

# That a Runner may Read it

Hespeler, 30 October 2022 © Scott McAndless – Anniversary

[Habakkuk 1:1-11; 2:1-4](#), Psalm 119:137-144, 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12, Luke 19:1-10

**T**he prophet Habakkuk is one of those guys who just seems to have the ability to be completely open and honest with God. He opens the book that bears his name in the Bible with a question that I think many of us could ask if we dared to be so honest. **“O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack, and justice never prevails.”**

Habakkuk was obviously living through some pretty hard times – times when it seemed as if the very structure and conventions of society were breaking down. And I could probably spend some time going through all of the ways in which things were breaking down in his day, but I honestly don’t feel like I need to. I kind of feel like we are living through it.

## Crisis Times

I constantly hear today about how some of the basic conventions of our society – the things that once held us together and allowed us to function – are no longer working for us. We see it in a growing mistrust of the basic assumptions of democratic government. I realize that this is something that probably started in the United States in the aftermath of their last Presidential elections, but it has absolutely spread to Canada and many other parts of the world.

## Crisis in Confidence

Growing numbers of people everywhere have lost confidence in the security and fairness of democratic elections even though these things continue to function well. Suddenly it seems that losing candidates only need to say that the election of their opponent was unfair, without needing to offer any evidence at all, and huge groups of people will believe them. And I have to wonder how we can possibly manage to govern ourselves if people are attacking the very foundations of that system.

And it’s not just there that we see the breakdown. The whole experience with the pandemic has led to a huge loss of confidence in both public health measures and medical expertise. And I’m not even saying that this didn’t happen without some reason. In many cases, the implementation of even the best advice left a great deal to be desired. As a result, many people have felt let down and I fear that it is leading us to a place where so many people are going to mistrust all expertise in healthcare. If a sufficient number of people no longer follow sensible public health recommendations, it probably doesn’t matter



what the rest of us do. We will all get caught up in the public health crises that follow.

## Civility Breakdown

But it is not just in the big public issues that we see this kind of breakdown. In all kinds of ordinary interactions and discourses it certainly feels as if the very rules of civility that we took for granted no longer apply. All of a sudden, we hear people saying racist things or hateful things about women, people who don't fit traditional gender roles and others. These are things that, just a little while ago, would have been unthinkable for people to actually say them.

And, sure, maybe people were thinking those kinds of things all along and just didn't dare to say them. But I've got to ask the question what does it mean for our society when the inhibitions that once stood in the way of people actually saying them are no longer there?

And maybe this is just me, but I am rather concerned about the impact of all of this on the Christian Church. I'm not just talking about all of the ways in which the church seems to be declining as a recognized institution in society, though I guess that is part of it. What disturbs me more, however, is how some of the worst tendencies we see at work in society are being so thoroughly associated with certain brands of Christianity.

## What is a Christian?

What I mean is this. Not all that long ago, if you asked people in general what a Christian was, you would have gotten answers like that a Christian was someone who went to church fairly regularly, who at least tried to act morally and ethically. They may have even said that Christians were people who tried to take care of the less fortunate.

You want to know what kinds of answers you get to that question today? People are much more likely to reply that Christians are people who are anti-immigration, who have animosity towards LGBTQ people, who are perhaps even white nationalists. In fact, in some recent American studies, there was a stronger association between voting Republican and being a Christian than there was between going to church and being a Christian.

## Working in Reverse

The association between these things has gotten so strong that it seems to have started to work in reverse. Some people look at themselves and say, "Look, here I am. I am against immigration, I don't much like LGBTQ people and think that white people really ought to be in charge, hey, I must be a Christian even though I never go to church or read the Bible. That is what the understanding of Christianity has become in many circles.

Now, please understand me that I'm not saying that that is what Christianity is or that all Christians think like that. That is anything but true. No, it is just that a certain very intolerant expression of Christianity has become very successful at representing itself to the world as the only legitimate kind of Christianity. And I find that very disheartening.

## Habakkuk Demands an Answer

So, these, for me, are the signs that the structures and conventions of society are breaking down under pressure. You might point at different indications, and that is fine. But the feeling that

these things are breaking down is very pervasive these days. I feel very much in tune with Habakkuk and what he is saying. But the wonderful thing about Habakkuk is that he doesn't just dare to talk about what he sees going wrong with the world, he actually demands to know what God is going to do about it. And God answers.

