

Why doesn't God act more like God?

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, have you ever noticed that often in the wake of a traumatic experience, children ask the questions that adults are almost afraid to ask.

DAVE BAST

And here is the question I have heard most often: Why does God let bad things happen? Or perhaps something like this: I prayed, but God didn't answer my prayer.

BOB HEERSPINK

I've heard that, too. If God is capable of stopping bad things, well, why doesn't he?

DAVE BAST

And that is exactly the question, Bob, that we want to address today; so let's talk about it on *Groundwork*.

BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. We are in a series of programs that have been prompted by questions children have asked, and one by one, we are addressing those very real and very deep questions; many of them are very deep, including the one today. It is the question of why does God allow bad things to happen.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know; I remember asking that question when I was in middle school. My grandmother had had a stroke. She was seriously ill, and I prayed; and I thought for sure she would get better; and then the phone call came that she was gone. It was a real shock to me; how could this have happened? I prayed. How could God take away the person I loved?

DAVE BAST

We have a 3-year-old granddaughter and when we go and have a meal together often she will say, "I will pray," you know, "Let me pray." And of course, the prayer that she prays is the first prayer her parents taught her at the table. It is the prayer I learned, maybe you did, too: God is great, God is good. So we thank him for our food. And it struck me that that little prayer really sums up our biblical faith, and it also expresses this problem that we are raising today. If God is great – all powerful, almighty, in control, sovereign, ruling all things, even the flight of a sparrow and the number of hairs on our head – and God is good – loving, gracious, merciful, only wanting our best, doing all things for our salvation – well, then, what gives? What gives when cancer strikes, when accidents happen, when death robs us of our loved ones? What gives?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it is almost as though people say: I have to deny one part of that equation. Either God is really great – he can do everything, but he is not really good, or he really is good but his hands are tied behind his back and he is not great enough to really tackle the tough stuff that happens in my life.

DAVE BAST

And this is what theologians call the problem of evil. In fact, we have wrestled with it from the very beginning; the attempt to come up with some kind of response has a fancy name, too. It is called *theodicy*, or justifying the ways of God with men, as it has been put; and frankly, for a lot of people there is no solution – there is no good answer. There was a well-known book published a few years ago by a Jewish rabbi, Harold Kushner, called *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and his conclusion was: Well, because God could not stop them – He's not great, in other words.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Others might suggest the other thing: He is great, he is sovereign, but he doesn't care.

BOB HEERSPINK

And yet, as Christians who come to scripture... at least, I am not ready to let go of either part of that definition of who God is. he *is* great, he *is* good, and then I've got the problem: What about evil?

DAVE BAST

Well, I think part of the problem comes in when we think that God is just like us, because as I look at this, I think maybe I would try to stop the cancer or say yes to every prayer for healing or not let children get AIDS from their parents or keep that car from running the red light and killing the innocent person in the other car...you know, I mean, wouldn't you? What would you do?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes...

DAVE BAST

What would you do if you were God?

BOB HEERSPINK

I mean, we have this idea that God is superhero. You know, a superhero comes in and saves the day and makes everything right. So if I had the powers of God I would straighten out all the issues in the world and everything would be right tomorrow. Why isn't God more like God? We might say, well, we want him to be more like us. He should do what we would do.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is interesting you should use that phrase because I actually wrote a little book a few years ago on the problem of evil and I called it: *Why Doesn't God Act More Like God?* You know, why doesn't he step in and stop all this mess and straighten everything out? I guess the answer is, because he is God and we are not and his ways are not our ways. They are higher and better, we believe, but they are not always understandable.

BOB HEERSPINK

But I think that is where we have to push, because just to say, well, God is God, you know isn't, I don't think, Dave, much of an answer. There has got to be more that we can say than that.

DAVE BAST

Well, let's look at the Bible; that is the best thing to do as a rule, and actually, there is a book that really does push back on these questions, and it is the little book of Habakkuk. You may never even have read it, or it may be a long time; you may not know what is there or remember; but I think if we explore this little book – three chapters long – it is going to help us work toward an answer to the question: Why does God let bad

things happen?

BOB HEERSPINK

And we will look at that right after the break.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink, and I am joined by Dave Bast.

