

Standing at Our Watchpost

How many of our prayers (in other words, our conversations with God) have begun with those two words, “How long?” Is that even permissible? Or is it downright rude? Might God find it arrogant? Is it a sign of a weak faith, to ask God, “How long?” Might it even make God angry?

And yet, we find it in Scripture. Over and over. Especially in the Old Testament. No fewer than thirteen psalms, some of them multiple times. Let’s look, for example, at Psalm 13. In fact let’s look just at the first two verses, Psalm 13:1-2.

¹ *How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?*
² *How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

What makes the psalmist even think that he or she can get away with that? You can’t talk that way to God!

And let’s look at the biblical prophets. Six of them ask the same question. Some of them multiple times. Jeremiah, for example. Eight times he asks God that question. But let’s look at the prophet Isaiah. He only asks that question once. But not surprisingly it is very early in the book. In Isaiah 6:8 God asks, “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” To his credit, Isaiah simply replies “*Here am I, send me.*” God then commands Isaiah what to do and say:

Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’
¹⁰ *Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend
with their minds, and turn and be healed.”*

How does Isaiah respond? With a question, comprised of four words. “*How long, O Lord?*”

Keep in mind that whenever we see the words “O Lord,” what that’s translating is God’s name. “Yahweh.” God’s personal name, that he first gave to Moses and commanded Moses to pass on to the people. So that his people would know that their God was a personal God. A God who cares deeply. The kind of God to whom you can say such things, and not get blasted, but rather be heard and even responded to. Did you know that we have such a God?

Let’s look again at our passage from the prophet Habakkuk. This comes at the very beginning of his book. Chapter 1:1-2 (we have it on our bulletin):

1 *The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.*
² *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?*

And then the prophet gives Yahweh his laundry list.

- 1. I cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?*
- 2. You make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?*

3. *Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.*
4. *The law becomes slack and justice never prevails.*
5. *The wicked surround the righteous— . . . judgment comes forth perverted.*

That's quite a list, isn't it? Honest. Bold. Angry, even.

What's on your laundry list? It probably looks something like this.

Cancer. Covid. Growing old. Conflict in our families. Conflict in our Church. The infiltration of societal values. Death. Grief. Loneliness. Loss of who we are. Alienation and condemnation. Not enough money. Loss of a job. The weather. Heat. Hurricanes. Destruction and devastation. Global warming. The war in Ukraine. Rhetoric that worsens the war and deepens the divide. Saber rattling. The growing threat of nuclear war.

Undoubtedly some of the items on your list are deeply personal, even private. Some of them we don't want to share, don't want others to know. Fear of being seen as weak. Vulnerable. Imperfect. Many of them are based on fear. Fear of change. Fear of loss. Some of them are political. We don't like what's going on. We don't like who our leaders are. We don't like who all the world's leaders are.

It is clear very early on that Habakkuk's list was in part political. As were the lists of his prophetic colleagues. Wars, wars, and rumors of wars. Injustice. Indifference to the poor. And through it all there runs at least one common thread. The sense that they—we—are helpless. The sense that either God doesn't hear our cries, or doesn't care. That we are on our own.

But then, a shift happens. More like an earthquake, a powerful shaking of the ground that is both devastating and clarifying. Chapter 2:1. *"I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint."*

First and foremost what we discover in these verses—what shifts—is the realization that the prophet—and we—are not helpless. There is something we can do. Second is remembering that we in fact have a job to do, a job apparently given us by God. And third, understanding that part of that God-given job is simply to watch and to wait. To watch, because God will respond. God always does. To wait, because we don't know when God's response will come. Let alone, what that response will be.

It's hard to wait. It's hard to keep asking *"How long?"* Especially when it seems like God isn't answering. That very question represents a faith in crisis. The beginning of doubt, perhaps. Doubt that God hears, or cares, or responds. Perhaps even an unspoken, terrifying, but unavoidable doubt whether God in fact even exists.

But the question *"How long?"* is actually just the opposite. Instead of representing a faith in crisis, or worse, dead, it represents a faith that is still very much alive. Like a grain of wheat lying deep in the cold winter ground. Like a body hanging on a cross. That seed may feel dead at times. When in reality it is merely dormant. Spring is coming. We just don't know for sure when. And so we ask the obvious question, *"How long?"* because we really want to know. We don't know. But we know that God does know. And so, we ask. You could even say that our asking is our job. How long, O Lord? O Lord, how long? How long?

The thing is, when you're stationed on the rampart, when you're standing at your watchpost, you can see better than anyone else. You can see God's answer coming before anyone else can.

And once we see it, we have another job to do. [*“Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.”*] Namely, to write it down. To make it plain, on tablets. So that even the proud will have to acknowledge it. So that even a runner may read it as he is passing by. *“For there is still a vision for the appointed time.”*

When all is said and done, this is precisely what it means to live by faith. Standing at our watchpost. Writing down what we see. So that a runner may read it.

We can do that, can't we?

Amen.