

## **Introduction**

I'd like to begin with an old idiom that all of you have used and heard, **"If worst comes to worst."** That idiom was coined in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and means **"If the very worst possible thing happens."** In the context of sports and for those of us who are Browns fans, it has happened. In the context of life itself of course, the "worst" can be far "worse" than that. A Christian named Marc Herrienger was shoveling snow on his driveway. His wife came out and asked him to watch their toddler daughter as she moved the car. Moments later, Marc's wife and he were thrust into a parent's nightmare. The car ran over, crushed, and killed their daughter. **"If worst comes to worst"** happened to them.

And it will almost certainly happen to us as well, if it isn't happening to us already. Which raises a question. Can we have fullness of peace and joy **"If worst comes to worst"** for us? Yes, we can and the text I read earlier, Habakkuk 2:1-4 and 3:16-19 tells us how.

## **Habakkuk's Questions**

Chapters 1 and 2 of this book are comprised of two strophes. Each strophe revolves around a prophetic question and a divine response.

The first question and response are found in 1:1-11.

Habakkuk asks God in verse 2, **"Why do you, a just God, allow this wickedness to go on?"** The wickedness he's referring to is the nation of Judah's. He describes it in verses 3-4, which portray Judah's people as evil and perverse. So why doesn't God do something about it, Habakkuk asks Him in verse 2.

God responds in verses 5-11 that He's going to do something about it. He's going to punish and put an end to Judah's wickedness by raising up the Babylonians. The Babylonians will conquer Judah and subjugate its people, which did happen two years later, in 605 BC.

The second question and response are found in 1:12-2:20.

God's response to Habakkuk's first question so disturbs him that he

asks a second in 1:12-2:3, **“Why would you, a just God, use a nation far more wicked than Judah is to judge it?”** As bad as God’s people were, the Babylonians were far worse. They were a brutal, barbaric, and pagan people that made God’s people look like choir boys in comparison. Besides, the nation that Habakkuk loved being conquered by another wasn’t what he had in mind when he asked the first question. So, he asks this second one, **“Why would you, a just God, do that?”**

### **Our Question**

That is Habakkuk’s question and it’s ours as well.

A few years ago, pollster George Barna conducted a national survey. In it, he asked a scientifically selected cross-section of adults, **“If you could ask God only one question and you knew He would give an answer, what would you ask?”** Those surveyed gave one answer more than any other, **“Why is their pain and suffering in the world?”**

The fact of suffering, which includes injustice, is a challenge to Christian faith. The Greek philosopher Epicurus said in that regard: **“Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or He can, but does not want to. If He wants to, but cannot, He is impotent. If He can, and does not want to, He is wicked.”** His flawed logic reveals the issue before us. If God can do anything He wants to do, wants to do good, and knows what that good is, then why is there so much suffering?

That’s the question and it isn’t just an academic one. It’s a real life, nitty gritty question that can prevent faith in God. Lee Strobel, in fact, says it’s **“the single biggest obstacle for spiritual seekers.”** But it doesn’t just prevent faith. It can diminish or destroy it as well.

Back in the 1940’s, Charles Templeton preached with Billy Graham and then founded a church that soon overflowed its 1200 seat sanctuary. American Magazine said about him that he **“set a new standard of mass evangelism”** and predicted his ministry would eventually eclipse Billy’s. But then something happened. He saw a photograph in *Life Magazine* that showed a woman in drought stricken Africa. She was holding her

dead baby and looking up to the heavens with the most forlorn expression he had ever seen. He looked at the photograph and thought, **“Is it possible to believe that there is a loving and caring creator when all this woman needed was rain?”** He was soon answering “no” and before long quit believing in God. Templeton died several years ago, an agnostic who said: **“It’s impossible for me to believe that there is a loving God who could allow what happens in our daily world.”**

Templeton’s comment articulates quite concisely the issue that is before us. If God is all-powerful, all-loving, and all-just, why does He allow all the sufferings that happen to others and us? That’s the question that Habakkuk asks in 1:13 and so do we.

God responds to that question in 2:4-20, **“The righteous will live by his faith.”** He means by that, **“Believe in and follow Me.”**

Notice something. That’s an admonition not an answer. God nowhere in Habakkuk’s book tells him why it’s just to use a nation far more wicked than Judah to conquer it. He admonishes him instead to believe in and follow Him. It’s the same with us. God nowhere in the Bible tells us why He allows the sufferings He does. He admonishes us instead to be faithful, to believe in and follow Him in the midst of them.

But He not only admonishes us to be faithful. He assists us as well by giving us two things, each of which I want to explain.

## **The Insights**

One of the things He gives us is insight, specifically three penetrating insights about our sufferings.

First, some of our sufferings are battle scars. Paul teaches in Ephesians 6 that a dramatic spiritual war is going on in the heavenly places between God and Satan and their respective kingdoms. Sometimes, according to Job 1-2, you and I are casualties of that war. Job suffered, for instance, in order to be God’s preacher to Satan and it just may be that we do too. If it isn’t for that reason, it may be for some other that achieves God’s purposes in the heavenly war.

