

God Delivers

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In Hebrews chapter 10, the writer encourages God's people to persevere in faith. We read in Hebrews 10:31 these words, ***It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*** Yet we're assured that we can approach God with confidence. Note 10:19, ***We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus.*** In other words, the Lord Jesus, through His death and resurrection, has made it possible for us to come with confidence before God.

At the same time, we must recognise that God is a jealous God. Thus, just as He promises to love us and to bless us, He also promises to discipline His people. In Hebrews 10:30b, quoting from Deuteronomy 32:36, the writer tells us ***"The Lord will judge his people."*** Later, in chapter 12 we read about the Lord's discipline. We'll note 12:6a, ***"The Lord disciplines those he loves..."***

This is the hardest thing for us to understand. Why would God want to discipline His people? It seems so strange that God would discipline those whom He loves. But God's discipline shows that His love is real. Love without justice, without discipline, is weak. Again, we read in Hebrews 12:10, ***Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.***

God's discipline has a purpose, to lead us to holiness. It is just one means that God uses to conform us to His ways. In fact, God's discipline always has a purpose. In the end, His deeds will always bring glory to Him. Note Ephesians 1:11, God ***works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*** Habakkuk didn't have this verse to help him understand God's purposes. It does, however, encourage us in our times of trial. He struggled to understand God's ways. Nevertheless, we can sympathise with him in his difficulties.

We read in 1 Peter 2:21b, ***Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*** Is that true? We Christians do suffer for our faith. But there is another possible outcome. Discipline or suffering could lead to bitterness and resentment. Let me put it to you as a question. What's your response when life deals you a hard blow? Or, you see others facing enormous, unsurmountable difficulties. What's your response to their trials?

Many years ago now, Ginny was in hospital feeling most unwell. Her doctor, who was an atheist, wondered what our God was doing. For, there was God's child, suffering. Our atheist friend, though he was a good doctor, could not understand. His idea was that God's children should not suffer. Even though he claimed that he'd read through the Bible, he couldn't see God at work *in all things*.

I must admit that neither Ginny nor I could understand what was happening. But one thing we did know, God had a purpose in those events. There were lessons for us to learn from what we were going through. I'm not saying that God was punishing us, though that could be true. I don't know that we even have all the answers now. But, in the face of the unknown, at the very least, God was teaching us to trust in Him. Similarly, God is teaching you the same lesson.

So, not all suffering is due to God's discipline. From time to time we all have problems to overcome. Difficult decisions have to be made. On the other hand, there are those other times when you know that life is out of your control. Life takes an unexpected turn that throws you off balance. It was like that for Habakkuk.

Habakkuk had seen the wickedness of God's people in Judah. He complained to God about it. Clearly, he'd been doing this for some time. Nothing happened. God was silent. Habakkuk 1:2, 3b ***How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?... Why do you tolerate wrong?*** Habakkuk's plea is for justice. He writes in 1:4, ***Justice never prevails... justice is perverted.*** We do much the same, don't we? When things don't go our way, we want justice.

Be careful when you ask God for justice. It is far better to plead for mercy. Perhaps it's unfair to judge Habakkuk. But, isn't that what he ought to have done? Instead, he cries out that justice be restored to the land. And then, in judgment upon the violence and strife in Judah, God sent the Babylonians to overrun Judah.

What are we saying when we cry out for justice? We're saying that we're better than those people who hurt us. We don't deserve what's happening. Judge them, not us! Punish them, God! Bring them down, so that we'll be vindicated [= seen to be in the right], so that our goodness will shine among the wicked!

Can we talk to God like that? I don't think so! Do not cry out for justice. You may get it. And if God were to act towards us in justice, we could never stand before Him. Not one of us is good enough to stand in the presence of God's holiness, His perfection.

The story is told of a mother who approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice. Justice demanded death. "But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained. "I plead for mercy?"

"But your son does not deserve mercy?" Napoleon replied.

"Sir?" the woman cried, "It would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for?"

"Well, then?" the emperor said, "I will have mercy?" And he spared the woman's son.

Cry out for mercy, for yourself and for those who sin against you. Cry out to God that He will hear your prayer and restore you into a right relationship with Himself. In your trials of life, ask God what lessons you are to learn. What is God teaching you about Him? What is God teaching you about you, yourself?

