



## FAITH WALK

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For those of you in the job market, I have a little tip this morning. Apparently there is literally a sweet spot in the economy these days: The candy industry is booming. At the big national Candy Expo this week, it was revealed that the candy business is one of very few that actually grew this past year. Americans may not be able to afford new cars or appliances, but we're not about to give up our M&Ms.

What's interesting is that statistics show people have changed their buying habits somewhat. We're buying our comfort candy right now and not getting too fancy or adventurous with new-fangled sweetness. So Katy, I'm sorry to say that the chocolate and bacon bar you shared with our family probably isn't going to become a best seller. We want the basics that we know are going to make us feel better. At least until we step on the scale.

These are tough days, and whether it is through candy or something else, we all have ways of trying to cope. That's where this study of Habakkuk fits in. As we said last Sunday, Habakkuk was a prophet living about 600 years before Christ, in an era not so different from our own. It was a challenging time to live in Judah, where everything seemed chaotic and violent and it didn't look like God was doing anything about it. Habakkuk is a book full of questions for God, asking for explanations.

We can relate to how Habakkuk must have felt, because the world is full of stress on all levels right now. A few weeks ago, Karin bumped into a friend who has really been struggling. Her health was poor, her job was not going well and her kids were making painful choices in their lives. She told Karin, "The only thing I can think is that God must not be in control anymore." This was a committed Christian talking who had been in the church her whole life. It was a sad comment that expressed what a lot of people feel deep down. How can God allow this world to keep going the way it is?

That's why I appreciate Habakkuk so much. He asked all the same questions we have, yet he still maintained this very vibrant, rock-solid faith. He had this direct conversation with God that only served to deepen their relationship.

Last week we looked at why we should ask the "why" questions. We said that even when we don't have answers, there is still value in the questions themselves. God uses them to change us and to draw us closer to him.

That's the base we're operating from, at least. Now as Habakkuk moves into the next chapter, he begins to put some flesh on it and show us more of what it means to actually live with the questions. I want to read the whole chapter for us in one chunk, and then we'll go back and look at individual sections more closely.

## **Habakkuk 2**

*I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts;  
I will look to see what he will say to me,  
and what answer I am to give to this complaint.*

*Then the LORD replied:*

*"Write down the revelation  
and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.  
For the revelation awaits an appointed time;  
it speaks of the end and will not prove false.  
Though it lingers, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.*

*"See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright --  
but the righteous will live by his faith --  
indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest.  
Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied,  
He gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.*

*"Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying,  
'Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion!  
How long must this go on?'  
Will not your debtors suddenly arise?  
Will they not wake up and make you tremble?  
Then you will become their victim.  
Because you have plundered many nations,  
the peoples who are left will plunder you.  
For you have shed man's blood;  
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.*

*"Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain  
to set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin!  
You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,  
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.  
The stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.*

*"Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime!  
Has not the LORD Almighty determined  
that the people's labor is only fuel for the fire,  
that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?*

*For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,  
as the waters cover the sea.*

*"Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors,  
pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk,  
so that he can gaze on their naked bodies.  
You will be filled with shame instead of glory.  
Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed!  
The cup from the LORD's right hand is coming around to you,  
and disgrace will cover your glory.  
The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you,  
and your destruction of animals will terrify you.  
For you have shed man's blood;  
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.*

*"Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies?  
For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak.  
Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!'  
Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver;  
there is no breath in it.*

*"But the LORD is in his holy temple;  
let all the earth be silent before him."*

Heard a story on the radio the other day about a newspaper in London called The Daily Telegraph. They had just gotten a big scoop on a political story that shook up the whole British government and did some housecleaning among elected officials. The story rocketed the newspaper to new heights and increased their circulation by tens of thousands. What most people didn't know was that the story really belonged to a reporter from another paper. She had done all the legwork and background research that paved the way for the story – The Telegraph took her work, beat her to press and got the credit. The radio personality was interviewing her, and she didn't sound upset at all – she was happy because what mattered to her was that the story had finally broken and that she had played a part in it.

There's a line out of Habakkuk that is probably his most famous, but we usually credit it to Paul, because Paul quotes it in two of his letters: *The righteous will live by his faith.* The writer of Hebrews quotes it too, so we think of it as a New Testament saying and most of us probably didn't even know it started with Habakkuk. But like that reporter, I don't think he would really care who got the credit – he just wanted that message out there.

