

O Lord, How Long?

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, October 22, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Habakkuk 1:1-3, 2:1-4; Psalm 119:137-144; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

After the fire burned our church I heard a number of people say, "It's too bad the hotel didn't burn." ... meaning that it would make more sense for God to let the hotel burn than to let his church burn.

Last summer a tornado ripped through a midwestern town. A church was completely destroyed. The local beer-garden was untouched. It doesn't seem fair or just.

In 1775 an earthquake far worse than the one that rocked San Francisco nearly destroyed the city of Lisbon, Portugal. It was on *All Saints' Day*, November 1st. Thousands of people worshipping in church were killed. That tragedy rocked Europe and raised troubling questions about God's justice.

An editorial on the San Francisco earthquake in last Friday's News Journal by George Will. He's speaking tongue-in-cheek. He writes, "In this secular age... the phrase 'acts of God' denotes only disasters." Why are "acts of God" always considered to be tragedies and ~~natural~~ disasters? The disaster this past week in San Francisco and the earlier disaster caused by hurricane Hugo in the Southeast prompts many of us to ask a question some people once asked Jesus after a disaster that took many lives. "Were these people worse sinners than we?" The implication: if tragedy strikes it must be a result of God's judgment against sin otherwise, where's there justice?

Listen to your children. They know all about justice and injustice. They know instinctively what's fair and what's unfair, what's just and what's unjust. And they soon come to know that there's a lot of injustice

in the world. A lot of things that aren't fair. It's unfair that mom and dad can watch television on week days and they can't. It's unfair that one boy must have the lights out by 8:30 when another boy can read until 9:00.

We come today to one of the great passages in all of Scripture. There's a prophet, a man of God, named Habakkuk, and he's discouraged. He looks around his nation and his church and discovers that so much in life is unfair. And he asks, "How long, O Lord, are you going to put up with this injustice... this unfairness in life?"

Then he gets a shocking response. "Habakkuk, I'm going to raise up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians. They march through a country with a swiftness unknown to any other army, and they level all the homes that aren't theirs. Everything they see they take by force. I'm going to raise them up against my people, to punish my people for the way they're living."

Well, this is like God telling us that he's going to judge the sins of our nation by sending in the Colombia drug cartels to take us over. They're worse than we are. And that's exactly what Habakkuk tells God, "Lord, are you going to use a people who are wicked, not nearly as righteous as we are, to punish us, your chosen people?"

"Yes, that's right."

"But that's not fair. How can you do this Lord?"

Throughout the prophecy of Habakkuk we hear him asking God these kinds of questions. Now I want us to think about this for awhile. I want us to mull this over in our minds and hearts. I want us to meditate on how Habakkuk, in his prayers, dares to ask God questions... dares to question God's answers.

When I was taught how to pray, I was taught that there are five different kinds of prayer. There's adoration. In adoration we tell God how

great God is. We express our love for God. A good example of a prayer of adoration is found in our old Book of Common Worship. "O God, who art infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, glorious in holiness, full of love and compassion, abundant in grace and truth..." Then there's the prayer of confession in which we admit to God that we've sinned. A good example of that is found in our corporate confession of sin with which we begin our worship service. Third, there's thanksgiving, simply thanking God for his many blessings. A fourth kind of prayer is supplication. In supplication we ask God for things for ourselves. A fifth kind of prayer is intercession, praying for others. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication and intercession. But nobody ever told me about a sixth kind of prayer: the question.

But the prophet Habakkuk illustrates for us how prayer to God can also be expressed by our questions. Habakkuk questions God. In fact his question is actually a complaint about how unfair life is. Habakkuk reminds me of a child crying out to a parent, "But mom, dad, it's not fair." He's really complaining to God in the form of a question. The Bible is filled with examples of questions and complaints that people have expressed to God in prayer. "Why are you so far away O Lord? Why do you hide yourself when we are in trouble? (Psalm 10)" "How much longer will you forget me, Lord? Forever? (Psalm 13). And it was our Lord Jesus Christ who asked on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? (Psalm 22)"

I'm glad those kinds of prayers are in the Bible. I'm glad that God's own word shows us that it often takes a man or woman of deep faith to ask God questions and even to complain to God.

Dave Rife was a member of my church in Buffalo, New York. He'd been

president of his highschool youth group. He'd once organized and led a bike-a-thon to raise money for the hungry. He went off to college where he did very well, graduated, got married and got a great job in Michigan. Everybody in the church was sorry to see Dave move away. One summer evening he was playing baseball with his eight year old brother-in-law. An electrical storm came up suddenly. Dave told the boy to run home... he'd get the bat, ball and gloves. The boy started running... he saw a flash of lightening followed immediately by a loud clap of thunder... he turned to see his brother-in-law lieing on the ground, struck by lightening. He was killed instantly. ^{TP} I've never so much wanted to avoid the responsibility of visiting a bereaved parishioner. But I went immediately where I found his father, David senior, sitting on the front porch head in hands, crying. "Ted, how could God let this happen? Was it just chance? Couldn't God prevent it? There must be a reason. God must have a purpose."

Later we gathered in a circle in the living room... Dave Sr., his wife Dorothy, and there three other children, Sherry, Robby, and Ricky. We all held hands and the father prayed, and his only prayer as he swayed and sobbed were questions, "O God, why Dave? Why? Why? How long, O Lord, will we feel this pain?"

You say, "He shouldn't have questioned God. If he'd have had faith he'd just have accepted it, without question."

No, my friends. I don't believe it. Faith asks questions. My boys are always asking me questions because they have faith in me. Sometimes their faith in me is misplaced. I don't know as much as they think I know. But our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is never misplaced. We boldly ask God questions because, through our Lord Jesus Christ, we've come to trust that God is loving and all powerful. Rarely in the Bible is faith pictured as

having all the answers. Faith is a venture, faith is a risk. Faith exists to be tried and if it isn't tried it's not faith. Faith is taking a promise from God and believing it when you can't see how it's going to turn out.

The prophet Habakkuk was a person of deep faith. It was his deep faith in God's loving purposes for his people and for the world that prompted him to ask God questions.

Time and again in our disappointments, we wonder in our inward hearts, "Does God know what God's doing? If God is in control, has God lost control temporarily?" And often it's faith, not unbelief, that's behind those questions. We ask those questions because we trust the Lord and know something of the Lord's kindness and justice and love and just can't understand how God let's such injustice and pain take place.

There are many Christians who are suffering tragedy, disaster, and affliction. God seems to be silent. No word from the Lord as to what the Lord is doing or why. It would be nice for God to tell us why these things are happening to us and to those we love- but the Lord doesn't. Instead the Lord tells us "those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God." Or, "the just shall live by faith."

We trust in the character of God, the character of the God we've come to know in Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection. We trust in the Lord, who works all things after the counsel of God's own will, is doing all things well according to the Lord's plan and purpose.

The world is not out of control no matter who appears to be in charge-- in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, the Soviet Union, or South Africa. Faith affirms that the Lord is in charge-- and if the Lord weren't, it would be foolish to pray for anything.