

PRAYER'S DELAYS

by Ray C. Stedman

The prophet Habakkuk was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, who is known to us as the weeping prophet, because he ministered to the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the darkest days of its national history, just before the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and carried the people into captivity. Habakkuk (his name means, "the embracer") also was in Jerusalem at that time, so he too saw all that went on.

I thought of Habakkuk this week as I was watching a newscast from El Salvador, the little country in Central America which is going through some very severe troubles right now. This newscast had a report of a band of government soldiers who, for some reason still vague and undefined, dragged people out of their homes one night and ruthlessly killed some twenty-three persons, including children. As the camera recorded the aftermath of that event, I was particularly struck by one father who evidently came upon the body of his son while searching through a pile of bodies. Embracing that dead body, tears running from his eyes, the father lifted up his face and clenched his fist. Though there was no sound with the report, you could almost hear the cry of protest and the call for vengeance in his heart.

This prophecy of Habakkuk opens with that very scene. Habakkuk, the embracer, is embracing the people of Judah, who are suffering under the injustice of the government of that day. He is crying out in protest against the apparent inactivity of God. These are his opening words:

**The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw.
O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and thou wilt not hear?
Or cry to thee "Violence!"
and thou wilt not save?
Why dost thou make me see wrongs
and look upon trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law is slacked
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous,
so justice goes forth perverted. {Hab 1:1-4 RSV}**

Many of us have felt that way at times when we heard of some brutal act that seemed to go unavenged, some terrible injustice which was ignored by the authorities, or some personal disaster which struck. We cry out to God and say, "Why did you let this happen to me?" In the same way, this opening prayer of Habakkuk is a protest against what seems to him to be the indifference of God to human suffering.

I thought of this little book also this past week in connection with the crisis in Poland. Christians there (some of whom are personal friends of mine) are crying out against injustice, waiting with bated breath to see what Russia is going to do. This spirit is to be found all over the world today. The prophecy of Habakkuk therefore, is very relevant to our times.

Now God answered the prophet immediately. He did not leave him puzzled and bewildered. Verses 5-6:

**Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe if told.
For lo, I am rousing the Chaldeans,
that bitter and hasty nation,**

**who march through the breadth of the earth,
to seize habitations not their own." {Hab 1:5-6 RSV}**

Then God goes on to describe in vivid language exactly what these Chaldeans are like.

Now God answered Habakkuk, but not in the way the prophet thought he would. I'm not sure what he did expect. He probably expected a change of heart in the governing powers in his land, or some rising tide of concern that would deal compassionately with the problems they were facing. God's answer, however, was totally unexpected.

God sometimes deals with us in that way. We cry out, we pray about something that bothers us, and we have worked out exactly what God could do to change that situation, but he ignores our solution. In some ways this is one of the most common, yet most difficult problems we have to face as believers -- what to do when God is apparently inactive and seems to ignore situations that call for emergency action.

When the prophet is told what God is doing, he can hardly believe it. God said, "I am raising up a nation to judge this nation. The Chaldeans, with their huge, vicious armies, are waiting right on the border." God says of them,

**Dread and terrible are they;
their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.
Their horses are swifter than leopards,
more fierce than the evening wolves; {Hab 1:7-8a RSV}**

He goes on to describe them as proud and arrogant, fierce and ruthless, cruel and irresistible. Nobody has been able to stand against them.

There is an interesting note, in Verse 10,

**At kings they scoff,
and of rulers they make sport.
They laugh at every fortress,
for they heap up earth and take it. {Hab 1:10 RSV}**

Those of you who saw the film, Masada, this past week remember how the Romans took that redoubtable fortress, which seemed unassailable, by heaping up earth to build a ramp up to the city. That is what these Chaldeans did when they assaulted the great walled cities. God understands how they act, and he describes it to the prophet. Verse 11:

**Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god! {Hab 1:11 RSV}**

How descriptive that is of some of the godless powers of earth of our day, who seem to increase in strength, striding across the world with bold and arrogant words, subduing peoples and ruthlessly moving on. But what amazes Habakkuk is that God said, "I am doing this. I am rousing up the Chaldeans. These are my people, and this is my answer to your prayer." That was hard for Habakkuk to handle. He probably would just as soon not have had that prayer answered than have heard the answer which God had in mind. Like the man who was told, "Cheer up! Things could be worse!" he said, "I tried it. I cheered up, and sure enough, everything go worse!" That is what happened here.

