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# Come What May

## Finding Patience and Joy in a Slow Calamity



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A slow-moving calamity rolled through the ancient world, now more than 2,500 years ago, crawling, at a haunting pace, through one nation after another.

Unlike Pearl Harbor, or a terrorist attack, or a tsunami along the Pacific Rim, this plague caught very few off guard. Every king, every nation, every citizen saw it coming. They heard the reports. They lived under the specter. The world's greatest city at the time, Nineveh, didn't fall overnight, but over painful weeks and weeks, even months. Jerusalem came next. Waves of destruction came to the holy city, first in 605 BC, then eight years later in 597, and finally total decimation eleven years later in 586.

What threat paralyzed the world's great cities not just for hours and days, but for weeks and months, even years? The rising power of Babylon and the slow march of its army from one capital to the next, setting up

months-long sieges, and toppling the world's leading cities as their supply lines ran out and the people began to starve.

And all the more, the coming calamity should have been no surprise to God's first-covenant people. Even in the middle of the seventh century before Christ, while Assyria was the reigning world power, and Babylon was only slowly on the rise, God's prophets, like Isaiah, told of the coming disaster decades ahead of time. As did a far less prominent prophet named Habakkuk, who may have an especially striking word for us in our present slow-moving distress.

## God Does Not Look on Idly

Unlike any other Hebrew prophet, Habakkuk never turns and speaks directly to the people in his short, three-chapter book. He reports his dialogue with God and God's surprising work *in him*, leaving personal application to the reader. The book's outline is rather simple, as far as Hebrew prophecies go.

First, Habakkuk begins with his seemingly righteous frustrations, perhaps slightly overstated. He asks, "How long, O Lord?" to the rampant wickedness he sees around him, among God's own people, in an era of spiritual decline ([Habakkuk 1:2–4](#)). God responds with a revelation the prophet not at all anticipated (1:5–11). Essentially: *Yes, little prophet, my people have become wicked — and I am not looking idly at it. In fact, I am raising up the Babylonians to destroy them.*

Habakkuk reels and rocks. He thought he had justice problems before. Now all the more. He responds with a second complaint (1:12–2:1). How can God "idly look at traitors" ([Habakkuk 1:13](#)), Babylonians even more wicked than God's backslidden people? The prophet becomes more defiant: "I will take my stand . . . and look out to see what [God] will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint" ([Habakkuk 2:1](#)). He presumes God's response to his second complaint will not suffice, and he'll be ready to answer back.

But God's second response (2:2–20) does silence him. The prophet never registers a third complaint. God will not leave Babylon unpunished. His full justice — his fivefold woe — will be served in his perfect timing. The hand of justice indeed will fall, destroying the prideful and rescuing the righteous who live by faith ([Habakkuk 2:4](#)).

## How Do We Live by Faith?

The core of the book's message, from the voice of God to the hearts of his people, is *live by faith in unprecedented days*, come what may. God doesn't promise the anxious prophet that soon he'll make things better. In fact, he promises to make things much worse before they get better. Utter devastation will come first, then deliverance. First total ruin, then final rescue.

To the disoriented, panicked prophet, God exposes the folly of human pride, and issues a fresh call to humility and faith, to patiently receive God's mysterious "work" of judgment ([Habakkuk 1:5](#); [3:2](#)). To trust the divine in the toughest of times, in days of looming trouble. Here we have God's timeless call to his people in mysterious times, Habakkuk's and ours: *live by faith* ([Habakkuk 2:4](#)).

But what does that mean? “Living by faith” can sound so vague and general. What might it mean for us here on the ground, under the present (and coming) threat?

## Will We Wait Quietly?

After he has been silenced, Habakkuk speaks again in chapter 3, but now in prayer, not complaint. He has heard and heeded the divine voice and now celebrates God’s unstoppable power and uncompromised justice. The prophet’s prayer concludes with two “Yet I will” statements. First, he says he will exercise patience. The prideful and unbelieving may ride it out with all sorts of panic and noise, but Habakkuk will wait quietly:

Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble  
to come upon people who invade us. ([Habakkuk 3:16](#))

His faith in God’s perfect justice has been renewed. He will adjust the clock of his soul to God’s timetable, not presume the converse. God is not standing idly by, of this we can be sure. He is watching. He is attentive. He sees every movement, every detail. In the end, the world will see that he has done right, never treating any creature with injustice.

And as prone as we are, in our finitude and sin and anxiety, to want to force on God our own timetable for resolution, he calls us to quiet patience, even as painfully slow as the present distress may unfold.

## Will We Rejoice?

The second and final “Yet I will . . .” comes in verse 18: “Yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.” And the prophet says so precisely with the worst-case scenarios on the table:

Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation. ([Habakkuk 3:17–18](#))

In other words, though the supply lines should fail, and the shelves be bare, and the economy tank, and the virus come to our own city, and street, and even home, yet — even then — this newly humbled prophet will rejoice *in the Lord*. Will we? Not in our supplies. Not in our health. Not in our own security. Not even in the defeat of the enemy. There is one constant, one unassailable surety, one utter security, one haven for true joy in the most challenging of journeys: God himself. He holds himself out to us as he removes our other joys. Will we lean anew into him?

Those puffed up in pride will certainly be destroyed in time, whether sooner or later. But those who welcome God’s humbling hand and bow in faith — in quiet patience and trans-circumstantial joy — will find God

himself to be “my strength” in such days ([Habakkuk 3:19](#)). So too for us, living by faith in such times will come to expression in patience and joy. But what again might that look like?

## Will We Rise in Song?

Among the many ways God may inspire his church in the coming days, we at least have one clue from Habakkuk what such patience and joy sounds like: *singing*. That’s the stunning and unusual way this short interaction between the prophet and God ends — with the prophet singing praise. That’s why he ends with directions for corporate worship: “To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.” These final lines are not only a prayer. They are a song for others to join.

There’s not anything else quite like this in all the prophets. Habakkuk begins with as much feistiness and (what seems like) defiance as we find anywhere else. And yet God graciously moves his soul from protest to praise. Which should be an encouragement to those honest enough to admit to finding this pandemic tripping up the feet of our faith so far.

As we’ve seen, Habakkuk didn’t come into the news gracefully. Yet God met him there, in his pride and defiance and fear. The little prophet foolishly took his stand, and God mercifully brought him to his knees. God humbled him, and the prophet received it, humbling himself. He received the disorienting, inconvenient, painful purposes of God in the coming judgment, and he abandoned his protest, bowed in prayer, and rose in praise.

Will we do the same in the lingering confusion and disorientation of the slow-moving uncertainty we’re living in? Will our protests, however justly conceived, lead to bent knees? And will our prayers lead us to sing?