

Prayer's Strange Answers
Habakkuk 1:1–11

October 23, 2005

SERMON NOTES

- A. The Problem of Pain — the questions we ask about world and personal events

- B. The Unanswered Questions
 - 1. Psalm 2:2 ... about governments

 - 2. about good people

 - 3. Romans 8:18–22; natural disasters are result of

 - 4. Romans 8:28; God's answers will always be

- C. Habakkuk's Problem Habakkuk 1:2–4
 - 1. Habakkuk lived (when?) ...

 - 2. The book of Habakkuk is a ...

 - 3. Habakkuk's concern was for ...

 - 4. Habakkuk's questions are ...

- D. Gods' Answer Habakkuk 1:5–8
 - 1. What does God warn Habakkuk about His answer?

 - 2. Isaiah 55:8–9; one reason for this is ...

 - 3. What is strange about God's answer?

- E. Conclusion
 - 1. Paul's experience, 2 Corinthians 12:7–10
 - a. What did Paul have (verse 7)?

 - b. What did Paul do about it (verse 8)?

 - c. Given what happened with Paul in Acts 14:19–20, 19:11–12, what might we expect?

 - d. What was God's answer?

 - 2. the bottom line for the believer
 - a. Proverbs 3:5 – that

 - b. Job 13:15 – that

—{1}. **Habakkuk 1:1-11 Prayer's Strange Answers**

A. The Problem of Pain

1. I have culled some headlines from some recent newspapers
 - a. "School scorched by molotov cocktails" – Era-Banner
 - b. "Farmer sentenced to life for feeding man to lions" – Star
 - c. "Bank robbed by serial bandit, cops say" – Era-Banner
 - d. "I believe in the Charter" (PM re his faith) – Star
 - e. "Men remain at large in armed heist" – Era-Banner
 - f. "Alberta pastor to go before human rights tribunal" (he had temerity to say homosexual practice is immoral)– Interim
 - g. "Avian flue expected to kill hundreds" – Era-Banner
 - h. "WHO sees 7.4M casualties" (avian flu) – Star
 - i. "Neighbour confesses to Alicia Ross murder" – Era-Banner
 - j. "Unlicenced driver gets 60 days in road death" – Era-Banner
 - k. "Stop clawbacks – poverty group" – Era-Banner

2. or there are those more general items in the news of which we are all aware; for example,
 - a. We just passed the fourth anniversary of the destruction of the twin towers in New York city on September 11
 - b. Last year when right after Christmas, a tsunami struck the coastal lands, towns and villages of south-east Asia
 - c. The earthquake in the Himalayan foothills, particularly in Pakistan, and the great loss of life there recently
 - d. The devastating hurricanes that have battered the lands and islands of the Caribbean, especially Katrina, Rita, and now Wilma: destroying property and people

3. or, on a more personal note, there are those things that have happened to our friends
 - a. There are Paul and Mary Kerr who have served for many years at home and abroad.. Mary had contracted cancer and after an operation and treatment it appeared to have been cured. As late as

August or so she was given a clean bill of health. Then in mid-September the symptoms reappeared and the diagnosis was terminal cancer. In their own words, "Are we disappointed and grieving? Yes. Are we disconsolate? No." On Thursday, at about 10:00 a.m., Mary went to be with her Lord

b. Or, David and Celeste Holwick: David is a pastor friend in Ledgewood, New Jersey; Celeste his dear wife, help-meet and nurse. Very recently she was found to have uterine cancer in an advanced state. After an operation to remove the cancer site, for the next 18 weeks she faces very aggressive chemotherapy and then radiation. In their mid-forties, this has tremendous consequence, but in David's words, "Right now I am ... leaving it all in the Lord's hands."

B. The Unanswered Questions

1. here we have listed 11 headlines, four catastrophes, some news about friends — as we read, as we hear, as we experience such events, there come to us a host of unanswered questions
 - a. when we read of violence, murder, robbery, injustice, we ask, "Why do you allow this wickedness, O God?"
 - b. when we see how, even as the Psalmist expressed it, "The kings of the earth stand up, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against His anointed:" (Psalms 2: 2 JPS), then we question, "Why do you permit governments to be so wicked, O Lord?"
 - c. when we see the devastation and suffering caused by great natural and man-made disasters, we search to know, "Why do you let so many people suffer, Father?"
 - d. and, when it becomes personal; when it is people whom we know and love that are distressed by accident or disease, our plea goes up — expressed perhaps in the words that Rabbi Harold Kushner entitled his book — "Why does God let good people suffer?"
 - e. Charlie Brown, in Peanuts, had been having another one of his exercises in futility — perhaps it was with the kite-eating tree, perhaps with the hundred and something-th loss of his baseball team — and he concludes "In the book of life's questions, the answers are not in the back." —^{2}.
 - f. these are questions unanswered for most of us
2. Yet these questions are not new
 - a. there in a line in a song that was popular many years ago: "The world still is the same, you'll never change it" —^{3}.

