



## WHY ASK WHY

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It's no big secret that I'm a pack rat. I'm not proud of it, but I've learned to accept it as one of my endearing traits. Some people don't understand the need to collect things, so let me give you a few of my basic hoarding rules.

First, you can never throw away a phone number written on a sticky note – especially if there is no name or explanation written with it. Which is most of the time for me. Since I can't tell whose number it is, I need to keep it in case I remember and in case it's important. Which hasn't happened yet, but still.

Second, you can never throw away anything with a memory attached to it. No dear -- I need those. Those are ticket stubs from the movie we went and saw three years ago. I'll just keep them with the napkin from Starbucks and the pen from NW Sports Rehab that's out of ink. We have to keep that -- Jim and Ming Ming gave it to me.

A third rule is that you never under any circumstances throw away anything made of metal. Like a miscellaneous bolt, or one of those little assembly tools from Ikea. You never know when you might find a use for it.

Which brings me to this gem. A couple weeks ago, I was working on a house project and needed to open a can of paint. Normally I will grab a screwdriver from my workbench, but at the moment I could barely locate my workbench, let alone a screwdriver. I'm still tinkering with my organizational system for the garage. But in any case, I couldn't put my hands on a screwdriver.

Then I remembered we had this little bottle opener thing in our junk drawer. I have no idea where it came from. I don't think I have ever used it once, since we have another bottle opener. But it fell under rule #3 – don't throw away metal. So it was just waiting for me in the junk drawer. And lo and behold – the other end of it is made for opening cans. The curve on it makes it even BETTER than a screwdriver! It was as if it had been waiting for that very moment to help me out of a jam and validate all my years of hoarding at the same time. I got the can open with ease and gained a whole new appreciation for this small collector's item I had never had any use for before. And now that it's got a memory attached to it, I'll never throw it away.

One thing I love about Scripture is that it has the right words for us, right when we need them most. As timeless as the Bible is, sometimes it's as if God wrote the words specifically for a given situation or season.

For most of us, the book of Habakkuk is like this little forgotten tool, packed away in a drawer because we've never seen any use for it before. But then, life goes along and suddenly this seemingly insignificant book is the perfect fit for what we're going through.

It feels like as a culture and as a church, we are in a unique season right now. Within the last year, there has been a giant wave of crisis crashing over people at New Day left and right. From job losses, to deaths, to crumbling marriages to illnesses to depression to addictions to fights between kids and parents – it's been a relentless pounding. And it's not just within our church – everywhere you go, you hear about the plummeting economy and the war and global climate change and people struggling with despair.

It's not that these kinds of things aren't always happening, because they are. They're part of life. It's just that the volume seems to have intensified in recent months. Just like there are seasons to the weather, I think there can be these emotional or spiritual seasons that have their own character to them, and the times we're living in right now seem particularly heavy for many people.

And that's what drew me to Habakkuk. Habakkuk was a prophet who lived centuries before Jesus in the same time period as Jeremiah – around 600 B.C. Jeremiah has been nicknamed "The Weeping Prophet" – not because he was an emotionally sensitive guy, but because he lived in such sad times.

Habakkuk is right there with him, living and working in Judah right as their culture is on the brink of collapse. He can see it coming. There is corruption and evil within and corruption and evil without. And in this tiny book, Habakkuk is wrestling with God to make sense of all that he is seeing around him.

It is a timely book. And as we try to cultivate a life of faith in the middle of stressful circumstances, Habakkuk speaks our language and voices our concerns.

Let me just say at the outset that since this is going to be a three part series, we're not going to rush to a conclusion every week. We're going to let the book unfold as we go, and that may mean we need to live with some unsatisfying endings along the way. But I think that's in keeping with the spirit of the book and the nature of life anyway. It will be good for us to live with the text as it flows and to take our time to let each stage along the way sink in.

Let's take a look at how it begins:

## **Habakkuk 1**

*The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.*

*How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?  
Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?  
Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?  
Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.  
Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.  
The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.*

That's some brutally honest confrontation, isn't it? Maybe you can see why it seems like this book is so timely, because maybe you've wondered similar things. If God is good, how can he allow everything to go along the way it does? They are the questions that come when life as we're experiencing it does not fit with our picture of God.

Right off the top, we're told this is an oracle. Oracles are funny things. For some people, all that brings to mind is the old lady from the Matrix movies called the Oracle. She always spoke in cryptic messages and seemed to be able to predict the future. She was clearly patterned on some of the ancient concepts of oracles – even though it turned out she was just a computer program. But the filmmakers tried to capture some of the mystery and wisdom associated with the word.

