

Sermon: Patience will be rewarded
Habbakuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-10;
2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10
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If only all things in our life would go according to our desires. If only our life was easier and not so full of storms.

Being part of the family of God gives us hope; it gives us strength; it comforts us; but does it diminish the troubles? I do not think so.

Our Bible is full of examples of people in deep problems. How did they deal with them?

1 When things go wrong

Habbakuk, the Old Testament prophet, cries to God: (Hab 1:2-3a)

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrong-doing
and look at trouble?

The prophet of God saw troubles all around.

If only God would always immediately change what is bad in our life and around us, and help us in our problems.

He did not do that for the prophet Habbakuk; He does not do that for me; He does not do that for you.

The problems that Habbakuk faced? He said: (Hab 1:3b-4)

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack

and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous--
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

Nothing much changed, did it? Even 2500 years later in spite of the good intentions of many people, life still can be defined as violence, jealousy, injustice, evil people winning the day, and no justice being done.

Look at our nations, our societies, our families, even our churches.

The war in the Nuba mountains is killing many; the laws in our lands are applied harshly for the poor and much lighter for the rich; life seems very unfair. Very unfair.

Paul writes to Timothy that he was appointed by God for the gospel as a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That was great, he was doing good. In spite of this, he adds: "...and for this reason I suffer as I do." He refers to his persecution and to him being in prison in Rome at that time.

Bad things happen to good people; bad things happen to you. Yes, life is unfair. We do not get what we deserve; we do not get what we desire. This can be extremely painful. That is why we read so many complaints about this injustice in the Word of God.

And it often seems the evildoers win.

But how to respond in times of trouble?

2 Hold onto God. Patiently and prayerfully

In Psalm 37: 8-9 we have heard the advise of the Psalmist who witnessed injustice around him. His pastoral advise:

Do not fret yourself over the one who prospers,
the one who succeeds in evil schemes.
Refrain from anger, leave rage alone;
do not fret yourself; it leads only to evil.

To be jealous of those who do evil and prosper, has no impact at all on those evil people. It only hurts yourself. So the writer of the Psalm advises us to refrain from

those negative emotions. Do not fret yourself about the injustice and the problems around you.

Do not let it eat you up inside. But also, we must not give up on seeking justice, solutions to our problems, answers to our prayers.

In the midst of his troubles, Habbakuk said, Hab 2:1

I will stand at my watchpost,
and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what [God] will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

Habbakuk did complain to God about his problems and his nations' troubles. And he waited for answers.

When you are overwhelmed with sadness because of injustice, or whatever problems you face, try to start with God. Take time to pray to Him. Pray again and again.

And sometimes your circumstances do change, unexpectedly and dramatically. Sometimes God intervenes and changes your circumstances. I am sure you remember some of those occasions where against all odds, He blessed you with exactly what you needed and asked for.

But I think it is fair to say, more often, nothing changes, in spite of all your prayers. Life is often like walking through mud or rather, through dung.

When we were in Holland last summer we rented a small farmhouse in the midst of farmlands. Our farmhouse had been turned into a holiday home, but the lands around us were used by farmers in the area.

One morning it hit us like a train. One farmer was spraying dung on his land. Awful, that smell. But it is good for the land. And if we feel that we are wading through dung in life, forget not that it is the dung that make the grass, the plants, the flowers grow.

Our own attitude makes a big difference to what impact problems have on your life. Your troubles can be a cause for heartburn, if you only focus on the injustice and on how you should be better off. If you fret all the time.

But we can also grow stronger through our problems.

I mentioned, prayer is a great way to deal in the right way with the headaches of life. Not necessarily prayer that is focussed on God to 'please change it all', but prayer as in being in the presence of God.

We need the sort of prayer that is simply resting in God. Being with God. That can even be a wordless prayer, silent.

Or a prayer in which you focus on the things in your life that actually do go well. We overlook those areas easily when we feel wounded by life, but truth is, most things in your life are fine. You are healthy, you have food, you have a roof over your head.

Count your blessings.

And be patient. Habbakuk was told by God to be patient. Listen again to what God told him when he complained that all things were a mess in his life:

Then the Lord answered me and said:
[...] There is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.
Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

God did not promise Habbakkuk that he would change things soon. Maybe that was disappointing to Habakkuk?

God told Habbakuk to be patient, because in the end, salvation will surely come. And Yes, it may seem to tarry, but wait for it.

Often it seems that we just wait and wait, for what we need and desire. And it is a fact, God's intervention often seems to tarry.

But our Lord says to Habbakuk that he must wait for it. Be patient Habbakuk, maybe you do not get what you desire soon, maybe you do not get it at all. But God is coming. And we can live our life today, by faith. Prayerfully, patiently holding on to our God.

3 He certainly guards your eternal life

This is what Paul is writing to Timothy. Timothy is impressed by the suffering of Paul, he sees problems all around him, so he needs some counseling by Paul.

Timothy was clearly intimidated by the problems - just as we can really be upset when bad things happen to us or to friends.

Paul says to Timothy, 2 Tim 1:7

God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Now that is what we need as well in our daily circumstances. God's power; the experience of his love; and the self-discipline of patience.

Paul has the same long-term vision as Habbakuk. We may be in troubles, it may seem that God's answers never come; but He will intervene.

The comfort that Paul with his gospel offers, is that God has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Jesus abolished death, and brought immortality to light. For us, this is our true hope.

Troubles? Problems? Injustice? Yes it's all part of life. But you have received a hidden quality in your life - God has given you immortality.

Your immortality is anchored in God. That is how secure it is.

Paul is able to live his troubled life with joy and faith, because, he says: 2 Tim 1:12

I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

If we have entrusted our humble, poor life to God, it is safe in his hands. Whatever happens to us.

Conclusion

Why let the unfair things that happen to us push us down? Yes, they are real, yes bad things happen to you.

But be patient, God will act. Pray to him, and do not give up.

And look at what God tells you: death has been abolished, and life and immortality belong to you.

That places the events in our life today in a different light, does it not? Allow this truth to pierce the darkness of your anger, your fretting, your frustrations, your fears.

The immortality that God has given to us is the great truth that gives us peace, joy, love and hope in this present life.

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