

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon: More Problems, More God

Anthony Ballard

Disclaimer: This transcript was computer generated and may contain errors.

Transcript:

Lord Jesus, I am up here because of you, so I pray that your Holy Spirit will be within me, that you will use these words that I wrote down to encourage your people and to courage myself, Lord. I pray that you would take anything away that's not supposed to be here and that you would add to it as well. I pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Good morning, BelPres. My name is Anthony Ballard. I'm on staff here at this church. Back in April, some of the pastors and staff had a meeting to discuss this summer's sermon series titled Nevertheless, which is the story of Habakkuk. And I wasn't raised Presbyterian, so I don't know if you know this, but Presbyterians like to plan way ahead, sometimes even a year and a half in advance.

Pastor Dudley had decided that we will look at the Book of Habakkuk to see how we can have hope in God in a time when everything around us looked bad. But our thinking at the time was mostly focused on COVID-19. We didn't expect that the next two months would shine a spotlight on racial injustice, that it would bring civil unrest and protests and riots and violence and sweep our nation on top of living in a global pandemic.

But God knew this. And that may sound cliché, but the fact is Habakkuk's story actually is more relatable when you add more problems. As we learned last week, Habakkuk was going through this personal struggle, he was trying to believe that God is good when all he sees is injustice around him. And there was violence everywhere, and then worse it was happening from amongst his own people.

And so he does something interesting. He complains to God and he asks God to help, to do something about it. But God's response is actually shocking because God basically says that He's going to bring more trouble to Israel. And so He says, "I'm bringing the Babylonians to bring down my justice on these people." And Habakkuk is just like, "What? You're going to use the Babylonians? These are the worst people ever. They're actually worse than we are."

And so this is the equivalent of God saying that the LA Clippers are going to destroy the LA Lakers for the next five years and you just have to sit there and watch it. And as a Laker fan, that is really bad news. But that's why the Book of Habakkuk is more relatable with not one but two global problems. The more problems we have, the more of God that we need. And so this book, it does not solve the problem of evil

and injustice in our world, but it does affirm one thing, and that is that God has not lost control and that He cannot let evil win.

And so Habakkuk did the three things that I want to look at. And one was that was a man who complained well, and then two, he listened intently, and three, he trusted that God would complete the work against injustice. And so I want to encourage you that if you're going to complain to God, you need to do a really good job at it. A friend of mine was going through a difficult season and she was talking about the emotional pain that she was going through and that she was feeling at the time. And we had this moment in our conversation where she said, "I'm mad at God right now and I just don't want to talk to Him." And then she paused and said, "I know that doesn't sound very Christian, but it's true. That's how I feel."

But I actually encouraged her to continue to be candid with God because that's what we see throughout the Bible. Don't avoid God, go to Him, let Him know your troubles. And so in chapter 1, when we read Habakkuk's complaint to God, we see that he doesn't mince his words and he demands an answer from God for the unfairness that he sees all around. Habakkuk was unique among the prophets because he doesn't accuse the people of Israel of their sin, he doesn't go to them and tell them how bad they are. Most other prophets did this, but not Habakkuk. He actually goes directly to God and only to God.

His first instinct wasn't to go to people or to friends or family to complain. Because when you do that, there's a chance that people won't want to listen because they're going to hear you whining and you're going to sound like a whining person. But God can actually handle that. And so Habakkuk draws God's attention to the injustice because he knows that He's the only one that can actually do something about it. I think Habakkuk is the Bible's example of someone who wants to speak to the manager all the time. So if you work at a restaurant, this is not the guy that you want to sit in your serving section, because he will want to speak to your managers if something is not right.

But again, Habakkuk complained well because he knew God's character. And when you're in real trouble, you have to know who God is and what He's capable of doing, and then you can call Him on it. And so there's that famous quote that says, "Don't tell God the size of your problems, but tell your problems the size of your God." And in verse 12 of chapter 1, when he's making his second complaint, Habakkuk calls out God's omnipotent power by saying, "Lord, are you not from everlasting?" He makes similar claims throughout the chapter basically to say like, "Aren't you all powerful? Aren't you all knowing? Can't you fix this with ease."

And then if you scan the Bible, you'll see that the people in it who were either sad, angry, or depressed, always called out God's character of greatness, His attentiveness, and they were reminding Him of His mighty acts that He had done before, while they were asking for help. And Habakkuk, he doesn't belittle God in the process of complaining. He still speaks to Him, of Him as holy, as mighty, and he makes God big. And so when you're complaining, you need to make God big.

So some examples might be, "Aren't you the God who split the Red Sea? Aren't you the God who brought water from a rock? Aren't you the God that helped David killed Goliath? I need that God, right now in this problem that I'm in." And even if you don't know the Bible well, use what little you do now. And I don't care if you've only seen a couple episodes of VeggieTales, use that as your basis. And that may sound goofy, but the reality is VeggieTales was made to help people learn Bible stories. So use what you got and God will know what you mean.

