and does not lie.*

*If it seems to **tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.**  
Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them,  
but **the righteous live by their faith.**”*

These verses offer some guidance into what it means to **live by faith**.

**First, living by faith means actively looking for how the Lord is acting in your life.** Habakkuk describes himself like a **sentry** on the wall of a fortress, *“I’ll stand at my post and station myself and keep watch.”* Your job on the wall of a fort is looking for the first sign of danger so you can warn your comrades and friends, knowing that people’s lives are depending on you. How alert would you be for the first sign of movement or the first sound of an advancing enemy? All your senses would be heightened. Do you look for God like a sentry on watch like Habakkuk? Do you have your senses open to hearing from God and seeing God at work throughout your day? God can sneak up on you if you haven’t been paying close enough attention. Living faithfully means **actively looking for how the Lord is acting in your life**.

**Secondly, living by faith means believing the Lord has a vision for the future.** The Lord replies to Habakkuk’s complaint about standing, watching, and waiting to see what the Lord will say, by assuring him **I have a vision**. God’s **vision** has several qualities. **The Lord’s vision is plain, brief, and clear**, like BBC’s *“Love, Grow, Share.”* A runner could read that passing by. God’s vision will be revealed in the right time and it’s always future oriented, *“it speaks of the end.”* God’s vision is true and based on truth, *“it does not lie.”* Our timing is not the Lord’s timing, and we may have to wait for God’s vision to be revealed or to unfold and *“if it seems to tarry”* the Lord tells us to wait and not give hope because God’s vision *“will surely come.”* Finally, the Lord condemns the proud, as happens everywhere throughout the Bible, *“their spirit is not right in them,”* and encourages us to live by faith.

**Living faithfully means actively looking for how the Lord is acting in your life and trusting God’s vision for the future even when it’s hard to do so because you have to wait for it.**

**While we wait for God’s vision to be realized**, there are several things we can do to **live by faith** in a world where terrible things like war happen. How are we to respond as disciples of Christ in the face of evil or oppression? How are you to act and pray? **First**, you’re called to **follow the example of Jesus**. Jesus’ actions and words were grounded in his relationship with the Father. Your life, your actions, your words are better when they’re grounded in a personal and growing relationship with God that

guides every aspect of your life. This relationship is what enabled and empowered Jesus to act at all times out of a heart of love, a mind of wisdom, and with moral and physical courage. I believe that's what we're called to do. Several of you have asked me about what you can do as far as the war in Ukraine, and there are a number of things you can do and the first is to seek to **follow the example of Jesus**.

**Secondly, you can pray**, but how are you to pray? Some of you have asked if it's okay to pray that Russian leader Vladimir Putin will die or be killed, and what about Jesus' teaching to pray for our enemies? You might say, *"I am praying for him, I'm praying for him to die a painful death today!"* I'm not sure that's what Jesus intends. However, I certainly understand and can relate to the emotion behind that desire and the hope that his death might bring an end to what's taking place. There are many prayers in the Psalms that, if you're not familiar with them, might shock you a bit, like Psalm 58 which is a prayer for vengeance (Psalm 58.3, 6-8a), *"The wicked go astray from the womb; they err from their birth, speaking lies. O God, break the teeth in their mouths... Let them vanish like water that runs away; like grass let them be trodden down and wither. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime."* I've never used that as a unison prayer in a worship service, but you can understand the feeling being expressed when you've suffered violence at the hands of the wicked.

Here are some ways you can you pray for the situation in Ukraine. Pray for: An end to the war, Putin either repenting or being overthrown, Safety and protection for all Ukrainians, Provision for all refugees, A refusal by Russian soldiers to fight, Wisdom for NATO leaders, and Courage for Russian protesters. I'm sure you can think of other ways to pray. Combining fasting with prayer is also something you can do and is fitting during this season of the church year.

**What does it mean to live by faith?** You can **follow the example of Jesus**, you can **pray**, and **you can give generously and even sacrificially**. You can give financially to reputable charitable organizations that are supporting relief efforts. You can give to BBC and mark "Ukraine relief" with your donation, and we'll be contributing to relief through the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering as well as being in communication with our partners in eastern Europe like the Oprenov's in Sofia, Bulgaria

who are assisting refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. And if you're tempted to complain about rising gas and oil prices, remind yourself you and your loved ones aren't being shelled, bombed, attacked, driven from your home, or killed so keep a mature perspective.

For the early Christians, who were regularly persecuted, their period of suffering demanded great trust in God's promises in Jesus, which inspired them to endure in spite of exceedingly difficult circumstances. The Letter to the Hebrews quotes Habakkuk in urging believers to endure in the face of persecution and suffering. **Hebrews 10:32-39**, *"But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you **endured a hard struggle with sufferings**, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, **and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions**, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. **For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.** For yet *"in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but **my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.**"*  
***But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.***"*

Through Habakkuk, God is urging trust and faithful endurance in tough times. The tension between this vision of a good and just God and the world we live in is often stretched to the breaking point. It was for Habakkuk and other faithful Jews in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., it was for persecuted Christians in the Roman Empire. And today each tragedy, whether individual or communal, national, or international revives this tension and reminds us to remember Habakkuk's vision of faithfulness and steadfast endurance.

The poet Wendell Berry wrote, ***"Be joyful though you have considered all the facts."*** The righteous, the truly faithful, those who long for and work for justice not just in their own lives but in their nation as well, will receive the strength to go on, not because the world is just (it isn't), not because the world rewards those who work for

justice (it often hurts or even kills them), but because they are possessed by the Lord's larger vision of the way things should be.

Habakkuk, like most of the prophets, struggled to know why God was allowing evil to go unpunished. God's answer about using Babylon was even more troubling but eventually Habakkuk reached the point where he could trust God even in terrible circumstances and that trust enabled him to seek to live faithfully and to go on believing in and serving a just God in an unjust world. Like some of us, the prophet has complaints about what was going on in his world, but the Lord's answer is that God has a vision that will be fulfilled **so stay humble and keep the faith.**

### **Blessing:**

*"Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.*

*Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.*

*Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. "*

1 Corinthians 16.13, Romans 12.12, James 1.12

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Are there any questions that trouble you that you wish you could ask God to answer? Can you identify or share one or two?
2. In his book, the prophet Habakkuk asks a series of tough questions. Why does a good God allow evil? Why are the wicked prospering? Why are the just and faithful beaten down? Why does God appear indifferent and inactive in the face of wickedness, exploitation, violence, and greed? Can you relate to his questions? How would you answer them?
3. Habakkuk wants God to answer his complaint (2.1). When was the last time you felt like you genuinely wanted to hear from God about what was troubling you? What was going on in your life?
4. The Lord tells Habakkuk there is still "a vision," but he has to "wait for it." Do you find it hard when you must wait to see or know God's vision and for it to begin unfolding? What helps you when you're in a time of waiting?

5. What does Habakkuk say about the proud (2.4)? What do you do to cultivate a spirit and attitude of humility?
6. What does it mean to live by faith? How does that look in your life? What difference does it make on a daily and weekly basis?