

Waiting for God - Habakkuk 3:16 NASB

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I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us. – Habakkuk 3:16

No other nation in the history of mankind had experienced so much of the blessing of God. Even before becoming a nation it first had to be delivered from the tyranny of a world superpower vastly superior in military might and numbers. The land to which they had come was rich in natural resources beyond what anyone had ever seen before; resources which seemed to be inexhaustible. It truly was a land flowing with milk and honey. Its founders had been a unique group of men endowed with incredible wisdom and foresight. Its founding documents were based on biblical principles and drafted by men whose thinking was shaped by biblical truth. Its laws and system of government were the envy of all others nations. The people of the land shared a common faith and they all worshiped the same God, the God of the Bible. They even claimed that God's word must be the ultimate authority for all they did, both in their religious and civil life.

This nation had survived the destruction of its northern sister-nation by another superpower and even prospered. Unlike its northern sister it had been periodically blessed with godly rulers who had instituted reforms intended to bring the nation back from the brink of hedonism and paganism and reestablish justice and righteousness in the land. Yes, the southern kingdom of Judah had experienced the rich blessings of God in its religious, civil and economic life.

Yet despite all of God's gracious and benevolent dealings with them the people still turned their back on God. They refused to heed the numerous warnings of multiple prophets over decades of time sent by God to call the people of Judah back from their shallow, superficial, and false beliefs and practices to a true and saving relationship with Him. Rather the people flocked to the voice of false prophets and priests who proclaimed a message of their own, who equated material blessing with God's favor, who interpreted God's patience as indifference, who flattered the people's ego, pandered to their carnal desires, fed their self-righteousness, presumed upon God's grace and mercy, and refused to make any distinction between true and false doctrine.

This was the nation in which Habakkuk lived. It was a nation which spiritually was very much like ours today, with the exception that America is not in a covenant relationship with God. The shallowness, superficiality, worldliness, and error which permeated Judah's religious life have infused themselves into the vast majority of the professing church today. Like the people of Judah the church today does not take God's warnings seriously, it has convinced itself no such God exists who will judge and punish sin, it sees itself as having done all that is necessary to pacify God, and rests secure in its own achievements. Like Judah of old it says, "*We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have made a pact. The overwhelming scourge will not reach us when it passes by, for we have made falsehood our refuge and we have concealed ourselves with deception*" (Isaiah 28:15). The words of Jeremiah, of whom Habakkuk was a

contemporary, are just as true today because God is not mocked, *“Your own wickedness will correct you, and your apostasies will reprove you; know therefore it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God, and the dread of Me is not in you,”* declares the Lord GOD of hosts (Jer 2:19). We cannot escape the principle that we reap what we sow; not individually, corporately, nor nationally.

Unlike the other prophetic books of the Old Testament which record the prophet’s message to the people, the book of Habakkuk is entirely a dialogue between Habakkuk and God. Time has run out for the nation of Judah. Judgment is imminent and devastation is looming. The nation has obstinately refused to forsake its sin and return to God. Evil is not only rampant but it has gained control of the very instruments of law by which it should be restrained, *“the law (i.e. God’s law) is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted”* (Hab 1:4). The fragmentation and disintegration of a society into competing factions, where the minority faction is characterized by righteousness and the majority by wickedness, is bound up with the rejection of those forces that unify it – namely *“law”* and *“justice”*. Justice is the right application of the law. Both are *“perverted”* by the corruption of a nation’s civil and religious life.

Knowing the obstinacy and hard-heartedness of his countrymen, Habakkuk asks God *“how long”* He will allow this intolerable condition to persist (Hab 1:2). *“How long”* will God tolerate the flagrant violation of His law, the desecration of His worship, the distortion of truth and justice on every level of society without any fear of divine intervention or retribution? Such seeming indifference to evil on the part of God becomes a crisis of faith for this man of God.

Habakkuk seems to have forgotten what most today ignore and reject and that is, the longer God delays His judgment the more devastating that judgment will be. The longer people sin against God’s patience the more ruinous will be God’s retribution when it comes. Such was the fate of Judah. Far from being indifferent to the nation’s sins God informs Habakkuk that He is raising up a foreign power to be the instrument of His judgment. Not just any foreign power, however, but the dreaded Babylonians. They will be the rod of His judgment (Hab 1:5-11) – an announcement that sends Habakkuk to his knees. The Babylonian campaign against Judah would be swift, fierce, violent, brutal, destructive, and total. This is God’s answer to Judah’s obstinate refusal to repent. It is God’s answer to all who refuse to be ruled by Him and His word, and that answer is a certain terrifying expectation of judgment (Hb 10:27).

