

June 24, 2001

“WHEN YOUR FAITH GOES IN A SLUMP...”

**“Out of the depths I cry to Thee, O Lord, hear my cry.” -
Psalm 130:1**

Has your faith ever gone in a slump? I mean like it says in the dictionary “to fall or sink suddenly”, or like when a major league baseball player can’t buy a hit. (Even Ted Williams had occasional slumps.) Or like the stock market of recent times went into a fast slide. It is worrisome, but a slump does not simply that everything is gone; it is only that you can’t find what you need at the moment.

In the Bible even with the best and most loyal prophets of the Lord, there are times when they lose their vision too. Jeremiah was so angry when the people of Anathoth began to pick on him, he railed out loud against the Lord. God told him to hush. It would get worse, when he was sent up to Jerusalem. It did. Moses complained that the Lord was not being fair with him. God said, “Go, sit on top of Mt. Nebo for awhile.” King David sinned against Uriah, and felt the spiritual pain for all his life. Job complained (he had good reason) “Where were you Lord when my fortune was lost and my children were killed?” Even the Lord Jesus had times when he felt that God was very far from him.

Have you ever had such a time, when your faith went into a slump, when life challenged you and you came up empty. Now, please do not get worried. I seek neither your sympathy nor your alarm. But, to be honest, my faith has been in a kind of slump for the past six months. I have deep faith. Not that I feel forsaken of the Lord, but I have been trying to piece together all the variety of strange things that are happening in the world, in my own life, and occasionally in the Chapel. I pray to God to give me greater understanding and to stand by me and those I love, God at times the vision seems to tarry. That’s what the prophet Habbakuk wrote. “If the vision tarry, wait for it.”

I have a professor friend who says that his favorite book of the Bible is Habakkuk. Now you have to have a lot of nerve to say that. In his case, he is a professor; he published a book on it. It might seem strange to some of us, who no doubt would have great difficulty just finding this little prophet in the Bible, let alone adopting him as a special friend. He is one of the minor prophets. Except for the fact that in Habakkuk 2:4 where he sounded a clarion call for faith, which St. Paul used in Romans for his doctrine of justification by faith alone, which later became the touchstone of the Protestant Reformation, there is little known about Habakkuk or his prophecy. “Whatever goes on in the world,” Habakkuk said, “the righteous shall live by their faith.”

He spoke somewhere around 600 B.C., a little before the time when the Chaldeans (the Babylonian Empire) came and destroyed the Southern State of Judah. The northern State of Israel had long since been carted off into captivity. They were perilous times indeed.

I asked my friend one day: “Why is Habakkuk your favorite book?” He replied: “Nowhere else in the entire Bible is the issue drawn so clearly of why righteous people suffer, and so many times the wicked seem to prosper.” Nowhere else, except in a few of the Psalms, do you find such a call for courage not to give up hope that God will answer you. If the Vision tarries, wait for it!

So I ask you, “Does the vision tarry in your life?” I know a lot of people who would answer: “Yes, the vision tarries...life seems long and slow.” It can come when the doctor tells you that you have a serious illness. Or when someone you love is having a long and hard struggle. Many of you will immediately think of those who have suffered the loss of someone they loved too much to lose. “I was so lost and lonely when it happened, I wanted to die...” a woman told me up in New Jersey, three years ago, “but thankfully, the fog is lifting some.”

I know some of you are thinking of loved ones and friends past and present in nursing homes, or those in constant pain, or with problems of addiction to drugs and alcohol. I do not have to recite all of that to you. There are so many, many, many times when the vision tarries, and you have to wait for it to return. There is no other choice.

Perhaps it is just in the inevitability that you are growing older and things begin to go wrong and life is no longer a friend but a threat. For many it is not true, I know. But life can seem long and slow if you gave everything you could in a relationship, and your partner walked out of it. That hurts. Even if they stay, they can still be gone. For those who cannot find a way to form close relationships, for whatever reason, the vision tarries. One girl in Pittsburgh told me long ago, with tears in her eyes: “All I ever wanted to do was get married and raise a family, and now I never will...what happened?” I read her some verses from Habakkuk, and from John.

Then, too, I am thinking of people in occupations they never liked to begin with, and now have no way to get out of them. They were passed over for promotions in favor of someone who was chosen by some scale that had nothing to do with individual excellence, or commitment to the job (Are you with me?). Those people got stuck where they are, and they know there is no realistic hope to change it until retirement comes. I do not know what I would do if I did not enjoy my work. I come to work excited every day of the week. I do not know how I would respond were I stuck in a job that did not bring me fulfillment.

I could go on all day, but there is one more cause that can put faith in a slump: those people who never get what life seems to promise. Maybe it came about because of their mistakes; maybe it was caused by bad decisions maybe through no fault of their own. It can be anything...but life sometimes promises more than it delivers, and in the end, they wearily just watch it all roll by.

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Habakkuk and Psalmist 130 are waiting here for any and all of us. If the vision should tarry, as it does, what can you do about it? Simple they say, (don't be disappointed), wait for it. "If the vision tarry, wait for it." You might want to say: "Wait a minute, I was told those two (the Psalmist and Habakkuk) have more insight than anyone in the whole Bible, what do you mean, just wait for it? If life is long and slow, is that all you have to tell me? I need something concrete I can live with, and hold on to. Don't tell me just to have patience. Is that what you mean?" Well, Habakkuk would respond: "Yes, that is what I mean."

That is what the Psalmist says too. I think I know what he means. He means that you have to believe that God cares about you. If God made the world and everything in it, and if all that comes to you falls within His loving care, then nothing else can matter more than that. And if He did not make the world, and did not give you life, and did not make you in His own image, and did not put us on the earth for a purpose, then nothing matters much anyway. We might as well eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we will surely die. Be patient as you wait, but wait with power and expectation.

