Habakkuk 2:4 *The Waiting Room: With Us in the Waiting*

***DeMotivators***There’s this company called Successories that sells motivational posters. You’re probably familiar with their work. They’re the company that sells posters like **this:** a picture of a rowing team over a slogan that reads: “*Teamwork is the fuel that allows common people to achieve uncommon results.*”

The idea is that employers will hang these up around the workplace as a way to inspire the employees and convey the company’s values. Here’s **another**: a runner in a beautiful desert setting with the slogan: *“Persistence: the race goes not always to the swift, but to those who keep running.”*

They have been pretty popular, and I’d expect most of you have seen them. **One more**: the sun peaking through the clouds as a lone climber stands on a mountain peak. The quote is from Michael Jordan: “*Some people want it to happen, some wish it would happen, others make it happen*.” Pretty inspiring, right? Makes you want to go out and grab life by the horns.

But there’s another business that looked at the all the success of Successories with a bit of cynicism. They’re called Despair.com and they started wondering if motivation is really something that can be drummed up by a poster. So they came up with their own line of posters. They call them DeMotivators, and here **are a few examples**:

Pretty picture, looks a lot like the rowing team, but read the caption: “*Get to Work: You aren’t being paid to believe in the power of your dreams*.”

Or**, again**: another pretty picture, looks like a Successories product, but read the quote: “*Motivation: If a pretty poster and a cute saying are all it takes to motivate you, you probably have a very easy job. The kind robots will be doing soon.*”

They’ve got a whole bunch of these on their website. It’s a hoot. Here’s **my favorite:** *“You are Special. If you require additional affirmation, get a puppy. The rest of us are trying to work.”*

Or, I thought this was **pretty funny**: a beautiful silhouette of man and a woman running a mountain ridge with the caption: “*Persistence: It's over, man. Let her go*.”

And **then this**. I think that’s a picture of a lava flow running over a highway. The quote says: “*Obstacles: Some things can not be overcome with determination and a positive attitude*.”

Here’s my point. The DeMotivators get at this nagging truth: sometimes, even when you do everything right, life does not work in your favor. The Successories product line is built on the notion that if you have the right attitude, and give the right amount of effort, you will be a success. And often—even most of the time—that’s true. That’s why those posters are so popular. But sometimes, no matter how hard you try, things go against you. Some obstacles simply cannot be overcome just because you have a great attitude. Or, **as this DeMotivator** says: “*The journey of a thousand miles sometimes ends very, very badly*.”

And that leads to this question: is life fair? When we do everything right, and we give our very best effort, and life still throws us curveball after curveball, we wonder: where’s the fairness? When you’re making the sweetest lemonade possible, and yet life keeps sending you more lemons, you start to wonder: Where’s the fairness? Is God fair?

***Cleaning House with a Dirty Broom***In our march up to Christmas we have been doing a sermon series called ***The Waiting Room.*** The idea is that Christmas is hard to wait for. We all turn into little kids as Christmas approaches, anxious to see what’s under the tree. But nobody likes waiting.

And we’ve been carrying that over to some of the more serious things we wait for in life. We’ve been talking about the situations and circumstances that we are praying will change, and the difficulty of waiting at those times. We’ve seen that waiting is a Biblical value. Waiting in the Bible is a tough, persistent, resolute longing for God. We’ve seen that the Bible calls us to put our whole-hearted trust in God, even as we wait.

Today, I want to take you to the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk is one of the minor prophets—which means it is one of the shorter prophetic books. (I grew up saying *HABBA-kuk*. But when I went to seminary, it was mostly pronounced *hab-ahh-kuk*. I’m not really sure if there is a correct pronunciation. It’s one of those: “You say potato, I say spud” sort of deals.)

Habakkuk is a book about waiting. **The second verse of the book says this**:

**2**How long, Lord, must I call for help,
    but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, “Violence!”
    but you do not save.

Habakkuk finds himself in life’s waiting room. He lived at a time when the nation of Judah wasn’t doing all that well. There was a weak and corrupt king and all kinds of violence and strife and conflict and miscarriages of justice. Habakkuk calls God’s attention to all the wickedness and he asks, in essence, “How Long, O Lord? How long are you going to let all this wrong continue?”

The book reads almost like a prayer journal. We get some of Habakkuk’s very personal, very heartfelt thoughts and questions about God. He is struggling with the wait. And then we get some of God’s answers. **Verse 5 is God’s answer**:

**5**“Look at the nations and watch—
    and be utterly amazed.
For I am going to do something in your days
    that you would not believe,
    even if you were told.