That message is the center of this chapter and this book as a whole – living by faith and not by sight. Basing our actions and our attitudes on what we believe to be true in spite of how circumstances look around us.

Living like that sounds like a good idea (or maybe a crazy one), but how do we do it?

I read about a high school in Ontario, Canada this week that has a landscaping class as part of their curriculum. It's one of few such programs in the province. The school just received a big grant that will enable them to move their program from the classroom out to the school grounds, where they could get some actual field training, cutting paver stones with real wet saws, planting trees, leveling dirt. Their teacher, Todd Bradley, made this comment:

“Without being able to get outside, you can't really landscape. (Who knew?!) We can practice and we can do things in theory but until you get the hands-on, it is hard to give them the real experience of what we can do.”

It's one thing to talk about living by faith, living with the questions – it's another thing to actually do it. Habakkuk takes us out of the classroom in chapter 2 and begins to show us a strategy for putting what we know and believe into practice.

If you remember from chapter 1, Habakkuk had asked God why the bad guys seemed to be winning in life and why God wasn't making things better. Habakkuk was trying to reconcile the reality he was living in with what he believed God was like. In spite of the disconnect, the foundation for Habakkuk came down to two things: 1. There is one God who is holy and eternal and good and just and loving in his very nature, and he's in charge of everything. 2. Therefore – he is the only one to pour out my heart to, regardless of how things look.

He reminds me of Winston Churchill during WWII when he said, “Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never...Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”

Habakkuk would not yield, even though it looked overwhelming. He just kept going to God. But God's response wasn't what he expected, because God said, “Actually, Habakkuk – it's going to get worse. I'm sending the Babylonians to swoop in and bring judgment on my people.”

Where was the justice in that? It was a deflating kind of answer that would knock the wind out of anybody. I think I would have felt betrayed and unmotivated to cry out to God anymore. But instead of giving up or becoming bitter, Habakkuk goes into this entirely different mode. Look again at the first few lines of the chapter:

*I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts;  
I will look to see what he will say to me,  
and what answer I am to give to this complaint.*

I see three gifts from God, three strategies in this chapter that stand out as incredibly practical tools for helping us in our faith walk. The first is **the Watch**.

Habakkuk says, “I’m going to watch what happens.”

Even though he is mystified by God’s response, Habakkuk says he is going to keep looking to God to see how he will make sense of all this. He gives us this picture of a sentry, standing up on the castle wall, scanning the horizon.

Now there are all kinds of ways we could go with an image like that, but there are four basic things I’d like to point out about this kind of watching. First, **this kind of watching is intentional**. Guards are alert and vigilant. Habakkuk calls it “his watch”. He’s taking ownership and responsibility for it. It’s not a casual look around – it’s watching with purpose and focus because something is at stake.

It’s like the difference between going to the airport to people watch – which is always entertaining -- and going there to meet someone you love who you haven’t seen in a long time. One is random observation and the other is alert and dialed in. When our boys were little and Karin’s parents would come for a visit, they would be straining their necks to be the one to get the first glimpse, and as soon as they would catch sight of Grandpa, they would take off toward him

Sometimes we watch for God more like we’re people watching. We don’t give much energy or focus to it. What will serve us better is if we look for God the way we look for someone we love, where we’re ready to take off toward him as soon as we catch sight of him.

Second, **this kind of watching is outward**. A guard on a wall is concerned about what’s beyond it – not within it. He wants to know who or what is approaching the city from the outside.

Remember – Habakkuk’s initial concern was what he saw going on WITHIN Judah. It would have been easy for him to become consumed with the internal problems. But he knows he has to keep an eye out for God’s answer, and that’s going to come from somewhere else.

It’s very easy to turn inward when we’re hurting and don’t have answers. We can’t see past the pain. God invites us to raise our sights and turn our attention toward what he’s going to do. That shift in itself can sometimes be the beginning of the healing process as we see that God is already at work and on the move.

A third truth to note is that **this kind of watching is for answers AND enemies**. Habakkuk has said he’s going there to watch for God. But he’s also positioning himself on the rampart. That’s a defensive wall intended to keep attackers out. He is in guard dog mode.

The times when we are listening and looking for God’s answers – and NOT seeing them – those are the times when we are most vulnerable to spiritual attacks. That’s when disappointment and bitterness and cynicism and an unrepentant attitude can gain ground.

### **Proverbs 4:23**

*Above all else, guard your heart,  
for it is the wellspring of life.*

A faith walk is one where we need to be vigilant about the enemy. God had said the Babylonians were coming, so Habakkuk went to the wall to see what would happen. He didn't know why God would choose that – it made no sense to him -- he just knew that's what God had said. So he acted on the bit of an answer he had been given and went to look for the rest.