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Adam Sloman wrote a beautiful book called "Delayed Blessings." He had a dream that he went to heaven one day, and of all the rooms he saw the most enchanting place was called the room of "Delayed Blessings." He asked St. Peter what it meant. St. Peter said: "They are the blessings God has already prepared, but has not yet delivered. They will arrive when God determines it is time. But meanwhile they are all wrapped and ready to go."

In the meantime, we need to do all within our power to change things for the Lord. That is what is taught in the Serenity Prayer. There are some things we cannot change; we have to live with them. But other things we can change, and we had better do it!

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The ancient Talmud, a commentary on the Jewish Scripture, tells a marvelous, if all too funny, story. Abraham invited a traveler, into his tent to have dinner and to spend the night. When time came for evening prayers, Abraham faced the altar and asked the man to join him in praying to Yahweh. The man refused. He worshipped the god of fire, I guess, or some other deity. So Abraham threw him out of the tent, because the man was so disagreeable, and unwilling to do what Abraham wanted. That night, in a vision, God came to Abraham, and said: "I have borne the ignorance of that man for seventy-five years, and you could not stand him for even one evening..."

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If the vision tarry, and life seems long and slow, surrender! Stop where you are. "I cannot handle this alone, Lord. Let me go with the flow, and You take care of the rest. I cannot handle it alone. Please teach me by Your power and peace what to do next."

Once you completely surrender, it becomes a little more palatable. If the vision tarry and life caves in, what do you do about it? (Repeat.) You wait. You wait with patience, you wait with determination, you wait with commitment, and you wait with surrender.

Habakkuk offers his promise to you. Christ offers it, too. If the vision tarries, wait for it, it will surely come. That is what happened in the Incarnation, when Christ came down to Earth. God with us. God came to take control. He asks us to surrender, and to try and be like Jesus Christ. In the fullness of time, fourteen billion years or so after the moment of Creation, he came. Now that's a long time to wait, for sure.

In Psalm 130, the words I chose for our text, the famous De Profundis Psalm it says, "Out of the depths I cry unto you, O God, Lord, hear my voice." The exact status of the Psalmist and the reason he feels God has abandoned him is not made clear. He says he feels as if he is in the nethermost region of Sheol, and very much alone. He is in a spiritual abyss. Scholars say he could have been one of the Kings of Israel, probably much later than David, to whom the Psalms are traditionally credited. The language used is not in keeping with the Hebrew of David's time (about 1000B.C). It is closer to the Post exilic years, say five or six centuries before the time of Christ.

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Meanwhile, there are mysteries untold, problems to contend with. Hardly a day has gone by in these recent weeks in which we, each and all, have read stories of children and families who have gone astray. Two drug crazed young men torture and murder an innocent young woman. A royal son murders his family across the seas because they had ridiculed his choice of mate. A young man bombs a building killing innocent children. A young mother drowns her own children. Why Lord, why? Those things are challenges to the security of my faith.

They upset the serenity of my faith. Why God? Why? Dr. Victor Pentz, the new Pastor of the Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia where my friend Dr. Frank Harrington used to preach, recently put me in touch with the New York Times best selling book, The Color of Water, by James McBride. It is a touching story, true, basically about his mother and their family. As a young European emigrant she came to the United States with her family to escape the wrath of Adolph Hitler in the early 1940's. They were guilty of no sin or misbehavior. It is just that they were Jewish. Her father was a Rabbi. Her mother was severely handicapped.

Once in this country, she eventually chose to leave their home, for reasons I choose not to detail for you now; but if you assume the worst, you would not be far from the truth. Whatever, in her transition, she married the son of a black Baptist in Harlem. They had 12 children. Then suddenly her young husband died, leaving her with next to nothing. In a tiny Harlem apartment this white woman reared her 12 black children on the tiny wages she could make and some occasional handouts. Oh dear, what would ever happen to those children?

The author, one of her sons, James, tells how her faith faltered in the long ordeal. She went into a slump on a semi-regular basis. She was so distraught she would sometimes disappear for days on end. The children were alone under the care of others in the house. At other times she would stand at the sink looking out the tenement window for hours on end. As I look back “Mother was utterly confused” he wrote, “about everything except for one thing: Jesus. Jesus Christ gave her hope. He was Mommie’s salvation. Jesus pressed her forward.” Every Sunday, no matter how depressed, or poor, or tired or broke she was, she got up early, dressed her self up as best she could, and went off to the Baptist church, taking everybody she could manage with her.

So are you still wondering what happened to the children reared in such paltry circumstances, without a father and with a mother who could not function most of the time? They had every good sociological excuse for failure, for feeling cheated, for rebelling against society, for ending up in drugs, or alcohol, or crime?

“No”, James tells us in The Color of Water. One son, Dr. Andrew McBride graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, then a graduate degree at Yale. His sister Rosetta is a staff psychologist for the New York Board of Education. Little Billy became Dr. William McBride, also a Yale graduate; David has a PhD from Columbia. He is chairman of the History Department at Penn State University in University Park, PA. I could go on.

But, that’s enough. There is not one loser in all twelve. Would you like to guess why? We don’t have to: McBride tells us it in his concluding words of the book: “My mother and I would like to thank the Lord Jesus Christ for his love and faithfulness to all generations.” At times it was hard to figure it out. But he tags on a little advice from Proverbs 36: “In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct thy paths”. “Their mother was confused about everything, except Jesus. Somehow when you get it right with Jesus, everything else falls in line.” It does. It will. It has.

"Out of the depths I cried unto Thee, Lord, hear my cry", and be pleased to answer it, for now and forever more. Amen.

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