

Asking God “Why?” — Dr. Bryan Maier

Thank you, Keith, for that introduction. I always get a little nervous when someone introduces me. One of my friends introduced me for a Sunday school class that I was teaching for him and he said, I'd like to introduce you to my friend, Dr. Brian Mayer, who struggles with God and loves Him deeply. And I thought, thank you, I think. So thank you, thank you, Keith, for that introduction.

As Keith mentioned, I have been here for, I'm on my sixth year. I have a really cool mug in my office that I got for being here for five years. But I started here six years ago, and a lot of things have changed at Cairn in the six years that I've been here. For one, when I got here, Sauder was a men's dorm, if you can remember that. And there was a culture that went with that. And the big, wonderful athletic field that we have out there was just a field with a couple of cardboard coyotes to scare away the geese. Didn't work. So a lot of things have changed. The biggest change is, for me anyway, was when I got here, my son Nathaniel was already here. And shortly after that, my son Joshua showed up. And so for the first four years that I taught here at Cairn, when I would introduce myself to somebody, they would say, oh, you're Nathaniel's dad, or oh, you're Joshua's dad. So I was really excited last year when I got to carve out my own identity and figure out who I am, apart from being their father. But actually, it's an honor to be their dad. I love my three boys. And this gets to what we're going to talk about today.

A lot of times when babies are born, you think their first words are going to be mama or dada. But I think my son's first words were why. And if you know my sons, that doesn't surprise you. So we're going to talk about asking God why today. So turn in your Bibles to Habakkuk. It's at the end of the Old Testament. And what I remember from seminary is that Habakkuk has three K's, because the quizzes I had to take not only was to do the books of the Bible in order, but spell them correctly. So anyway, we're in Habakkuk. But as we're thinking about asking God why, I think about asking why about all kinds of things. And if you notice this life, a lot of times there's a lot of absurdity in this life. And you begin to ask, why this? Like if you're in a drugstore and you find a tube of some kind of ointment, and it says on that tube not to be ingested by mouth, why? Why do they have to put that there? I drive a lot on 63, Route 63, because I live in Lansdale. And if you just pass 309 and you're on 63, you'll see this sign, which I still don't understand. It's one of those diamond yellow signs, and it says turtle crossing. What am I supposed to do with a turtle crossing sign, especially if I'm driving at night 40 miles an hour? Am I supposed to pull off and see if there's any turtles? I just don't get that.

So there's a lot of things in life that make us ask why. Most of you aren't this old, but there was a funny comedian back at the latter part of the last century named Arsenio Hall, and he had a little bit that he did with things that make you go, hmm. So there's a lot of things that make you go, hmm. But on a more serious note, I'm a counselor. I see clients. I work with people. And this is one of the most common questions I get asked is why. Why did God let this happen? Why is my life so hard? Why won't God make my life easier? Why is He doing this to bring Himself glory? And I think maybe some of the reasons why my clients feel comfortable, I hope, to ask me those questions is because I have had questions myself.

Twenty years ago, I'll just share a few of them, but twenty years ago I was part of a church plant, and we met in a movie theater of all things. I was raised that movie theaters were the den of iniquity, and here we are, you know people getting saved in the den of iniquity. But we wanted a building. And so our small church plant sacrificially gave. We put money in an account, and we bought this piece of land to build a church. And after we bought the land and we couldn't get out of it, then we figured out it was built on a swamp. So we couldn't build our church, and we had lost all that money. And I remember asking God, why? Why? A few years after that, my wife of twenty-one years contracted stage four breast cancer. She had no chance from the beginning, fought it for three years, and passed away. Still don't know why about that one. And then recently, my son had an accident, a life-changing accident, and I don't know why that happened either.

So there's a lot of things that make me ask why. And my clients continue to come to me and ask why, and I wonder why. And so as I ask myself, or I ask God, really, I ask God why, why, I get two common responses, one more than the other. The first response I get from God is absolute silence, which drives me nuts. I ask God why, and He just doesn't feel the pressure to answer. But the more common answer that I get is when God doesn't answer. I remember from my seminary training that God speaks through His Word. So I go back to His Word, and I study, and I read, and I try to think, what would God say to me? What is God saying to me when I ask Him why? And I remember that He's God, and I'm not. And I look at the characters in Scripture, like Job, and I realize God never answered Job's question either. God never said to Job, "Look, dude, I picked you for my fantasy team. Now go away. Go win me some money." You know, He doesn't do that. He didn't do that with Job.

