

Waiting on the Lord
Habakkuk 1:12-2:1

I suppose anyone who's ever set out for a creek with a pole or who has run a trot line can appreciate the excitement, the exultation of a successful fishing expedition. When we read verse 15, we certainly get the idea that Habakkuk knew something about it: "They take up all of them with the angle, the hook, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their dragnet: therefore they rejoice and are glad."

But how would you feel if you were not the fisherman but the fish? How would you like to be swimming along, minding your own business, only to discover a certain tantalizing bug or worm was actually hiding a hook? How would you like to be suddenly surrounded on all sides by a net too tight and strong for you to pass through? How would you like to end up being someone else's lunch?

Yes, that's the problem with verse 15, for it isn't really talking about catching fish at all, but men, and specifically the people of God. And who are the fishermen? God has already told Habakkuk in verse 9 – the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, the people living in what we now call southern Iraq. In verses 5 through 11, God has already said these terrible and dreadful people will invade the land of Judah and carry off as many captives as there are grains of sand on the seashore, just as a fisherman carries fish caught in his net.

Okay, so what if you had heard such a pronouncement of impending doom? What would you say if you heard that God was preparing a swift and decisive judgment for modern America? I suppose our first inclination would be to deny the whole thing. We might say the prophet was crazy, that he didn't really hear God say any such thing.

But of course, Habakkuk can't do that. He is, after all, the prophet, so he knows that God really has been speaking to him. He knows that in verses 5-11 God has said the Chaldeans really were coming to bring judgment on the people of God. And so in the second half of verse 12, Habakkuk acknowledges this. He admits that God has in fact ordained the Chaldeans to bring judgment and correction upon His people.

Okay, so what would you say if you couldn't deny a prophecy of impending doom? Would you just sit there and take it? I don't know about you, but as an old high-school debater, I might be tempted to argue with God, perhaps to persuade Him not to allow such a terrible thing to take place.

And such discussions aren't unknown in the Bible, even in the Old Testament. After the people of Israel made and worshipped a golden calf, Moses argued and begged and pleaded that God would forgive His people and go with them into the Promised Land – and God relented. Perhaps most famously, Genesis 18 describes Abraham haggling with God, asking God not to destroy the wicked city of Sodom if there were only fifty righteous men in it, then forty-five, then forty, and so on all the way down to ten. Of course, since it turned out that Lot was the only righteous person in the city,

God simply removed him before destroying the whole place with fire and brimstone from Heaven.

And so, as Habakkuk found himself squarely in the crosshairs of God's latest pronouncement of judgment, we might expect him to do what Abraham and Moses had done, and start arguing with God. And he did – but perhaps not in the way we would expect.

For how would you argue with God if you were in Habakkuk's shoes? Would you say that God wasn't being fair? If so, be careful. For do any of us have a broad enough perspective to really determine what is fair? Can any of us sufficiently master all the variables in the world to determine what the truly best course of action would be in any given situation?

Sure, sometimes we think things are clear enough – Hitler had to be stopped, for example, and I doubt any of us would say America's participation in destroying the Nazis wasn't fair. But historians still debate about the wisdom of our cooperation with the Soviet communist government in order to accomplish this end – for weren't they just as bloodthirsty as Hitler was? In fact, didn't they kill even more people than he did? And after the war was over, the Soviets used much of the materiel we gave them to destroy Hitler to turn around and enslave Eastern Europe for another generation. So, was what we did during the war really fair to the Czechs and the Poles?

And things don't get much clearer when we bring our focus closer to home. I may think it's fair for me to get a promotion, but what if there's someone else in the company who needs it more than I do? I may think I deserve to get a different job, but what about the person who already has that job? If I get rain on my field, someone else's crops will be dry. Can any of us really know what is truly fair in the cosmic sense?

Or look again at the particular problem facing Habakkuk. He just couldn't understand why God would allow the wicked Babylonians to become the agents of God's justice. But God had already used them in exactly this way. They had already conquered the Assyrian Empire and destroyed the city of Nineveh. And in doing so, the Babylonians had brought down the kingdom that had, in turn, destroyed the northern Kingdom of Israel. Surely, Habakkuk thought it was fair for the Babylonians to destroy the wicked Assyrians. So, how could he object when they turned their sights on his own wicked people?

For if Habakkuk couldn't appeal to fairness, he also couldn't argue that his people didn't deserve exactly what they got, right? After all, weren't the first four verses of this book a complaint to God about the widespread wickedness, the rampant corruption that was filling the land of Judah? After hearing about the judgment God had planned for them, could Habakkuk suddenly change his tune and deny that the people deserved what God said was going to happen to them? No, he couldn't say that what God was doing wasn't just.

