

Voices: Not-so-Minor Prophets: Habakkuk

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The Book of Habakkuk is a short book of only three chapters, but we can learn a lot from this prophet.

1. Be unafraid to voice your questions to God.

The first voice we hear in Habakkuk is that of complaint: “O Lord, how long will I cry, and you will not hear?” (Habakkuk 1:2).

Making a complaint is to be differentiated from doubting God. People complain to God when they know who God is but are baffled by what the God they know does or does not do.

When you feel the need to complain to God, remember God’s ways are not our ways.

“‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,’ says the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

If you have to complain, though, be sure to complain to God. Resist the temptation to complain about God. When you feel frustrated about something God has done or does not do, go directly to God. God is big enough to handle your complaint. He will not chastise you for daring to complain to him.

However, do not doubt God. Doubting says you do not know who God is or you are not sure if he even exists. Hebrews 11:6 points out, “He who comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.”

We should not encourage people to doubt God. People do more than enough of that all by themselves. They need no encouragement in that regard. The Bible condemns doubting God.

Jesus gently upbraided Thomas for doubting when Thomas’ fellow apostles told him the risen Lord had appeared to them in the upper room at Jerusalem. When, at the risen Lord’s second appearance in the upper room, Thomas finally acknowledged, “My Lord and my God,” our Lord said, “Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

We see several heroes of the Bible complaining to God but not doubting God. Moses, Job, Jeremiah, Jonah, Mary and Martha are excellent examples.

Habakkuk’s complaint stemmed from his being baffled that God would allow people who were less righteous than the people of Judah to punish the Judeans. He was not claiming the Judeans were righteous. He was just saying they were at least more righteous than the people who were oppressing them.

Biblical scholars wonder as to whether the oppressors were internal—fellow Jews, such as the king and his high officials—or external, meaning some other nation, and if external, whether they were the Assyrians or the Babylonians. It is possible to point to aspects of internal as well as external oppression.

It is hard to blame Habakkuk for feeling frustrated. He articulated his frustration clearly to God:

“You are of purer eyes than to behold evil,
And cannot look on wickedness.
Why do you look on those who deal treacherously,
And hold your tongue when the wicked devours
A person more righteous than he?” (Habakkuk 1:13).

2. Be intent on listening for God’s answer.

You accomplish nothing good if you complain to God but do not stay poised to hear God’s answer. Many are good at complaining, but not at listening. Habakkuk was wise enough to listen for God’s answer. He would say:

“I will stand my watch
And set myself on the rampart,
And watch to see what he will say to me,
And what I will answer when I am corrected” (Habakkuk 2:1).

It is instructive that in saying “when I am corrected,” Habakkuk sensed God’s answer might correct his outlook on what he was observing. Always be open to God’s word correcting your outlook. This calls for patience on our part. God asked Habakkuk to be patient:

“For the vision is yet for an appointed time;
But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie.
Though it tarries, wait for it;
Because it will surely come,
It will not tarry” (Habakkuk 2:3).

This reminds us of the encouragement given to us in Isaiah:

“But those who wait on the Lord
Shall renew their strength;

They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31).

God's answer did come, and his answer would be, "The just shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4b).

The Lord "in his holy temple" (Habakkuk 2:20) always knows what he is doing. The righteous person is to live by his or her faith, trusting in the God who is not only omnipotent and omnipresent, but also omniscient. Therefore, God is one who always knows what he is doing and always does everything right.

Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times in the New Testament (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

3. Be sure you learn something from God's answer.

As you receive God's answer, be sure to learn something from it. Habakkuk had already expressed his openness to having his attitude corrected by God's answer, and he would take correction in a remarkable way.

This book that began with the complaint of a prophet ends with one of the strongest affirmations of personal trust in the Lord in the entire Bible. Habakkuk said:

"Though the fig tree may not blossom,
Nor fruit be on the vines;
Though the labor of the olive may fail,
And the fields yield no food;
Though the flock may be cut off from the fold,
And there be no herd in the stalls—

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will joy in the God of my salvation" (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

When you realize Judah had an agrarian society with many depending on their crops and their animals, you learn to appreciate how strong an affirmation of personal trust in the Lord this was. Habakkuk was saying even if everything were to go wrong in his life, he still would rejoice in the Lord, trusting the Lord always knows what he is doing. You and I would do well to make the same strong affirmation of personal trust in the Lord.

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