

REMONSTRATING WITH GOD IN ADVERSITY: A STUDY IN HABAKKUK

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Think about the following verse: “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.” (Philippians 4:11, NKJV¹) What is Paul saying here? Is he saying that no matter what God throws at him he will, as a dumb brute who has no choice, bow his neck to his horrid fate? I do not think so. What Paul is really saying, I think, is that God’s decisions are fine with him. Paul is content and pleased to abide in and with them because he knows God’s decisions are right and good. He is talking about loyalty.

You may think this is a strange way to begin a study of the book of Habakkuk, but I hope that you will quickly see the connection between Habakkuk’s thought and Paul’s. Before we launch into the prophet’s marvelous little book, however, I must define some terms. First, the verb *to remonstrate* means “to exhibit or present strong reasons against an act, measure or any course of proceedings” (Webster, 1828 ed.); or as Webster’s *New World Dictionary* states it, “to present and urge reasons in opposition or complaint; protest; object.” I could have titled this article “*Protesting with God in Adversity*,” or “*Complaining to God in Adversity*.” *Remonstrating* is a strong word for strong action, and you may wonder at its use in this context. Most evangelical, Bible-believing people consider complaining to God a sin, not recognizing that the Bible is full of godly men *properly* complaining to God. The purpose of this article, then, is to explore how to properly bring complaints and objections to God when His providence seems to contradict our understanding of His character and practice.

A second term is one that you have already seen defined elsewhere in this issue, namely, *theodicy*. Coined in 1710 by the German philosopher and mathematician Baron Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, *theodicy* utilizes the Greek words *théos*, God, and *diké*, justice, to describe a system of theology that seeks to vindicate divine justice in allowing evil to exist. The subject is one that has intrigued human beings since the Fall. How can a just God allow evil, adversity, and chaos to exist? As evil becomes more predominant, the question becomes even more intense. With that intensity comes the desire on our part to object to what God is doing. Again, we come to the question of objecting properly before God.

The last term I wish to discuss is *loyalty*. Frankly, understanding loyalty is the key to knowing how to properly remonstrate with God. The concept of loyalty is not grudging acquiescence to someone or something; it has to do with covenant faithfulness. *Fidelity* is a good synonym for loyalty. It means we are faithful with a whole heart; happy to obediently and contentedly walk in the way before us. Loyalty involves the recognition of authority and obligation in our lives, and so it has become an increasingly unpopular concept in this pagan world in which we live. Loyalty runs opposed to self-centered living and acknowledges that someone else may have a better handle on our lives than we do.

The popular bumper sticker that reads “Question Authority” expresses very well

unregenerate man's independent thinking. Ultimately it is the issue of authority that separates those who are the Lord's and those who are not. Everyone instinctively realizes that decision-making is the primary activity of any authority. It all boils down to who is going to make the decisions in our lives, and how we are going to respond to those decisions. With that in mind, let us now look at God's revelation to Habakkuk.

An Outline of Habakkuk

With your Bible open to Habakkuk, you will be able to easily follow along and see the structure of the book. The structure is important, because it helps us see arguments and principles that we might otherwise miss if the book had been written differently (for example, if it had been written as a narrative and not a dialogue).

1:1 Title

Habakkuk's heavy heart reveals itself in the choice of the word *burden*.

Section 1

1:2-4 Habakkuk complains of God's tolerance of injustice.

1:2 He does not think that God hears his cries for deliverance.

1:3a He cannot understand God's lack of action.

1:3b-4 He sees nothing but abrogation of God's law in the land.

The problem is that Israel is walking in open rebellion against God, and nothing is apparently being done about it. Jew is oppressing Jew; strife and contention reign. Habakkuk knows that God's covenants promise curses for disloyalty, but nothing is happening. Habakkuk wants to know why God is permitting injustice.

Section 2

1:5-11 The Lord God answers Habakkuk's complaint with His solution to the problem.

1:5 The Lord uses means unbelievable to man.

1:6-11 The Lord raises up the Chaldeans to judge the nation.

1:6 They are ruthless.

1:7 They are unscrupulous.

1:8 They are fierce.

1:9 They are destructive.

1:10 They are skilled warriors.

1:11 They are proud.

The Lord's answer is amazing. He intends to use the wicked to judge His own people! The Chaldeans were incredibly cruel and hostile, and their actions against Israel (stirred

up by God, verse 6) would be fierce, quick, and hateful. In their arrogance they would ascribe their victory to their own gods and their own prowess. Israel, on the other hand, would have no trouble realizing that they were being punished by the Lord!

Section 3

1:12-2:1 Habakkuk incredulously questions God's decision in light of His character.

- 1:12a He reminds God of His covenant with His people.
- 1:12b He observes God's decisions in light of that covenant.
- 1:13 He compares God's character with that of the Chaldeans.
- 1:14-16 He notes the cruelty of the Chaldeans.
- 1:17 He wonders how God can allow such a situation.
- 2:1 He waits for God's reply.

To Habakkuk, the Lord's solution is worse than the original problem. Like David, who did not want the heathen to carry out the Lord's justice (I Chronicles 21:13), Habakkuk begs the Lord to reconsider His decision. Why should God use the wicked to accomplish His purposes?

Section 4

2:2-20 God reveals a glimpse of His sovereign providence to Habakkuk.

- 2:2-4 Habakkuk is to live by faith.
- 2:5-20 The wicked will be judged for their sin.

