

When Things Get Worse Before They Get Better

Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4

Grace and peace from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Extinction is a method used in (applied behavioral Analysis) or ABA therapy to change, to literally extinguish, a bad behaviour in a child. But experts say that in doing so, “the way” a person, a child reacts to the therapy, problematic “behaviors can sometimes increase rather than decrease. Often, this is done unintentionally.” But the goal is that by “modifying” the “response to the challenging behavior” that behaviour will decrease overtime, and one day, the unwanted behaviour will be no more.

But it is important experts say, to remember that in the process things get worse before they get better. They say that to change or extinguish an existing bad behaviour in a child, they often see “an extinction burst, or an increase in the occurrence of the problem behavior. Sometimes a child will even resort to more intense behaviors or try alternative inappropriate behaviors when the original problem behavior no longer results in what the child wants.” That’s how bad things get before they get better.

Have you used that statement? “Things will get worse before they get better!” I’m not sure we like that statement, although states a reality.

Another way we can see that things get bad before they get better, think of Nelson Mandela. In his quest in leading an essentially peaceful revolution fighting against apartheid in South Africa, things got very challenging for him. Arrested, charged, and condemned to prison for life. He was there for 27 years. It did get worse for him and for his country before things got better. One day, in 1990, he was released from prison,

and in and the post-apartheid election of 1994, he became the first president of a democratic South Africa, things had to get worse for him.

It happens with health conditions too, many times sick people get worse before they get better.

Now in all these cases, the waiting for things to unfold, for things to get better can be and it is difficult, hard to watch, even take a toll on a person, whatever it is. A problem child, a social cause that seems to go nowhere, health matters, and more. But that's the reality we live in.

But it is not only in the material world we see this happening. In matters of faith happens a lot. Sometimes Christians feel that way about life, faith and the way response to our prayers, or the calls God makes or doesn't make when things are bad. Either God's apparent inactivity or the course of action God does seem to choose leaves us feeling like victims of injustice. Maybe God will get it right in the end, but it gets worse before it gets better! But in the meantime, all we see is a God that is unjust, uncaring, and perhaps even nonexistent, maybe there is no God after all, just look around what's happening all over. Hurricanes, wars, pandemic... where is God when we need him.

An interesting thing about God's people, and people who consider themselves nonreligious, is that they, we take our concerns about this hidden or seemingly unjust God, to God Himself. Sure, we may think about God or talk about God, but eventually we go right to God with our complaints. It is part of who we are, we see it all through the Bible, people like Job, he did it. Jeremiah and many others did the same. Even king David did it. In Psalm 22 he cries "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of

my groaning?” (22:1), a cry picked up by Jesus from the cross when things got worse before they got better.

The prophet Habakkuk does the same in our Old Testament reading. He takes his complaint to God.

The conditions and situation around him, for his people and in his country, were dire. It was a time of chaos, uncertainty, international intrigue, and violence for Judah, where he lived and preached. Habakkuk had gone often to the Lord in prayer for his people, and it just seemed things were getting worse before they got better. In chapter 1, Habakkuk brings two complaints to God. His complaints are personal; notice that he uses the pronouns “I” and “my.”

His first complaint is in chapter 1, there he focuses on God’s apparent lack of response. Violence, wrong, and injustice seem to flourish, while God seems distracted, uninterested, or on vacation. Habakkuk thinks God is the official making no call at all. O, but God is at work. In the following verses, 5-11, God responds to him, and assures Habakkuk that he is active, even then, he was orchestrating a coming invasion of Judah by the (Babylonians). That invasion, says the Lord, will bring his justice to Judah.

Habakkuk, on hearing God’s plan for Judah, raises his second complaint in 1:12–17. Now, aware of God’s strategy, Habakkuk questions its wisdom and fairness. How can God take a wicked, idolatrous nation such as Babylon and use it against a more righteous nation such as Judah?

“Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One?” Habakkuk cries out, “You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the

wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?” He complains some more.

Like a child with an unwanted bad behaviour interpreting the actions of the therapist, or more so, a worker of justice and freedom, being sent to prison. Where is God in all of this? Is he allowing destruction and injustice all around to keep going? Why? Aren't things only getting worse? God, cannot you see?