The prophet's next prayer is one of bewilderment at the inconsistency of God. Verse 12:

**Art thou not from everlasting,
O Lord My God, my Holy One?
We shall not die.
O Lord, thou hast ordained them as a judgment;
and thou, O Rock, hast established them for chastisement.**

**Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil
and cannot not look on wrong,
why dost thou look on faithless men,
and art silent when the wicked swallows up
the man more righteous than he? {Hab 1:12-13 RSV}**

Now Habakkuk really has a problem. And this time it is not with God's inactivity, but, rather, with God's inconsistency. How can a holy God let this kind of thing happen? Habakkuk wonders, "How can God use a ruthless and morally degraded people to punish a more righteous people?"

In the rest of Chapter 1, the prophet goes on to compare these Chaldeans to a greedy fisherman who sweeps through the seas and brings in a net full of fish. He has caught all he needs, but he is not satisfied. He casts his net again and again and brings back more and more fish and stacks them on the bank until they rot in the sun. That is the way Habakkuk sees the Chaldeans acting. They conquer people after people, country after country. Nothing stands in their way.

His final question to the Lord is in Verse 17:

**Is he then to keep on emptying his net,
and mercilessly slaying nations for ever? {Hab 1:17 RSV}**

What do you do when God does not act the way you think he ought to? That is one of the hardest problems we face as Christians. And, especially, what do you do when he uses somebody whom you don't like to correct you?

Some years ago I ran across this little word by Oswald Chambers, where he speaks of believers as being grapes that are crushed to make fine wine:

God can never make us wine if we object to the fingers he uses to crush us with. If God would only use his own fingers and make me broken bread and poured-out wine in a special way! But when he uses someone whom we dislike, or some set of circumstances to which we said we would never submit, we object. We must never choose the scene of our own martyrdom. If ever we are going to be made wine to drink, we will have to be crushed. You cannot drink grapes. Grapes become wine only when they have been squeezed.

Habakkuk has to face the fact that God knows more about the problem than Habakkuk does. To him it looks like a simple problem of governmental injustice, but God said, "No, it is much more complicated than that." God said he is going to have to bring in a very bitter and hasty nation, a very cruel and ruthless crowd who are going to create widespread destruction, because it would take that to solve what Habakkuk sees as a simple problem.

But now Habakkuk does a very wise thing. Chapter 2:

**I will take my stand to watch,
and station myself on the tower,
and look forth to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my complaint." {Hab 2:1 RSV}**

When you face a problem in your life where you do not understand what God is doing, do not do what so many do, and say, "Oh, I've tried faith and it doesn't work," or, "I've tried God but that doesn't work," or, "I've tried prayer and it doesn't work." People who say those things really don't understand what they are saying, because what they are actually saying is, "God is a liar. There is no real God." What they are saying is, "The Word of God is not true, the Bible is a fraud. It ought to be thrown out." They are declaring that God is faithless to his own promises. But God cannot ever be faithless to his word. The problem is not God -- though we so often blame it on him -- the problem is us. We are so ignorant, we see so little, we understand such a minute fraction of the scope of any problem. We ought to do as Habakkuk did -- get out on the watchtower and wait to see what God is going to say. If we ask him, God will help us to understand something of what we are going through. That is what Habakkuk did, because he expected an answer.

Jesus encourages us this way. In teaching about prayer, he said that there were three levels of prayer: ask, seek, knock:

1. Ask, and it shall be given you. God can grant some things immediately, and he always does, when he can. But sometimes he cannot.
2. Then seek, and you will find. Look for answers. They will come.
3. If even then an answer is delayed, knock. That is a repetitive prayer. Come back again and again and ask God to explain what he is doing.

Wait, that is what Habakkuk says he is going to do.

Now God usually answers in one of three ways:

Most commonly, he answers us through his Word. This is what is so valuable about reading the Word of God, especially when you are confused or troubled about how he is acting. Oftentimes light will come suddenly out of a verse which seemed obscure; you will see a new aspect of what you are facing. Perhaps an answer will come when you are listening to a message, or a verse will come to your mind (one that you memorized in Sunday School), and it will deal with your situation. God has given us his Word so that we might understand how he acts.

Then sometimes God answers directly in our spirit. We sense a kind of pressure within which drives us in a certain direction; some conviction comes and settles and we cannot shake it off. We have to be careful here, because at this point the enemy can counterfeit the voice and mind of God. But the voice of the enemy is always nagging (to make you feel guilty) while God's Spirit speaks quietly but persistently. If this leading is in line with what the Word of God says, then that is the Spirit of God leading us. In Romans 8, Paul says that "those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God," {cf,Rom 8:14}. We can expect, therefore, to be led along that line.