b. and, intellectually, we know that all these things happen because we live in a world that has been devastated by sin

- (A) an earth that is subject to the curse because of the failure of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden — and on that subject, there is a church here in town that has a lecturer seeking to show that Eden was within the boundaries of the promised land. Well, I would warn you against getting involved in such speculations. If God had intended us to know exactly where Eden was He would have made it very clear; but He didn't; in fact, quite the opposite, He closed the way to Eden
- (B) Paul describes the relationship between suffering and the fallen state of creation in Romans 8:18–22 (NAS): ¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.
- (C) and yet, and yet, when these things happen, especially when they happen to good people, and intellectual, theological answer does not satisfy
- (D) but our emotional being takes over and we cry out to God in pain and perplexity, “why? why? why?”

3. so Christians, quite naturally, take such pain to God in prayer

- a. seeking an answer from Him to ease their difficulties
- b. just as Habakkuk did in the passage before us this morning
- c. and like Habakkuk, the answer they get may be strange, totally unexpected
- d. for God does not answer according to our imperfect ideas, but in accordance with His own most perfect will, the will that is described working in Romans 8:28 (NLT): **And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.**

C. Habakkuk's Problem, chapter 1:2–4

- 1. Habakkuk lived at the same time as such prophets as Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah in the 7th century before Christ's birth

- a. a century or more after the ten northern tribes had gone into captivity and been deported to Syria and Persia
 - b. a time of the increasing faithlessness of Judah
 - c. and, seeing these things, Habakkuk speaks to God
 - (A) in fact this book is not a sermon nor an exhortation
 - (B) but a conversation between a man and his God
 - (C) maybe even better described as a debate or argument
2. let me reread these verses from the NLT ^{-(4)}}: *How long, O LORD, must I call for help? But you do not listen! "Violence!" I cry, but you do not come to save. Must I forever see this sin and misery all around me? Wherever I look, I see destruction and violence. I am surrounded by people who love to argue and fight. The law has become paralyzed and useless, and there is no justice given in the courts. The wicked far outnumber the righteous, and justice is perverted with bribes and trickery.*
3. Worthy of note is Pastor Don Horban (of Cedarvale church up the road in Newmarket) comment on these verses ^{-(5)}}.
- a. *"Understand, he's not brokenhearted about the sin of the world around him. He's not complaining about violence in the streets or corruption in government. He's brokenhearted over the sin among God's people. That's his concern.*
 - b. *"To put it in today's terms, he's not thinking here about abortion or homosexuality. He's not agonizing over the plight of the homeless on the city streets. All of those things are proper and valid concerns for any Christian, but they're not Habakkuk's primary concern here.*
 - c. *"He's looking at God's people. He's looking at the church. They don't care about God's laws. They aren't upset by the sins they commit. God's people are not regulating their lives by God's laws. They're doing their own thing. They're mean spirited. They're dishonest. They're idolatrous. They're greedy when it comes to material things and indifferent when it comes to spiritual things."*
4. so, Habakkuk is definitely praying in complete accord with the revealed will of God, a condition for answered prayer
- a. and Christians do, it seems, often pray contrary to the revealed will of God

- (A) that they could marry and unsaved person
- (B) that they have revenge on a neighbour or work-mate
- (C) that they get a divorce to marry someone else
- (D) and many other such things
- (E) and no one should expect a positive response on these

b. but here we know

- (A) God expects; nay, commands that His people be pure, that they be just, that they be faithful to Himself
- (B) yes, Habakkuk expects a positive answer to his prayer
- (C) but, God is not answering Habakkuk's prayers
 - (1) why doesn't God answer the cry of the righteous?
 - (2) why doesn't God send revival?
 - (3) why doesn't God correct all these abuses?

5. and so, we often pray and wonder

- a. knowing what the will of God is
- b. yet not seeing any response
- c. but when it does come, what a strange answer it is

D. God's Answer, chapter 1:5–8

- 1. is strange; even God Himself admits this to be the case, verse 5 (NLT): *The LORD replied, "Look at the nations and be amazed! Watch and be astounded at what I will do! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn't believe even if someone told you about it."*
 - a. if your are going to pray for hard things then you need not expect the answers to be easy: to believe or to accept
 - b. God's plans exceed our plans: Isaiah 55:8–9 (NAS): *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways," declares 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."*
- 2. what is that strange thing? ... this unbelievable answer? ... God is going use tool to correct Judah, His

people: listen (Habakkuk 1:6–11, NLT): I am raising up the Babylonians {Or, *Chaldeans*.} to be a new power on the world scene. They are a cruel and violent nation who will march across the world and conquer it. They are notorious for their cruelty. They do as they like, and no one can stop them. Their horses are swifter than leopards. They are a fierce people, more fierce than wolves at dusk. Their horsemen race forward from distant places. Like eagles they swoop down to pounce on their prey. On they come, all of them bent on violence. Their hordes advance like a wind from the desert, sweeping captives ahead of them like sand. They scoff at kings and princes and scorn all their defenses. They simply pile ramps of earth against their walls and capture them! They sweep past like the wind and are gone. But they are deeply guilty, for their own strength is their god.

