

When Bad Things Happen to God's People

Habakkuk 3

On Nov 19, 1966, Rabbi Harold Kushner's home was rocked by the news that his only son, 3 year old Aaron, was afflicted with an extremely rare disease called progeria. Better known as the rapid aging disease, the progeria syndrome dramatically accelerates physical aging.

Eleven years later, Aaron passed away, driving Rabbi Kushner to search for answers to the question: "How could God allow bad things to happen to good people?" When he thought he had found the answer, he wrote the book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

While the search for answers to his personal crisis is understandable, the title to the book is misleading. First of all, there is no such thing as "good" people. Romans 3:23 confirms that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Isaiah 64:6 adds that "all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment."

Furthermore, the book is not about what to do "*when*" bad things happen; rather, it is about "*why*" bad things happen. His pursuit was about *why* or *how* God—a good God—could allow bad things to happen to people he thought deserved something better. That was really the question on the mind of Rabbi Kushner. He wanted to know "Why."

Habakkuk, in the first two chapters of his prophecy, finds himself asking the same question.

Habakkuk's Why Question # 1 (1:2-4). About a hundred years after Assyria had taken the northern ten tribes into captivity (722 B.C.), Habakkuk was prophesying during the final years of the southern kingdom of Judah. Following the path of her northern sister, Judah's sin was rampant and Habakkuk wants to know why God doesn't act! Because God appears to be indifferent to Judah's sin, he accuses God of inaction: "Why aren't You doing anything?"

God's Answer (1:5-11). In reply to the prophet's accusations, the LORD startles Habakkuk with a most unexpected answer: He is sending the Chaldeans (Babylonians) under the leadership of His servant (Jer 25:9), Nebuchadnezzar.

The picture is not a pretty one. The Chaldeans were a "fierce and impetuous people" who lived by their own rules (1:6-7). With the swiftness of leopards and eagles and the cunning of wolves (1:8-10), their weapons of war overwhelmed anything or anyone that would attempt to thwart their mission.

Habakkuk's Why Question # 2 (1:12-17). Habakkuk is bewildered by the answer. In the prophet's thinking, God's reply is *unbelievable*. Though pleased that his call for action was heard and that God is doing something, the prophet is astonished by the means He has chosen.

His perplexity is propelled by two problems. First, Chaldea (Babylon) is *not* just another godless nation. They are the epitome of anti-God. They worship military might (1:15-16a); yet, astonishingly, it seems God is prospering their wickedness (1:16b-17)

Second, in the thinking of Habakkuk, God's employment of Chaldea is an affront to His holiness! Israel was His "kingdom of priests" (Exo 19:6)! How could He now allow His prized possession (Exo 19:5) be overrun by such an anti-God people—a nation of non-kosher, uncircumcised "fishermen" (1:14-17)? That's Habakkuk's point in 1:13. By using them, the prophet thought God was looking with favor on wickedness.

In the prophet's first query, he questions God's *inaction*—evil is everywhere and God is doing nothing about it! In this second question, he bemoans God's *action*—God seems to be prospering the wicked (1:16b-17).

God's Answer (2:2-20). God answers Habakkuk by telling him He is going to judge the Chaldeans too. Emphatically so! They will be looted (2:6-8), shamed (2:9-11) and left to experience first-hand the temporal and vain nature of imperial ambitions (2:12-14). They will be disgraced, devastated (2:15-17), and left to suffer the full impact of the nothingness of idolatry (2:18-19). In comparison to the God of Israel (2:20), the idols of Bel and Nebo cannot be aroused to offer protection from the LORD of hosts (cf. 1 Kgs 18:27).

Within these judgments on Chaldea, the prophet is given two very important words of comfort. The first comes in 2:4: "The just shall live by his faith." God is telling Habakkuk that His use of the Babylonians in no way justifies them. Rather, right standing before God is by faith. The just will be both justified and preserved by faith.

The second word of comfort comes in 2:20. Contrary to the idols of Chaldea, which offer their worshippers no help, the God of Israel is still sovereign; the "One who lives forever"—the LORD—is still reigning "in His holy temple."

These verses (2:4, 20) provide the foundation that allows Habakkuk to respond the way he does in chapter three. They are the backbone of the book, the lifeline that rescues Habakkuk's thinking! They totally reshape the prophet's outlook and sculpt his response. As a result, he no longer wants to know *why*. Rather, he now focuses on how he will respond *when* the judgment and devastation come.

Chapter three provides a glimpse of Habakkuk's reoriented perspective. It offers five examples as to how we can respond to difficult times—five Godly responses *when* bad things happen.