So we make God big by reminding Him of what He's done before. And really what that means is reminding us of what He's done before. And so after Habakkuk's second complaint, he says this, he says, "I will stand at my watch, I will station myself on the ramparts. I will look to see what He," that is God, "Will say to me and what answer I am to give to this complaint." And then Habakkuk goes on this nightly breeze walk to stand on top of a Watchtower.

And I really liked this part because I felt like it was really dramatic and emo even like. He's just so in anguish that he had to do that. But he knew how to sell it. And so I think be dramatic with God and complain well. While Habakkuk was waiting on that watchtower though, for God's response, it's so important because he did something few of us do when we're praying. And that is that he listened. So he stopped talking and he listened to God intently and he listened desperately, which is point number two.

A few months ago, I was talking to someone on staff here and I'll call him Daniel Bates because that's who it actually was. Daniel was telling me how he started practicing more in his prayer time to listen to God and to write down God's response in his prayer. And in fact, he took it as far as most days to only let God talk. And he told me, "When you go to dinner with someone who's older and wiser than you, you shouldn't do all the talking because you're there to learn." Yet for some reason, when we talk to God, we expect Him to be quiet and just do what we want. And honestly, that's wrong. At some point, we got to be quiet.

By not listening to God and praying, we're actually missing out on the fullness of Him. He's not some genie that grants prayers and does everything that we want, but He has things to say. He has exciting things to reveal for our lives and for our world. And so Habakkuk was good at letting God talk. And if you look at the layout of the first two chapters of Habakkuk, his first complaint was three verses long, and then God replied to that with seven verses. And then Habakkuk second complaint was for six verses, and then God replied to that with 19 verses.

Now, how many of us talk for 19 verses and let God talk for only three? If that's you, that has to change. So while Habakkuk waited for an answer we see in chapter 2, verse 2, the Lord replied, "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it." This particular time, God wanted Habakkuk to write down his response. And so BelPres, we are actually going to practice this. For the next week, I want to challenge you, that's everyone watching, whether you're a kid or an adult, to write down the words, you hear God saying to you.

And try to do this as best you can to let Him do most of the talking. So if you pray for 30 minutes, make five of those minutes your words and the rest should be what you write down from God. And I know 30 minutes has probably sound like a long time for a lot of you, so try 10 minutes. But I want to really challenge you to go for 30, because this is the Lord who created the universe that we're going to be talking to, why would you want less time with Him? I don't know. So remember this is an exercise. It won't be easy at first, but it will be worth it. So be intentional.

So here's some things to pray and ask God for. God, what do you want next for my family? God, what do you want next for my life? How do you want me to prepare for the next six months? How do you want me to bring your justice in my community or workplace? And so Daniel told me that sometimes his only opening lines of prayer in the morning were, "Good morning, God." And that's it. And then he started writing from there.

So another thing, how do I know when it's God's voice? Here are four thoughts. There can be more, but these are some solid four. So one, test it with the truth of scripture. God will never say anything to you

July 5, 2020

about anything that contradicts who He reveals himself to be in the Bible, ever. God's voice brings transformation. When He speaks, you'll feel what He says. It's not information. Information is just informing, but revelation is transforming. It may not be words, but a picture. God spoke frequently through visions in the Bible. And if you're able, draw it or paint it out. And if not, just describe it.

And then the last one be open to hear anything. God's first reply to Habakkuk was not what he was expecting or even wanting to hear. And so remember, God is not a genie. He doesn't grant wishes, He doesn't give us everything we want, but He does take us where we need to be. So BelPres, please, will you try this for a week with me? I'll be doing it with you. And I want to encourage you to share what you hear with a good friend. They can help you understand things that you may be a little unsure about. And so remember, it's an intentional practice. Like Habakkuk, go to your watchtower, whatever that is, whether it's a room or your backyard, or just your car even, and wait for the Lord's response. But have your pen and paper ready to write down the revelation.

And so I said it earlier and I'll say it again, the Book of Habakkuk assures us of one overwhelming truth. And that is no matter how bad things get in the world and no matter how bad it gets, God has not lost control and He cannot let evil win. So Habakkuk's complaining led to His listening. Then that led to the revelation that God would bring justice to the world.

So the third thing I wanted to share that from Habakkuk was, God will complete the work against injustice, but we have work to do ourselves. So when framed in the context of the past two months, Habakkuk reads much more poignantly than it did in April. The more problems we have, the more of God we need. And so when our biggest obstacle was only facing COVID-19, the word we really needed to hear at that time was, be still and know that He is God. But after the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and now Elijah McClain and many others, and riots on top of that, and looting just down the street from the church, we're at a time when we need Habakkuk style prayers.