I was talking with Derek a few weeks ago about his changing career path and trying to discern God's will for their family in the middle of everything. And he said that when he and Meghan aren't hearing God's voice clearly, they go back to the last point where they knew God had led and wait for him there.

I think that's beautiful, and it's right in line with Habakkuk. When we can't see everything, we go to what God has already shown us and start from there.

A final note about the watching is that **this kind of watching is full of patience.**

*Then the LORD replied: "Write down the revelation  
and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.  
For the revelation awaits an appointed time;  
it speaks of the end and will not prove false.  
Though it lingers, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.*

Stick around, God says. Don't cut out early and miss the best part. So much of our struggle with why questions is linked to timing. We can't see far enough ahead to trust that God may have purposes beyond the moment.

What we may miss, though, is that we're not the only ones waiting. Right in the middle of that section, it says

*For the revelation awaits an appointed time.*

I am terrible about keeping family surprises a secret. If we plan a trip or buy something special for our kids, I never seem to be able to hold out and tell them later. I want them to be able to share in the good news right away, even if the timing is off.

I think it takes incredible patience on God's part to wait until just the right time to reveal the answers we're begging for. He already knows the ultimate outcome. Since he has the answers and is holding them back for the time being, he must have a reason, because he is good and has our best in mind.

## **2 Peter 3:9**

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

There it is again – the Lord is the one showing patience while we think we’re being patient because he’s so slow. Thankfully, his patience isn’t fazed by our impatience.

So that’s the first component of living by faith – watching intentionally, upwardly, carefully and patiently. When questions are looming large, we can feel like we’re paralyzed as we wait for God’s answers. Habakkuk’s style of watching can help us live proactively even as we wait.

I’d like to pause here for just a moment and give you a chance to think about your own watching for God’s answers. Which of those qualities would you like to see more of in yourself? Do you need to be more intentional and purposeful about looking for God? Do you need to take your eyes off your own problems? How are you doing at guarding your heart? And how is your patience level? Take a minute to identify where you’re struggling most and talk to God about it right now.

Habakkuk gives us a second strategy for our faith walk, and that is what I would call **The Woes**. That may not sound all that encouraging, but hang with me for a minute and I think you’ll see what I mean.

For the bulk of chapter two, God is outlining his ultimate answer to Habakkuk. Justice will be served in the end. The oppressors are headed for woe. It’s a for sure thing. Five times, God calls out different groups who are keeping his people down and he says, “Woe to you.”

God is not going to let evil slide forever. And once he’s on record, we can take heart, because he never fails to keep his promises. I like what Henry Blackaby once wrote: “What God speaks, he guarantees will come to pass.”

That’s where the encouragement comes for the victims – knowing God sees and is going to do something about our plight. But it even goes beyond that. Look again at WHO God says is speaking these “Woe to you”:

*He gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.*

*"Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying,  
'Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion!"*

Who is talking here to the oppressor? It’s his victims. They’re the ones who get to speak the truth. The people who have been held down are now the ones who get to stand up and say, “You have no ultimate power over me. God has said so.” What an empowering, liberating way for God to right the wrongs.

As I mentioned, there are five woes God speaks. We don't have time to look at them in depth, but I want to summarize them because I think there's something important for us to see:

The first woe is to **self-centeredness**. *'Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion!'* These are the people who have plundered the nations for their own gain without any regard for other people. It's all about them.

The second woe is to **escapism**. *Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain to set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin!* This is avoiding suffering at all cost, whatever it takes to protect themselves from pain.

The third woe is for **misguided ambition**. *"Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime!"* It's empire building through accomplishment. Look at what I did. Habakkuk says all that work is for nothing – fuel for the fire of God's judgment.

The fourth woe is for **shame & destructive patterns**. *"Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies."* Remember the story of when Noah got drunk and was passed out naked on the bed? One of his sons came in and saw him and was making fun of him. It was completely disrespectful and shaming. God says that kind of treatment of people will not stand. He even includes the destruction of creation and treatment of animals in this woe. To tear down what God has made, particularly people made in his image is a major offense.

The final woe is for idols, or what some authors call **functional saviors**. *'Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!'* We're talking about replacing God with substitutes that cannot even begin to help us.

