

## When God Does Not Hear

A sermon preached by Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, October 19, 1986. 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 Spirit. Amen.

"GOD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, 'Violence!' and you will not save?" This isn't an isolated cry in Scripture? It's a cry we hear over and over in the Bible. We hear it in the prophets. We hear it in the New Testament. We hear it especially in the Psalms. It isn't too far from the cry of Jesus on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" And I wouldn't be surprised if you've caught yourself, at times, praying, "God, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?"

*1. Few things so severely test our faith as the apparent deafness of God. God so often doesn't seem to hear our prayers.*

*Think of the world.*

Today is world order and peace Sunday. People around the world have been praying for peace since time immemorial. For nearly two thousand years the church has prayed daily, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth." And still nationalism, militarism and terrorism seem more deeply entrenched than ever. Around the world the cry goes up to God, "How long, O Lord, before apartheid is dismantled? How long before the violence in Northern Ireland is settled? How long before Lebanon can begin to rebuild their ruined nation? From Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Philippines and the Sudan the cries of mothers and fathers go up to God for their sons and daughters marching off to war, "God, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, 'Violence!' and you will not save?"

*Look at the church.*

Two thousand years ago Jesus prayed in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. It was the night he was betrayed; the night he instituted the Lord's Supper. That night he prayed for all those who would come to trust in him as their Lord and Savior. "Holy Father, I pray that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you hast sent me." A thousand years have come and gone and near a thousand more and we still aren't one. Look at how Christ's body lies dismembered, bleeding and divided. Hundreds of different denominations compete with one another instead of being united in work and witness. Violence in Northern Ireland between Presbyterians and Roman Catholics. In our own country strife and contention between liberals, conservatives, charismatics, and fundamentalists. And even within local congregations divisions drain vital energies. Why hasn't God heard and answered that prayer; the prayer of his own beloved son?

"How long shall we cry for help, and you will not hear?" How long will the Church have to wait for the fire from heaven to fall? How long before the vision of Ezekiel is a reality and the dead bones stand up and live and become a mighty army? How long before

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun,  
Does his successive journeys run.

*Bring it closer to home. Look at ourselves.*

Our lives are so difficult to change. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. We can identify with St Paul when he wrote, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate". We make resolutions only to fail. We get discouraged and feel like giving up on the Christian life. We're so often defeated; so easily seduced into worry, resentment, coldness of

heart and ingratitude. We cry out to God to help us change our lives; to be more Christlike, to control our appetites, our tempers, our desires but, so often, he doesn't seem to hear.

A lot of times it's not ourselves we're praying for. We're praying for loved ones. We're praying for sick people. We're praying for our children. We're praying for unbelievers. We follow the formulas in the Bible about praying in the name of Jesus according to his will. Jesus said, "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them." St. John wrote, "If we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him." But it often doesn't seem to work. We know it's God's will for someone to turn to Christ and yet, despite the promises, it seems like God doesn't hear. Our loved one isn't healed. Our son or daughter dies. God seems not to hear or care or be willing to do anything.

Of course it isn't always like this. Sometimes we get quick answers to prayer. Before we ask we've received. But so often it's not like that.

The prophet Habakkuk knew all about unanswered prayer. For years he prayed for an end of violence but nothing happened. Finally he brought a complaint against God. It almost seems blasphemous to hear him complaining to God. "Don't you hear? Aren't you willing? Or don't you care?" And then the prophet waits for God to justify himself.

God's answer can be summed up in two words- *wait* and *believe*.

*Wait!*

"If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay," God rarely does things quickly by our standards. When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden God promised that a child of Eve would crush the serpents

head. But Adam and Eve died never having seen the fulfilment of that promise. God promised to give Abraham land and many descendants but he died as an alien in a strange land. Joseph waited and prayed for years in Egypt before he was vindicated. The children of Israel cried out to God to deliver them from slavery but it wasn't until Moses was 80 years old that he led them through the Red Sea. Another thousand years slowly passed before the Messiah came. For thirty years Jesus worked and waited until the time came to begin his ministry. God works slowly most of the time.

*Wait!*

Though the mills of God grind slowly,  
Yet they grind exceeding small;  
Though with patience He stands waiting,  
With exactness grinds He all.

As sacrilegious as it might sound, we need to be patient with God. He's like my wife and I on Sunday morning trying to get three boys ready for Sunday School. We may be late, but we always get here. He may be late, by our standards, but he has always come through. And that leads us to the second word God gave Habakkuk in answer to his complaint.

*Believe!*

"The righteous shall live by their faith." Believe God is listening when you pray. Believe in miracles. Believe in the final victory of God. The New Testament is absolutely categorical and emphatic on this point. God's will, though it may be hindered for a time and obstructed by human blindness and folly and sin, cannot finally be defeated. When Christians make that assertion we're not inventing a fool's paradise, we're not talking about pie in the sky. We're building on the solid rock of history. We believe that God will conquer in the end, because we believe he has already conquered.

Look at the cross! If there ever was a crushing defeat it was surely

there on the cross. If ever it seemed that God didn't hear, it was there. But look at the cross a little more closely. Isn't the cross God's answer to all the prayers of people since the beginning of history. On the Cross the Jesus defeated Satan. Out of that hour of deepest darkness, when God seemed deaf, has come hope and life for millions of people. Evil, at the very point of its supreme achievement, at the crucifixion of Jesus, has been met and mastered and defeated. That Cross, with the Resurrection to seal it, remains forever as the guarantee of the ultimate triumph of God's will.

If we continue to cry out to God for his kingdom to come in its fulness, we'll begin to believe it's actually possible; a world without war and violence and destruction; a church and family that's free of contention and strife; where the knowledge of God covers the earth as the waters cover the sea; where Christ is Lord of all. And what we believe, what we really believe, we act on; we come to live by that faith. We begin to work for what we pray for. We begin to believe in and work for Christ's kingdom. And when God seems not to hear; we wait in hope and we believe that he does hear and will answer. We keep on beating the path to God's door, because the one thing we can be sure of is that the God we call upon will finally come down that path, and even if he does not bring us the answer we want, he will bring us himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that's what we're praying for anyway.

Let us pray: Lord, we believe you are always ready to hear our prayers. We do not ask you to give us anything which you know will not be for our good. Therefore help us, please, to understand what you want, and to ask for that. Amen.

"Teach me to feel that Thou art always nigh;  
Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear,  
To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh;  
Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer." Amen