

LIVING IN LIGHT OF LIFE'S PERPLEXITIES: LESSONS FROM HABAKKUK

by Brian Allred

I FIND CERTAIN THINGS PERPLEXING. For example, why is d-o-u-g-h pronounced “doh” while r-o-u-g-h is pronounced “ruf”? That doesn't make sense. Why do we drive on parkways and park on driveways?¹ And why is it when I go to the drive-through and ask my wife if she wants any fries, she says no – but the first thing she does when I get mine is ask for some? That's perplexing.

There are lots of little things that perplex me. But there are other not-so-little things that perplex me. My younger brother was diagnosed with leukemia at nine months of age. He was placed on a treatment regimen at St. Jude's Children's Hospital as part of an experimental research group. My brother was the only child from his group who survived the treatments. But as a result of the regimen, he suffered severe brain damage and lived with acute disabilities. He never walked, never fed himself, eventually lost his sight, and developed scoliosis that significantly compromised his organ function. My family watched him slowly deteriorate for 32 years in a body that didn't work. That doesn't make sense to me. Why did God allow that to happen? I am perplexed.

All of us likely have our own disquieting experiences of perplexity. Perhaps this should not be all that surprising as even those we read about in Scripture wrestled with God's ways and give voice to their perplexity at times. The prophet Habakkuk, for instance, was confused and perplexed by divine providence. We find him engaged in dialogue with the LORD in the midst of his perplexity in his brief and often overlooked book. But by paying attention to the dialogue between Habakkuk and our Sovereign God, we not only can relate to Habakkuk but we learn how our righteous God instructs his people to live by faith in light of life's perplexities. Moreover, we gain insight into what such living by faith looks like. Consider the following lessons.

1. Deal Honestly with God

The book opens with Habakkuk bringing questions before the LORD. His questions arise in the midst of injustices that surround him in Judah.² He observes the prevalence of “destruction and violence” and “strife and contention” (v.3) while

1. Credit for this inquiry goes to comedian Steven Wright.

2. For a treatment of the issues related to identifying the perpetrators of the Judean oppression, see C. Hassel Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 176-177.

lamenting that “justice never goes forth” (v. 4). Still, what prompts his question is not merely the injustice. It’s the tension created by the extensiveness of such wickedness about which a perfectly just and all-powerful God apparently does nothing. He asks, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?” (v. 2) and inquires “why do you idly look at wrong?” (v. 3). He is perplexed and confused because what he *believes* – that a just and good God rules the world and rights injustices – is inconsistent with what he *sees*.

In his response to Habakkuk’s question (vv.5-11), the LORD reveals to Habakkuk that he is not unaware of the injustice in Judah. Indeed, he is raising up the Chaldeans (i.e. the Babylonians) to punish the evildoers.³ But this answer serves to spawn new questions for Habakkuk (vv.12-17). He probes, “You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and are silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?” (v.13). For Habakkuk, the divinely prescribed cure seems worse than the disease. How can a pure God not only utilize wickedness to carry out his plans, but actually *raise up* the wicked to carry out justice on the less wicked? Wouldn’t it make more sense for a righteous God to raise up the *righteous* to punish the wicked? Or why, more generally, is evil allowed to prosper at all in a universe under the rule of a God of almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, infinite goodness, and perfect justice?⁴

It doesn’t make sense to Habakkuk. And if we’re honest, it often doesn’t make sense to us either. We are often perplexed by how God governs the world. Why do violence and falsehood and immorality so often seem to have the upper hand on peace, truth, and purity? Why do the abusive and the swindlers seem to thrive while the meek and humble are exploited? If there is a connection between virtue and blessing and between sin and judgment, the connection is not always easy to detect. Parents who are routinely neglectful and abusive are given multiple children while a godly couple struggles with infertility. Some people have a deep desire to be married and pray for years for God to grant a spouse yet remain lonely, while others suffocate in hateful marriages that feel like torture. To put it bluntly, what happens in the world and in our lives often *appears* random. There doesn’t seem to be a discernable rhyme or reason or pattern to what God is doing – or why he is doing it. We simply don’t understand God’s ways much of the time. And neither does Habakkuk.

But what we learn by listening to Habakkuk is living by faith in light of life’s perplexities encompasses being honest with God about our perplexity. Habakkuk is

3. Habakkuk’s reference to the Chaldeans appears to locate his ministry sometime in the latter half of the 7th century BC when the Assyrians succumbed to increasing Babylonian power and before Judah was driven out of Jerusalem and exiled under the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in the early years of the 6th century BC. For a historical summary of this period as it relates to the dating of Habakkuk, see F. F. Bruce, “Habakkuk” in *The Minor Prophets*, ed. Thomas E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 832-834.

