

# A Sermon for DaySpring

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## “The Problem with Pain”

Habakkuk

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Everyone gets to it eventually... especially if they're at all serious about life. There is this collision that happens with head and heart and faith... a question that has no good answer.

**“How come?” “How come the world is such a mess if God is so good and powerful?”**

**“If God is God then why do the innocent suffer?”**

**“How are we to believe in a loving God, when life can treat folks in such unloving ways?” “How come?”**

The question gets asked in all sorts of ways... but it's always the same question. It's the same problem... where things aren't adding up and there is this incongruity that is troubling at the very least and maybe even devastating.

It depends on whether you're asking the question over conversation around the coffee pot down at the grad school... doing a little rapping (as we once called it) after the lecture. Or whether you're asking the question in the children's ward of the hospital and you don't need any coffee to keep you awake because it's your child that is suffering.

The question is troubling in the brain but when it's in your heart that is breaking, it's devastating... because everything in our being is screaming, **“this ought not be.”**

Children ought not have to go through horrible things.

And the powerful ought not be able to pray on the powerless.

And holocaust should never be.

**“Where's God?”**

And there are some predictable responses... some things we've circled round to over and again.

There are those who get real shallow in response. They get real silly and dishonest about life and about their own pain. And they develop cliches that put a lid on it all and go to church's where hard questions aren't allowed... and doubt never expressed. **“Smile... God loves you!”** For some it seems to be enough... but not for most.

You may try putting a smile on your face and a cliché on your bumper sticker but at night when it's just you... it's not enough.

That's one response.

Another equally shallow response is to punt.

Declare yourself an atheist...

And that the world is flat and not full...

And that beauty is an accident.

And that fallen in love is only about biology... as is laughter... And goodness is only in the eyes of the beholder. Just say that there is no problem because there is no

meaning. It's a lazy approach really. You hit the wall of this hard question and you eliminate the pain by pulling God out of the equation. **"Life sucks, then you die."**

That's the bumper sticker on your car. It's a easy way out... but, of course, posits a life not worth putting up with... really.

Still another way of dealing with this is to get real rationale with it and devise theories. There's been a lot of that along the way. Explanations... they call them "theodicies" in the ivory towers. Probably not a bad thing to do along the way... try to reason with it... but ultimately not all that satisfying... particularly not in the children's ward.

Theories and theologies give us a sense of control... They give us the illusion of control. **"There, I got it."**

Paul Duke told a story once of being in a setting where he was talking about this with some young first year seminarians and one of the students announced that he had it all figure out.

Paul said, **"Really... in one year?"**

The student said, **"Well, I majored in religion in under grad... it was five."** And he went on to talk about free will and quoted some scripture, including that passage from Romans about all things working together for God's folks...

Paul Duke said... **"I don't think he'd lived long enough yet... or looked deeply enough into his own dark heart."**

Someone said to me recently, "the pain of life is not a problem to be solved it's a mystery with which we live." We don't solve this, we deal with it. (Heschel)

And this little prophetic book of Habakkuk, I think, gives us some help doing that. Habakkuk is different as the prophets go. He isn't preaching to anyone... he's complaining to God. Doyle Young said this is more like a journal entry from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC than a sermon.

Only Habakkuk decided to share this journal entry and the community decided to save it and put it in their book, their worship book. I guess in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC they knew about the cancer ward too... and they worked on this problem of pain and found some help for it in Habakkuk's journal entry.

## I

For starters, Habakkuk is honest with God. I don't know what he was preaching down at the church house, but when it was just Habakkuk in his study, he took it to God.

**"How long... I call you and you don't listen."** Don't ask Habakkuk if "he's prayed about it?" He's prayed plenty and the response from the heaven's has been silent.

**"Why do you look at injustice...**

**why do you tolerate all this?**

**Why don't you do something God?"**

There is real and fair expectation... isn't there. He says to God exactly what's on his mind and puts in his prayer exactly what he is thinking. **"God, you make no sense to me."**

And all the people listening in an ancient temple and on any Sunday morning throughout time, said, **“Amen?”** We’ve written those words in our journals. **“God, I need you. God, get me out of this mess... do something.”**

For Habakkuk the way to deal with this mystery is to begin by being real. You can’t turn off your mind or these questions, at least not in the short run. So, Habakkuk takes them to God... he is engaging God. He isn’t afraid of being real... like Job before him, he lets God have it.

And do notice, he’s still standing.

And do notice that the community canonized his journal entry.

There is no way through this mystery a part from your being honest about what is. **“This is bad God... where are you? You are silent, why?”**

Well God answers him but he doesn’t really answer the question. He tells Habakkuk that He’s going to do something... eventually. That wasn’t the real question... **“Why do you tolerate injustice?” “Why do innocent people hurt so?”** God tells him that someday the circumstances will change, but that’s not enough.

So Habakkuk complains some more.

He picks his quill back up and makes another journal entry... (one we didn’t read). **“Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up the righteous? You’ve made us like fish in the sea with no ruler... we’re just a part of the food chain down here, we’re getting gobbled up and you don’t care.”**

And God answers... and again it’s a promise about someday. That the bad guys will get what’s coming to them. Still, not a real answer to the problem with pain... more of a warning not to be a bad guy. Crime isn’t going to pay... neither is sin and injustice. And that’s important for all believers to remember... we do know the end of the story... love wins.