And so I'm left with my second answer, which is trust me. Trust me. And most of the time I don't like that answer either, because I'm not very good at that. But that is the most common answer. But I have to go through steps of studying God's Word, and praying, and thinking through issues, and where I end up is trust me. And that's probably the best answer that God is giving me. But I get sick of that answer. And I think, wouldn't it be great just once, just once, if God would lay His plan out for me and show me, okay, this is what I'm going to do. This is how I've got it all laid out. Here's what's next. Here's what's next. Here's what's next. If He would just do that once. So far He hasn't done that. But sometimes there are stories in Scripture, and I think this is part of the reason why the stories in Scripture are there, is to give us an opportunity to see what happens when what we long for actually happened. Like if you could have every food you wanted, whenever you wanted, and everything else you ever wanted, Solomon has that. And I believe he wrote Ecclesiastes, I don't want to argue with the Old Testament department but I believe he wrote Ecclesiastes, and we see how that turned out. Well, there's a character in Scripture, there may be more than one, but I found one, there's a character in Scripture who God actually answered his why questions. And so I want to look for a few minutes with you this morning in Habakkuk. Habakkuk asked God why, and God actually answered his question, and we'll see how that turned out.

A little bit of background, Habakkuk, as best I can figure out, was during the reign of a guy named Jehoiakim, who was the son of Josiah. Josiah was a pretty good king until the end, and he did something really stupid and got killed. And so he had set up his younger son to be his king, to be king after him. So Jehoiakim, who was the firstborn, got passed over. Well that young son got hauled off into Egypt, so now Jehoiakim gets to be king, and he is terrible. He was trying to win the title of worst king of Israel, and there's a lot of candidates for that. But imagine a politician that you absolutely hate, and then multiply by ten, and that's Jehoiakim. I mean, archeology and history show some of the terrible things that he did. And so Habakkuk has the whiplash of being under the ministry of Josiah, the good king and then Jehoiakim is terrible. And so Habakkuk looks up. This is also during the time of Jeremiah, and if you read Jeremiah, you'll see how Jeremiah responded to this same thing. But Habakkuk looks up and he goes, why?

And his first question is in Habakkuk chapter 1, and he says, how long, O Lord?. This is verse 2, Habakkuk chapter 1 verse 2. How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and you will not hear?

Now, whatever you see in Scripture, the word how long, particularly in the Psalms, what that indicates is this is not the first time Habakkuk probably said this. He's probably saying this over and over and over again. How long will I call for help, and you won't hear? I cry to you, violence, and you won't save. Why do you make me see iniquity? In other words, why are you letting Jehoiakim run rampant? He's a terrible king, and you're letting him do this, and the people are following him. And again, sometimes when we ask God why, if we're honest, we have a particular answer that we're hoping He will give us, that we have already cleared with our infinite rationality to know what would be best. And I think what Habakkuk is hoping for is the God to say, you're right, I'll get rid of Jehoiakim. I'll put a new king in here who's really good. But that's not how God answers his question

Now, Habakkuk, when he asks, why are you letting the country turn so terribly rotten so fast? That question, God is not silent, and God doesn't say, trust me. God actually answers Habakkuk's question. What does he say? Verse 5, look out among the nations, observe, be astonished, wonder, because I'm doing something in your day that you wouldn't believe if you were told. For behold, I'm raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people who march throughout the earth to seize dwelling places which are not theirs. And then there's like four more verses on how awful they are, and we get down to verse 11. Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on, but they will be held guilty those whose strength is their God

So what's God's answer to Habakkuk when Habakkuk says, why? Why are you letting the nation turn so bad? God's answer is, I'm not. I'm bringing the Babylonians to punish them. Well, obviously Habakkuk did not like that answer. That's a horrible answer. It's the right answer, but it's a horrible answer. God laid out what He's going to do. I'm going to bring the Babylonians, who were a terrible people, and Habakkuk for some reason gets brave and actually asks God a second question, because Habakkuk's now really totally disoriented. You mean you're going to bring a foreign people, a people who hate you, and we'll see later in chapter 2, you can read that, they worship nets, for goodness sake. You're going to let people who worship nets and

sticks and rocks, you're going to let people like that come and put a weapon on us? That doesn't make any sense.

