

## “How Long?”

“Look to the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.”

*How long?*

Chances are that you have uttered this phrase on more than one occasion. It may have been as a child, as you impatiently waited for the school bell to signal the end of the day; or counted the days until your birthday or Christmas; or hungrily asked when it was time for dinner. It may have been as an adult, wondering when you would hear from a loved one, or standing at the train station looking down the tracks for your train home. It may have been when you received the news of a cancer diagnosis, waiting anxiously for test results and a call from the doctor’s office. Whether it is in anticipation of a celebratory moment or in trepidation over the arrival of devastating news, the question “*how long?*” is asked in the hope that whatever may happen, the time of waiting will be over soon.

The phrase “*how long?*” is the first statement in the book of Habakkuk, one of the Twelve Prophets of the Old Testament whose book addresses one of the central issues that continues to plague humanity: how can a person of faith maintain a belief in God’s justice in an unjust world? Habakkuk’s central concern for justice places him solidly in the tradition of Israel’s prophets, calling attention to and criticizing the miscarriage of justice in the political, judicial, and economic institutions of Judah and Jerusalem, and predicting the demise of this unjust society as God punishes its unjust leaders and re-establishes equity and proper order. Unlike other prophets, however, Habakkuk gives prominent attention to a persistent and troubling problem that challenges this prophetic confidence in God’s justice: the persistence of injustice in the world. “*No prophet confronts the issue of a just God and an unjust world in the direct and forceful way that Habakkuk does.*” (Theodore Hiebert).

The book of Habakkuk is unique among the books of Old Testament prophets in that it contains no direct address to the listener. While every other prophetic book contains some statement directed at a human audience, Habakkuk is structured as a debate between the prophet and God. The prophet’s address to God is in the form of a lament, in which a person in distress cries out to God with the desperate cry “*how*

*long?”*

- “Help, O LORD, for there is no longer anyone who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind.” – Psalm 12:1.
- “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” – Psalm 22:1.
- “How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name for ever?” – Psalm 74:10.

Habakkuk employs the language of lament in his opening statement to God: “*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?*” (1:2). Habakkuk complains about the abuse of power in Judean society; this may refer to the abuse of power in the administration of King Jehoiakim (609-597 BC), whose reign in Judah is chronicled in the Second Book of Kings:

- “Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he began to reign; he reigned for eleven years in Jerusalem ... He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, just as his ancestors did.” – 2 Kings 23:36-37.

The exploitation of the poor and the less privileged by the rich is a fundamental concern among Israel’s prophets. The terms “violence and destruction” are used as a pair by other prophets to describe the ruthless accumulation of wealth by political officials:

- “Thus says the Lord God: Enough, O princes of Israel! Put away violence and oppression, and do what is just and right. Cease your evictions of my people, says the Lord God.” – Ezekiel 45:9.
- “They do not know how to do right, says the LORD, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.” – Amos 3:10.

“Cry” is customarily used in the Bible to appeal for help by the oppressed (“*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!*” – Isaiah 5:7). Habakkuk’s use of “righteous” for the victims of such abusive policies may identify them as society’s poor and marginalized, persons who are victimized when “*the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore justice comes forth perverted.*” (1:4).

Further support for Habakkuk's lament can be found among Israel's historians and prophets. Jehoiakim is accused by Jeremiah of exploiting the poor and vulnerable: "*But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.*" (Jeremiah 22:17). He is charged with using forced, unpaid labour for building his own lavish residences, and with demanding heavy payment from Judah's citizenry to support his alliance with the Egyptians ("*He exacted the silver and the gold from the people of the land, from all according to the assessment, to give it to Pharaoh Neco.*" – 2 Kings 23:35). The king is implicated in the obstruction of justice, shedding of innocent blood, and the murder of prophets ("*... for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD was not willing to pardon.*" – 2 Kings 24:4).

While Habakkuk's pronouncements on the evils and injustice of the rich and powerful in his society echo the words of other prophets, unlike other prophetic announcements Habakkuk assumes the role of the victim, lamenting injustices that have gone unseen and unpunished. He cries out in the language of lament that can be sorrowful, desperate, and even angry. His words addressed to God are not pleas for God's help in times of trouble; they are cries of anger against God who appears to be absent from God's people in a time of deep distress.

- "Habakkuk is not just asking a question of God; Habakkuk is saying, 'I not only want to know how long. I want to signal you, God, that I am wholly and heartily sick of what is happening, and I think it is beyond time that you do something about it.'" – Rachel Wrenn.

With his opening words, Habakkuk accuses God directly of being inattentive and inactive. In other prophetic books does the problem of divine justice set the terms for the book as a whole as they are set in the opening lines of Habakkuk's lament.

- "If God is really God – in control of the world – God cannot be good or just and also allow injustice and suffering to exist and to endure. If God is really good and just, God cannot be in control of such a corrupt world." – Hiebert.