At other times God speaks through our circumstances. Doors shut, and we cannot open them, no matter how hard we try. That is God at work, shutting doors here and opening others, pushing us in one direction. Oftentimes this is the way God answers. But he promises us that he will answer. He will not leave us as orphans, nor abandon us to ignorance. James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him," (James 1:5 {RSV}) That is what Habakkuk did.

Now, in Verse 2 of Chapter 2, he says,

**And the Lord answered me,
"Write the vision;
make it plain upon tablets,
so be may run who reads it." {Hab 2:2 RSV}**

In other words, God is going to show himself to Habakkuk in a remarkable vision (recorded in Chapter 3). He tells Habakkuk to write it down so it will be plain, so that anyone who reads it may run to obey it.

Then God tells him, in Verse 3:

**"For still the vision awaits its time;
it hastens to the end -- it will not lie.
If it seem slow, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay." {Hab 2:3 RSV}**

Now there is God's promise: *Wait*. This is one of the hardest words to accept in the whole Bible. Our impatient spirits want answers now, or yesterday! We are trained to think of God as a kind of heavenly room service who, when you order on the phone of prayer, delivers an answer within a half-hour -- at least! But God does not work that way. He is working out amazing purposes, far beyond anything we know about. We

do not see the complexity of our lives. We do not see that what we do affects someone else, and then others, and others, and others. It all has to be worked out, and it takes time. But he is working; he says so. He never apologizes for it. He just says, "Wait." The first thing the prophet learns as part of the answer God gave is that delays are not denials. God is not saying "No," he is saying, "Wait." There is a lot to learn in the process of waiting.

Here is a quotation from Dr. F. B. Myer:

So often we mistake God and interpret his delays as denials. What a chapter might be written of God's delays! It is the mystery of the art of educating human spirits to the finest temper of which they are capable. What searchings of heart, what analyzing of motives, what testings of the Word of God, what upliftings of soul, searching what or what manner of time the Spirit of God signify! All these are associated with those weary days of waiting, which are, nevertheless, big with spiritual destiny; but such delays are not God's final answer to the soul that trusts him.

That was the first thing the prophet learned.

But the second thing he learned was even greater. God said to him, Verse 4,

**Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail,
but the righteous shall live by his faith. {Hab 2:4 RSV}**

Now that is one of the most important verses in the whole Bible. It is quoted in the New Testament in Romans, in Galatians, and in Hebrews as the key verse of the Christian life -- especially the latter part, "the righteous shall live by faith."

Those words took deep root in the soul of Martin Luther. While he was yet a priest and monk, Luther was on his knees, making his way up the holy stairs in Rome (which was supposed to be the stairs by which our Lord's body was taken down from the cross) when this verse came flashing into his mind.

Now the reverse of this is true also: The man who lives by faith is righteous. More than anything else in life, Martin Luther hungered after righteousness. He tried with all his heart to obtain it by good behavior, by penances, by beating himself. When these words came into his mind, he got up off his knees and walked back down the stairs, returned to Germany, and there began the Protestant Reformation -- built upon this verse: "The righteous shall live by faith."

It is interesting that in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews there is a kind of divine commentary on this verse:

1. Romans stresses what it means to be "righteous." There we are told that the righteousness of Christ is imparted to us by the gift of God. Righteousness is handed to us. We don't earn it; we have it the minute we believe.
2. Then the words, "shall live," are interpreted in Chapter 5 of Galatians, the great chapter on the life in the Spirit. What does "to live" mean? It means to walk in love, and joy, and peace, and longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control.
3. Then the words, "by faith," are interpreted in Hebrews, the great letter on faith. What does it mean to have faith? It means to trust that the invisible God is working, despite present appearances.

This, therefore, is one of the greatest verses in the Bible, and Habakkuk was given it.

By contrast, Habakkuk is told, "he whose soul is not upright shall fail." The word for "not upright" is, "puffed up." The man who thinks he has it in himself to live by his own abilities, his wits, his education, his own strength, etc., is the one who appears to be successful, but we are reminded that he will fail. He has the seeds of his own destruction within himself.

The rest of Chapter 2 is a picture of how five different forms of pride by which men seek to live are shown to be self-destructive:

- The ambitious man (Verses 7-8) will be destroyed by his own ambition;
- The greedy man who overreaches (Verses 9-11) will try to reach too far and will lose everything;
- The violent man (Verses 12-14) will accomplish nothing; his own violence will turn people against him;
- The insolent man (Verses 15-17) becomes sated with his own contempt for others and loses everything; and
- The idolator (Verses 18-19) begins to trust his own creation, and so, in the hour of desperation, he has no redeemer, no helper.