4. The first three of these divine attributes are taken from the wording in the Westminster Confession of Faith, V.4. For an excellent summary of the doctrine of divine providence as well as an example of how to confess faith in the face of its mysteriousness, see the entire chapter, especially articles 4 and 5.

not rebuked by God for his questions. Instead of requiring us to ignore, deny, or suppress it, God routinely allows his people to come to him and name their perplexity and confusion.⁵ When we experience the tension elicited by God's providence, we can bring our questions to him and voice our confusion honestly and still be living by faith. After all, don't we hear Jesus himself asking a question, one that David had asked earlier, in one of the most monumental moments in human history?

So deal honestly with God in your perplexity. God is big enough to handle your confusion. But beware – there is a danger lurking here. There is a difference between being honest about our perplexity and leveling an accusation against God and his character. This danger is captured well by C.S. Lewis. A bachelor for much of his life, Lewis eventually married a woman named Joy Davidman. Davidman had been previously diagnosed with cancer but when they married, the cancer was in remission. Shortly afterwards, however, the cancer returned and claimed her life. In wrestling through his perplexity of living as a bachelor for so many years, only to have her be taken after such a short time, Lewis admitted in *A Grief Observed*, "Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'"⁶

How do we deal honestly with perplexity in the face of a divine providence which allows at times for hardship and tragedy and the ascendancy of the wicked yet avoid harsh and critical conclusions about the nature of God?

2. Hold Fast to What You Know

While living by faith in light of life's perplexities includes being honest with God, we also learn from Habakkuk that it entails holding fast to what you know to be true about him. It is crucial to notice what frames Habakkuk's second set of questions (vv. 12-13). He confesses God to be holy, faithful, sovereign, pure, and just. These attributes of the LORD serve as foundational and indisputable truths for Habakkuk even in the face of perplexing circumstances. In other words, when Habakkuk witnesses what is inconsistent with what he believes, he doesn't allow what he *sees* to determine what he *believes*. Rather, in his perplexity, he holds fast to what he knows to be true about his God.

And what did Habakkuk know? How could he be so sure about God's holy, faithful, sovereign, pure, and just character amid confusing events and revelations? Well, he knew of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage that displayed God's sovereign power and gracious redemption. He knew of God's provision for his people that spoke of his covenant love and faithfulness in the pillar of cloud and fire, the manna from heaven, and the water from the rock. He knew of God's law that revealed his just and holy character, and he knew of God's atoning mercies and

5. For example, see Job 7:20, 10:18; Pss. 6:3, 10:1, 13:2, 35:17, 42:9, 44:24, 74:10-11, 88:14, 90:13, 94:3, 119:84; Jer. 20:18.

6. C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 18-19.

forgiveness through the priesthood and sacrificial system. And Habakkuk holds fast and confesses these truths in his perplexity.

Similarly, living by faith for us means holding fast to what we know to be true about God. But we know *more* than Habakkuk. When we look at our circumstances and the circumstances in our world, we know that they are arranged by the hand of an Almighty Father who gave his Son for us. The apostle Paul expressed his confidence in the familiar words of Romans 8:28, when he wrote, “And *we know* that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” How could Paul – who had suffered stoning and persecution and shipwrecks – be so certain of God’s goodness, faithfulness, justice, and love? Paul’s answer comes through a different set of questions than Habakkuk’s: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” Paul’s certainty is rooted in the cross.

Jesus Christ crucified and risen: this is the basis of Paul’s confidence in the goodness, wisdom, and justice of God’s providence, his assurance that everything works for good for those who love God and are called by him, regardless of present circumstances. And it is our confidence as well. In an often perplexing, confusing, painful, seemingly senseless, random world, do you want to know that God is just? Look to the crucified and risen Christ. Do you want to know that God is wise? Look to the crucified and risen Christ. Do you want to know that God is faithful? Do you want to know that God is good? Do you want to know that God is loving? Look to the crucified and risen Christ. Rather than interpreting God through the lens of our present circumstances, faith holds fast to what we know is true about him from his revelation and interprets our circumstances through the lens of the atonement. In Jesus, God has given us a clear demonstration of his goodness, his justice, his faithfulness, and his love, regardless of how our current circumstances might appear. So in your perplexity and confusion, hold fast to what you know about God.

3. Humble Yourself

But living by faith also consists of humbling yourself and acknowledging how much you don’t know. After raising his second question, notice Habakkuk’s posture. He is waiting. “I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me and what I will answer concerning my complaint” (2:1). He doesn’t see the whole picture yet. He doesn’t have “all the facts.” So he adopts a posture of humility and waits.