DAVE BAST

We are exploring this question: Why does God allow bad things to happen? Why does he permit evil to go on in the world? Why doesn't he always answer our prayers when we cry out for help? And the book that really speaks to this in the Old Testament is the prophecy of Habakkuk, just a short three chapters, written some time probably in the 700s BC, at a time when the southern kingdom of Judah was still doing fairly well; in fact, there was a lot of prosperity, but there was also injustice, there was violence, people were perpetrating crime in order to enrich themselves, sort of the story of the world, really, and Habakkuk is bothered by this; so he has this burden that he cries out.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Habakkuk is an interesting book because most of the time when you think of prophets you think of them having a word from God to speak to the people. Habakkuk really almost has a word from the people to speak to God.

DAVE BAST

That is a good point, yes; he is crying out to God. Most of it is his wrestling with God in prayer. Listen to this for example. Here is how he begins:

^{1:2}How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you: Violence; but you do not save. ³Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me. There is strife and conflict abounds. Why, Lord, why? That is his question.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it is reading the papers today and seeing all that is happening in the world today. You know, we can pray that same prayer because we see the same violence, the same injustice, and not just in our little part of the world that Habakkuk lived in, but we see it globally.

DAVE BAST

And then God answers; in the middle of Chapter 1 God says: Okay, hey, you know what? I am not just going to be silent, but what I am going to do is going to blow you away because I am going to bring in the Babylonians, and they are going to bring judgment upon Judah and destroy this society. And Habakkuk goes: What do you mean? They are worse than we are. How can you do that? And here it comes at the end of Chapter 1:

¹²Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One; you will never die. You, Lord, have appointed them to execute judgment, ¹³but your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, one thing I take from that, Dave, is... and it is not the whole answer to evil by any means, but the recognition here that God is at work in the midst of evil things or in the midst of terrible things, but in ways that we just don't understand. I mean, he is God. He does not operate the way we do; and so, Habakkuk is looking at this little piece of a little slice of life in Judea and he sees violence and he sees injustice, and he

says: Just straighten it out in my own little society here; and God says: Well, I've got bigger plans. I am going to be pulling the Chaldeans in and they are going to be my instruments of judgment; and this is just beyond Habakkuk's understanding. I mean, God just sees a bigger picture...

DAVE BAST

Yes; why?

BOB HEERSPINK

Than we do.

DAVE BAST

There is the big question: Why, he asks, why? Why are you permitting this? How can you be doing this? I don't get it. You maybe have some big plan, but it just does not seem right to me. And at the same time, he is confessing his faith: My God, my God, he says. Like Jesus on the cross: my God, my God, why? And there it is.

I remember reading a little article by Leighton Ford, a great evangelist, very active in the Billy Graham association, and he lost his son – he and his wife lost their son when he was a college student, aged 22, just kind of a freak thing. I think it was a tonsillectomy or something, but he died; and Leighton Ford said of that experience: Our struggle now is to reconcile our faith with our experience. I thought that was a great phrase, and that is exactly right. Our struggle in this whole question as Christians... I mean, unbelievers may look at this and just say: Pfft, there is no God; you know, nothing makes sense; bad things happen; there is no answer to prayer; there is no one to answer prayer. But for us as believers, when bad things happen our struggle is to reconcile what we believe with what we are experiencing.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think when we struggle with that, Dave, it is a sign of our faith not our doubt. If we didn't believe that God is intimately involved in our everyday life, we wouldn't have that struggle. It is because we cling to God – it is because of our confession that he is great and gracious and loving that the problem arises.

DAVE BAST

Sure, because the easy thing is to just say we blow off our faith. When that struggle arises – faith versus experience between what we believe and what we are living through – then the easy thing is to deny what we believe and say: Well, I guess I was wrong. I don't really believe in God anymore.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, you know, I think sometimes we wish that every time what seems inexplicable things happen to us, that God would just step in and give us a word of explanation. You know, he did that here in the prophecy of Habakkuk. He says: Let me explain what is going on. He doesn't do that time and time again; but I think he gives us this little snapshot of what he is doing in the Old Testament world to say: Okay, when you are struggling to reconcile your faith with experience, don't put me out of the picture. I am still active... maybe not in a way that you would prefer... not in the way you would expect; but I am there.