Thus the man of pride will fall apart, but the man of faith has present power to live. Not only will he wind up a victor, but even now he will live by his faith. That is the great lesson of this book.

That brings us to the third prayer of the prophet, the prayer of faith, in Chapter 3. Habakkuk cries out,

**O Lord, I have heard the report of thee,
and thy work, O Lord, do I fear;
In the midst of the years renew it;
in the midst of the years make it known;
in wrath remember mercy. {Hab 3:2 RSV}**

He is saying, in effect, "Lord, I see what you're going to do and what you have to do. I'm not going to quarrel with it any longer. But help me through it. In wrath remember mercy." This is a humble cry from the heart, which is saying, "Lord, whatever lies ahead, even though it's going to be hard, I know you're going to go through it with me."

Then there follows this magnificent description of the greatness of God, in this beautiful poem. Verse 3:

**God came from Teman,
and the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
His brightness was like the light,
rays flashed from his hand;
and there he veiled his power.
Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed close behind.
He stood and measured the earth;
he looked and shook the nations;
then the eternal mountains were scattered,
the everlasting hills sank low.
His ways were as of old.
I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction;
the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.
Was thy wrath against the rivers, O Lord?
Was thy anger against the rivers,
or thy indignation against the sea,
when thou didst ride upon thy horses,
upon thy chariot of victory?
Thou didst strip the sheath from thy bow,
and put the arrows to the string.
Thou didst cleave the earth with rivers.
The mountains saw thee, and writhed;
the raging waters swept on;
the deep gave forth its voice,
it lifted its hands on high.
The son and moon stood still in their habitation
at the light of thine arrows as they sped,
at the flash of thy glittering spear.
Thou didst bestride the earth in fury,**

**thou didst trample the nations in anger.
Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people,
for the salvation of thy anointed.
Thou didst crush the head of the wicked,
laying him bare from thigh to neck.
Thou didst pierce with thy shafts the head of his warriors,
who came like a whirlwind to scatter me,
rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.
Thou didst trample the sea with thy horses,
the surging of mighty waters. {Hab 3:3-15 RSV}**

Finally, Habakkuk's reaction is given, in Verse 16:

**I hear, and my body trembles,
my lips quiver at the sound;
rottenness enters into my bones,
my steps totter beneath me.
I will quietly wait for the day of trouble
to come upon people who invade us. {Hab 3:16 RSV}**

I think that is as close as you can get in the Old Testament to the prayer of agony which our Lord uttered in the Garden of Gethsemane. We celebrate on this Palm Sunday that last week when Jesus began what we call the "triumphal entry," when he rode down the Mount of Olives on an ass, and people went before him, spreading palm branches and crying, "Hosanna is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" {cf, Mark 11:9}. The remarkable thing about that story, however, is not what the people did, but what was happening to Jesus. For the gospel writers record that as he was riding down the mountainside in what we call the triumphal entry, his heart was broken; he was weeping as he rode. He had just uttered those words, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, but you would not," {cf, Matt 23:37, Luke 13:34}. He rode into the temple and, stopping the offerings being made there, he said, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. You will not see me again until you shall say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" {cf, Luke 13:35}. Later that week, in the prayer of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing the disaster of the cross, he had to pray, as Habakkuk prayed, "Rottenness enters into my bones, my steps totter beneath me, but I will quietly wait for the day of trouble" -- "Lord, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done," {cf, Matt 26:39 KJV}. That is where Habakkuk is now. He sees that the judgment of God is inevitable -- God must do his work -- but Habakkuk is content that God will keep him through it, steady him, take him safely through, and bring him out on the other side.

The final resolve of the prophet's heart, therefore, is (Verse 17):

**Though the fig trees do not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fall
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls, [this is a picture of the devastation that war will
bring]
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength; {Hab 3:17-19a RSV}**

I do not know anything that is more expressive of true spiritual maturity than when we come to that place in our prayers where we can say, "Lord, I see that this trouble cannot be avoided. You have chosen it for me, and I have to go through it. But Lord, thank you that no matter what happens, I know that it will be within the limits you have chosen for me. It comes from your heart of love, and it will accomplish something good for me, according to your word. You will be my strength all the way through. I will go through like a deer going up into the mountains, leaping with strength and power."

**he makes my feet like hinds' feet,
he makes me tread upon my high places. {Hab 3:19b RSV}**

That is one of the most beautiful expressions of faith found in the Old Testament.

Surely that is where God will bring all of us some day, to this place when everything else is taken away, but God himself remains. Because of that, our hearts are strong, our faith is vital, and we are able to stand.

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