In Bible times, an oracle could be a place where people went to consult God, it could be the person, like a prophet, who got messages from God, or in this case it could be the message itself. But what's really interesting is what the word means, because the definition of oracle is "burden."

I think that's incredibly helpful as we think about this book. Because it is burdensome. It's not a "fix it and make it go away" kind of book. What Habakkuk has received isn't just wisdom or a warning – it is a burden to carry. Sometimes the pursuit of truth is heavy, and what we discover does not necessarily make life easier.

Back in the early nineties, Budweiser had a series of commercials with the tag line "Why ask why?" The ads encouraged you to quit trying to figure out life's mysteries and just have a beer instead. And sometimes nothing sounds more appealing than just forgetting all the nagging questions that eat at us. We all know that this side of heaven we won't have complete answers to our "why" questions anyway. So that may make it seem like there's no value to them. But Habakkuk shows us why ask why. There is something worthwhile in the seeking process, and even if we don't get satisfying answers, there's still a reason for asking why.

The first thing Habakkuk shows us is that **questions are from God.**

The very opening line of the book says, "The oracle Habakkuk received" and then lays out his questions. To our way of thinking, a more logical sequence would be to ask the questions first and THEN saying "Here's the oracle Habakkuk received." But the way it is presented puts the questions themselves under the umbrella of the oracle. The questions are part of what God gave the prophet.

As Christians, that's an important message to hear, because we can feel so uneasy when there are questions related to faith. Questions tend to bother us for one of three reasons. For some of us, the **lack of resolution is hard to live with**. I'm terrible about this. I am not a process person. I want closure. I want finality. To have questions means to live with some unsettled business, and I can't stand that. I like clear cut, logical explanations.

For some of us, **questions equal guilt**. Have you ever felt bad about asking "Why, God?" Have you ever felt like it was wrong to question God about how he could allow so much suffering in your life or someone else's? We lay so much guilt on ourselves thinking that those questions show a lack of faith. We have it in our heads that to be a true believer means accepting what God is doing or not doing without batting an eye.

A third reason we can struggle with questions is because for some of us, **questions seem to rule out faith**. Maybe you don't feel any guilt over asking a question, because it is intellectually honest, but you feel it is incompatible with continuing to believe in God, and you have to choose one or the other. Questions represent doubt in your mind, and that leads you down a path toward unbelief. You feel like you can't hang on to what you thought to be true of God and pursue the questions at the same time.

All three of those objections to questions are challenged by this idea that Habakkuk's questions were something he received from the Lord. If I'm the type to always rush to resolution, knowing questions are from God means I better slow down long enough to let them do their work in me. If I'm feeling guilty over having deep secret questions about God's goodness or activity, it's a huge relief to realize I don't have to be afraid of them, because they originated with God. And if I have been thinking my questions ruled out the possibility of faith, God isn't going to let me off that easy. There's nothing we can ask that is a threat to him if he provides the questions in the first place.

Look at the kinds of things Habakkuk was asking:

*Why aren't you answering me when I'm calling for help?  
Why do I have to deal with this?  
Why do you put up with all this wrong?  
What's the point in living right when you can't win that way?*

Those are not soft, gently worded, safe questions. They are full of pain and bewilderment and grief, because God doesn't seem to be acting like God. But they are questions that have God's blessing on them. There is no shame in bringing them to him.

James Bruckner says, "Lamentation and questioning are God's gift to the believer. They provide a pathway of honest faith and faithful conversation with him in horrible times."

This leads to a second truth about asking why, and that is **if questions are from God, they can lead us to him**.

We don't typically believe that. We think they will lead us AWAY from God. Our assumption is that if you start pulling on one loose thread, the whole thing will unravel.

We tend to think that way because of stories like William Lobdell's. Lobdell is a newspaper reporter who became a Christian while he was working for the Los Angeles Times. Excited about his new-found faith, he took on a religion column for the paper. He pictured himself being a modern-day prophet, crusading for reform and shining a light wherever he could.

So for eight years, he reported on stories of faith. During that time, huge abuse scandals were coming to light within the Catholic church, where horrible injustices were being committed by people who claimed to be speaking for God. Lobdell was right in the thick of it, seeing the seamiest side of religion. Then he did exposes on the televangelists who were raking in money for themselves and squeezing their viewers to give more. Then he followed the stories on world famous faith healers who were nothing but a sham, building up the hopes of very sick people and profiting from them while they stayed sick. Lobdell said this:

*I understood that I was witnessing the failure of humans, not God. But in a way, that was the point. I didn't see these institutions drenched in God's spirit. Shouldn't religious organizations, if they were God-inspired and -driven, reflect higher standards than government, corporations and other groups in society?*

*I found an excuse to skip services that Easter. For the next few months, I attended church only sporadically. Then I stopped going altogether.*

*For some time, I had tried to push away doubts and reconcile an all-powerful and infinitely loving God with what I saw, but I was losing ground. And I considered another possibility: Maybe God didn't exist.*

God, if you're good and all powerful, why are your people so corrupt? What good is a God who doesn't make a difference in people's lives? Lobdell couldn't make sense of it, so he ended up walking away from God. You can sympathize with how he reached the conclusion he did. He was witnessing up close what happens when the gospel is horribly twisted to serve selfish ends. It would shake up anyone.