This is a pretty cool verse. Pretty inspiring. It would look good on one of those Successories posters. Habakkuk is crying out to God: “How long O Lord?” and God answers: “I’ve got this. I’ve got a plan. I’m going to do something utterly amazing; something that—if I told you about it—you wouldn’t believe.” That sounds like a good thing.

Only it’s not.

The **first line of verse 6**:

**6**I am raising up the Babylonians.

Question for you: Are the Babylonians good guys or bad guys in the Bible? These are bad guys. Anytime the Rolling Stones name an album after your city, you know it’s bad. Babylon is the city chosen in the book of Revelation to represent all evil. The Great Prostitute Babylon. These are not good guys.

Here’s what’s happening: Habakkuk’s complaint is that his nation is plagued by corruption and violence. He calls on God to do something about it. God says, “O.K., I’ll do something about it. I’ll send in the Babylonians to clean things up.”

Historically speaking, Habakkuk wrote his book right before the destruction of Jerusalem. He was there for the Babylonian invasion and the beginning of the exile. He predicted that this very thing would happen.

But he doesn’t like it.

To Habakkuk, God’s solution to the problem seems a little, shall we say, *extreme.* Does God really need to use the extra wicked Babylonians to fix the wicked Judeans? It seems like the cure might be worse than the disease. **Verse 13, what scholars call Habakkuk’s second complaint:**

**13**Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
    you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?
    Why are you silent while the wicked
    swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

Here’s Habakkuk wondering: Is this fair? How can the holy God use a group of people as deplorable as the Babylonians to execute His judgment? It’s as though Habakkuk is saying: “God, I know that I wanted you to do something about the wickedness in Judah. But the Babylonians? They’re even worse! This is like using a dirty broom to clean house.”

There are several descriptions of the Babylonians throughout the book that give us an idea of just how vile they are. They are a “ruthless and impetuous people” (1:6). “They are a law to themselves and promote their own honor.” (1:7) They “seize dwelling places not their own” (1:6) and they are “guilty men.” (1:11) Perhaps worst of all, Habakkuk can see that God is bringing the Babylonians in, but the Babylonians themselves do not even recognize God. They believe their own strength is their god (1:11 and 1:16).

How does it make sense that God would allow these people to conquer Judah? It doesn’t seem fair.

***Thoughts on Fairness***Now, let me pause for a moment in the exposition of the text to make a couple of observations about fairness. We wonder how it can be fair when we put all the right effort into something and the results are still not what we wanted. Then we see others who don’t try at all, and they seem to be enjoying all sorts of success. Habakkuk wonders how it can be fair that the Babylonians are being allowed to triumph over God’s people.

And the first observation on fairness is this: **Fairness is not a sliding scale.** Right and wrong, righteousness and unrighteousness, is measured by God’s standard, not ours.

Look at the end of **verse 13** and you’ll see that Habakkuk is looking for a sliding scale. He asks God: “Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”

Now, think about that. Just back in verse 2 he was complaining because Judah was so unrighteous. But now, the Babylonians show up, and he’s like: “Wait a minute, they’re worse! We’re more righteous than they are!”

And we all think like that. We like to divide the world up into Black Hats and White Hats. The Bad Guys get the Black Hats and the Good Guys get the White Hats. And do you know who always gets a White Hat when we do this?

We do! Right?

Nobody wants to think of him or herself as a Bad Guy. So we always wear White Hats and then we look around for people who are worse than us and we assign them Black Hats and then we start comparing. And, of course, if somebody we think ought to be wearing a Black Hat has it better than us, then we start wondering: How is that fair?

But, here’s the thing. When we’re talking about the way God sees things, there’s no sliding scale. It’s not like God is going: “Well, those people are a little better than those people and those people over there, why they measure up really well against these folks…”

It doesn’t work like that! God doesn’t see White Hats and Black Hats. Instead, He looks at us and all He sees are Black Hats. O.K.? There’s God, and then there’s everybody else. The standard isn’t how we measure up against other people, the standard is God—THE Holy One.

So that leads to my second observation on fairness: **Fairness is not always going to be in our favor.** If we want God to act with fairness and immediately judge all wickedness, then we need to keep in mind that isn’t going to go all that well for us either.

