

**+ Habakkuk 1:1-3, 2:1-4 + Wait for the Lord's Deliverance +
+ 20th Sunday after Pentecost + 11 October 2015 +**

Do you like to wait? If I were to ask for a show of hands, I doubt many of you would raise them. Who of us says, "I love to sit in bumper-to-bumper traffic during rush hour" or "I love to stand at the end of a long line at the grocery store or the DMV" or "I love to wait at the doctor's office" or "I love to be put on hold while waiting to talk to customer service." Isn't it amazing? For as fast-paced as our society is, we still spend much of our time waiting.

Sometimes in our lives we have situations where we are forced to wait—for test results, for good health, for a needed paycheck, for answers, for eternity. I doubt any of us here enjoy that kind of waiting either. In fact, Christians of all time have had to wait while they see the world worsen around them, while problems mount in their daily lives and sin increases within them. It should be no surprise then when your faith grows weak under all that strain and cries out, "How long, O Lord, how long?" "Why, O Lord, why?" The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk had the same lingering questions, but the Lord had answers that came in their own time. Today, then, the prophet urges us to **WAIT FOR THE LORD'S DELIVERANCE**.

"The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received." We don't know much about Habakkuk. He's not mentioned in any other Old Testament book. No prophet mentions him, but from his brief book, we learn he was a prophet or proclaimer of God's Word during the last days of the kingdom of Judah.

The people were falling away from the Lord in droves. The people of Judah had become a selfish, corrupt, and violent people. They cared only about themselves, and all Habakkuk could do was cry out to the Lord, ***"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? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds."***

Habakkuk had cried out to the Lord like this in the past, but it seemed like the Lord wasn't willing to answer. As the prophet walked through the streets, he saw destruction, violence, strife, conflict, corruption, and selfishness. Even more disturbing, he noticed that these acts didn't just happen to God's people, but were often done by those who professed to be God's people. It seemed like the Lord was keeping his hands in his pockets and doing nothing to judge the wicked or deliver the faithful.

So Habakkuk brought two questions before the Lord: "How long before you deliver us?" and "Why do you allow these things to happen?" Sound familiar, don't they? Have you ever found yourself asking similar questions?

We look at the world around us and see thousands dying at the hands of terrorist groups like ISIS and Boko Haram. It seems like every other week we hear about another gunman shooting up a school, a church, or some other public place. We hear about violence in the city and crime in the suburbs. Strife tears families apart, and conflict destroys relationships. Selfishness drives our society's love for things and glorifies all kinds of sexual behavior outside of marriage. We see the increase of gross and disgusting sins that publicly violate God's holy Law and justice seems paralyzed. "How long, O Lord, before you stop all this?"

We look at our own lives and Habakkuk's ancient questions become all the more relevant. You watch helplessly as a loved one goes down a path that takes them farther from the Lord, and you cry out, "How long, O Lord, will this go on?" Death takes a loved one—a friend, a spouse, a child, a grandparent—and you're left behind wondering, "Why did you let this happen, Lord?" We daily struggle with problems at home, problems at work, problems at school, and problems at church. "Why, O Lord, aren't you doing something?" When we're faced with difficulty or setback or emergency, we often find ourselves asking the Lord, "Why is this happening? Why me? Why my spouse? Why my kids? Why my parents? Why my friends?" We often preface those questions with, "I know I shouldn't be asking this, but..." Yet like Habakkuk, we still ask God those pointed questions.

To be honest, believers of all time have asked questions like that not because they deny the faith, but out of confusion why the Lord does not deliver when we expect him to do so. Times like these make "waiting for the Lord" so very difficult. We want his answer and his deliverance right now.

Habakkuk wanted that too, but he knew the Lord in his grace would provide answers to his faithful people. The Lord provided an answer in the verses immediately after Habakkuk's first complaint. A time was coming very soon when the armies of the Babylonian Empire would overrun the wicked land of Judah and destroy Jerusalem. Judgment was coming soon.

This response worried the prophet because those who remained faithful to the Lord would be swept away with the wicked, but Habakkuk knew the Lord in his grace would deliver. For that reason, Habakkuk waited again for the Lord's response. ***"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."*** Why do we wait for the Lord's deliverance? We do it because the Lord has answers and he answered Habakkuk. ***"Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay."***

To the questions "How long?" and "Why?", the Lord answered with judgment and deliverance. For the faithful few in Judah, they were about to be overrun by the Babylonians, but God would provide deliverance. ***"See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright, but the righteous will live by his faith."*** The ***"he"*** Habakkuk describes is Babylon, whose strength was described as ***"their god."*** The Babylonians were so confident in their own strength that they did not realize the Lord would one day sweep them away for their wickedness as he was doing with Judah. In fact, if you look back on history, such judgement happens to every nation that makes its strength their god.

To those questions "How long?" and "Why?", the Lord also had answers which would come much later in the person of Jesus Christ. Though that fulfillment did not come immediately, it did not fail to come at the precise time God had appointed. The Apostle Paul explains in Galatians 4(:4), ***"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem (or deliver) those under law."***

The Lord's answer to those big questions came after much waiting, but still came at the appointed time. The Lord guided all of history to the perfect time for the birth of the Savior. That Savior grew up during a time of relative peace in the known world, which allowed him to safely live a perfect life of obedience to God's holy will free of doubt and worry and impatience in our place. Then the time came for him to turn his face towards Jerusalem and deliver all humanity there through the shedding of his blood on the cross. There he made us holy in God's sight by clothing us with his own holiness.

At the right time in your life, God sent his Holy Spirit to create faith in your heart through the hearing of his Good News connected with the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism. Through that faith you are declared righteous in God's sight as Paul describes in Romans 1(:17), ***"For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"***

Ah, we hear those words of the prophet Habakkuk echo down even to today! By faith alone you are made righteous in God's sight and now have eternal life, but you also live your life by faith. That is God's present answer to those questions "How long?" and "Why?" When you are faced with difficulty or hardship or tragedy, you can live by faith! It's not some wishful hoping or trusting that good things will come. God doesn't tell you that "You gotta have faith." No, he says, ***"My righteous one will live by faith..."***

It's not blind faith, but faith in God's love and promises fulfilled in Christ. It means faith in your Lord, who is truly in control of all things from history to your daily life. That Lord promises to never leave you and promises to let nothing separate you from his love. He promises to work all things for your eternal good. It means trusting in the power of the means that God has given you to touch and taste and see—the waters of Baptism connected with the Word cleansing the soul of a child or adult, the bread and wine where Christ gives you his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Above all, living this life by faith means going back regularly to God's promises of love and forgiveness and deliverance fulfilled in a manger, on a cross, and in an empty tomb, where you see God and his love for you in the flesh.

When questions like "How Long?" and "Why?" arise, go back to the Lord's promise, ***"Behold, I am coming soon."*** (Revelation 22:7) Wait for the Lord's final fulfillment when he will return with all the hosts of heaven and take you to be with him forever where you will no longer need to wait. Yes, we cry out with all believers, "Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come," yet we heed David's words, ***"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD."***

As we wait for the Lord, holding firmly to his promises of love and faithfulness, Habakkuk shows us the way once more. He finishes his book not as an impatient, questioning man, but as a patient believer, confident in the Lord and his promises. Even when all seems lost and hopeless, we can turn to God's promises and wait joyfully for his deliverance. ***"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no***

cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” (Habakkuk 3:17-18)
Amen.