But – and this is a big but -- this is the exact same scenario Habakkuk was facing. There was nothing new or more alarming in what the reporter saw than what the prophet did 2,600 years ago. The same frustrating disconnect haunted him as well – people who claimed to know God weren't living like it and God wasn't doing anything about it. The wickedness Habakkuk was witnessing was among God's people – the ones who should know better. The Israelites weren't living according to their own God's law. Habakkuk was seeing all this abuse within the leadership of Judah that was corrupt through and through. The parallels to the reporter are all over the place.

And really – that’s happened all throughout history. It’s the scenario Martin Luther faced when church leaders were selling forgiveness. It’s what Dietrich Bonhoeffer confronted in Nazi Germany. It’s what Frederick Douglass saw in evil slave holders who claimed to be Christians. There has always been wickedness so deep that it called into question the goodness and power of God and a host of people troubled by the disconnect.

And yet somehow, Habakkuk and all these other people were able to ask the very same questions as that reporter and end up at a very different place. They walked away with a stronger faith instead of a weaker one.

What made the difference? I don’t want to oversimplify the issue, because I’m sure there were many factors. But one telling distinction between Habakkuk and the reporter was in their approach to their questions. **Habakkuk chose engagement, while the reporter chose disengagement.**

The reporter admitted that he quit going to church. He gave up. And then he said he thought, “Maybe there is no God.” Now instead of going to God with his doubts and fears, he began to talk about God in the third person.

That is no small shift, because it took him out of prayer and into presumption.

Many years ago, when I was a worship leader, there was a man in the church who didn’t like the direction I was taking with the music. So he decided to write a letter to the board about me. He managed to find a draft of an article I had written on worship, and he quoted me in his letter. But he took my comment completely out of context and made it sound like I was saying the opposite of what I had meant. Had he taken the time to come to me directly with his concerns, he would have discovered we weren’t nearly as different as he thought. Instead, he presumed he already knew the truth and didn’t need to talk to me.

It’s obvious to see why that doesn’t work in human relationships, but it’s something we do on a regular basis with God when the questions start to get harder. We quit talking with God about them and just think about them instead. We draw our conclusions based on our own wisdom. And pretty soon we jump to some presumptions about God that are off base because we’re talking about him instead of to him.

Habakkuk directed all his questions to God: “Where are you? How could you? Why didn’t you?” Those may sound accusatory, but they’re all spoken in the context of relationship. That makes them a form of prayer. You can have all the doubts in the world, and as long as you are choosing to engage God with them, they are healthy for the conversation and ultimately for your faith. Like the quote we read earlier said, the questions become a pathway for interaction with God.

I don’t know if it’s arrogance or ignorance, but we tend to think that our own questions are newer or harder for God than have ever been asked before. We view ourselves as smarter and more sophisticated than people in the past. But if we spend any time at all

with a book like Habakkuk, we discover that not only have people been asking tough questions for a long time – God actually included them in the Bible. That means he isn't threatened by them.

The literal meaning of the name Habakkuk is “embrace” or “hug”, particularly as a means of keeping warm when there is no shelter. When Job is talking about the poor, he says

**Job 24:8**

*They are drenched by mountain rains and hug the rocks for lack of shelter.*

That's a Habakkuk hug. You can picture someone pressing in as close as they can against a mountainside, clinging to it with everything they've got because of the rain and cold around them.

And this is what is going on as Habakkuk asks his questions. The only way for him to survive is by pressing close to God and holding on to him in a bear hug. There is no warmth anywhere in this world. There is no solution on the horizon. His only hope is to cling to God through this conversation, to stay engaged with him in a fierce embrace. That is what is going to preserve his life and his faith. So rather than let his questions drive him from God, he uses them to pull himself in as close as possible in direct contact with God. And he comes out the other side with a deeper understanding of who God is and an ability to worship through any circumstances.