Habakkuk is stunned. Egypt was bad. Assyria was worse. But the Babylonians....! They are more corrupt, more brutal, and more perverted than Judah. Habakkuk is more confused than ever, he wants to know how God can chastise Judah with a nation that is even more wicked than they are. How can a God whose eyes are too pure to look on evil with favor, look with favor on people who are more evil and idolatrous than the people He is judging (Hab 1:13)? As Habakkuk braces himself for God’s reply (Hab 2:1), he is reminded that *“the righteous will live by his faith”* (Hab 2:4).

Living by faith entails faithfulness to God’s word and dependent trust in the nature, character, and promises of God. It is an obedient commitment to all that God is and has said. Such faith is clearly demanded by the present context. This is how the righteous are to live when they are endangered by the judgment intended for the wicked. It is how the righteous are to live today. The righteous do not make a pact with the wicked in order to preserve the social fabric that is being destroyed by others who are more wicked.

Neither do the righteous retreat into a bunker. They live by faith.

Contrary to appearances, the judgment of God is precise and selective. Unlike the priests who made no distinction between the holy and profane or the clean and the unclean (Ezk 22:26), God knows how to distinguish between those who are His and those who are not (Ex 9:4). When Egypt was being decimated by God's plagues not even a dog barked against any of the sons of Israel (Ex 11:7). Salvation is always by faith.

The Lord answers Habakkuk with five pronouncements of woe on Babylon (Hab 2:6-19). Each woe is connected with a specific sin – the sin of greed and aggression (2:5-8); the sin of exploitation and extortion (2:9-11); the sins of violence (2:12-14), immorality (2:15-17), and idolatry (2:18-20). All these sins are a consequence of Babylon's insatiable lust for power and wealth. Ambition is an addiction that knows no bounds and to which all other interests are sacrificed. The moral and spiritual consequences are overshadowed by the triumphant accomplishments. God is well aware of the sins of Babylon, and they will not escape God's judgment. However, Babylon's greater sin does not cancel out Judah's rebellion. There is nothing virtuous in being a little better than the worst. There is no moral superiority in being less bad than the baddest. Judah is guilty of the same crimes and is under the same sentence of condemnation. It is only a matter of degree.

Sadly, the same thinking dominates most of the professing church today. People derive their ideas of Christianity not from the Bible, but from how others have defined Christianity, and they define Christianity in terms of morality or self-improvement, as being a little better than Babylon. In so doing they become those who "*measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves with themselves*" (2 Cor 10:12) and are unwise.

It is a malignant flaw of human nature to consistently base the value and quality of things on their external appearances. The prophet Samuel looked at the outside when sent by God to anoint a new king over Israel (1 Sm 16:7). To men the Pharisees appeared righteous, but they were in reality full of dead men's bones (Mt 23:27, 28). The Corinthians disparaged and maligned Paul's ministry because they judged it by worldly standards of success and achievement. Paul freely admitted his oratory skills were not as polished as those of the false teachers, and that compared to them he had a low entertainment value (2 Cor 11:6). But Paul did not come to Corinth to entertain. The Corinthians "*looked at things as they are outwardly*" (2 Cor 10:7). Jonathan Edwards wrote of this same tendency almost 300 years ago,

The notions that some persons entertain of Christianity are very distorted and ill conformed to the gospel. The notions of others are very erroneous....And the reason why they have no better notions of Christianity is, because they take their notions of it chiefly from those sources whence they ought not to take them. Some take them from the general cry or voice of the people, among whom they live....Or they take their notions from the example of particular individuals now living, who are in great reputation for godliness. And their notion of Christianity is, that it consists in being like such persons....If we would have right notions of Christianity, we should observe those in whom it shone, of whom we have an account of in Scriptures. For they are the examples that God himself has selected to set before us to that end, that from thence we might form our notions of religion....God knows how to select examples....And if the professors of it would form their notions of it from such examples as those, rather than from any particular customs and examples that we have now, it would doubtless appear much more amiable in their practice than it now does...¹

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2 (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA), 865.

Two days before His crucifixion Jesus was leaving the temple in Jerusalem when some of His disciples began pointing out the opulent splendor and magnificent architecture of the temple buildings (cf. Mt 24:1; Mk 13:1, Lk 21:5). They were obviously enthralled with all the superficial trappings and symbols of external religion. But Jesus was disgusted with the entire system. He was sickened by the corruption, by the self-indulgence, materialism, and incompetence of the spiritual leaders (cf. Mt 23). He was revolted by the fact that ritual, symbolism, and man-made rules had replaced a true love and devotion for God and His word. What looked good on the outside was in reality inside a putrid rotting mass of nauseating, self-serving, self-gratifying hypocrisy.