We can all sympathize with Habakkuk. It’s sort of like if you live in a neighborhood where there’s a lot of crime and violence, and you call up the police and say: “Hey, could you come do something about this neighborhood?” And they say, “No problem, we’ll drop a bomb on your street next Tuesday.” And now you’re thinking: *Hey, wait a minute, I live on that street!* In a sense, that’s what happened to Habakkuk. By bringing in the Babylonians it feels like God has exercised the nuclear option.

But go back to the sliding scale. So often, when we call on God to be fair, when we ask God for justice, what we mean is for God to bring justice to everybody else. But we think we should be exempt. We forget that in God’s eyes we are all wearing Black Hats.

One of the most well-known verses in Habakkuk is **chapter 2, verse 20:**

**20**The Lord is in his holy temple;
    let all the earth be silent before him.

God is in His Holy Temple. God is set apart. There is no one like God. He’s the only one wearing a White Hat.

So “all the earth” needs to be silent before Him. Not just the Babylonians. Not just the people who belong to that party or who practice that particular behavior. All the earth. That includes you. That includes me. None of us have a leg to stand on before the Holy God.

And so, we need to keep in mind that as much as we want God to be fair, we are all desperate for His mercy as well.

***On the Ramparts***Now, let’s go back to the text. Habakkuk is still wondering: what about the Babylonians? If Judah deserves to be punished, what about them? **Chapter 2, verse 1:**

I will stand at my watch
    and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
    and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

Here’s the waiting. Habakkuk pours out his heart to God, and then he declares his intention to wait. And, I’ll suggest that Habakkuk is a good model for us here. I appreciate Habakkuk’s commitment to wait for God’s answer.

There is a difference between questioning God and accusing Him. Questioning God is when you say, “God, I know you’re good, and I look at the earth, and I don’t understand what you’re doing.” That’s questioning God.

Accusing God is when you say: “God, you say that you’re good but I look at the earth and I don’t see it. So I think you’re a liar. Or I think you’re a failure. You’re not doing your job.” That’s accusing God. When we accuse God we basically say to Him that we think we could do a better job running the universe than He can. That maybe He should start consulting with us.

And that, I’d suggest, might be a little arrogant on our part.

But what Habakkuk is doing, having questions and going to God and saying: “I don’t understand, please help me understand.” That’s actually humility. That’s faith. Habakkuk commits to wait for God’s answer. But he knows—and this is the key!—that God does have the answer.

David Bast, fromer President of Words of Hope, writes:

[Habakkuk] believes both that there are answers—the right answers—to his questions and that God will reveal them to him. If our hope is that God will never give up on us, our faith means we never give up on him. (*Why Doesn’t God Act More Like God,* p. 43)

And finally, God does answer. **Verses 2-4:**

**2**Then the Lord replied:

“Write down the revelation
    and make it plain on tablets
    so that a herald may run with it.
**3**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.

**4**“See, the enemy is puffed up;
    his desires are not upright—
    but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness

Essentially, God comes to Habakkuk and says: “I’m going to give you a revelation—a vision—and I want you to write it down.” He says: “Write it big, write it on tablets, so the runner can read it as he carries it to others.”

God says: “I’m going to give you a picture what is coming, and while it might seem like a long time coming, don’t give up. Because it will happen exactly when I mean for it to happen. Remember, Habakkuk, the arrogant trust in themselves and are always hungry for more. But the righteous are the ones who trust in me. So keep trusting in me Habakkuk, and you’ll see what I have planned.”

What is this vision? Some scholars think that the vision Habakkuk received is what is recorded in the first 15 verses of chapter 3. It’s what is known as a “theophany”—an appearance of God—and it is quite awe-inspiring. For example, **Habakkuk 3:3**:

His glory covered the heavens
    and his praise filled the earth.
**4**His splendor was like the sunrise;
    rays flashed from his hand,
    where his power was hidden…

**6**He stood, and shook the earth;
    he looked, and made the nations tremble.
The ancient mountains crumbled
    and the age-old hills collapsed—
    but he marches on forever.

Basically, God gives Habakkuk a vision of Himself, breaking into the world. It’s a picture of God as a Warrior/King, the God of justice stepping through the curtain of heaven to set things right. It is a promise that a time is coming when all wickedness will, indeed, fall silent before God.

But for now, the key is waiting. Back to **chapter 2, verse 3:**

**3**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.

Habakkuk gets a sneak preview with the vision he’s been shown. It is a vision that will not prove false. But it’s not on Habakkuk’s time schedule, nor ours. In fact, from our perspective, it seems like it is lingering.