Did I say that this is easy? Not at all! It's hard, very hard. At the same time I, for one, am thankful for Habakkuk. He doesn't try to cover up his problems with what has happened. And, he doesn't try to make out that he was in the right. In fact, when we come to chapter 2, he realizes that God *will* avenge His people.

His first complaint was that God was silent. Later, he complains that God has gone too far. Note 1:13b, ***Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?*** You can't help but love him for his honesty. But then, as we've seen previously, Habakkuk realises that there's nothing he can do about what's happening. He's beginning to learn his lesson about the God whom he worships. 2:2, ***"I will stand at my watch... I will look to see what he will say to me..."***

The Lord graciously answers Habakkuk. His message to him and to us is in 2:4, ***"The righteous will live by his faith."*** Amidst all of his troubles the Lord encourages Habakkuk, and us, to trust. Then the Lord reveals the woes that will come upon the Babylonians. God will not tolerate their wickedness, drunkenness and idolatry.

Now, Habakkuk is humbled. We read in 2:20, ***"But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."***

In chapter 3 Habakkuk is at worship. This chapter records his prayer to the Lord. In 3:2 he begins with a prayer for revival. He recalls the great works of God. ***I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known.*** And now we see that his way of thinking has changed. No longer does he cry out for justice. He now pleads for mercy in the face of God's anger against the Babylonians. ***In wrath remember mercy.***

In 3:3-15 Habakkuk continues to teach us about prayer and worship. Facing disaster through the coming of the Babylonians, he reviews how God rescued His people in the past. In particular, he remembers their exodus from Egypt.

Briefly, recall why Israel had gone to Egypt. We read in Genesis 15 how God made a covenant with Abraham. At that time God said that Abraham's descendants would spend a long time in another country. 15:13, ***They will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.*** He also promised that they would leave that land (in the Exodus from Egypt) with great possessions (15:14). It is this exodus that Habakkuk recalls. 3:3, ***God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran.*** God does not come from heaven, but from the earth, ***from Teman*** and ***Mount Paran***. These two places trace the steps God took to lead Israel from Mt. Sinai, through Edom, into the Land of Promise, Canaan (Palestine).

At Sinai, God revealed His glory. There, Israel had been told that they must take on God's character and be holy (Leviticus 11:44). God had revealed His glory at Sinai, yet not fully. Sinful men and women cannot see all of God's glory and live. Habakkuk 3:4, ***His splendour was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand, where his power was hidden.*** Habakkuk refers to God as ***the Holy One***. As ***the Holy One***, God cannot tolerate evil. God's power was seen in the plagues He produced in Egypt. 3:5, ***Plague went before him; pestilence followed his steps.***

And so we read in Hebrews 12:29, **Our “God is a consuming fire.”** Now, Habakkuk sees God’s holiness first revealed in judgment against Judah. Secondly, he sees God’s holiness in striking down the Babylonians.

Now that the Lord has arrived, Habakkuk meditates on the effect of His glory. 3:6, **He [God] stood, and shook the earth; he looked, and made the nations tremble. The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed. His ways are eternal.** One commentator writes, ‘When God arrives on the scene and makes His presence felt, not only people, but mountains shake, as though smashed by a giant sledgehammer.’

These images used by Habakkuk come to their fullness in the new covenant era. In 2 Peter 3:10 we read about the return of Christ and the events of that great Day. **But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.** On that Day, all the nations will tremble.

Then, Habakkuk sees two dwelling places which illustrate the effect God’s coming will have on the nations. 3:7, **I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish.** Israel’s past experience with these two nations (or tribes) saw them frustrating Israel’s entry into Canaan.

In 3:8 Habakkuk speaks once more about God’s wrath. These verses (3:8-15) are full of His divine displeasure. Three words are used to describe this displeasure: **wrath... anger... and rage.**

The first part of 3:8 consists of two almost identical questions. They are rhetorical, for they are not answered. **Were you angry with the rivers, O LORD? Was your wrath against the streams?**

God would not be angry with nature. However, God did part the waters of the Red Sea for Israel to cross. Those same waters then closed over the Egyptians who’d enslaved Israel. Later, God parted the Jordan River so that Israel could enter the Promised Land.