Today so much of what professes to be the church points to its popularity to justify its sacrifice of truth and character; a sacrifice made on its altar of ambition to its idol of success. We just can't help evaluating by outward appearance. We forget that God is unimpressed. We forget that God looks at the heart, and that the righteous lives by faith, not behind a façade.

What remained of Judah's façade of external religion was about to be stripped away by a people more wicked than themselves; by a people who recognized no authority but their own; a people whose character was rooted in self-determination and self-sufficiency (Hab 1:6-11). As a result the Babylonians were a people to be feared and dreaded (Hab 1:7), thus usurping the place of God. When those who profess to be God's people refuse to fear God and heed His gracious warnings, eventually they will be compelled to fear those who are unworthy of fear.

Habakkuk feared, but he feared God, not the Babylonians. He feared for his nation and prayed to God that in His wrath He would remember mercy (Hab 3:2). Knowing that God was the author of Judah's impending judgment did not exempt Habakkuk from the inner turmoil, disabling apprehension, and foreboding certainty of imminent devastation and personal loss. He *"heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I must tremble"* (Hab 3:16). And the very cause of his inward turmoil is *"because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us"*. For Habakkuk to see all the wickedness in his nation of which his countrymen were blissfully ignorant and to which God seemed to be indifferent was a cause of great distress to him. To see beyond to God's judgment with all its fears and uncertainties and yet acknowledge the wisdom of God's judgment, to understand that it was God who had appointed the means of judgment, demonstrates the faith that allows Habakkuk to "wait quietly".

The word denotes an inward peace free from any agitation of mind. The only place this peace is to be found is in Jesus Christ. It is the peace that surpasses all understanding. It is the peace promised by Jesus (Jn 14:27). Many people profess to have peace, but it is a false peace. A false peace is part of God's judgment. There are two types of false peace that ruin most people: peace *in* sin, and peace *with* sin. Only those who live by faith, who trust in the nature, the character, the word, and the promises of God, can "wait quietly", even in times of God's judgment. Habakkuk's faith found expression in his great doxology found in 3:17-19. Even in times of complete economic and social collapse Habakkuk *"will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk in my high places"* (Hab 18, 19).

In such times only a true, unfeigned faith in God the Father and Jesus Christ will support. Spiritual sentiments and platitudes, religious works, glowing ideas of God,

flattering messages will not support the soul in such an hour. There is much self-deception in our own estimation of ourselves when we live with our faith untried, in the midst of religious friends who praise our religious works, and when our casual, presumptuous perception of God is never challenged by the removal of all other supports, props, hopes, worldly security, and stability. Untried faith is uncertain faith.

People talk bravely and confidently of believing while whole and sound, while no trial disturbs their rest. But to rest patiently, quietly, and calmly in God alone, trusting Him alone for all while facing imminent loss and ruin of all you hold dear, all you've ever worked to build and accumulate, is beyond the ability of human nature. This is why Habakkuk affirmed "*the Lord GOD is my strength*" (Hab 3:19).

Do not judge God's love by providences, but by promises. To equate personal and material blessing with the smile of God is very worldly and carnal. It is more likely to be a curse. It is still easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Bless God for shaking off false supports and unstable foundations. Better sickness, poverty, marginalization, scorn, opposition, obscurity, and temptations than false security and superficiality. Comfort from anything but the hand of God and person of Jesus is deadly.

To a self-secure, self-reliant soul Jesus is simply a legend and the Bible is just a story. Like the people of Judah their relation to God is a product of birth and culture. If the same people had been born and raised in an Islamic family and culture they would be Muslims, if in a Hindu family and culture they would be Hindus, if into a Buddhist environment they would be Buddhists. Their Christianity is merely a product of birth and education, not a new birth, not a work of God in the heart. They have come to Christianity but not to Christ.

Nothing but lying in the bosom of Christ like a weaned child will dissolve a hard, proud heart, make you mourn for sin, and cure the gangrenous superficiality of religious profession. When you exercise faith, what do you look to first? Your own faith, your own righteousness, your religious duties and activities, worldly means, your own abilities, the schemes of men? What is the ground of your hope? A prayer you prayed, a decision you made, a religious ceremony you went through, your religious pedigree? If it is anything but Jesus and Him alone, they will veil Christ to you. Pride and unbelief will make you look to and hope in self and others first, but those who live by faith look to nothing but Jesus. These alone can "wait quietly" in a confident trust that God is working all for our good and His glory, even in times of God's imminent judgment. *I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us* – Habakkuk 3:16,