And there is more to the picture than what any of us see. We don’t have all the pieces of the puzzle. Based on the limited information I possess, I am hardly competent to accurately judge the wisdom, goodness, or justice of God’s plans or the instruments and methods he uses to accomplish those plans based upon present circumstances alone. While we can’t deny that God allows sin and employs aspects of the curse to bring about his sovereign plan – and that human pain and suffering are often part of that plan – this doesn’t serve to refute the ultimate goodness or wisdom of God. A nurse administering vaccinations to a newborn, a father using

tweezers to remove a splinter from a child's foot, and a surgeon performing open heart surgery to repair damaged coronary arteries are all regarded as good and loving acts even if the newborn, child, and patient fail to perceive the goodness and lovingkindness at the time. Indeed, the nurse, father, and surgeon have more information about what is best and necessary. Being similarly limited in our knowledge and understanding as children of our Heavenly Father – not to mentioned as broken sinners in need of healing grace and radical transformation – we need to respond in our perplexity with humility. It's true that you and I don't always see the goodness, or justice, or wisdom in what God is doing. But that doesn't mean it isn't there. Rather, we can believe it *is* there as we live by faith in the character of our God and humble ourselves before him in our perplexity.

I very much enjoy watching Bob Ross paint. Some might know him better as “the Happy Painter.” Though he passed away several years ago, he can still be seen – and easily recognized by his large afro – on Public Broadcasting television stations. I am usually mesmerized as Ross seems to move effortlessly from a blank canvas to a majestic portrait of nature in less than 30 minutes. But I confess that every time I watch, I am convinced at some point he's messed up. He does something on the canvas that looks like it's wrong and can't be fixed: a stroke that looks too big or too dark. But without fail, by the end of the program, it all fits, and what I thought was too big and too dark is woven seamlessly and beautifully into the painting.

Some of the things God allows – indeed decrees – in our life and in our world seem too big and too dark. But no one sees the whole picture yet. But if Bob Ross is a skilled enough artist to make all the strokes, the big ones and dark ones included, beautiful and fitting, how much more is the God of all creation able to make all the strokes of his providence beautiful and fitting in their time? So we humble ourselves and wait in light of our limited perspective.

4. Live in Hope

Finally, as we read the LORD's reply to Habakkuk's second question and consider Habakkuk's concluding declaration, we learn that living by faith in light of life's perplexity means living in hope. Habakkuk reports, “And the LORD answered me: ‘Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end — it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith’” (2:2-4). One day the justice, purity, wisdom, and goodness of God and his purposes will be plain and clear. This hope was extended to Habakkuk in the promise of judgment to come upon the Chaldeans (2:16), “The cup in the LORD's right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory!” It is this promise that results in Habakkuk's steady resolve and resolute hope to “quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us” (3:16).

We can also live in the hope that one day our faith will be made sight. *If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come.* It may even happen this side of glory. How many of us can look back now at a painful period of our lives, in which we suffered disappointment or loss or confusion, and now see the wisdom and goodness of God

in it and can render thankful praise for it? Still, being able to clearly perceive the goodness of God's providence may be a long time in coming. In fact, while we may see the wisdom in God's providence this side of glory, we also may not. I doubt that I will understand any better than I do now why God allowed my brother's illness to afflict him and my family. But we can live in hope that there is a coming day when we will perceive with greater clarity the justice and wisdom of God.

Indeed, the first rays of the light of this promise have already broken through in Christ's death and resurrection. On Good Friday, we learn that when things looked the darkest, when there was seemingly only injustice, despair, loss, pain, sorrow, the triumph of evil, meaningless and hopelessness – we can wait. God was working something glorious and joyous. This is the promise of God through our Lord Jesus that allows us to live in hope.

5. Conclusion

Our perplexity and confusion in the face of divine providence should not be minimized. The times when God's justice, purity, faithfulness, wisdom, goodness, and love are not evident to us can feel like an oppressively dark valley through which to walk. But there is a way for the righteous to navigate the fog. Habakkuk teaches us that we can deal honestly with God and give voice to our perplexity. We can hold fast to what we know is true of God and view our circumstances through the lens of the cross and resurrection. Anchored by God's love for us in Christ Jesus, we can humbly wait upon the LORD as we acknowledge all we don't yet know, see, or understand. And we can live in hope for the promise of the future in which the love, wisdom, justice, and goodness of our Heavenly Father's providential dealings are no longer cloaked in mystery but shine forth clearly for all to see to the praise of his glory.

The righteous live by faith in the face of life's perplexities. And living by faith takes us where it took Habakkuk as he ends the book on a resounding note of confidence and commitment. May our trust in God be as firm and unmovable in light of life's perplexities, as we confess with Habakkuk in faith, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation" (3:17-19).