DAVE BAST

Well, have you ever experienced that? I mean, have you ever felt that he was saying that to you in some way when your faith and your experience... you know?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, when I have gone through hard times and I have wrestled with things, it is a weird experience; but the times when I have been most honed and most shaped by God, it is with the hard stuff of life.

You know, that was very true in the life of my mother. My mother had polio when she was 26 years old. She was paralyzed from the neck down and in a hospital bed. One of the nurses said to her: Man, you must have

been a terrible person to have God judge you this way...

DAVE BAST

Oh, thanks a lot! I'm sure that was helpful.

BOB HEERSPINK

That was encouraging; you know, but that was the kind of misunderstanding of the work of God that I think we are wrestling with right here. All this nurse could see was God is a judge; you are going through tough times; you are being judged. It was really the words Job's friends laid on Job.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is right out of the book of Job.

BOB HEERSPINK

But you know, looking back on that experience on her polio – and she was in a wheelchair for 50 years – she said: You know, God was working in this in a way that you could not tell me. I mean, if someone came and said: All things work together for good, that is cold comfort; but she said: I took that to myself and I saw what God was doing. He was answering my prayer; he was shaping me in a way that I would never have chosen. It wasn't the way I wanted it to go, but God was still there at work.

DAVE BAST

That is a good point, I think. We may be able to come up with answers that other people shouldn't lay on us, but those of us who have gone through the experience. It is interesting that you should mention your mother when she was 26. We asked this question of people using Facebook and the Web and all that – our website: Have you ever struggled to reconcile your faith with your experience? And as you might imagine, we got a lot of responses. People could really identify with that; but listen to this one. I want to read this from a woman who wrote in: My husband died suddenly of cancer when I was 26, and left me with three small children. We prayed in faith for a miracle, but it was not God's will. I have since learned to trust and thank God in all things... There is the answer she came up with for herself, she developed... but then she adds this: I still get a tweak of misgiving and doubt whenever I hear about miracles of healing from cancer. So, that never goes away, quite, either, does it? That, why didn't God answer my prayer, when he answers other peoples' prayers?

BOB HEERSPINK

There could have been another way God could have worked, but that is not what he did in my case.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, what do we do in response? I think that is the question, and we want to go further down that road after this short break.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

DAVE BAST

Along with Bob Heerspink, I am Dave Bast, and Bob, we ended with Habakkuk and his sort of dangling conversation with God. He is left dangling at the end of Chapter 1, with the question: Why? God, why; you are of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. In other words, God is so good, God is so holy, he cannot even look on evil; but why does he then seem to tolerate it? And Habakkuk does not really get an answer in Chapter 1... In fact, in a way, he doesn't get an answer throughout the book.

BOB HEERSPINK

You are looking for more answers than what he gets; but in Chapter 2 I think he really invites us into the posture – the faith posture – that we have to take when we face issues of evil and suffering. Habakkuk 2 starts out by saying:

¹I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts. I will look to see what he will say to me, what answer I am to give to this complaint.

DAVE BAST

So, we mentioned the fact that the easy thing to do when you are in this tension of faith versus experience is to blow off your faith; but Habakkuk refuses to do that. Instead he says: In fact, I am going to climb up on the wall like a soldier, you know; and I am going to stand there until God gives me an answer.

BOB HEERSPINK

I am going to scan the horizon and I am going to look for that answer to come.

DAVE BAST

I am looking for the messenger coming from the Lord, you know; which is a wonderful act of faith, isn't it? You know, to say: I am going to hang on. I am going to keep believing in this good, loving, gracious, merciful Father, and when the things that he sends are terrible things, I am not going to quit believing.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, the calling is to patience; and I think especially in our culture we are not encouraged to be patient people. I mean, we want everything instantaneously. We used to have to wait a day to get our news in the newspaper; now we just pull up the website and check out what happened ten minutes ago in the world. I mean, we want it now; and when we have questions we want them now, and I think we have the same attitude with God. Lord, you've got ten minutes to get me the answer I need to my question; and Habakkuk is saying that is not the way God works. One of the ways he is going to exercise your faith is by a call to patience.

DAVE BAST

That is a great word. I am glad you brought that word up because in the New Testament it is *hupomone* – perhaps I shouldn't throw Greek out, but...

