

How long, Oh Lord?

Original article written as an encouragement to farmers at the height of the farm invasions in Zimbabwe on 29th December 2002.

This question was the subject of most earnest prayers of many righteous men. How long is it that wickedness should seem to prosper? Jeremiah cries out to God,

Jer 12:1 “... Why has the way of the wicked prospered? Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease ...”

Habakkuk echoes that cry,

Hab 1:2 “How long, O YHWH, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, ‘Violence!’ Yet You do not save.

1:3 “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.

1:4 “Therefore the law is ignored, and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted.”

David suffered for many years under the unjust rule of king Saul, but when he had the opportunity to kill Saul, he refused to do so. He rather entrusted justice into the hands of God than to take matters into his own hands. Yet he still cried out,

Psa 13:1 “A Psalm of David. How long, O YHWH? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?

13:2 “How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sorrow in my heart all the day? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?

The martyrs who died the most horrific deaths under the evil pagan Roman government, cried from under the altar,

Rev 6:10 “How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

In all of these cries, there was the understanding that God is the Judge of all the earth who judges with righteous judgement, and that eventually true justice would therefore surely come. Their problem, and indeed ours, is the *time frame* for this justice. In our frail humanity, we want justice to be meted out quickly. If the sword of justice were to be in our own hands, we would deal swiftly. I think it would be true to say that most of us in Zimbabwe (and South Africa) would feel the same. We want justice / vengeance, and we want it now!

Consider the following amazing passage of Scripture:

Joh 13:1 “Now before the Feast of the Passover, ⁽¹⁾ Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

13:2 “During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him,

13:3 “Jesus, ⁽²⁾ knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that ⁽³⁾ He had come forth from God and was going back to God,

13:4 “got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself.

13:5 “Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with

which He was girded."

Consider the implications of this passage. Jesus had three pieces of knowledge that were far beyond any human had ever experienced.

1. He knew that He was standing at a crucial place in history. His actions in the next few hours were to change the course of world history. Just like the anxious moments we experience just before a major exam, which could alter the entire course of our life, so He was about to be tested to the limits. **His hour had come!**
 2. He knew that **all things were given into His own hand**. The Father had given Him all authority and power. The decision to go through with the crucifixion was entirely in His power. At His disposal was a massive army of angels. In Matthew 26:53, Jesus spoke to one of His impatient disciples who wanted to "do justice", to "fight for His rights". He said, "**Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?**" All the while as the Roman soldiers were lashing Him with that whip - as they were hitting the nails into His hands and feet - the entire army of angels must have been staring in amazement at their Commander - waiting for even the slightest whisper from Him to wipe out all of mankind. Their beloved Commander! **All power was in His hands** to command at will, and He knew it. He could stop the injustice of it all with one signal!
 3. He also **knew who He was**. He was very God of very God! How puny the unfair judgements and accusations must have sounded - considering this was the Judge of all the earth being judged. How strong the urge for vengeance - for justice - must have been!
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Yet,

Isa 53:7b "Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth."

Why?

Why did He not act, and mete out justice on those wicked people?

Does it mean that the wicked are never to be judged? No! It is rather all a matter of timing - God's perfect timing. It took another 37 years before judgement finally fell upon Jerusalem - and how terrible was its destruction - 37 years of mercy. In that time, a few million people had turned away from their worldly ways and embraced their Messiah. If He had judged too soon, those would not have been saved. Among them was the terrible persecutor of the church - Saul of Tarsus - who was to become Paul, the beloved apostle. Also, many priests had turned to faith in Jesus. Where would they have been if judgement had been too quick - if it had to be placed into the hands of the Zealots?

You see, God is both a God of justice and a God of love. Utter justice, and utter love. Love had to run its full course before justice was meted out in the most terrible manner. Do you know that the wrath of God continually rests upon the sinner? The Scriptures tell us:

John 3:36 "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Yet His love is also constantly extended towards those same sinners during a period of grace.

Do not think for one moment that any sin or unjust action will not be punished. The wages of sin is death. There is no other penalty

sufficient for sin - only death - eternal death and punishment in a most terrible hell. There is nothing done in the darkness that will not be brought to the light - NOTHING! Yet, constantly, Jesus offers His own death as payment for the sins of mankind - the corruption - the deception - the hatred - the murders - the pride and arrogance - the theft.

The wicked keep walking in their wickedness day after day, thinking that they are getting away with it - they will never be found out or punished - they are above the law. Like the Sword of Damocles, the *wrath of God abides with them*, dangling dangerously above their heads, with only a string of mercy holding it back! At the same time, constantly, through the incredible love of God, this string of mercy, this offer of forgiveness through the death of Jesus, God's Son, is held out to them. When we, in our frail humanity think, *"Enough is enough,"* God's patience still endures.

Then suddenly on a day, the line is drawn and judgement is meted out! The Bible calls that *"The Day of the Lord"*. It is the day of judgement, and it will be a terrible day. There are many Scriptures about this day. I quote here just six of them:

Joel 1:15 "Alas for the day! for the Day of YHWH is near, and it will come as destruction from the Almighty."

Isa 2:12 "For YHWH of hosts will have a DAY OF RECKONING against everyone who is proud and lofty, and against everyone who is lifted up, that he may be abased."

Amos 5:18 "Alas you who are longing for the day of YHWH! For what purpose will the Day of YHWH be?"

5:19 "It will be darkness and not light; As when a man flees from a lion, and a bear meets him, or goes home, leans his hand on the wall, and a snake bites him."