And so there are people who are praying, "How long, oh Lord, must I cry out to you, violence, but you do not save?" There are Christians whose prayers sound like Habakkuk style prayers because they're facing COVID-19. And many black American Christians are praying Habakkuk style prayers right now because of the racial injustice they're experiencing and they're seeing. My family is praying Habakkuk style prayers right now. I, in my job here at BelPres, have been praying Habakkuk style prayers.

I've been getting asked the question a lot, "Anthony, what will reconciliation look like? And how do we know when we've done it?" And the truth is, no one really knows what that looks like, but that doesn't mean that we are going to stop pursuing it. God gives us two important statements to hope in. He says, "The righteous live by faith and the Earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord." So as Christians, we have hope, not just that change will come, but we have hope that perfection will come through Jesus Christ.

And so many of you know that at BelPres we are a church that stands for racial justice and reconciliation. And we want to do this in a third way, which means that it won't look Republican or Democrat or liberal or conservative, but it will look like Jesus. And so I've been praying and asking God, "What does the third way look like?" And I keep hearing, "Look to Jesus." And so I did that. And when I look at Jesus, I see that in Matthew 8, He ministered to and gave the highest praise to the Centurion who was a police officer of his day.

And at the same time, He defined his ministry as being for the oppressed and to set prisoners free in Luke 4. And not only that Jesus healed one of the men that came to arrest Him in Luke 22. And not only that,

July 5, 2020

while hanging on the cross, Jesus promised a robber who was a looter of his day, that they would be in paradise together in Luke 23. And I see throughout the whole Gospels that Jesus' followers expected Him to lead an uprising that would overthrow the Roman ruling occupation. But instead Jesus directs them towards His true rule, which is in the kingdom of heaven, in a kingdom that cannot see decay or be corrupted or be overthrown.

And when I read that, I'm like, "Who is this guy?" We can't put Him in a Republican box or Democrat box no matter how hard we try. And it gets frustrating sometimes because I know we want Him to fit into our ideas, but it's really us who needs to fit into His. And so I really want to encourage you, don't mistake this for Him being neutral. Jesus actively loved, He actively ministered and pastored all, very specifically. And that is our role as Christians for such a time as this.

1 Corinthians 3:9 tells us, "We are co-laborers with Christ," which means we partner with Him in the work to do justice and bring reconciliation. There are things we can do here and now on Earth that can make measurable progress. And there's healing that we can make happen here, but it's going to be Him who ultimately completes the job. So this is going to be a long marathon, it's going to be uncomfortable. But Jesus doesn't promise us easy, He promises victory.

Then the Lord replied, "Write down the revelation, 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 linger, wait for it. It will certainly come and will not delay. See the enemy is puffed up, his desires are not upright, but the righteous person will live by his faith." So the unity, the wholeness, and the justice that we're looking for in our world, it will come. Though it linger, wait for it. Just as Habakkuk learned, God sees injustice and He responds to it. And He responds to it in the person of Jesus Christ.

And I'll close with this. As a kid, my mom would ... she'd be gone for the day. She'd called home and asked me to take off the chicken from out of the freezer to defrost it. So that by the time she got home, she can cook it and we could have dinner. And that was my job, just to take the chicken out of the freezer and defrost it. And it was important that I listened and obeyed my mom, because if I didn't take the chicken out of the freezer, dinner would be delayed.

And for some reason there were many times when I would not take the chicken out of the freezer, because I'd be watching TV, playing with friends, or I just wouldn't, I'll be distracted. But if I did my part, we would all eat when she returned home without any unnecessary delays. And the food would be really good too, because my mom can really cook. But I absolutely needed to defrost the chicken before we could eat. And our roles as Christians is that.

For such a time as this, we don't have to worry about the pressure of completing racial justice and reconciliation because Jesus will do that. But our job is to do something, is to take the chicken out of the freezer and defrost it. So when He comes back, He'll provide the feast. We set the table and we can have confident hope like Habakkuk did that God is going to prepare a feast greater than anything we can imagine. And that is called the wedding supper of the lamb, and that is the good news that we have.

So Lord Jesus, I pray for this church, Bellevue Presbyterian, Lord, that we would be people that listened to you in our prayers, that we would complain to you well when we have problems, Lord, that we would listen to your Word, to your revelation, God that you have for us. God, I pray that we would be steadfast as we pursue justice. As we do justice and pursue reconciliation, Lord, be with us from the youngest person to the oldest in our congregation. God, use this church in our community on the Eastside in Seattle

July 5, 2020

to bring your healing Lord. And we wait for you to do the ultimate job and finish this work that we long to see done in our world. In Jesus' name, Amen.
