



From Pain to Praise

Please turn in your Bible to the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. The best way to find this peculiar prophet is to locate the Gospel of Matthew and go left five books. We don't know much about this man, other than that his name is hard to pronounce. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah and he ministered in the time right before Babylon was set to destroy Judah. The reason I want us to look at this book is because Habakkuk, whose name means "wrestling," had a number of questions for God and complaints against Him. The book is actually a dialog between the prophet and God, with Habakkuk arguing that God's ways are unfathomable and even unjust. He represented the questions of the godly in Judah, and he no doubt gives voice to some of our complaints as well.

Habakkuk 3:17 Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:**18** Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.**19** The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places. To the chief singer on my stringed instruments.

- * Why does God seem so far away?
- * When will He do something for me?
- * Why did He take away my loved one?
- * When will the bad people get what they deserve?
- * Why does my life always seem to go from bad to worse?

It's sometimes hard for us to jump right into singing when all we feel like doing is sighing. I'm reminded of Psalm 137:1-5 when God's people couldn't sing because they were so sad. They even hung up their harps: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps."

1. Declare your questions.

It's not wrong to ask questions, or even complain to God. The Book of Job and many of the Psalms express serious questions to God. For example, Psalm 10:1 begins rather abruptly: "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" God, you may be powerful and you may be personal, but why can't I sense your presence right now? The psalmist is expressing his frustration at the aloofness of the Almighty. The psalms are saturated

with these kinds of questions. Here's just a sampling.

- * Psalm 13:1: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"
- * Psalm 44:23-24: "Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?"

Turn now to Habakkuk 1:3: "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?" He's basically charging God with being both indifferent and inactive.

When tragedy leaves you teetering, it's not unspiritual to declare your questions to God. He's big enough to handle your cries. Some of you have been rocked by some pretty tough stuff.

What do you do when you're faced with an avalanche of agony and you feel like God is playing "hide and seek" with you? Some of you think that Christians shouldn't question God and so you keep your concerns bottled up. Friend, it's

much better to ask God where He's been than it is to wear your spiritual smiles and act like everything's going well when you know it isn't. It's better to express it to the Almighty than it is to suppress it and live in agony.

The word question has as its root the word "quest." If you're on a quest to understand, if you're serious about seeking answers, then don't hesitate to declare your doubts. If you don't ask, you might miss out on some surprising answers and ultimately short-circuit some growth that God wants to accomplish in your life.

2. Describe your complaints. After declaring his questions to God, Habakkuk next gets real specific and describes his complaints. His main beef is that it doesn't seem fair that God would use a wicked people like the Babylonians to punish God's people. Habakkuk spells it out in 1:13: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?"

3. Deepen your commitment to God. I love the faith progression that takes place in this little book. The hurting follower begins with a "how long" question, followed by two bold "why" questions and then he spells out his complaints in specific detail. As a result of being honest with God, and after questioning and complaining, Habakkuk is now in position to move to the next step in the praise process. Check out 2:1: "**I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.**" Habakkuk is now ready to hear God's answer even though he's not going to like what God has to say. We can learn from this same process. If you have questions and complaints, don't stop there. Express them and then turn again to the Lord.

God answers Habakkuk but never really answers his "how long" or his "why" questions. But He does give him two anchors to hold on to. In verse 2, God tells him to "write down the revelation." Anchor #1 is the Word of God. In verse 3, God tells him that the Babylonians will destroy them even though it will be delayed for awhile. God sets forth the second anchor in verse 4, which is quoted in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. In the midst of the mess of life, when problems are pummeling you, hold on to this: "...But the righteous will live by faith." In other words, "Hold on to me Habakkuk, because I know what I'm doing." When our faith is anchored to the Word of God we will be able to handle what comes our way.

Moving from Pain to Praise

Do you know that it's possible to praise even when you're in pain? You can love God when you experience loss. In fact, the most authentic times of adoration are often when we feel the most awful. As we come to chapter 3, let's learn from Habakkuk as he followed a process that moved him from pain to praise. Worship is not complete until we follow the arc from agony to adoration. When pain has been acknowledged, we are invited to focus on God's faithfulness in the midst of suffering. Verse 1 tells us that this chapter is really the prophet's prayer: "A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet." He's moved from a complaint about problems to a composition of prayerful praise.

John Walvoord writes: "Habakkuk's book begins with an interrogation of God but ends as an intercession to God. Worry is transformed into worship. Fear turns to faith. Terror becomes trust. Hang-ups are resolved with hope. Anguish melts into adoration

Disappointment does not have to lead to despair. I love the small word "yet" in verse 18: "Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior." Even though there will be no food and no flocks, Habakkuk has determined to rejoice. Three "thoughts" are followed by a crescendo of "yet." This is very similar to the process Jeremiah went through in the Book of Lamentations. He was filled with "why" questions and he listed his grievances to God but when he's finished, he forced himself to think about what is true. Listen to what he wrote in Lamentations 3:19-23: "**I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.**"

Job experienced a similar thing when he writes in Job 13:15: "Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him" and Job 19:25-26: "**I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been**

destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.” Look back at Habakkuk 3:18. This can literally be translated: “I will jump for joy in the Lord. I will spin around for delight in God!” The tense of this means, “I will shout for joy and would shout on; I will bound for joy and would bound on.” Notice that he rejoices “in” the Lord; when He has nothing else, He has the Lord. When I can’t rejoice in my situation, I can always rejoice in my Sovereign. In the midst of despair he will delight in the Lord.

In chapter one Habakkuk was low. In chapter two he climbs up to the watchtower to wait for God’s answer. And in chapter three he is walking on the heights. He has steadily progressed on an upward arc toward God. Are you ready to move from pain to praise?

Don’t unplug or you will unravel. There are people who are not here today because they’re mad at God for something that’s happened in their life. May I appeal to you to not unplug from church when you’re hurting? You can be real here. Hebrews 10:25 offers a warning to each of us: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

It’s easy to get out of the habit of going to church. And, once you establish the habit of going, you will hang in here when hard times come. Someone said it this way: “Make Sunday attendance a habit so when you can’t praise, you will continue the habit anyway.

2. Praise must become personal. Verse 18 says, “**I will rejoice...I will be joyful.**” Here’s a question. Do you have a personal relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ? If you don’t, I don’t know how you’re getting through life. In order to handle your problems you must first let Jesus handle you.

3. Turn what’s wrong into a song. Habakkuk’s name can mean not only “wrestling,” it also means “embrace.” He’s moved from fighting with God to faith in God; from wrestling to worship. It’s very interesting to know that Habakkuk 3 is not only a prayer; it’s also a praise song. Look at 3:19: “...For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.” Evidently Habakkuk wrote the lyrics and now he wants the music director to utilize instruments and put this poem of praise to song. 3:1 uses the phrase: “On shigionoth.” This word is a bit of a mystery but most commentators believe it refers to music or a musical instrument. While most simply leave it untranslated, the Amplified Bible translates it this way, “set to wild, enthusiastic and triumphal music.”