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buzz@BuzzKing.com

<https://BuzzKing.com>

Habakkuk 2:1–3 ESV

*I will take my stand at my watchpost
and station myself on the tower,
and look out to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.*

² *And the LORD answered me:*

“Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.

³ *For still the vision awaits its appointed time;*

it hastens to the end—it will not lie.

If it seems slow, wait for it;

it will surely come; it will not delay.

Psalms 13:1–6 ESV

¹ *How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?*

How long will you hide your face from me?

² *How long must I take counsel in my soul*

and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³ *Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;*

light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

⁴ *lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”*

lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵ *But I have trusted in your steadfast love;*

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶ *I will sing to the LORD,*

because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Waiting too long?

I’m sure that all of you are quite familiar with the Book of Habakkuk and have

spent countless hours reading it. But just in case a few of you are not intimately

familiar with it, let me provide an overview. Habakkuk was one of the latter prophets of the Old Testament. He lived during the last part of the seventh century, B.C. He prophesized about how righteous and wicked people relate to each other. He concluded that God is just, and therefore, the righteous can count on being vindicated in the end and that the wicked can count on perpetual, divine punishment. As far as Habakkuk as a person goes, his book tells us virtually nothing about him. He apparently was closely associated with the daily operation of the Temple. He listened to God and passed God's words on to his people. Parts of the Book of Habakkuk were probably used in worship services, especially parts of the very poetic third chapter of his book. The bottom line of the Book of Habakkuk is that it is intended for those who are caught in a waiting period. God has made a promise – and it is yet to be fulfilled. We have turned to God – but we have not yet felt the touch of God's grace in return. The Book of Habakkuk is about patience and waiting for God to decide when the time is right.

Our first quote today comes from the beginning of the second of three chapters in this short book of prophesy. *I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint. And the LORD answered me: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its*

appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. This passage is typical of Habakkuk and of the prophets in general: Habakkuk is saying that we must wait on God for God to decide when it is time for an answer. There is an appointed time, and until it comes about, we must wait. This, in general, is a common theme in the Old Testament, and not just in the Book of Habakkuk. The subtlety here is that the prophet isn't telling other people that they must wait: he is himself waiting on God to respond to him. Habakkuk, like all other prophets, is not himself a wise person who knows all: he is simply the messenger, the spokesperson for God, who is infinitely wise and does indeed know all. The lesson for us? If Habakkuk must wait with patience for God to reveal the right time, then surely, we must learn to wait. Habakkuk uses the metaphor of a watchtower: the great prophet is really nothing more than an average guard, at his post in the watchtower, keeping an eye out for God – and making sure that he is listening when God's response is given. What Habakkuk is waiting on is the answer to the question that all of us have asked ourselves: why does God allow innocent people to suffer? Why is there injustice and brutality? In particular, why would God allow a foreign power overrun the land of God's people? Ultimately, Habakkuk tells the Israelites that they must wait on God to free them from the Babylonians.

Recently, I sat with a man, who was somewhat younger than me, who was desperately ill. He had gotten bitten by some sort of insect, apparently, and had waited to go to the ER, despite the fact that the bite had become badly infected. He waited days and then weeks because he was afraid of being infected by the corona virus while in the hospital. This is based, as near as I could tell, on the misconception that hospitals are dangerous places to hang out at right now. Emergency rooms across the country have reported a sharp decrease in visits during the pandemic. People are apparently having heart attacks and strokes, running high temperatures, getting hurt – and not going to the ER like they would normally do. This man’s serious medical condition was not the reason I was sent to talk to him: he was upset with himself for waiting so long to get help. He was beside himself with self-directed anger. By the time he went to the hospital, the infection was a couple of inches wide and was deep, open, and raw. He was also septic. An infection had invaded his entire body, making him very dangerously ill.

I of course told him that he shouldn’t berate himself, that he was just doing what he thought was best. He’s not a medical person. The media made it sound like hospitals were teeming with people who were violently sick with Covid-19, and in some places in the country, this was quite true. He had no way of knowing

that in reality, the precautions that are taken in hospitals make any given hospital safer than a Starbucks or a Safeway. I'll get back to this man; let's call him Tony.

Our Psalm today is in a group of Psalms that are attributed to King David. We of course have no idea if he actually wrote them or if they were attributed to him as a way of showing respect. These Psalms reveal the need to have a deep trust in God, even during times of deepest despair, and they have been used heavily in Jewish and Christian services. Number 13 evokes a strong sense of loneliness and desperation from someone who is facing persecution. But in the end, it reaffirms God's never-ending mercy, relief, and love. God will indeed listen to a person who is suffering and provide for that person in a bountiful way. The issue for the oppressed is how long they may have to wait for God to choose the right time for action.