And so Habakkuk gets brave and asks a second question, and this is the end of chapter 1. Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God? We will not die. You Lord have appointed them to judge, he's kind of buttering God up here. But then in verse 13, your eyes are too pure to approve evil. How in the world can you approve of these people, the Babylonians, to come and put a weapon on us? You can't put up with them. Why do you look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are you silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they? That's a little bit of hubris there, but why are you letting them do this? So Habakkuk asks a second question, how can you use evil people to discipline us? And God actually answers his second question in chapter 2. Well, in chapter 2, verse 1, Habakkuk's basically saying, I'm going to stay here until you answer the question. Lucky for Habakkuk, God answered it pretty quickly

Verse 2, then the Lord answered me and said, record the vision and inscribe it on tablets that the one who reads it may run, for the vision is yet for an appointed time. It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. The summary of chapter 2 in Habakkuk is that God says, I'm not going to let the Babylonians get away with anything either. And He says, that's what the... if you read chapter 2, and we don't have time to read the whole thing, but if you read chapter 2, you'll see there's a series of woes, W-O-E, woe for them for doing this, woe for them to doing that. And most of the woes have particularly to do with the culture of the Babylonians. For example, one of them is, woe to him who drinks a lot. Well, the Babylonians were known for drinking a lot. In fact, if you remember, when the Persians came and took over Babylon, it was in the middle of a big drunken party.

So chapter 2 is God's answer, and He says, I'm not going to let the Babylonians get away with anything. And this is a great comfort to me and to my friends who come to see me about childhood trauma. God doesn't let anybody get away with anything. It is a really comforting thought that God keeps score. And so God keeps score on the Babylonians. He knows exactly how wicked they are. He knows how they're going to be punished. And I could almost see God saying to Habakkuk at this point, you got any more questions? And Habakkuk's like, no, I'm good, sort of like Job, remember, at the end.

So what does Habakkuk do? When he asks God these why questions, and God actually answers his question. Again, I think when we ask why questions, we want God to give us a particular answer so that we will be comforted and we can, okay, now that I know what you're up to, I'm not going to be so scared. I'm not going to be so anxious. I'm not going to be so upset. I know what you're up to. We're good. Well, God showed Habakkuk what he was up to. And Habakkuk, maybe, I mean, we would call this in psychology, had almost a panic attack, in a sense, because especially when you look at verses 14, 15, and 16 of chapter 3, starting with verse 15, you did tread on the sea with your horses in the surge of many waters. And so he's realizing God is sovereign. He kind of admits that God is sovereign. No more questions. I don't want to ask any more why questions.

But what was the response that Habakkuk had to have? He says And I heard, and my inward parts trembled, at the sound of my lips quivered, decay entered my bones, and in my place I tremble, because I must wait quietly on the day of distress for the people to arise who will invade us. So Habakkuk got his answer. The Babylonians are coming. And he's like, ah, this is awful. And when he looked ahead and he saw what was going to happen in the short term, that the Babylonians were going to come and take over, that was horrifying to Habakkuk. And he started to tremble. And he realized that his future and his country's future in the short term was going to be horrible. Now what's he going to do? Now, how is he going to respond to this?

Habakkuk has several choices here. One choice for Habakkuk is he could start a YouTube channel and talk about how he deconstructed his faith. He doesn't do that. Of course, they didn't have YouTube channels back then, mercifully. But he doesn't do that. He doesn't say, well, if that's the future, then I'm out of here. Now, and some people do. But what happens when he gets his why questions answered? He's scared. He's frightened. He knows what's going to happen. But then he says this at the end of chapter 3, and Dr. Plummer read this for us

Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olives 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, I'm going to deconstruct from my faith. No, he doesn't say that He says, yet I will exalt in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord is my strength. He has made my feet like hinds' feet and makes me walk in high places.