But though it seems long in coming, still we are urged to wait for it.

***The God Who Enters Our Pain***I see a Christmas promise in this verse.

We live in a different era than Habakkuk. The vision of chapter 3, the vision of God appearing in power and might to set all things right, is a vision we are still waiting for. Like Habakkuk, we long for the appointed time when God will come and evil will end.

But what we know, that Habakkuk didn’t know, is that there was to be a first coming. Before arriving as the King of kings and Lord of lords, God would first enter time as a humble peasant boy.

And, incidentally, that also points us to the most important answer concerning the question of whether or not God is fair. I’ll make one more observation on fairness, and I’ll phrase it like this: **God has entered into our world of unfairness.**

Whenever you struggle with the issue of evil and suffering and God’s fairness in this broken world, this one thing must be kept in mind: God sent His Son to suffer cruelly on our behalf. Jesus Christ, God’s own Son who is to be worshiped as God, suffered an excruciatingly odious and shameful death. And in doing so, He took His White Hat--because of all the people who have ever walked the face of the earth, Jesus alone was worthy to wear a White Hat—and He exchanged it for our Black Hats. He who had no sin became sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. (see 2 Cor. 5:21)

This is how God can turn our Black Hats into White Hats. This is how God dealt fairly with the consequences and penalties of our wickedness.

And more than that, Jesus now identifies with us in our suffering. As D.A. Carson writes: “The God on whom we rely knows what suffering is all about, not merely in the way that God knows everything, but by experience.” (*How Long, O Lord?* p. 159)

Greg Boyd is a seminary professor and church pastor up in the Twin Cities. Some years ago he wrote a book called *Letters from a Skeptic*. It’s a series of actual letters (before the days of e-mail) between Greg and his father, who at the beginning of the book is not a Christian. Essentially, what Greg did was invite his dad to ask any questions he wanted about Christianity, and he’d do his best to try to answer them.

And one of the main questions that keeps coming up is the question of suffering. Greg’s mother, Arlyle, had died of cancer, and she had suffered a great deal. So how could a good God allow so much pain? How was that fair?

Here’s part of Greg’s answer:

You may remember that my first year in college I went through a long period of acute doubt over the truth of Christianity. This problem we’ve been discussing—the problem of evil—was at the heart of it. I was torn between two opposing convictions. The world, with all of its beauty, design, intricacy, and personal characteristics, demands that there must be a God. But, I thought at the time, the suffering of the world says that there can’t be a God. It all came to head for me one cold February night as I was walking back from an astronomy class at the University of Minnesota. Thinking of the grandeur of the stars we had just been looking at, I was saying to myself “there must be a God.” But thinking of the nightmarish suffering of Auschwitz, I was saying to myself “there can’t be a God.” The two thoughts were battling with each other at hyperspeed. I was tormented.

Finally, just as I approached my car, I looked up to the sky and cried out with a loud, angry voice—“the only God I can believe in is one who knows firsthand what it’s like to be a Jewish child buried alive, and knows that it’s like to be a Jewish mother watching her child be buried!” And just then it occurred to me (or was it revealed?): that is exactly the kind of God Christianity proclaims. There is no other belief which does this. Only the Gospel dares to proclaim that God enters smack-dab into the middle of the hell we create. Only the Gospel dares to proclaim that God was born a baby in a bloody, [smelly] stable, that He lived a life befriending the prostitutes and lepers no one else would befriend, and that He suffered, firsthand, the hellish depth of all that is nightmarish in human existence. Only the gospel portrait of God makes sense of the contradictory fact that the world is at once so beautiful and ugly.

I guess what I’m saying, Dad, is this. I don’t know exactly why God didn’t answer our prayers for Arlyle. I know that if it wasn’t for human sin, and if we weren’t involved in this spiritual war, this painful situation never would have arisen. But more important than this explanation is this understanding: God was suffering with you, and me, and Arlyle, throughout the whole affair. He cries too. And through His participation in our pain, He wants to redeem it. (p. 61-62)

For me, this point is so important. We can talk about Black Hats and how we all deserve nothing but immediate judgment as much as we want; but if God is just some distant deity who is impassively watching the events of our lives unfold, it would still be pretty hard to take. There are just too many times when life doesn’t make sense, too many events that seem so unfair.

But knowing that God got off His throne and entered into the very midst of all this unfairness helps me to have faith that God does understand. He’s been here. He’s suffered. And He has a plan for our pain.

**3**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.