

BaptistWay Bible Series for June 24: A desperate cry for hope

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Explore the Bible Series for June 24

Habakkuk's lessons on genuine prayer

- Habakkuk 1:2-3, 5-6, 13; 2:2-4; 3:16-19

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Some say God answers prayer in three ways: "Yes," "No" or "Wait." Others encourage us to "pray it through," suggesting either our lack of faith or the spiritual powers that be are preventing our prayers from reaching heaven.

When times are tough and we're looking to God for answers, the feeling that God isn't responding or that our prayers hover somewhere just under the ceiling can be discouraging. But Habakkuk gives a good picture of prayer and some interesting thoughts about it. As we read the book, we get to sit in on the prophet's private conversation with God. It's personal. It's real. He simply talks to God as if God were in the room with him.



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All too often we think of prayer as a church event. We think there are rules and, if we don't do it right, it won't work. But prayer is not an incantation. It's a conversation with God, like the one Habakkuk has.

Habakkuk lives in a time much like our own. His nation, once the jewel of God's heart, had become corrupt and had turned its back on God. Our nation, too, was founded on faith in God. But we have grown cold, and in the name of religious freedom, Christianity is suppressed. We live in a culture devoid of Christian principles that laughs at faith. Meanwhile, God is silent.

Like Habakkuk, we can't help but question God. Does he hear us? Does he respond to our prayers, or did he only respond in Bible times?

Lesson one: Prayer is faith

The first thing we learn from Habakkuk is the right attitude about prayer. Most of our prayers are responses to suffering, unjust treatment or difficult decisions. We want to stay in God's will, but the Bible doesn't speak directly about our personal situations. When prayer goes unanswered for any length of time, we can't help but wonder how we should respond. Is God's silence an answer? Or is God suggesting he's already equipped us to choose our action? Should we continue to pray, strengthening our prayers as Daniel did with his persistence? Or will God consider our repeated

requests “vain repetitions”?

We want rules. But as stated above, prayer isn't an incantation, and there is no single right or wrong.

Think about it. Prayer itself is an act of faith. What are we doing when we pray? We're talking to an unseen power whom we trust to have the answers. To people who don't believe, prayer is silly, a crutch for the weak. But for Christians, it is our strength. It's our comfort. And it gives us peace.

So what do we do when there seems to be no answer? If prayer is genuine, it begins with faith. It must also end with faith. When those who really trust in God receive no answer, they continue to trust. They listen to their hearts for the still, small direction the Holy Spirit gives, and then they choose an action. Sometimes it is to wait patiently. Other times it is to continue in prayer. And other times, our hearts begin to change, and we don't resist. We recognize our answer as internal change, not external direction.

This trust, this listening for God, is faith. “But the righteous will live by his faith” (2:4). Without it, our prayers are useless.

Lesson two: Prayer seeks God's heart

Another lesson we can learn from Habakkuk is that prayer isn't about us. Genuine prayer expresses our desires or fears only so we can hear God's heart about the issue. Genuine prayer isn't looking for confirmation about an action we already have decided to take; rather, it presents the idea only as an effort to learn God's preference. Genuine prayer is not about trying to convince God our way is best. It's about learning what God thinks is best. But this will never happen unless God can get a word in edgewise. “But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (2:20).

Sometimes God speaks clearly, as a voice. Other times he directs our thoughts or changes our hearts. He speaks through his word and often will bring Scripture to mind. But God does speak. We must simply tune in to him. The static of this world often drowns out his message. If we aren't listening carefully, walking in a state of prayer, we won't even be aware of his presence.

But sometimes we do hear God; we just don't like what we hear. Like Habakkuk, we argue with God, wondering how he possibly could be right. These moments are the decision points in our walk with God. We must then answer the vital question: Will we turn away from God because he doesn't make sense, or will we trust him no matter what? Hopefully, as Habakkuk, we'll say, "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).

Lesson three: Only genuine prayer works

We keep asking for rules. But there's only one rule when it comes to relating to God. We can't be fake. Only genuine prayer will work. So the question must be asked: What is genuine prayer?

- Genuine prayer begins with a right attitude. It is humble, aware of the greatness of God and our unworthiness to come before him. It is genuine sorrow for being less than God desires us to be. It is being thankful to God, in spite of life's circumstances (Psalm 51:1-17).
- Genuine prayer also trusts God. It cries out to him boldly. It knows he has an answer and is willing to wait for it. It plans to obey whatever answer is received (Hebrews 4:16, Mark 14:36, Luke 18:1-8).

- Genuine prayer is not done to impress others. It is a private conversation. It expresses concerns and desires, but also listens (Matthew 6:6-7, John 10:3-5).

- Genuine prayer is continuous. Sometimes, formally, it speaks aloud. But other times, it is a silent reliance on and awareness of the ever-presence of God (1 Thessalonians 5:17, Psalm 5:1).

- Genuine prayer believes God always is right and knows he is listening. It understands prayer doesn't have to be perfect but trusts God to know what we mean and what to do with our honest confessions. It flows from a desire to please God and see his will done (James 5:16, Romans 8:26, Matthew 7:7-8, Matthew 21:22).

In their discourse, God assures Habakkuk that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord” (v. 2:14). Prayer is the evidence of our belief that his glory surrounds us even now. Let's follow Habakkuk's example and speak honestly to God, looking for his truth. Then let's commit to follow his truth wherever it may take us.

Discussion questions

- When you pray, do you try to follow formulas or do you speak honestly to God?

- Do you really believe God will answer?

- If God were to answer your prayers clearly, are you prepared to obey him no matter what?

- What does it mean to pray continuously? Do you do it?



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