

MESSAGE FROM THE MASTER

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Text: Habakkuk

I'd like to begin this morning with a brief exercise. I will give you the marketing slogan of a particular product or service and I want you to try to come up with the name of the company that provides it. Are you ready? Here we go.

What is the name of the candy that melts in your mouth, but not in your hand? M & Ms. What shoe company encourages athletes to "just do it." Nike. What breakfast cereal boasts that it is the breakfast of champions? Wheaties.

Those brands were fairly easily to identify. I have one more to share with you, and this one might be a little tougher. What company do you identify with the slogan: "You've got questions. We've got answers?" The answer is RadioShack, a national consumer electronics chain.

Those six little words say a lot. With that slogan, the people at RadioShack are promising potential customers that they can help them understand and appreciate and even use the electronic products they offer.

What is the difference between an iPod and an MP3 player? How many megapixels do I need for my digital camera? What is a megapixel anyway? RadioShack says: If you have questions about any of the products we sell, we are ready and willing and eager to give you the answer.

Habakkuk never shopped at RadioShack. Habakkuk lived thousands of years before the electronic age. And yet the company's slogan is also the perfect theme for the Old Testament book that bears his name. Habakkuk had questions, questions that he was not afraid to ask, questions that he was not the first person to ask, questions that you and I sometimes ask.

The Lord heard Habakkuk's cry. The Lord listens whenever his people call upon his name in prayer. And as we consider how God responded to the prophet's petitions, the Lord gives each and every one of us this comforting assurance...

YOU'VE GOT QUESTIONS, I'VE GOT ANSWERS

Before we take a closer look at the questions themselves, it would probably be a good idea to get to know the person who asked them. So what do we know about Habakkuk? Truthfully, not much. We don't know where he lived. We don't know anything about his family.

Everything we can know for certain about Habakkuk is contained in the opening verse of the book. There we are told that he was a prophet of God and that he had received a revelation from God. And immediately after giving us that bit of biographical information Habakkuk launches right into his first question:

"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. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted" (1:2-4).

When Habakkuk looked at the land and the people he loved, he didn't like what he saw. Destruction and violence were everywhere. The legal system was a complete mess. The wicked were prospering. The righteous were suffering. And Habakkuk simply wanted to know: "Why? Lord, why aren't you listening to me? And if you are listening, why aren't you intervening?"

If you didn't know that these questions were coming from the mouth of Habakkuk, you might just as easily assign them to any Christian living in the 21st century. As I write this sermon, these are a couple of the top stories in the local news: "12-year old girl shot in dispute; condition is critical" and "Milwaukee alderman faces federal charges of bribery and extortion."

When we look at all the hatred and violence in our world, when we see how crime and corruption have made their way into our own communities, we can understand where Habakkuk was coming from. We might even want to ask the same questions he asked: "Why, Lord? Why do you allow the innocent to suffer? Why do you let the guilty go free? Please do something. Do something to let us know that you are listening. Do something to show us that you still care."

The Lord did hear his prophet's complaint. The Lord did care about his people. And in his response to Habakkuk he explained exactly what it was he planned to do: **"Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor" (1:5-7).**

God's plan of attack was precisely that, a plan of attack. He had been patient with his people. He had sent prophet after prophet to warn them about their sin and call them to repentance. But God's chosen people had chosen to dishonor him and disobey his Word, and justice demanded that they be punished. And the rod of God's divine justice came in the form of the Babylonian armies.

Within a few years of this prophecy Babylon became a world power. A few years after that the Babylonian empire extended as far as the gates of Jerusalem. A few years after that the Babylonian armies desecrated the temple and destroyed the city and deported the people.

That probably wasn't what Habakkuk wanted to hear. That certainly was not what he expected to hear. Even if he wanted to take back what he had said, even if he didn't want to hear what God said, it was too late. And since he had already asked the Lord one question, he was emboldened to ask him one more:

"O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die. O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish. 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" (1:12,13)?

Before he asked any more questions, Habakkuk wanted his God to know that he was not questioning his divinity or his ability to make decisions. He said: "God, you are eternal. God, you have made your intentions known, and I respect that. You can do that. You're God. I'm not."

But at the same time Habakkuk wanted the Lord to know that he didn't quite get it. The wicked people in Israel deserved to be punished (he agreed with that), but as bad as they were, they weren't nearly as wicked as the Babylonians. The way Habakkuk saw it, God's solution didn't really solve anything. In fact, the solution was just as bad as (and maybe even worse than) the original problem.

God didn't get angry with Habakkuk for questioning him, but he didn't feel obligated to explain his actions either. Instead the Lord responded to the prophet's questions with some of the most quoted and most precious words in the entire Bible:

“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. ‘See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous will live by his faith’” (2:2-4).

“The righteous will live by his faith.” The apostle Paul quoted those words not once, but twice (Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11) to prove that eternal life is a gift a person receives, not a goal a person achieves. The writer to the Hebrews quoted those same words to encourage followers of Jesus to follow Jesus, to stand up for Jesus even though they would be ridiculed for it, to live their faith even though they would be persecuted for it (10:38).

“The righteous will live by his faith.” Those words didn't directly address Habakkuk's question, but they did give him the answer to a much more important question. If Habakkuk wanted to know if God still loved him, the answer was “Yes.” If Habakkuk wanted to know if God had a plan for his life, the answer was “Yes.” If Habakkuk wanted to know if he had any hope for eternal life, the answer was “Yes.”

The Lord told Habakkuk: “Don't worry about the Babylonians. They will get what is coming to them (see the rest of chapter 2 for the details). But even better than that, much more important than that, is that you will not get what is coming to you.”

The Lord says to Habakkuk and us: “I know all. I can see all. I can see into your heart. Sometimes you question me. Sometimes you think you know better than me. There are times when you are convinced that life is not fair. There are even times when you believe that I am not fair. But you're wrong.”

“If I were truly fair, if I treated everyone the way they deserved to be treated, heaven would be a pretty empty place. You would have to pay for your sins. You would have to die for your sins. And you would spend eternity in hell.”

“What is not fair is that someone else took your place. What is not fair is that my perfect Son paid for your sins. And the most glorious injustice of all is that Jesus died for you so that you might live forever with me.”

The Lord's answer made an impression on Habakkuk. The Lord's response inspired Habakkuk to respond with a psalm of praise. The musical notations throughout the chapter (3:1 and 18; “Selah” in 3:3,9 and 13) tell us that what began as Habakkuk's personal prayer later became a corporate prayer of thanksgiving.

This is more than an interesting observation. It means that these are the words of all of God's faithful people. It means that Habakkuk's words are our words. And so we stand with the prophet and pray: **“LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy” (3:2).**

“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” (3:17,18).

We may not be able to understand why everything happens in our world. We may not always understand why God allows suffering to come into our lives. The Lord doesn't promise to answer all of our questions, but he has given us the answer to life's most important questions.

Are we loved? Yes, God so loved the world that he gave us his one and only Son. Are we are saved? Yes, Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins. What are our prospects for the future? Because Jesus has made us righteous in God's sight, because God has given us the gift of saving faith, we will live forever in heaven. Amen.

Prayer: Lord God, your ways are not our ways and your thoughts are not our thoughts. We cannot even begin to comprehend the complexity of the world in which we live, and yet you remain in control of all things and you make everything work out for the good of your people. Forgive us when we question you. Restore us when we confess our sins to you. And renew us with the good news that eternal life is ours through your Son and our Savior Jesus. Amen.