Now we have another amazing answer. For the Lord intends to punish the very instruments He has raised up to correct His people. The pronouncement of woes to the wicked reminds Habakkuk that God is a Holy God who is faithful to keep His promises. Also, the Lord's admonition to the righteous to live by faith (v. 4c) and to all to keep silent before Him (v. 20) is a reminder to Habakkuk that though there is much about God and His ways that are beyond human understanding, God is faithful to His covenants.

Section 5

3:1-19 Habakkuk responds to God's oracle in praise.

- 3:1, 2 Title and invocation
- 3:3-17 Habakkuk sings of God's power.
- 3:17-19 Habakkuk sings of God's faithfulness.

Habakkuk realizes that God is in control. As he responds in faith, his heart overflows into a hymn of praise. His faith is secure in the work and word of the God of his salvation. His remonstrance at an end, he bows before the feet of his covenant-keeping God in adoring worship. Habakkuk's trust is absolute, echoing Job's statement that "though He slay me,

yet will I trust Him.” (Job 13:15)

3:19d Epilogue

The Question of Loyalty

Habakkuk, like all the other prophets, primarily functioned as a spokesman for Yahweh. The majority of the prophets’ messages are concerned with calling God’s people back into faithfulness to the covenants that God had made with them. The prophets habitually couch even the foretelling aspects of their messages in covenant terms.

The sin of questioning God is not in the questioning, but in the manner and attitude we engage in while questioning. Here is where loyalty comes in. Loyalty is both passive and active. Philippians 2:13-16 describes the passive side: “. . . It is God who works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life. . . .” This passive aspect of loyalty is a combination of allegiance to God’s person, as children to their father (v. 15), and of acceptance of God’s purpose and revealed will (“holding fast the word of life,” v. 16). It is critical that we meditate upon what we know when we are faced with the unknown.

Titus 2:9 and 10 discuss the active side of loyalty. Servants “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” when they obediently demonstrate “all good fidelity” to their masters. Even so men show honor to God when they faithfully receive and act upon God’s decisions. We know we serve a God who is both faithful to His promises and far above our capabilities to control or direct. So when adversity confronts us, our questioning must be characterized by reverence and humility.

We must here take a moment to discuss *disloyalty*. Jim Berg, Dean of Students at Bob Jones University, describes disloyalty as an “act of disobedience or attitude of displeasure which I perform or possess when personal desires are valued more than the desires of my authority.”² Put another way, disloyalty is *someone making a decision about a previously made decision*.

The Lessons from Habakkuk

As I read the book, I find that Habakkuk’s remonstrance with God boils down to two principles. First, God sometimes does things that we do not understand. On the surface, of course, we would admit that is a given. After all, there would not be any question about God’s justice if this principle were not true! However, recognizing a truth and *humbly* recognizing a truth are two different things. Habakkuk shows us the proper way of dealing with the principle.

Consider the following problem/solution layout of the development of this first principle in Habakkuk’s book:

P: God allows sinfulness. (1:2-4)

S: God uses an outside nation to correct. (1:6)

P: That nation is wicked and Gentile. (2:12-17)

S: They will be punished for their sin. (1:11; 2:5-19)

P: They are punished for something that God moved them to do. (1:6)

S: They acted according to their will. (1:11)

P: Habakkuk lacks under-standing. (1:1-3a; 1:12-2:1)

S: Habakkuk responds in faith. (2:4; 3:1-19)

Habakkuk uses an interesting word in 2:1 that indicates his frame of mind as he remonstrates with God. The verse reads, “I will stand my watch and set myself on the rampart, and watch to see what He will say to me, and what I will answer when I am *corrected*.” That last word, really a noun, indicates the propriety of Habakkuk’s remonstrations. It also governs how we are to understand Habakkuk’s line questioning. *Corrected* translates the Hebrew word *tôkahaṭ*, which means *correction, rebuke, contradiction, or instruction*. Habakkuk realizes that he just does not understand God and that his own thinking needs clarification. He humbly assumes that he is wrong in his assumptions about the appearances of things and waits for God to instruct him properly.

Habakkuk’s second major principle is the one that Paul builds his gospel on: the just shall live by faith. God’s instruction to Habakkuk in 2:4 ensures that our response to God will not be the mere grudging acquiescence of a dumb brute. Living faith is not a mindless trust, but a trust based upon the sure and certain knowledge of a relationship. This kind of faith works no matter what the circumstances *because of the nature of its Object*. Job demonstrates proper faith when he asks, “Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” (2:10) Habakkuk still does not understand God’s thinking, but he does trust his Lord to be faithful to the covenants with His people (note the frequent use throughout the book of the covenant Name, *Yahweh*, written as LORD). In his closing hymn (chapter 3), Habakkuk remembers the marvelous works and the infallible words of the Lord. The memory brings reverence and awe. Habakkuk’s closing lines demonstrate that he knows how to properly remonstrate with God: no matter what the circumstances of life may be, he will rejoice in his covenant-keeping God. He knows that his Lord will invariably do what is right.

Conclusion

Far from being a sin, proper remonstrations with God is the activity of a healthy faith relationship with Him. He delights to instruct us and impart wisdom to us. Our proper method of coming before God includes our humble acknowledgment that we do not know, nor need to know, the mind of God. It also includes a calm surety that our lives are solidly in the hands of the Creator of all. As we face the calamities that confront us from day to day, let us not fear to seek God’s face about them. On the other hand, let us not arrogantly presume that we know better

how God should order His world (and ours!). As we faithfully remember His works and word, we will, with Habakkuk, confidently assert that “The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer’s feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills” (3:19). †

¹All Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version, (Nashville:Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1992).

²Statement made in a leadership meeting at Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina, September 6, 1982.