The imagery is of God as a victorious Warrior, riding out against His foes. 3:8b, 9, 15, **Did you rage against the sea when you rode out with your horses and your victorious chariots? You uncovered your bow, you called for many arrows... You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters.**

Again the picture that Habakkuk paints is of the Exodus. This picture of God’s future act of judgment includes His triumph over Pharaoh at the crossing of the Red Sea.

Habakkuk and all Israel know that their God can also fight for them through His creation. The stopping of the Jordan River, the safe crossing through the Red Sea were not natural events. God’s creation was fighting for Israel.

In 3:10, 11a Habakkuk recalls how three parts of God’s creation have responded to God. **The mountains saw you and writhed. Torrents of water swept by; the deep roared and lifted its waves on high. Sun and moon stood still in the heavens.** These verses recall God’s mighty acts on behalf of His people. Mount Sinai **trembled violently** (Exodus 19:18) at the presence of the Lord. Later, God revealed Himself in a storm. The sun and the moon stood still while Joshua fought the Amorites (Joshua 10:12-14). One writer notes: ‘History has become a series of divine actions, the purpose of which cannot be doubted.’

Habakkuk 3:12-15 reveals God’s victory. His divine power wasn’t just to terrify the world, but to deliver His people. That has always been God’s purpose. Note 3:13, **You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness, you stripped him from head to foot.**

Habakkuk has reviewed God’s saving acts. The pattern of the past is now the promise of the future. This section (3:12-15) ends with another allusion to the Red Sea crossing. 3:15, **You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters.**

Habakkuk’s faith is strengthened in the face of his people turning away from God; the coming Babylonian exile; and the knowledge that God saves. God delivers. And so Habakkuk doesn’t just dwell in the past. Instead, he relives it. For, he now sees God doing in his own day what God alone can do.

The God whom we worship is the same One whom Habakkuk worshipped. His promises are yes to us in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). Our God makes promises and keeps them. God is faithful.

There are many promises to us in Scripture. Here is one from the lips of the Lord Jesus. John 14:1-3, ***“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you... I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”***

There are two final questions for us today. When the Lord Jesus returns, who can stand on that great Day of God’s Wrath? No one will be able to resist His power on that day (Psalm 110:5). His Anointed One (the Lord Jesus) has the authority to break any nation that rebels against Him (Psalm 2:8, 9; 1 Corinthians 15:24). One day, all of His enemies will be put under His feet (1 Corinthians 15:25).

The second question is more personal. Will you be able to stand before the Lord Jesus Christ? How is your faith? I hope that you have seen how Habakkuk has grown in his faith. It’s not just that he has more faith, his faith is now mature. He has moved from complaint onwards to praise and worship. He knows that God will fight for His people. If he lived today his prayer would be far deeper than the children’s prayer I once learned: *Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child...* It’s not a bad prayer, but it only gives us half the story. For, the Jesus we worship is ***Lord of lords and King of kings*** (Revelation 17:14). There is no other king in the Church.

Louis XIV of France wanted to be remembered as the greatest king ever. He required that at his funeral only one candle be lit and that on his coffin. One preacher, however, could have made Louis feel dissatisfied. When that preacher got up to speak, he walked over to the casket and snuffed out the light. He then commenced his message, saying, ‘Only God is great. Only God is great.’

Revelation 19:11-16 is all about King Jesus. ***I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns... and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron sceptre.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.***

All of God’s promises and His mighty acts come together in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Him we have nothing to fear.

You may wonder why I question the idea that we can ask God for justice. After all, God is just. Justice is essential to His character. But God’s justice is demonstrated at the cross. For there, in His death on the cross, the Lord Jesus paid the price for our sin. God’s justice was satisfied. And His love for us in revealed in giving up His One and Only Son for our sakes. At the cross, God’s love and justice meet. Romans 5:8, ***But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***

When you and I plead with God for His mercy we know that we really deserve His justice. We deserve spiritual death, to be separated from Him for all eternity. You must make a decision. Do you want God’s justice, or His mercy? Choose mercy. Come to Christ in repentance and faith. Turn from sin and trust that Christ has received the justice that you and I deserve. Find your hope, your peace, forgiveness of sin and eternal life in a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we read in 1 Peter 1:3, ***Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Amen***