Questions are from God. Questions can lead us toward God. And **questions can take us deeper without answers.**

We don't necessarily need matters put to rest in order to have a payoff for our questions. When Habakkuk laid out his complaints to God and waited for an answer, listen to what God said:

*"Look at the nations and watch- and be utterly amazed.  
For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe,  
even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians,  
that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth  
to seize dwelling places not their own.  
They are a feared and dreaded people;  
they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor.  
Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk.  
Their cavalry gallops headlong; their horsemen come from afar.  
They fly like a vulture swooping to devour; they all come bent on violence.  
Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand.  
They deride kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities;  
they build earthen ramps and capture them.  
Then they sweep past like the wind and go on- guilty men,  
whose own strength is their god."*

In other words, God is saying, “You think it’s bad now? It’s going to get worse. I’m going to use the evil empire to bring my justice.”

This doesn’t solve anything for Habakkuk. It only raises more questions.

*O LORD, are you not from everlasting?*

*My God, my Holy One, we will not die.*

*O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment;*

*O Rock, you have ordained them to punish.*

*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.*

*Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?*

*Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?*

Have you ever felt like you and God weren’t talking the same language, like the answers he was giving you weren’t directly on point? I remember at one point in my career when I was really asking God for direction, I kept praying he would show me where to go. And I wasn’t getting a clear answer. I would think, “Well maybe I’m supposed to look for this kind of job,” and then an opportunity like that would pop open and I would think that was God’s answer to me. Then I’d go on an interview and realize it wasn’t at all what I wanted. So it made me ask a new round of questions to find greater clarity and get to know myself better. Then another situation would come up and the same thing would happen. At first I would think it was the answer, and then I would find it just led to more questions.

But you know what? I look at that period of my life as one of the times when I felt most dependent on God. As agonizing as it was, there was something very precious about being stuck in that space, because it forced me to keep going back and back and back to God, because I had nowhere else to go.

We can learn to be thankful for the questions because of what they do for us. And becoming thankful in those moments is the costly obedience that is our best response.

God’s primary purpose for us in life is not to answer all our questions and get us past them. His purpose for us is to walk in close relationship with him. And sometimes the best way to do that is to let us live with our questions for a time.

When God replies with the unexpected, Habakkuk has to dig down to some truths that he knows. He knows God goes way back – he’s from everlasting. So Habakkuk starts thinking about things from a long-term perspective and concedes that God may have a plan he can’t see. He acknowledges that God is in control. These Babylonians aren’t going to attack without his knowing.

And he begins to explore a new question: Why would God allow the epitome of evil – Babylon – to be the one to bring judgment on his people? The Israelites looked squeaky clean by comparison to the Babylonians. That hardly seems fair.

We're a long way off from neat and tidy answers for Habakkuk, but you can see development in his thinking. He's spending time reflecting on the eternal qualities of God – his purity, his justice, his sovereignty – instead of just the circumstances.

Something else has happened in this first exchange with God. We can see from God's response that he totally identified with Habakkuk's assessment of the situation. He describes Babylon's evil in detail. As one scholar put it, "Yahweh doesn't defend his goodness in his responses but seems to despair *with* his people."

I think it is really helpful to remember that God is the only perfect parent, and we are his children. When friends of ours made the painful choice to send their son out of state to a rehab camp, it was a necessary step to break the cycle of addiction and rebellion he had been in throughout high school. And when he yelled and screamed and called them names, they responded by sharing in his grief. It broke their hearts, too.

God is not callous as he listens to our complaints. This is the final reason "why ask why" – **God joins us in the asking**. Instead of simply giving us an answer, God has chosen instead to identify with us in feeling all the injustice. Because the ultimate question of Habakkuk is what was put on the lips of Christ himself as he hung on the cross and asked, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" All the pain and suffering of the ages was spoken in that one question as Jesus gave voice to what every human being has wondered at one time or another. All the injustice every victim has ever felt was embodied in Christ at his crucifixion.

When we pray, we can know that we're talking to a God who has lived through our questions for himself. And he gives us his very own Spirit to help us in our asking.

### **Romans 8:26**

*Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans.*

Maybe you're feeling tired in the waiting this morning. Some of you have been asking why questions for a very long time. And I'm not here to defend God this morning or explain away his seeming silence in the face of your pain.

But I do know this: God can work in the questions themselves, and as I think about that for my own life, here's what I want to know:

1. What are my biggest questions?
2. Am I engaging God directly with them?
3. What are God's non-answers leading me to ask?

4. Where do I see God with me in the asking?

The painter Pablo Picasso once said, “Computers are useless. They can only give you answers.” We want answers so badly, but having a God who acts like a computer would be useless. Because God knows we need more than answers. We need a closer relationship with him. And sometimes there’s nothing like time spent with a good question to help us get there. Am I able to thank God for the questions he has left me with today?