Ah, but perhaps he could have objected that it wasn't just, it wasn't right for he himself to be caught up in the consequences of other people's sins. For surely Habakkuk wouldn't be complaining about all that violence, strife, and contention if he was doing all those wicked things. How could it be right for him to share in the punishment for things he hadn't done?

Perhaps, if we were to hear that God was bringing judgment on America, we would make a similar appeal. Perhaps we would look around us at the increasing wickedness of our culture and take comfort in the fact that we don't participate in whatever sins we happen to be lamenting most strenuously. If so, we should be careful. For just as we've seen that we have a hard time determining what is truly fair, we also have a hard time being accurate judges of what we do and don't deserve.

For sin, after all, is rarely straightforward. It often hides within us and deceives us. And that means we might be participating in the same sort of sinful behavior as others without knowing it.

Again, it's hard for us to know what our own blind spots may be. It's hard for us to see how we could be participating in the collapse of the American family, or the attenuation of educational standards or in any of the other causes of our current social decline. So to make this point clear, to demonstrate how deceptive sin really can be, perhaps it would be helpful to look instead at the problems of a previous generation.

Last week, for example, we noticed that the sin of slavery was rooted out of Southern culture only at the cost of a terrible war. But when you look at the numbers, only 49% of Mississippi families held slaves. So, why should 51% percent of the folks have been caught up in the war to end a problem they weren't involved in? Why did they have to go through the multi-generational poverty that resulted from it? And I'm sure many Northern folks wondered why their sons had to go off to fight a war to end an institution they bitterly opposed. What business was it of theirs?

But here's the problem with that kind of thinking – you can be involved in a sin without knowing it. Think again about antebellum slavery – how did all those Northern merchants make their money? By shipping slave-grown Southern crops to Europe – before the Civil War, cotton, tobacco, and rice formed the engine that drove the entire American economy. And even if they didn't own slaves themselves, how would the Southern merchants or tradesmen or even preachers for that matter make a living if it hadn't been for the money the slaveowning planters had to spend?

No, when you get right down to it, there really weren't any Americans who weren't involved in slavery in one way or another. Oh, and with precious few exceptions, all Americans both North and South shared the same attitude about black folks that made slavery possible in the first place. Even most abolitionists of the day believed that white folks were just inherently better than black folks. It took more than a war to destroy that idea didn't it?

So no, it's never a good idea to root our prayers in what we think is fair, or in what we think is right. Perhaps that's why Habakkuk chose instead to ground his complaint in the one thing that never changes – in the eternal character of God. Facing the invasion of his country, instead of asserting his own innocence, he confesses in verse 12 that God is the One Who is Holy. Instead of complaining about the impending disastrous change in his circumstances, he confesses that God is the One Who is everlasting, God is the One Who is immortal. Instead of relying on his own reason or experience, Habakkuk bases his prayers on what He is sure is true – on God Himself.

But it is precisely what Habakkuk knows to be true about God that confuses him the most. Since God is holy and pure, verse 13 rightly acknowledges that God is too pure to look on wickedness and iniquity. So, given everything he knew about God, Habakkuk can't help wondering why God would choose such terrible people as the Babylonians as agents of His perfect, righteous justice.

So, Habakkuk asks "Why?" Why is God willing to look on while the treacherous Chaldeans devour those more righteous than they? Why does God let these wicked people go on prospering, even as they slay nations?

And perhaps we wonder the same thing at times. Perhaps we wonder why businessmen prosper when they send American jobs overseas. Perhaps we wonder why politicians who take bribes and break laws keep getting re-elected. Perhaps we wonder why ISIS thugs and communist dictators get away with persecuting Christians. Perhaps we wonder why so many people who despise Christ and His teachings have achieved such cultural prominence in our own country.

Now, next week we'll get to how God answered Habakkuk. Next week, we'll start to see how God's righteousness can in fact be displayed in the midst of our worst problems. Next week we'll see that having faith in God is really the best thing for any of us to do, regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves.

But before he heard God's answer, chapter 2 verse 1 shows Habakkuk doing what is probably the hardest thing of all for us: he waits. He hasn't heard God's answer yet, but like a soldier standing a watch, he will wait for God to answer his questions.

And why does he wait? He waits because, in a very real sense, he already knows the answer. He already knows that God is holy, and that God always does what is right – albeit in His own way and in His own time. And because of this, he knows that he can trust God, no matter what happens to the culture around him, no matter what happens to him personally. And thus he waits expectantly. He waits faithfully. But he waits.

Today, we may wonder what God is up to. We may wonder how in the world He can bring anything good out of the mess in which we find our ourselves, our country, and our world. But as we wait for God's answers, let us remember what we can be sure of: God is holy. God is righteous. And God will do justice in His way, in His time.