- a. so, we find that God's answer raises a question even more imponderable than the original question
 - (A) strange? ... yes, but not for God
 - (B) because did you hear God's description of His tool?
 - (C) "cruel .. violent ... notorious ... doing as they like ... fierce ... scoffing ... scorning ... guilty ... making a god of their own strength" — ungodly to the extreme
 - (D) how is it that God can allow such things to happen
 - (E) say, are we not back to Habakkuk's original question but with a different focus?
- b. what a strange answer to the prayer of the righteous!

3. now, we won't go any further into the strangeness of this answer than what we have said: you can follow up that by reading this short little book on your own and the rest of the conversation that Habakkuk has with God as he seeks to know how a righteous, holy God can use such an even more evil instrument, the Chaldeans, to punish the backsliding of His people — but let us conclude with the lesson for us to learn

E. Conclusion

1. in this respect, Paul had an experience that may serve well to us as an example, which is related in 2 Corinthians 12
 - a. he describes this, in verse 7 (NIV), as "a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me"
 - b. now, there is evidence that this may have been a problem that Paul had with his eyesight; which would have had, indeed, a huge, detrimental impact on his ability to minister; how would he read? ... how would he write?

- c. but we don't know that it was poor vision; I believe, in fact that the Holy Spirit has deliberately left it uncertain so that whatever it was we can apply it to our own situation
- d. in verse 8 (NIV), Paul tells us, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me."
- e. well, there was a prayer you would think that God would have answered "Yes" for His servant Paul
 - (A) this is for Paul, His apostle to the Gentiles
 - (B) this is so that Paul can be more capable in ministry
 - (C) this is the same Paul who was stoned and left for dead outside Lystra, then miraculously arose to enter the city (Acts 14:19–20)
 - (D) this is Paul who worked unusual miracles, from whom aprons and handkerchiefs were borne to the sick and they were healed (Acts 19:11-12)
 - (E) surely God will grant him healing from his suffering
- f. well, no, God didn't send healing, didn't answer "Yes" but Paul did find out the reason; it was so that
 - (A) he would be kept from becoming conceited because of the great revelations that he had witnessed
 - (B) then, Paul could realize in practical measure the truth of Christ's answer, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness" (verse 9, NIV)
- g. one of prayer's strange answers; and Paul rejoiced in it, verse 11 (NIV), "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

2. and here we have the bottom line for the believer when it comes to this matter of our unanswerable questions

- a. of the burden on our hearts in this unrighteous society
- b. of the heartache of the suffering of family and friends
- c. that we can turn
 - (A) though not seeing an answer
 - (B) and be living by faith and not by sight
- d. realizing in practical terms the truth of Proverbs 3:5 (AV) "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding."
- e. and be prepared for the strange answers of God
 - (A) ready to accept what we might think unacceptable

- (B) perhaps to suffer that God's grace be shown to all
- (C) perhaps to serve where we feel no competence that the sufficiency of God in all things be seen in us
- f. being able to say with Job (13: 15, AV) "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him."

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Various English versions of the Holy Bible are used in this sermon. Some (for example, the AV, ASV, and NAS) seek to be strictly translations, while others (and especially PHIL) contain paraphrasing which involves a certain amount of subjective interpretation. Nevertheless, there is little material difference in meaning among these. Some prove slightly clearer on some verses than others. Looking at more than one version sometimes sheds additional light on any particular verse. Explanatory additions to the Bible text are shown in [square brackets]. The versions are identified as:

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| ASV | American Standard Version of 1901 |
| AV | Authorized (King James) Version |
| JPS | Jewish Publication Society translation of Old Testament |
| NAS | New American Standard version © 1975 The Lockman Foundation |
| NIV | New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society |
| NKJV | New King James Version © 1979 Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers |
| NLT | New Living Translation © 1997 Tyndale House Publishers Inc. |
| PHIL | New Testament Translation © 1972 by J. B. Phillips |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version © 1946, 1952 by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A. |
| WEY | The New Testament in Modern Speech © 1902, 1912 R. F. Weymouth |

Further sermons and illustrations may be found at the web-site, www.holwick.com. Materials in this sermon from Rev. David Holwick’s database are identified by “Kerux” followed by a sermon or illustration number.

2. Peanuts by Charles Schulz, quoted in Bits & Pieces, October 10, 1996 – Kerux illustrations #4972
3. “You’re Nobody Till Somebody Loves You” by ? Harold Arland?
4. NLT: 1996 New Living Translation, © 1996 Tyndale Charitable Trust
5. “What to Do When God’s Ways Seem Strange” by Pastor Don Horban – Kerux sermons #11692