

Experiencing God in Troubled Times: Waiting is Hard

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

Copyright © 2009, Bill Couch. All rights reserved worldwide.
This material may be printed or copied for personal use only.

This morning we continue with our series of messages entitled “Experiencing God in Troubled Times” based upon the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. This prophet lived around 600 BC during a time when the nation of Judah was filled with corruption and violence. In the first message we saw Habakkuk ask God why he allowed all this injustice in the world. God responded: “Things are going to get worse. The Babylonians are coming to conquer you and carry you into exile.” This was not the answer Habakkuk was hoping for. He can’t believe that God will let things get even worse. He begins to realize that he needs to trust God no matter how bad things get. He learns to trust that God can even use the Babylonians to accomplish his purposes even though it was hard for Habakkuk to accept.

We are living in the midst of troubled times. There is a lot of unrest in the world. Violence is increasing. Injustice fills the headlines. Executives of the large financial institutions which caused the economic crisis receive millions of dollars in bonuses. At the same time, the victims of their greed are losing their jobs and homes. We wonder how long the economic crisis will last. Some are telling us it could be over soon. Others say we should prepare for a long and difficult recovery. Habakkuk helps us to discover how to live with uncertainty in the midst of troubled times. The book of Habakkuk is an honest dialog between God and a man who just can’t understand what God is up to. He is really having trouble with God’s prediction that things are going to get worse and he tells God so. Let’s listen to more of their conversation:

Habakkuk 2:1-4

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.

2Then the LORD replied:

"Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald may run with it.

3For 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.

4"See, he is puffed up;
his desires are not upright--

but the righteous will live by his faith--

Habakkuk tells God he wants some answers. God says he will have to wait. "For the revelation awaits an appointed time." One of the major themes of the Bible is "waiting on the Lord." It is something we must learn to do in the midst of trouble and uncertainty. In these few verses we learn five important things about "waiting on the Lord."

First, patience. "Though it linger, wait for it." (vs 3) God says to Habakkuk: "You cannot understand what I'm doing right now. I will answer you at the appointed time." The Hebrew word for "wait" includes the quality of patience.

We live in an instant society that does not like to wait. I don't like to wait. I'm always maneuvering for the shortest line at the check out stand. I get frustrated when it takes 15 seconds for my computer to connect to the internet. Most of us don't like to wait for anything. And yet some of the most valuable lessons in life are learned during times of waiting. When we are in the midst of troubled times, we want them to turn around quickly. I like the economists who say we are already out of the recession. But, the reality is, we don't know if it is over or how severe it is going to get. God's message to Habakkuk is: don't try to escape the trouble. Wait for the Lord in the midst of troubled times. What can God teach me about life and about myself, while I'm waiting? What do I need to learn? We may realize during this time how much we depend upon our financial condition to provide security. Is our security ultimately in God and his presence in our lives? Or have we placed our ultimate security in portfolios and the stuff we have? Persons without a job often struggle with self-worth. Of what value am I if I don't have a job? We discover how much of our worth we get from a job rather than from our Creator. During times of uncertainty we have an opportunity to look at our lives and discover what idols we

worship other than God. What are those things other than God that we need in order for our lives to be worthwhile?

Wait patiently on the Lord. What is patience? Patience is a deliberate act of humility. Listen to how James puts it in his letter:

James 4:13-15

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." ¹⁴Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

We don't know what will happen tomorrow, but we certainly act as if we know what should happen tomorrow! When things don't go the way we think they should, we get angry. We are angry because we operate out of the assumption that we are omniscient. We know what is best for us and what is happening is not it. This is a disaster. It is messing up all my plans. When our portfolios tanked last fall, didn't we all think that it was a disaster? It certainly messed up a lot of retirement plans. But how do we know that this is a disaster? Humility is saying, "I don't understand this. It is certainly not what I hoped for. But God may have different plans. He is in charge. He knows what's best. I will wait and see what he has to say about this."

Honestly, that is not my first response when things don't go the way I want them to. But peace comes when I quit trying to force things to happen the way I want them to and humbly admit that perhaps God knows what he is doing! Patience requires the humility to admit that I am not omniscient. I am not in control. I don't know what should happen. Only God does. And he is a whole lot smarter than I am. Waiting on the Lord means patiently accepting that I am not God.