But one thing that our society in the United States today does not stand for is indefinitely waiting for things to be made right. We consider delays to be denials. We want action now when we are feeling oppressed. We should not have to wait for relief from our enemies the way the Israelites had to wait. Waiting for God to choose the time seems foolish to people. And God tells us that there are times when we have to rise up and take care of ourselves.

Indeed. Tony, whose identity I am protecting by changing some of the details of this incident, turned out to be a believer and felt he should have done something. God does not tell us that we are helpless. God does not tell us that when things go bad all we can do is suck it up and wait for God to find the right time to bring relief. We are indeed expected to use our minds and take action to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and in fact, any human we come across who needs help. Sometimes what God tells us isn't to wait forever on God, but to go ahead and do what we have to do. Tony was angry that he didn't listen to God. He figured that God probably did tell him to go to the hospital, that God wanted him to take action for his own sake. He berated himself for not having the courage to go to the Emergency Room despite his desperate fear of the corona virus. That is what he had to do for himself: overcome that fear of infection.

Now, Tony eventually healed completely from his massive infection, although he spent a number of days in the hospital desperately ill. I happened to talk to him the day he was due to be discharged. I told him that I was very happy that he was okay. Then he asked me a question. He said that he had been raised to believe that he should be patient. That God is in control of all things, that we should trust God to do the right thing at the right time. So, he said to me, how do we know when to wait and when to act? I said, well, you told me that you felt

that God had indeed spoken to you, that it was time for you to get help. And, I said, when it comes to our health, we should act whenever we think it's right. I said that it's not the case that God micromanages us. God gave us powerful minds and expects us to use them. But that doesn't mean that things are simple. I can't give you a easy answer, I told him. There are times when we do need to wait, and it's usually when we're looking for something nice for ourselves, something that we don't need to survive. But then I told him about Habakkuk, and about our Psalm, and how even when our freedom, our human rights are at stake, we sometimes need to wait.

I said a good thing to do is to turn to an unbiased expert, like a doctor. If a physician tells you that you need help, do it. Next time call your doc or call the ER. Tell them what's happening. Listen to an expert's advice. But then he said something to me that really made me think. He told me that there was another reason why he had waited so long. It wasn't just that he was afraid of going to the hospital. It was because he was upset because his wife wanted him out of the house, that she wanted to end their marriage. He was afraid that if he left, even to go to the hospital, he wouldn't get back in. I asked him if he thought that she was going to change the locks or something like that. He said no, he meant it emotionally, that if he disappeared for a day or two, she would be glad he was

gone. I asked him if he was going back home now. He said that was where he was headed, but he had no idea what would happen. I can't ask a patient to contact me after they have left the hospital and I cannot give a patient my phone number to contact me. All I could do was tell him that I wished him the best, that I would pray for him, that I knew he was a good man. I said that he should accept his share of the blame for whatever was going wrong with his marriage and work hard to make things right. He thanked me.

Tony was discharged that afternoon and I never saw him again. There is a lesson here for all of us. Sometimes it's not a matter of waiting on God; nor is it a matter of having the nerve to act on our own and not expect God to do all our work for us. Sometimes we have to turn to God proactively. I wish that Tony had turned to God to help him with his marriage and to protect his marriage. I wish he had prayed about how to best heal his damaged marriage.

There's something else to this story. A tail end of the tale. A couple days later, I was talking to another employee at the hospital. She happened to make an offhand remark about a patient who had come in very sick but had left in very good shape. She referred to Tony and said that while he was in the hospital, his wife was there with him almost every day, but she wasn't sure he remembered because he was so sick. Then, he had healed quickly, almost suddenly, and so

they discharged him, she said. The wife was a very sweet woman, she said. So, my hunch is that Tony's marriage worked out just fine. Maybe his wife realized how much she loved her husband only when he became so sick. Maybe God was speaking to Tony all along, telling him, hey you're going to have to be real sick, trust me. Don't go to the hospital just yet. Wait until I tell you it's time. Then maybe God told him it was time. Maybe he went home, thankful that his wife was giving him another chance and then maybe he did everything he could to make his marriage something beautiful and permanent. Please pray with me.

God, it can be very difficult to know when it's time, when you are going to raise your hand and open your mouth – and make something happen. Help us listen. Give us that deep intuitive gift to sense your presence. Don't force us to rely on our objective, conscious thought. Let us feel you through the fire of the Holy Spirit working within us. Let us relax, trust you, and trust our ability to understand you without having to work at it. Amen.