BOB HEERSPINK

Oh, you will translate it for us.

DAVE BAST

It means – yes, it means more endurance.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Because we get... We hear the word patience and we kind of think it is a...

BOB HEERSPINK

It is a very passive word.

DAVE BAST

Passive – sort of sitting back; but it is more like a long distance runner who is at mile marker 20 and he has got to get to 26 to finish the marathon, and just gutting it out; and faith is like that. It is one of the fruits of the spirit, right – endurance?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you know, I had a virus once and I was sick for about a month; and I am back with the doctor and the doctor says: Well, you have been sick for two weeks and that is about as long as people can stand to be sick; and after that their patience runs out. I was like, yes, I know exactly what you are talking about. We don't want to be patient because we just don't have the endurance to pull through; and that is exactly what we are being asked here; to put some of those questions on the shelf and trust God, even if we aren't given all the answers to those why questions that we have.

DAVE BAST

Well, I am not sure if I would agree with you to put the questions on the shelf, because as I look at Habakkuk, he has climbed up on the wall and he is watching, but he keeps asking them, too...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, that is true.

DAVE BAST

The good thing is, he keeps asking them...he keeps going back to God in prayer. Because I think what we tend to do when we literally put them on the shelf is just sort of quit and give up on God, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is true; and you know, the interesting thing is, he expects even in his patience that answers will be given. I mean, there are answers...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

God just has not delivered them yet.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the great thing is, again, we used Facebook to put this question to people who follow the program and some of our other programs as well; and again we got all kinds of responses. The question we asked was: How have you experienced God when the unthinkable happened in your life? In other words, have you kept on with that relationship? Have you kept on praying? And lots of great responses.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, here is one. One person wrote: Finding out I had cancer, and I was suddenly at peace, knowing that God was and is in control.

DAVE BAST

Here is another one: I went from having knowledge *of* him to contact *with* him. That is a great point, isn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and here: He held me through the darkest hours.

DAVE BAST

Grace; amazing amounts of grace.

BOB HEERSPINK

He had his hand on me, my husband and our son each and every day.

DAVE BAST

And here is on that I really love: I lost my mom, my husband, and my oldest son. Oddly enough, thinking back on those times, the grief isn't what stands out; what I remember most is being held by our living God.

BOB HEERSPINK

I think back to a program that we did talking about how we know God is real, and thinking about how knowing God is relationship, and that is what is coming out, I think, in those expressions of faith; that I didn't have to know all the logical answers in this suffering, but I did have to know, in relationship, who had hold of me.

DAVE BAST

Well, these believers are all giving testimony to the truth that knowing God is better than knowing *about* God, or having answers about these questions; and you know, frankly, I find that when people are raising these issues and they are kind of dismissing the idea of God because of the problem of evil, it is all theoretical, at least most of the time. It is sort of like, well, this is a conundrum to me; this is an intellectual mystery, how God could be great and good and allow this; but when people are going through the experience, they find, like Job did – he is the paradigm, really, isn't he, in the Bible – or Habakkuk here; they find that in a mysterious way God comes closer when the questions are toughest; when the struggles and the pain are the most real, that is when we come to know him. Maybe that makes it worth it in the end.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you mentioned earlier in this program, Dave, how it wasn't just Habakkuk who said why in his sufferings and in his pain; it was Jesus Christ who asked that question from the cross. You know, I find in this life God doesn't give us all the logical answers as to why he lets bad things happen, but I do know that his Son experienced the same things we do; and that, at least for me, mutes my protests.

DAVE BAST

You know, I would like to end with Habakkuk – give him the last word again on this – because the closing verses of his little book are so moving to me. This is his confession of faith:

¹⁷Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines; though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food; though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls – in other words, the cupboard is bare – the checkbook is empty – I've got nothing – ¹⁸Nevertheless, (he goes on), yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will be joyful in God my Savior. ¹⁹The sovereign Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer. He enables me to tread on the heights.

So, he is going down, you know, not just into some despair, but he is rising up.

BOB HEERSPINK

He is holding on to God even in the midst of his pain; even in the midst of his suffering; and he is rejoicing in who God is for him.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating, responding to our questions that will keep our programs relevant. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics, perhaps, that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Just visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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