Response # 1 — He Related the Matter to God (3:1)

Habakkuk begins by taking the matter to God in prayer. This is a remarkably different Habakkuk than in chapter one. There, he repeatedly demands to know why (1:3, 13 [twice], 14). Not having the full picture, he is clearly struggling with God's plan.

But in 3:1 his response is different, especially noticeable in his attitude. God's words of comfort in 2:4, 20 have totally changed all that. Yes, he is still very emotional about the whole matter (3:16). The heart is still beating fast! But, instead of telling God how to respond, the prophet is now telling himself how to respond. He is dealing with his own response to God's perspective.

And remarkably, he begins with prayer! Prayer is the ultimate acknowledgement of God's sovereignty! Why else pray, right? Prayer recognizes that God is sovereign—He's in control of the circumstances and has the power to do something about the situation!

Prayer, in the midst of trial, brings strength. It did for Moses (e.g. Exo 32:11; Num 14:13; 20:6; Deut. 9:26), David (e.g. Ps 55:16-17, *et. al.*) and Daniel (Dan 6:10; 9:20-23). The Great High Priest, facing the ultimate cruelty of the crucifixion and weighed down with the sins of the world, spends His final night in prayer (Matt 27:36-44; John 17).

And we would do well to follow their example. Not only does prayer acknowledge God's sovereignty; it also takes the focus off our circumstances and focuses on God. That's what it did for Habakkuk. In the first two chapters, the prophet was focused on his situation. He was operating on the human level, making the relative goodness of Israel and the relative badness of Babylon seem great.

But once he took his eyes off himself, he caught a glimpse of God in His holiness (2:20), and suddenly these issues faded. Now all he saw was a holy & righteous God! In His instructions to the disciples, Jesus says: "And whatever you ask in my name, that will I do, *that the Father may be glorified*" (John 14:13). We focus so much on the first part of the verse (getting whatever we ask for) that we miss the second part (the goal of God's glory). Suddenly the focus is no longer on my need, but on giving glory to God!

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, commenting on this text, puts it this way:

"Our problems can nearly all be traced to our persistence in looking at the immediate problems themselves, instead of looking at them in the light of God. [Habakkuk] had to stop thinking in terms of the fact that the Chaldeans were worse sinners than the Jews and that God was going to use them... That attitude made him forget the sin of his own nation through concentrating on the sin of others, [making him] unhappy in mind and heart. But the prophet came ... to see only the wonderful vision of the Lord in His holy temple. When things are seen from a spiritual viewpoint, ... the holiness of God and the sin of man are the only things that matter" (*From Fear to Faith*, 59-60).

The hymn writer concurs: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face; And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His glory and grace."

Prayer may not change the circumstance—but it will change the perspective. It changed Habakkuk's perspective, and it will change yours too. That's what prayer does!

Response # 2 — He Recognized His Own Weaknesses (3:2, 16)

In the first two chapters, Habakkuk is seen chaffing and battling (1:2-4; 2:1), challenging God on how to handle the situation. He gives the impression that he knows what is best and expects God to respond in his way. But in 3:2, 16 he seems to surrender. And that's not an easy thing to do, because pride gets in the way (1 Pet 5:5-7).

Let's be honest, Habakkuk is still afraid (3:16). His stomach is churning; his visceral section is tied in knots. He knows it will be lengthy; that it will be *years* (3:2). But notice the contrast. The issue is no longer what Habakkuk wants; it's now "*Your* work." Realizing that it's God's work and not his own, the prophet prays that God will revive His work of grace toward Israel and reenact His deeds of power (3:3-15).

Recognizing his weakness, the prophet realizes he needs divine strength. It is a crucial step for Habakkuk—and for us as well—for a number of reasons:

Quite obviously, the first is the *omniscience factor*. God is omniscient and can see end from the beginning (Isa 46:9-10). We can't! We will never have the full picture cf. Eph 6:12), but He does.

Second, there is the *instrumental factor*. Acknowledging our weakness allows God to work through us. Habakkuk, as a prophet, was to deliver God's message to people. Yet, in those first two chapters, he had it all wrong. He was telling God what to do! Until Habakkuk learned that he was only the instrument, God couldn't use him. The LORD told Zerubbabel that the building of the temple was "not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit" (Zech 4:6). Gideon was told to first reduce his troop numbers from 32,000 to 300; then God could use him (Jdg 7:2-7). We too are only clay pots—the instruments, and until we learn that, we are useless to God. God does not give strength to the self-sufficient; He gives strength to the weak (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Third, there is the *maturation factor*. Exposing our weaknesses in the valley of trials is often what God uses to mature us. The apostle Paul exhorts us to exult in our trials and difficulties because the results are so grand: perseverance, proven character, and hope (Rom 5:3-4). A. W. Tozer observes: "If the truth were known, the saints of God in every age were only effective after they had been wounded" (*Men Who Met God*, 59).