My version still says hinds' feet. If you read the King James, that's hinds feet too. And there's a great devotional book. It's kind of like *Pilgrim's Progress*, only it's a little girl instead of a little boy and it's called *Hinds' Feet in High Places*. Great devotional if you want to read that.

But the idea of the hinds' feet in high places is, he's going to make me better. The goats in those days could run and jump on the mountains and not fall because their feet were set up to run like that. And Habakkuk's saying, when this is all over, somehow, someday, this is going to be good. This is going to be good for me, somehow, someday. But he didn't know how. But he was saying, if all this happens, I'm okay with that because I trust God. And I think when he says tremble in verse 16, when Habakkuk is talking about this and how he is wanting to trust God, I don't think he's saying it by pounding his chest. I think he's saying it with tears in his eyes and a quivering lower lip. That even if this is going to happen to me, I'm still going to trust him. This is still going to be in my best interest.

And I take great comfort in that. Because God knows that when we trust him, it's probably going to be accompanied often by trembling. It was for Habakkuk, and he knew the future. Imagine us that don't. But when we trust God, it's often with trembling, and that doesn't disqualify our faith. You can tremble all you want and still trust God, which is so reassuring to me. And Habakkuk was trembling as he looked at what was coming, but he still said to himself and to God, I still trust you, and I'm going to be better off when this is over. In other words, what he's saying is, God is good. God is good.

And so as we look at chapter 3, again, being disappointed, and I think Habakkuk honestly was disappointed. This is not the answer that he wanted. He gets the answer that the Babylonians are going to come in and run over you, and yes the Babylonians are going to get their own punishment one day, but it was really hard for him to face that. So he was disappointed, and I remember my teacher Larry Crabb saying, disappointment can coexist with faith, but demanding this can't. Disappointment can coexist with faith, but demanding this can't. And so Habakkuk is not demanding.

By the end of chapter 3, he's done with his questions, probably scared to ask a third one, but he's done with his questions, and he just says, okay. And how this brings back to my original point, remember I said that when I ask my why questions. God is either silent or He says, trust me. And as I'm looking at Habakkuk, I'm thinking, okay, what's going to be Habakkuk's response? What's God's response to Habakkuk, and what's He going to have to do in light of the fact that Habakkuk gets to see a little bit of the future? And I realize that at the end of the day, Habakkuk has to trust God too, that him knowing the future, as much as God was willing to show him, didn't lead Habakkuk to say something like, well, now I don't have to trust God. Now that I know the future, I don't have to trust Him. Habakkuk had to trust God too. And so the answer at the end of the day, God chose to answer Habakkuk's questions, but at the end of the day, it wasn't the answer to the questions that relaxed Habakkuk's soul or that nourished his faith. It was his trust in a God that was good and that loved him and was going to make things better for him someday, somehow by God's plan. And so when we ask God why, we have to do, even though we don't know the future, we have to do what Habakkuk did. We have to trust that even when it doesn't look good, even when bad things happen, which they will, we have to trust that God is good. And even when there's no fruit in the fields and everything's going wrong, God is good. There is a, so again, this comforts me as I pursue God, that He doesn't require me to just trust Him without trembling. It's okay to tremble. But to believe that God is good, He will make my feet like hinds' feet

In some churches, they greet one another with this phrase. Somebody will say, God is good, and somebody else will say, all the time. Maybe you've been to a church like that. But I'd like you to humor me this morning and change it a little bit. I'm going to say, God is good, and I want you to say, no matter what. Okay, let's practice. God is good *no matter what*. Okay. Now, let's do that several times. God is good *no matter what*. God is good *no matter what*. God is good *no matter what*.

That's a blessing to hear you talk like that. Stand with me. Let's close today with the first verse of what we sang earlier on. You have to sing with me because I can't sing that good. When we walk with the Lord in the light of His word, what a glory He sheds on our way. While we do His good will, He abides with us still, and with all who will trust and obey. Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

Pray with me. Dear Jesus, thank you for your love for us. Thank you that you're sovereign and that you're good, and thank you that we can bring our why questions to you, but we thank you for your loving kindness and that we can trust you. I pray that you would help us to trust you

more, even when we don't know what's next. We love you, Lord, and we trust you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thank you. Have a good day.