Habakkuk is so adamant in his complaints against God that he vows not to back down until he receives an answer from the Lord: "*I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.*" (2:1). Habakkuk describes the challenge he has posed to God and to traditional theology as a "complaint" (*takahat*, "argument, reproof, rebuke"). Habakkuk is more than a complainer or malcontent; he is the

debater in an argument, one who stands in judgment of traditional view of God's ways with the world. Habakkuk is angry, and he will not leave his post until he receives a satisfactory explanation from God.

- “Habakkuk is so overwhelmed with violence that he lashes out – at God. This prophet has the audacity to say that which we might only admit in our deepest of hearts; sometimes, with the violence of the world raging around us, it feels like God has failed. And Habakkuk not only says this audacious thought; he says it out loud **to God!**: - Wrenn.

Many people are uncomfortable with the harsh language of lament, believing that it is disrespectful to address God in such a manner, fearful that these complaints may provoke God's anger and wrath. But this is not what happens when God responds to the complaints of Habakkuk; God does not rebuke or chastise the prophet. In God's response to Habakkuk's lament, God promises to provide the resolution of Habakkuk's criticism of traditional prophetic theology and the questioning of God's just rule.

- “Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision, make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.” – 2:2-4.

Habakkuk is told to write down the vision so that it is clearly visible on tablets; the Lord commissions the prophet to record the revelation to carry it and to announce it to the people. The written record of the vision serves as an official announcement or guarantee to verify the trustworthiness of the vision's content. Later, when the events come to pass, the document provides indisputable confirmation of the truthfulness of prophetic revelation.

- “The vision is thus described as a reliable pledge that God will act in the future. Although its fulfillment may appear to be delayed, the vision will not prove false; it will inevitably come to pass.” – Hiebert.

The Lord calls upon Habakkuk to “*look to the proud,*” those who have placed their trust in their own selves and their own resources; while “*their spirit is not right in them ... the righteous live by their faith.*” The word “righteous” (*emuna*) refers to qualities of firmness, steadiness, steadfastness, and fidelity. It is the kind of loyal

commitment admired in people (“*The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous will stand.*” – Proverbs 12:7) and believed to be the primary aspect of God’s own character, the “steadfast love” (*hesed*) of the Lord that is at the heart of the confidence God’s people possess in the one who is their God.

- “I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.” – Psalm 89:1-2.

While the vision describing God’s intention to re-establish justice has not yet become a reality, Habakkuk is called in the interim to trust God’s assurances and remain faithful. This confidence in God’s faithfulness and steadfast love is another aspect of lament, the assurance that our cries are heard by God and that God will come to our aid and lead us out of the depths of despair from which we cry out: “*O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.*” (Psalm 130:7-8).

- “Biblical faith does not flinch or cloak in pretty phrases its assumption that being human means suffering. One of the foremost characteristics of the faith of Israel in particular is the forthright nature of its language of lament.” – Douglas John Hall.

The Word of the Lord that the prophet Habakkuk is called to proclaim to his people at a time when all appears lost is proclaimed anew by Paul in the opening chapter of his letter to the Romans. Faced with a world still plagued by destruction and violence, where the powerful victimize the powerless and where the apostles of Jesus Christ face tremendous opposition to their proclamation of the Gospel, the apostle finds inspiration in the words of Habakkuk that assure God’s people that their faith in the steadfast love of the Lord will give them confidence to endure even the greatest of hardships:

- “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” – Romans 1:16-17.

This faith, which is “*the assurance of things hoped for, the convictions of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1) is at the heart of our Lutheran understanding of our

relationship with God and how it is through faith that we can overcome the fears and anxieties that may enslave us. For Luther, these words became the turning point in his transformation of living in fear of a wrathful God to trusting in a God of steadfast love whose love is proven for us “*in that while we were sinners Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:8).

- “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise through opened gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.”

The language of lament that gave Habakkuk and generations of God’s people to bring “*everything to God in prayer*” is language that is available to us in the depth of the fear and anxiety that mark these times. In a world where violence and destruction appear to be all around us, when we live with the uncertainty that are the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, when we are not certain about the future of our families, our community, and our world, we are invited and given the very words to cry out to God for help and guidance in these times of greatest need. Faith does not promise that we will be immune from trials and temptations; faith does promise that we are never alone in such distress, that God is with us even when we walk through life’s darkest valleys, and that God will lead us through times of despair to the place where all that seeks to destroy and defeat us will be no more. Those who are righteous, who place their trust in the Lord, will live by the faith that assures us that nothing will separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- “So ‘Be strong, take courage.’ God is on the side of life; and we, who (it’s true) are often strangely attracted to death, may nevertheless be raised to life – enticed away from death – by the God who brought Jesus from the dead. By grace, we can learn, not only how to recognize the goodness of God in the land of the living, but how to participate in it ourselves – how to be stewards of that mysterious, transforming goodness.” – Hall.

We may find ourselves continuing to cry out “*how long?*” as we live amid the anxiety and uncertainty of our times; but the witness of Habakkuk gives us an example of how the relationship God has established with us gives us the language and the ability to bring to God our deepest fears, our greatest doubts, and even our harshest anger. We may not know how long our current circumstances might last, but

we do know that our precious Lord will take our hands, and that the grace that has brought us safe this far by faith is the same grace that will lead us home.

Amen.