

HOPE IN THE DARK

Just this week I began reading a devotional by Craig Groeschel, leader of Life.Church in the United States which he started in a two-car garage in Edmond, Oklahoma in January 1996. Since then, Life.Church has grown to include dozens of locations all over the United States but its mission statement remains the same: to lead people to become fully devoted followers of Christ. This devotional has led me to these thoughts which I will share until such times as we are all together in Bethel worshipping together.

Given these uncertain times which we find ourselves in, I felt that it was most appropriate, and especially as it follows the experiences of the Old Testament prophet, Habakkuk. The name Habakkuk is Hebrew for “hug” or “cuddle”, or I suppose, in Welsh “cwtch”. He lived around the same time as Jeremiah and the book which bears his name was written around 605BC. Whereas other prophets of the day were writing great messages from the Lord directed towards the nations of the day, Habakkuk’s short book seems to outline a more personal conversation which he was having with the Lord, describing God as his close friend and although he knew that God was in control of the chaotic world around him, Habakkuk’s belief and experience did not seem to match. This was the conflict with which he wrestled. He saw that wickedness and oppression was rife in Judah, and he struggled to understand why God didn’t act and do something about it. This inner conflict increased when God said to him that the evil Babylonians were going to be used to bring judgement upon Judah.

The whole book bearing his name is a conversation between the prophet and God. Habakkuk confronts God with his confusion and in doing so expresses the voices of the godly remnant in Judah. As you read through these three chapters you cannot help but recognise that the questions Habakkuk asked in his day, are very similar to the questions we hear being asked today: “How long do we have to call without an answer?” and “Why do you allow these things to happen?”

How often have we heard, or even said something similar so far, this year? There are times in our lives, when we reach that point of

wrestling with such questions. Our hearts tell us one thing, but our eyes and our minds try to distract us, calling us to question those wonderful promises of God. Even if we don't do it ourselves, perhaps our hearts have ached for those whom we love and care about dearly, battling with those same thoughts. When we find ourselves in uncertain times, sometimes it is hard to see the light of God's word.

Habakkuk was in such a position. In Habakkuk chapter 1 verses 1-4, we read:

¹The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

²How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?

³Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."

He felt overwhelmed by these questions. He was living in Jerusalem in the final days of the 7th century BC. Josiah, the great king who had discovered and implemented the great scroll of the Law, had destroyed the pagan altars, restored the Temple, had been succeeded by Jehoiakim who quickly undid all that great work – building great palaces, exploiting the people and leading the priests and those in authority to follow him (**verse 3**) evoking the cry from Habakkuk (**verse 4**). Habakkuk watched helplessly as the spiritual faith of society fell apart.

But for Habakkuk, it was not just the sinfulness of the people which caused him great angst, but also what he felt was the Lord's delay in doing anything about it. It was Habakkuk's understanding of God, which caused him to cry out as he did. You can imagine him crying out, "If what I know about you is true, then why is this happening? Why don't you do something about it? What are you waiting for?" Habakkuk's questions are not simply academic ones, they come from a heart which is deeply hurting. The late Eugene Peterson writes this about Habakkuk's cry: "He gives voice to our

bewilderment, articulates our puzzled attempts to make sense of things, faces God with our disappointment of God. He insists that God pay attention to us; and he insists with a prophet's characteristic no-nonsense bluntness.”

Are we confused about our seemingly silent God in the midst of all that is happening around us and to us? Have we prayed earnestly and sincerely and it seems that heaven is shut to our pleas? Are we ready to wrestle with our doubts in order to listen to the answers? As we progress through these thoughts on Habakkuk, we will see and I hope learn, that light and illumination may be closer than we think.

If these initial thoughts seem to cause more questions than answers, then why not take time to read through the rest of Habakkuk's 3 short chapters. Note the questions, which we will come to again, but also the answers. Compare where we read him starting in **chapter 1**, with his declaration in **chapter 3 verses 17-18**. It is not wrong to ask the questions, so long as we are prepared to recognise the answers when they come.