God's answer comes in the form of a vision that Habakkuk receives. Habakkuk is assured that God is at work in some of the disturbing things that are happening in the world. God says, **"I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; They are a law to themselves and promote their own honour."**

## Does God Endorse War?

Now, let me reassure you that that does not mean that God endorses or enjoys the terrible things that are associated with war and invasion in this world. God does not endorse the incursions of the Babylonians any more than God today endorses the incursions of Russia into Ukraine.

No, what the prophet is saying is that God is at work even in the terrible things that sometimes take place in this world. God doesn't endorse the violence and terror of war, but God is able to bring goodness and hope even out of the worst of all situations. So the message of this part of the prophecy is that we should not lose hope even when things look bleak.

But Habakkuk wants to know more than just what God might be doing. **"I will stand at my watchpost and station myself on the rampart;"** Habakkuk says, **"I will keep watch to see what he will say to me and what he will answer concerning my complaint."** Like I said, I like this guy. He wants to know what God wants him to do in the midst of all this and amazingly he gets an answer.

## God's Answer

This is what God tells the prophet: **"Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay."**

Now, there are two parts to this answer. The second part is essentially a command to not lose hope and wait upon the LORD. **"If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay."**

And honestly, holding onto our hope and expectation of God during times when it feels as if everything is falling apart is a very difficult thing to do. It is so much easier to give into cynicism, to throw up our hands and conclude that the evil forces at work in our world are going to win and so we might as well just go along with them. It seems easier to give in to the hatred, the selfishness and the xenophobia that is overtaking our world. But God tells Habakkuk and all of us to hold on.

## Write the Vision

But the first part of God's answer to Habakkuk also matters because it tells us what we can do while we wait on God. **"Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it."** And I will admit that that instruction made my mind race. I had images of us setting up huge billboards on the side of our church building that would proclaim our vision in letters so large that

not only runners but even street racers and motorcycle clubs driving at top speed would have not a choice but to read it.

There is something about how he puts that that speaks to me. He talks about creating a vision that is so clear and compelling that even somebody who is running past you – someone who was moving about as fast as anyone ever moved in that world at that time – will totally understand exactly what you care about and what you stand for.

## How Good are we at This?

And I am not sure how good the church is at doing that today. Are we so clear about our vision that somebody running by at their fastest could capture it? What would such a brief and clear statement be today? I suspect that many of us, if we were asked to summarize in a few words what it meant for us to be followers of Christ, might come up with a few platitudes and maybe some good intentions, but would we really be able to communicate what we stand for?

## Jesus was a Jew

There was a German preacher, for example, who, in the midst of the worst anti-Semitism of the Second World War, proclaimed that the whole Christian Gospel could be summed up in just one phrase: Jesus was a Jew.

Now, of course, under normal circumstances, that would hardly be a good summary of the gospel. But in those circumstances, when the German Church was not only supporting the rounding up and murdering of millions of Jews but also actively purging the church itself of all traces of Jewish origins and influence, it was a bold statement that immediately communicated what living for Christ meant at that moment in time. It was four words that could totally communicate what a believer stood for even if you only saw them when you were running by at top speed.

## What Message Does that Today?

That is not the specific message, but it is the kind of message that the church needs to be offering today. In a world where many are defining their faith in terms of who they hate, we need to boldly say that we do not hate. In a world where many assume that Christians are simply people who are intolerant, we need to not be afraid to loudly proclaim our tolerance. We are no longer living in a world where we can just put out a few vaguely positive sentiments and expect that people will admire us for it. It is time for us to write our vision of a better world, of inclusion and hope and love even for the outsiders on a tablet so large and so clear that a runner may read it.

What that specific message might be, I want to leave that to your imagination for a bit. In fact, I would encourage you to write down just a few words on the papers I have distributed today or send me a text or an email. Make it as simple as “Jesus was a Jew” or “God’s love includes Immigrants” or whatever it might be. What is the vision for a better world that we could proclaim so clearly that a runner could read it?