The Bible gives us a second insight about our sufferings. The universe is what one author calls a soul-making machine. The point of our lives on earth isn't comfort. It's training and preparation for eternity. And the essence of that training and preparation is character formation, becoming like Jesus. The more like Jesus we become, the more ready we are for eternity. Now, God structured the universe and life in it in a way that we might be trained and prepared for eternity. Part of that structure is that character gets formed through hardship, obstacles, and pain. Texts like Romans 5:3-5 and James 1:2-4 make that perfectly clear. C.S. Lewis said that pain is God's megaphone to arouse a deaf world and there is a great deal of truth to that. Adversity clears away the clutter and compels us to get focused on His kingdom and Him. Show me a great person and I'll show you a person who has suffered.

There's a third insight the Bible gives us about our sufferings. It's **"temporary and light."** That's Paul's message in Romans 8:18 and 2 Corinthians 4:17. The sufferings we go through on earth aren't worthy to be compared to the glories we'll get in heaven. Mother Teresa said the same thing Paul did but more vividly: **"In light of heaven, the worst sufferings on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on earth, will be seen to be no more than one night in an inconvenient motel."** I remember staying in a dirty run down motel one night years ago. Mother Teresa said in comparison to the glories of heaven, the sufferings of earth are like that. Paul's statements and hers might seem spurious but they aren't. Few people suffered more than they did, which validates their points of view.

Those then are the three insights God gives us. And they will, if we believe them, assist us in being faithful. But how do we believe them? Belief is a gift of the Holy Spirit that He gives us when we understand and ask. So understand by giving those three insights study and thought. Also ask by petitioning Him to give us the gift of belief until He does. Understanding and asking are our part in belief and if we do our part, the Holy Spirit will do His and give it to us.

## The Solution

But believing those insights isn't enough. God gives us a second thing to assist us in being faithful. Verses 16-19 reveal it. It's Himself.

After the two strophes in chapters 1-2, Habakkuk prays a prayer in chapter 3. Verses 4-15 in that prayer declare the magnificence of God. They disclose how utterly radiant and powerful He is.

That in turn prepares us for the climax of the book in verses 16-19.

In verse 16, Habakkuk expresses his initial distress at the coming judgment of the nation he loves, Judah.

Then, in verse 17, he describes that judgment in terms of fig trees, vines, olive trees, grains, and flocks failing. He does so because those things flourishing were the foundation of Judah's agrarian economy. A number of economists are predicting a collapse of America's economy. One writes about that, "**The Great Depression will look like a small blip compared to the economic collapse the United States is about to suffer.**" That's because the coming depression, if it occurs, will likely be accompanied by skyrocketing inflation instead of the deflation of the 1930's. We don't know if that will happen but it would be the modern equivalent of verse 17 if it did. What verse 17 is about, therefore, is "**If worst comes to worst.**" It pictures the very worst possible things happening to us: losing a job, being sued, getting cancer, having a mentally ill child, being abandoned by a spouse, and so on.

But notice what our experience of those things can be in verses 18-19. We can exult, rejoice, be strong, and walk on high places, as Habakkuk says it. Or to say it another way, we can actually have fullness of peace and joy when the very worst possible things happen to us.

That's what we can have, and verses 18-19 tell us how. Notice their subject: "**the LORD,**" "**the God of my salvation,**" and "**The LORD God.**" Do you see what's occurring here? God doesn't give Habakkuk an answer to his question. He gives him something better – Himself. Habakkuk knows and experiences God, who is a far greater and more affecting reality than what he's about to suffer. That in turn discounts

that suffering as a significant factor in his life.

Verses 18-19 teach us the single most significant truth about suffering that we will ever learn. When we suffer, God doesn't answer our questions but He does solve our problem – by giving us Himself. Participating in His presence discounts the suffering and gives us fullness of peace and joy. Listen to what Marc, the father whose daughter was crushed and killed, said about that: **“Sure, I'd like to understand more about why. But the ultimate answer is Jesus' presence. That sounds sappy, I know. But just wait – when your world is rocked, you don't want philosophy or theology as much as you want the reality of Christ. He was the very answer we needed.”** Marc experienced exactly what Habakkuk did in verses 18-19.

And you can too. Maybe you're suffering this morning and asking **“Why?”** If so, please understand there isn't an answer to your question. But there is a solution to your problem - God. So desire and seek Him with all your heart. I don't have time to explain in detail how to do that. But I can outline it for you: build a vision of God, train your mind to dwell constantly on Him, and practice the central activities of relationship with Him: solitude, silence, fasting, Bible study, worship, and prayer. Our discipleship curriculum teaches you how to do all of those things.

The best time to do that, of course, is before you suffer, which makes you ready for it. But it's never too late. Even if you're suffering and haven't sought Him with all your heart, start now.

## **Conclusion**

I leave you in closing with the words of a mother, Goldie, whose 18-year old daughter was raped and killed: **“In His presence we derive freely all the things that really matter: grace, strength, love, and best of all His constant abiding. Christ's presence has made our sorrow something beautiful.”** She's only saying what Habakkuk does in verses 18-19. Participate in God's presence. The **“worst”** will become the **“beautiful”** if you do!