Now, there is something about this prophetic book. It is like an ABA therapy if you wish. The goal is not so much to change our behaviour so we can please God and be saved. The goal is to see our bad behaviour and to realize that our bad behaviour is the cause of all the bad we see around. The Bible calls it sin.

So when you read this book of Habakkuk treat it like a textbook when facing situations that seem to be getting worse before they get better. And not only for those facing difficult situations, but for all Christians. Habakkuk's words move from frustration, through a chaotic time in Judah's history, to hope. For those of us in the middle of storms, whatever those are like se whirlpool, getting worse, sucking you down, or simply keeping you down, this prophet talks to us too, he shows how God provides the blessings that culminate in hope.

God provides what moves us to hope, even when things get worse before they get better.

We've already seen God's first provision. Habakkuk takes his frustration to God in prayer. Prayer is not just asking God for things; God invites us to open our hearts to him, freely expressing our anger, hurt, disappointment, and fears. It is ok, to be angry with God, it is ok to pour out your heart to him. Feel free to do so, talk to him in prayer, for prayer

recognizes that hopeless situations begin to change as God listens and acts.

A second of God's provisions toward hope we see in 2:1, as Habakkuk says, "I will . . . look out to see what [God] will say to me." Having stated his two complaints clearly in prayer, Habakkuk takes a stand looking for God's response. In other words, he takes a stand in the word of God. And God did speak to him. The Word brought to Habakkuk from God came in the form of a vision, so that Habakkuk will not only hear but also see the Word of the Lord. Those seeking hope look for it in the Word of God, preserved in the Bible. There, too, God's Word can be heard and seen. It is also heard and seen in the witness and encouragement of other Christians. When God comes to Habakkuk with his answers, he tells him to make the vision "plain" by inscribing it on tablets of stone or wood. It is a lasting Word God speaks, a Word for all seasons, clear and plain to those who read it. So, we approach the Word of God with confidence in its inspiration and truthfulness.

A third way God provides hope to Habakkuk comes in 2:3. God makes clear that the full answer to Habakkuk's prayer will be given in due time, it will surely come when the time is right. The Lord tells Habakkuk, "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."

In our day of instantaneous gratification and fast-food delivery, the call to wait for anything goes down hard for us. But we must trust God's time, his response might come soon or later, but will come. Hope always appears at the right time, and it involves waiting. It's like standing in the queue, like being put on hold... It's just in the waiting that we learn dependence, we grow, and we're shaped by God. Most important, in the

waiting faith is strengthened, and hope has everything to do with faith in what God will do in the future.

That's the fourth blessing toward hope God offers Habakkuk—and his most significant. “The righteous,” he writes in 2:4, “shall live by his faith.” Hope from a biblical perspective is inseparable from faith. Faith, in other words, gives hope its substance. Faith, this assurance, of course, is not just our trusting that everything will turn out all right. Faith is believing God will care for us because he has been reconciled to us by the one he promised even to the Old Testament people including Habakkuk. As St. Paul makes clear in Romans when he quotes these words of Habakkuk, it is Christ Jesus who by his death on the cross and his resurrection has accomplished this reconciliation to God. Our sin, which would have forever placed us on the other side of God's judgment, he took on himself and took away. Faith in that—in him!—is the faith by which we live and by which we are righteous before God.

Faith drives hope, indeed. Hope is the amazing gift of seeing the future through what we believe. It's why Christians with cancer can see themselves whole again—on earth or in heaven. It's why a husband and wife torn apart by conflict, sitting with a Christian counselor, suddenly see a future they may have together. It's the out-of-work single mom who simply will not stop her search for a job. They all have a faith, a trust, that drives their relentless hoping. They “live” this faith. “The righteous shall live by his faith” (v 4).

Yes, they live by that faith centered in a God who keeps his promises, who at the right time proved his trustworthiness and sent his one and only Son to save us. For when we needed God most, God was there, God is here now, and God will be there in the unknown to us future.

So, dear friend in Christ, keep on praying, keep seeking God's Word, keep waiting, and keep believing. When things seem to be getting worse before they get better, remember that he has vested you with hope, through faith in his Son Jesus.

Habakkuk end his prophetic words with these words:

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, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places." (Hab 3:17–19)

May these words be yours as well, through the lows and the highs in your life. In his name, amen.