Waiting on the Lord brings perspective about trouble. In verse 1 Habakkuk says “I will station myself on the ramparts.” Ramparts were the towers on top of the walls around a city. Why do the cities erect these towers? If you are down in the city surrounded by walls, you cannot see what is coming. The towers were erected so watchmen could see for miles and miles what was coming—whether it might be changing weather or an enemy. The watchmen in the tower had a completely different perspective from the persons behind the walls. Habakkuk is going to the tower to wait for the Lord. It is his way of saying, “God you have a better perspective than I do on things. I am in the midst of trouble and it is all I can see. Lift me up and help me to see things from your perspective.” God replies, “I see the Babylonians coming. Things are going to get worse.” But God also sees beyond the Babylonians. He will use even the Babylonian captivity as a part of his plan to redeem the whole world. When we go to the tower, we ask God to give us different perspective. We know that he sees everything and he sees beyond the trouble. We trust him to take care of the future. Waiting on the Lord means trusting that his perspective is much better than ours.

Waiting on the Lord also means staying engaged with him. In verse one, Habakkuk says “I will stand at my watch.” When a soldier is on watch, he cannot leave his post. It does not matter how terrible the weather is, how bad he feels, how sleepy he gets, or how bored he is. He cannot abandon his post. Habakkuk is struggling with God. He does not understand his ways, but he says “I will stand my watch.” He is going to stay engaged with God no matter what. It is interesting to me that we call servers in a restaurant “waiters.” When you watch them they do very little waiting. They are constantly in motion. They have several customers they must take care of. Our mental picture of waiters is in

the context of a busy restaurant. However, in ancient times, it was only the wealthy who could afford a waiter. The waiters were a part of the household staff. The waiters would literally “wait” beside the table during a meal for the requests of their employer. They would wait until they were told to do something or get something and then they would go do it. They would stand at their watch and stay engaged with their employer—listening for any request. It did not matter how bored they were or bad they felt, they were expected to stay at their post and listen. Habakkuk realizes that to wait upon the Lord means to stay engaged with him and listen for his requests or commands. Unfortunately when we are waiting on the Lord, we tend to get distracted. We get impatient if we do not hear the Lord’s voice. We allow ourselves to get distracted by things like excessive alcohol, food, sex or busyness. We find it hard to just stand at our watch and not leave our post. Are you actively engaged in listening to God or have you allowed yourself to become distracted from your post?

Waiting for the Lord means focusing only on him. Many times when we are waiting on the Lord what we really mean is that we are waiting on him to give us the answer as to why we are going through troubled times. Or we are waiting for him to turn things around and bless us with prosperity. In the book of Job, Satan says that Job only worships God because of what he does for him. God has blessed Job with a wonderful family, great wealth and good health. Satan accuses Job of only loving God because of things he has given him. Satan says that if Job loses all his blessings he will curse God. God allows Satan to take all the blessings away from Job. All his children are killed. He loses all his wealth—his stock market crashes. And he loses his health. Will Job abandon God because he no longer blesses him with stuff?

Satan is right about one thing. When we first connect with God it is because of what God can do for us. We need forgiveness, and he offers it. We have made a mess of our lives and he gives us a new beginning. We are destitute and he provides for our needs. Most of us begin our relationship with God because we need something from him. But if that is the only reason for our relationship with God, then we are missing out on so much. Many people never get beyond worshipping God for the benefits he provides and never get around to worshipping God for himself.

Like Job, we find out about the core of relationship with God when trouble comes. Do we love God just because he is God? Will we reject him if we lose all his benefits? Accepting God's grace means we come to the realization that there is nothing we can do for God. We do not deserve his love. We cannot earn his love by what we do. God loves us simply because we are his children. Don't we need to return that same love? We need to love God simply because he is our God, not because of what he can do for us.

When two persons exchange wedding vows they pledge to love each other for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; for better or for worse. They promise to go through life together no matter what happens. They promise to love each other for who they are rather than for the benefits they can provide each other. Many marriages fail because they are based upon performance and benefits. When the other person no longer benefits me, perhaps because of chronic health issues, I'm gone. How sad.

How sad it is when we abandon God because he is not delivering the benefits we think we deserve. It is the ultimate in self-centeredness to believe that God exists to provide me with benefits. Going through times of trouble, gives us an opportunity to learn to love God for who he is rather for what he can do for us.

Lastly, waiting on the Lord means trusting him. In verse 4 Habakkuk says: “the righteous will live by his faith.” Trust is the key to waiting. God only is worthy of our trust. We cannot trust the economy. We cannot trust our circumstances. Everything in our lives can be lost, except our relationship with God. Times of trouble remind us how untrustworthy everything is but God. Waiting on the Lord means trusting him.

Are you allowing yourself to grow in your dependence upon God alone during these trouble times? Are you waiting on the Lord?