Response # 3 — He Reviewed the Greatness of God (3:3-15)

Faced with the fear of the impending invasion, Habakkuk reminds himself of what he knows to be true. Emotion will not save him; reason will not save him. Only knowledge of what he knows to be true about God will save him! And so he begins reviewing God's great acts on behalf of His people, rehearsing the tremendous ways God had worked among them. Beginning with their deliverance from Egypt and entrance into Canaan, he highlights God's works in Sinai (3:3), the Shekinah Glory and the cloud between Israel and Pharaoh's army (3:4), the plagues in Egypt (3:5), crossing the Red Sea (3:8, 15), the sun standing still at Gibeon (3:11), and possibly David killing Goliath (3:14).

When you go to the bank for a loan, they want your credit history, right? Why? Because they want to know how you responded to loans in the past. So here! This is God's credit history! If He acted this way in the past, He can be expected to act this way again and again. Scripture gives us God's credit history in His Word through reading (Ps 119:105-107, 109-112), meditating (Ps 1) and memorizing it (Ps 119:11), and even singing hymns (Col 3:16; cf. Acts 16:25).

Response # 4 — He Reaffirmed His Faith in God (3:17-18)

Habakkuk knows the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar will bring massive famine! No food; no flocks or herds, no agricultural produce. Every source of food in ancient Israel is enumerated here, devoured by invading troops and snuffed out by the ravages of war. As a prophet in Israel, he knew what Moses had predicted, some eight hundred year earlier, if Israel failed to stay true to the LORD (Deut 11:16-17).

In spite of the inevitable gloom, the resolve of Habakkuk is absolutely remarkable. In contrast to his earlier response, the prophet reaffirms his faith in God. No matter what happens, he will exult and rejoice in the LORD (3:18)! As Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic for over forty years, told Larry King: "A wheelchair is my passport to joy and peace in such a way I would never have dreamed possible."

And notice that the resolve comes *before* the troubles arrived! Habakkuk knows it's coming, but he's prepared. His choice to exult was firmly established in his heart long before the heat of the trial (cf. Josh 24:15). Like the prophet, we may not have time to decide the biblical course of action in the midst of the trial. The swift onslaught of the trial does not afford that (Ps 32:6). It

must be cultivated ahead of time, before the affliction itself clouds our judgment and perspective. That way, we will not be tempted to “doubt in the dark what we’ve embraced in the light.”

Response # 5 — He Rested in the Strength of the LORD (3:19)

The first four responses have led to this amazing conclusion. If the first four take place, this is inevitable result! On the other hand, if the first four are absent, this reaction is not possible!

Habakkuk’s statement (3:19) is remarkable, especially in light of the earlier chapters. Instead of turmoil and fear (3:16), he is now bounding with strength and vitality. His feet are steady and sure-footed, like a deer standing on the narrow ledge of an ominous mountain precipice.

Before our very eyes, the message of 2:4 is being fulfilled in the life of the prophet. “The just shall live by his faith!” It was more than an intellectual assent for Habakkuk; it was a recognition that God was at work for his good and God’s glory (2 Cor 4:16-18). It was an affirmation and commitment energized by the Spirit’s application of the Word to his everyday life.

Every Christian’s perspective on life must be insatiated by this verse! It is not something to draw on from time to time as needed; rather, it is a truth designed to carry us continuously throughout our entire lives! Reiterated in the New Testament (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38), it represents the character of God’s work in the life of every believer. Justification by faith not only inaugurates redemptive life, it is also the sum and substance of the believer’s life, keeping us each moment of our lives as well. God’s gift of faith initiates regeneration and then infuses and sustains that new life.

As Habakkuk so brilliantly portrays, there is no need to panic. There is no reason to fear or doubt God. Whether or not we see it or feel it, God is orchestrating all things for His glory & our good. He is trustworthy. It’s His credit history! When faced with trials, the prophet blazed a trail we would do well to follow.

Habakkuk’s name means “one who embraces.” By the end of the book, the prophet is found embracing God’s sovereignty in the face of coming turmoil and suffering. He embraced God’s plan because he knew He was trustworthy. God’s credit history invites us to do the same!

→ William Cowper, an 18th c. English poet (1731 - 1800) who suffered a lifetime of distress and illness, memorialized Habakkuk’s perspective when he wrote:

Though vine nor fig tree neither
Their wonted fruits should bear,
Though all the fields should wither,
Nor flocks nor herds be there;
Yet, God the same abiding,
His praise shall tune my voice;
For while in him confiding,
I cannot but rejoice.