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The Associate Editor's

DESK

Frank M. Hasel

When Meaning Fades Away

It seems as if no other question is asked more frequently than “Why?” We all know the insistent and inquisitive “Why” of a 3-year-old child. With passing time it takes on a nagging, whining, and complaining connotation with a 9 year old and turns into a haughty, challenging, and even rebellious question with teenagers.

And when one faces pain, sickness, suffering, and death, the question “Why” quickly turns into a challenge that torments our minds and souls. It challenges our faith in God and even has the potential to destroy our faith. To experience suffering is painful enough. To suffer without meaning is almost unbearable. For many the temptation is to construct rather hastily some kind of coherent meaning out of our suffering. But to trust God, even if we don't see any meaning, is the challenge we all face as believers.

If we are honest, we all have grappled with this painful, nagging, challenging, and even rebellious “Why” in our own minds: Why, God, did this happen to me? Why, God, are my plans and hopes frustrated? Why, God, am I the one who is

always disappointed in life? Why, God, did You not help me in my helpless situation? Why, God, did You treat me like this?

When trouble, disappointment, and suffering sandblast us to the core, the true stuff of who we are and what is important to us will come to the surface. Actually for Christians, who believe in God, there are deep, more foundational questions: Is God good? Can God be trusted?

Our view of God and His character is the truth around which revolve all answers to the issue of suffering and pain. Do we really believe that God is good, nothing but good, through and through, completely, entirely, 100 percent, from beginning to end? Or do we share what many people believe: God is good. He is very good, they think. In fact, He is very good very often—but not always! In crucial moments of crisis, when our faith in God is put to a test, we can't really trust Him. We are not absolutely sure. And if we are not sure, why should we trust God in this situation? We always need to know first exactly why God did things and why He allowed things to happen. Only then are we willing to trust Him.

But if we know for sure that God *is* good and He does not make any mistake, then we can extend our trust in Him, even though we might not understand everything. Our trust in God is not blind. We trust Him for good reasons. Therefore we can say: "God, I do not understand why this happened *in this situation*. I don't know why You allowed this to take place. But I do know why I trust You anyway. I believe that *You* know, even if I do not know. I do not know *why* it happened, but I trust You, who knows the *why!*"

The question "Why?" surfaces in the Bible. In the little Book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament, we find the "Why?" question raised by the prophet with an intensity and rigor that amazes the reader. He begins the book with these questions: "How long, O Lord, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out to You,

'Violence!' Yet You do not save. Why do You make me see iniquity, And cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises" (Hab. 1:2, 3, NASB).*

These are significant and honest questions. It is encouraging to see that Habakkuk dares to raise such questions with God. If he approaches God with difficult questions, we do not need to be afraid to bring our questions to God, either. God is not offended by our honest, legitimate questions. He is not put off by our lack of understanding. Instead, He deals graciously with us.

The amazing thing is that God responds to Habakkuk. In fact, He gives Habakkuk not only one answer, but two. The first partial answer deals with Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire. The Chaldeans were cruel and had committed outrageous atrocities. They misused their sheer unlimited power. God assures Habakkuk that in the end, even the Babylonians have to give account before God for what they did and that they are not excused from God's judgment (2:5, 6, 8, 16, 17). But the deeper question that is at stake here, and where God provides an unexpected answer, does not aim at the external circumstances in which we live. The profound question that God is interested in has to do with His person and character. It deals with God's nature and His plan for us in this world.

Often, when life goes well, we fancy ourselves to be the main object that is important. We easily tend to think that God loves us in order to bless us, to make our life rich and glad. We believe that it is *our* happiness, *our* honor, *our* fame, *our* future, *our* well-being that is at stake—and that our relationship with Him is secondary. From our natural perspective, we are the center of things, and God is there to make us happy. When we talk of God the Almighty, we often think of His unlimited power as solely serving our interest. This idea of God is false through and through. It elevates us to the level of God and degrades God to

be our servant. And this is nothing less than idolatry.

The nature of biblical faith, however, is to give God the honor and glory and to place our lives as much as possible into His service. Therefore, the answers that we seek to our questions should not revolve around ourselves. It is God who is at the center of the controversy between good and evil. With this in mind, we begin to understand that God does not measure and decide things solely according to our desires and wishes but that greater things are at risk in the fight between light and darkness than what we sometimes perceive and experience.

From Habakkuk we can learn that in the end, God will be recognized as sovereign, just, and good, despite all the ups and downs in this world, despite the injustice and the confusion that apparently reigns. God has not forgotten and forsaken us. He is still in control. His promise stands firm: He will redeem His people and eventually will eradicate all evil.

This perspective prevails only by faith. It not without reason that God's profound answer to Habakkuk's question states: "The righteous will live by his faith" (2:4).

This statement is quoted by the apostle Paul no fewer than three times in the New Testament (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). In Hebrews, we find the reason that we need not throw away our confidence in God. There is a great reward (Heb. 10:35). "For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay" (vs. 37).

God has given His word. We can count on it. Until it will come to pass, we need to wait with endurance (10:36), and we should confidently live by faith! Faith is put to a test precisely when we do not see some things (11:1).

It is this confident attitude that arises through faith in God that propelled Habakkuk to close his little book with the following words: "Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail and the

fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on my high places" (Hab. 3:17-19).

Habakkuk's attitude toward God was not dependent upon external circumstances. It grew out of a deep trust in the goodness of God—who keeps His promises—and kept Habakkuk in His gracious hands. Even though we do not understand everything that God is doing, we can know for sure that God is wise and full of love. In a world that is clouded by the darkness of sin, this knowledge gives us confidence and hope that lifts us higher than any questions that might arise.

*Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this column are quoted from *The New American Standard Bible*.