As I looked at that list of woes, it struck me that nowhere in the whole declaration does God mention that this is exclusively for the Babylonians. These woes don't just apply to the outside oppressors of Judah – they apply to the internal ones as well.

Here's what I'm getting at and why I think it matters: We complain to God about the outside forces and bad circumstances that we feel are making it difficult for us to have faith. And God gives us hope that one day these will change. But our life situation or the trying times we live in are not the real issue. The real issue is where we let them take us, and that's a matter of the heart. God says we can even speak woe to what fights against it from within us.

Look again at the list of what Habakkuk said woe to: Self-centeredness. The desire to escape. Throwing myself into my personal ambition. Living with shame and destructive patterns. Turning to functional saviors – things other than God for my joy and meaning. Those are the enemies of our faith. And they are all internal choices that can shut us down with or without the help of outside circumstances.

The good news is that we don't have to give them that power. God has said "Woe" to them. And he's put those words on our lips. We can stand up to whatever is stifling our faith and say, "You can't control me anymore."

In the first Lord of the Rings movie, my very favorite scene is when all the good guys are being chased through this underground cavern by a demonic creature called a Balrak. The group has a lot of fire power between them, but they are no match for this powerful spirit creature. So Gandolf the Wizard sends them all ahead across the bridge. Then he turns to face the demon, he looks him in the eye and says in this intense yell, "You shall not pass!" Then he takes his staff and drives it into the bridge, and he gives up his life taking that demon down to its destruction and saving his friends.

That is woe Christ spoke on the cross. He looked evil in the eye and said, "You shall not pass!" He gave his life to free us, his friends, from our demons and sins that would drag us down. He said it is finished. And what God speaks, he guarantees.

Some of you today are needing to hear Jesus say that, because you are being chased and oppressed. You need to know you have the freedom and authority to say, I don't have to live life like it revolves around me, because God said so. I don't have to escape into fantasy and my addictions anymore, because God said so. I don't have to try to earn my worth through ambition, because God has already accepted me. I don't have to believe the lies of shame and tear other people down, because God has told me the truth. I don't have to look for joy and meaning anywhere but God, because there is no one else who can give it to me."

What brings out your worst emotions? What is robbing you of your strength? What is killing off your joy? What tugs your heart away from God? What has you believing lies about yourself? What destructive patterns can you see in your life?

Let's pause again to take the time to pray about what we need to speak a woe to in our own lives.

Habakkuk waits until the final words of the chapter to give us one last strategy for our faith walk.

*"But the LORD is in his holy temple;  
let all the earth be silent before him."*

## **Worship**

That is a hushing word. Shh. You're in God's presence. Time to show respect and acknowledge who we're dealing with. It is the exact same idea the writer of Ecclesiastes wanted to convey:

### **Ecclesiastes 5:1-3**

*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.*

*Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God.*

*God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.*

*As a dream comes when there are many cares,  
so the speech of a fool when there are many words.*

My nephew Mitchell was born with a heart defect that required surgery when he was just 10 days old. My sister and brother and law and the whole family gathered around to pray for healing. They had a worship time there in the hospital as they waited. He made it through the surgery, and then, inexplicably, his heart failed him in recovery and he passed away at just two weeks old.

There was a memorial service for him and the church was packed. The image that I will never forget from that day is of my sister, sitting in the front row with her hands raised, singing a song they had sung while they were praying for a miracle, and a line in that song said, "Bless the Lord who rules our lives with so much love, he can make a perfect heart."

Here she was, praising the God hadn't made a perfect heart, even though he could. My nephew died and the why questions were raging. But worship became a powerful tool of healing for my sister to acknowledge God and pour out her grief at the same time.

For me, that changes the tone of Habakkuk's call for silence. It's the recognition that God is aware and I don't need to bang down his door. It is a quieting of our hearts the way a parent calms a child, as if to say, "Shh. God knows. He sees. There's no need to clamor. He is on the throne, and this injustice will not go unaccounted for."

Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "Mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind." It is a mystery how someone like my sister could praise God in the middle of her pain. It is a mystery how Habakkuk continued to go to God in the face of ongoing suffering. Our modern minds cannot make sense of it.

And yet it is real. The righteous WILL live by faith. We WILL be sustained as we watch for God. We WILL find freedom as we speak woe to our oppressors. We WILL experience God's grace as we quiet our hearts and worship him in the mess of it all. God has said it, and what he says, he guarantees.

As we wrap up this final section, I leave you with that last question. How can I quiet my clamoring before God this week? What step can I take to acknowledge him today?