But in the meantime, we must deal with this confusing world of wheat and tares... and good and evil... and light and dark which are so close in the world and in ourselves that we can’t make sense of it. It is confusing and as Carlyle Marney wrote to John Claypool at the death of his dark, **“God has a lot to give account for.”**

Habakkuk would tell us to take our confusion to God... begin with that. Be real. Write in your journal. Open your heart and let God see what’s there.

## II

That’s what Habakkuk does... and he does something else. After God goes on about what’s going to come of the “evil doers.” Habakkuk steps back and says, **“Yeah, I’ve heard about all those deeds and I’m praying you’ll do them again in our day.”** And it gets him thinking... seeing.

He’s turned to God and begins to look at and consider God. And when that happens, his perspective changes. His journal entry gets very poetic, **“God’s glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth... his splendor was like the sunrise... he shook the earth... he split the earth with rivers.”**

Habakkuk's imagination has kicked in.

He's taken a step back and seeing something besides himself.

He isn't so centered in himself

and his problems and his ego.

Abraham Heschel says that the greatest beauty grows at the greatest distance from the ego. As long as you are stuck in the center of the world... there will be great limitation to see beyond yourself.

We don't so much need answers, perhaps, as we do awe. We need a sense of wonder. That life and that God are beyond us... ineffable. We don't need a riddle resolved... we need to remember and see beauty, we need to imagine... we need to wonder again and give ourselves to wonderful things.

I read someone this week who said, **"When an artist is doing what they do with abandonment... there is ego."** Have you noticed that... when you do something creative... beautiful. When you do something right and good, your questions and clouds have a way of dissipating.

You don't need answers... you just need a good walk in a beautiful park.

You aren't going to be helped as much by a debate over theories with your friends as you will by cooking a wonderful meal with a group of friends.

The world is full... there are tares out there but also an amazing amount of wheat. Wonderful fields of it for you to see.

There is great power in stepping back and in paying attention to God's world which is wondrously moving and happening and becoming all around you.

If you're having trouble on the children's ward... you need to make a trip down to the nursery. Life's pretty amazing... hard but amazing.

Habakkuk steps back... he remembers... He gets a sense of God and thereby a sense of perspective. The questions haven't dissolved but they also don't seem to be dissolving him.

### III

And then he ends his journal writing for the day by declaring one important thing. The last thing Habbakuk does is to declare that he will rejoice in God... he will be joyful in the Lord. **"Even though there are no figs... no grapes... no olives... no corn... no sheep... no cattle"** Sounds like the worst of times to me... sounds like the problem of pain to me.

**Even though, that's so... I will find my joy in God.**

**It won't be tied to circumstance...**

**and God will make my feet like the feet of the deer.**

**God will lighten me... lift me up.**

Rejoicing in God can sound simplistic I know. I've seen people grit their teeth and rejoice because that's what Christians do. But I don't think this is, "just about "putting on a happy face," for God. It is about being in God.

Notice the prepositions, "I rejoice, in the Lord... in God." This is more about his spiritual geography than about will power. Pulling your soul up by its "soul straps."

This is not, **“by God, I’m going to be happy.”** It’s more, I’m going to abide in the center. And while that’s not a simplistic choice we make to be happy, there is something for you to do.

You can learn to center yourself there and not in the confusion of life.

You can...

there’s something you can do about your spiritual geography. And when you do... it’s possible know a lightness of being... like God gave you feet like a deer.

My friend, Cynthia Bourgeault, wrote in one of her books about a moment like this. She’d lost her teacher, her mentor... This dear friend of hers had died. She was deep, deep in grief and said, **“my life was gone.”**

She recounts a moment when she was deep in this pain... sitting on a snowy deck where she’d spent time with her teacher mourning that even the memories were fading. And she says,

*“The most extraordinary thing happened. As I sat out there shivering with cold and lost in my misery, suddenly, from my toes up, I could feel a strange lightness and joy start to bubble up in my being – almost like an empty glass being filled with Champaign. It was not a mood shift, but a distinct physical sensation. There was an effervescence inside me that simple had not been there the moment before, as if I had been recharged, filled and fueled with an energy so light and buoyant that I simply could not sink if I wanted to.”* She writes, *“like Habakkuk, I found myself suddenly scooped up ‘on the heights,’ and soon even my feet were dancing.”* (*Mystical Hope*, p 15)

Habakkuk’s journal is more of a spirituality than a theological explanation. What he offers is a way for dealing with the problem of pain. He gives you a peak at what happened in him. And he moves from paralyzing questions... to leaping like a deer... or at least the hope of that.

My text says that this was a piece of music. How about that... not only was this in the worship book to be read but it was there to be sung. And so, folks who went to the temple would hear this sung... perhaps they’d tap their toes... and sing along. Kind of like we did today.

Folks who’d been to the children’s ward that week.

Folks who’d wrestled with life’s incongruence.

Who felt despair knocking at their heart’s door...

They stood and they sang. They lifted their voices. They sang together as a community. They sang of their questions to God, unapologetically, **“God where are you?”**...

And they sang of God’s grandeur in great wonder. **“His glory covers the heavens?”**

And they sang out their intentions to rejoice in God to live in God rather than down under what can never be answered. **“I will rejoice in the Lord.”**

Maybe they left feeling lighter. I’ll bet they did. I know we do. Amen?  
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