- 5:20 *"Will not the Day of YHWH be darkness instead of light, even gloom with no brightness in it?"*
- Obad 1:15 *"For the Day of YHWH draws near upon all the nations. As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head."*
- Zeph 1:7 *"Be silent before the Lord YHWH! For the Day of YHWH is near, for YHWH has prepared a sacrifice, He has consecrated His guests." (Vultures - birds & animals of prey.)*
- Zeph 1:14 *"Near is the Great Day of YHWH, near and coming very quickly; listen, the Day of YHWH! In it the warrior cries out bitterly.*
- 1:15 *"A day of WRATH is that day, a day of TROUBLE AND DISTRESS, a day of DESTRUCTION and DESOLATION, a day of DARKNESS and GLOOM, a day of CLOUDS and THICK DARKNESS,*
- 1:16 *A day of TRUMPET and BATTLE CRY, against the fortified cities and the high corner towers.*
- 1:17 *"And I will bring DISTRESS on men, so that they will walk like the blind, because they have sinned against YHWH; and their blood will be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.*
- 1:18 *"Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the Day of YHWH's Wrath ..."*

The question is again, *How long before justice is done?* The answer, simply stated, is, *Until the mercy and patience of God is fully satisfied!* The longer the wait, the greater is God's grace and mercy revealed.

So, what is our part to be in this waiting period?

After Habukkuk asks the question, “*How long?*”, YHWH answers him with the following instruction:

Hab 2:3 “For the vision is yet for an appointed time; it hastens toward the goal, and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay.

2:4 “Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by faith.”

So essentially Habukkuk is instructed to live by faith - specifically at the time that he does not really understand the reason for the delay. His response is amazing:

Hab 3:16 “I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, For the people to arise who will invade us.

3:17 “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,

3:18 “Yet I will exult in YHWH, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.

3:19 “The Lord YHWH is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on my high places. For the choir director, on my stringed instruments.”

I had never understood the farmers’ desperate cry for rain until now. I built three dams, planted various crops, and then prayed and prayed and prayed for rain - and it has not come. Oh, we have had

some rain for which we are grateful, but less than half the average of the usual rainfall, and the dams until now, don't have a drop of water in them.

Three times the forage that I planted in the wet soil immediate after a small shower of rain, died, because the break between showers was too long, and the volume of water that came was too small, and the little plants could not take root.

Then there is also the poaching, and at least a hundred people who constantly walk (trespass) through the farm, leaving plastic packets and rubbish all over the place. The gates are invariably left open, or the fences cut; and hours are spent trying to find cattle that have gone missing because of the uncaring actions or often deliberate acts of sabotage.

One wonders why. Why such difficulties? Why would God not answer our prayers? The clouds develop so nicely, and you think it can pour down any minute, and then the wind changes, or a cold south wind blows, and by the next morning it is a clear sky again. *(I honour you farmers who have worked with the elements all these years. You are amazing people!)*

This is exactly the time to walk by faith. Faith is not just some great act whereby miracles are instantly performed at one's fingertips. The greatest acts of faith recorded in the Scriptures are those of men and women who continued to believe God, year after year, in impossible situations.

We read of men like *Noah* who built an ark, and for 120 years preached about impending judgement by means of a flood - a thing which the known world at that time had never seen before.

Then there were *Abraham and Sarah*, who continued to believe for a child long after the childbearing years were over. *David* was anointed to be king over Israel by the great prophet Samuel himself. Yet he had

to wait some 15 to 20 years before he finally stepped into his kingdom over Israel. Most of those years of waiting were spent as a fugitive, fleeing for his life.

Again and again, the prime examples of faith are not the *"instant miracle"* kind of faith, but *the long-suffering, endurance type* - the *marathon race*. That is the type of faith Habakkuk had to endure - when everything was going wrong, wickedness seemed to be never-ending: no fruit on the vines, no cattle in the stalls - everything devastated. **Still he would trust in God** - and not only trust, but *keep on rejoicing* in God. And that is the type of faith that is called for in Zimbabwe (and South Africa) at this time. Job knew that type of faith when he said:

Job 13:15 "Though He slay (kill) me, yet will I trust Him." (KJV)

What an amazing statement. The common *"faith statements"* that many Christians make, are all about how we want God to bless us and prosper us. But here I see a price that had to be paid, and a purpose that sees far beyond our own needs and desires. It sees something greater - a bigger picture - and it says, *"I am willing to die for that!"* How shallow we Christian have become - how self-centered - pleasure-seeking.

I was driving through my farm this afternoon, after quite a difficult day, and I noticed again the thick group of bushes which had looked so ugly through the winter. Those who know the *Dichrostachys cinerea* or sickle bush, will know them to have an untidy crown with long, tangling, thin, seemingly useless grey branches, full of long white thorns, and generally the last plant one would desire to have on a farm. I have a lot of them! Here they were standing in the drought, covered with the most beautiful pink / mauve and yellow flowers in the shape of a little lantern. My children call them the *"Chinese lanterns"*.

Wherever I go, I see the thorn trees flourishing - the well-known

Sweet Thorn (*Acacia Karroo*) being most prolific, with their magnificent spread of bright yellow globules. I wondered at the marvel of this - how such hardy trees can flourish with such amazing beauty when water is actually very scarce.

Isn't that how we Christians should be? Still able to see the beauty in life when all else is so bleak - to give a gentle word, a helping hand, a smile to encourage, a piece of my own loaf of bread for someone else - for which I might have had to queue for an hour. We can only do that if we are consistently digging deep for our water - from the Word of God.

It is *in adversity* that *character is really tested*, and no man can speak of the greatness of his own faith until he has walked through the fire. So, praise the Lord for the fire. Let's not become all bitter and twisted just because we waited for 11 hours for fuel and then finally turned away with none. Try to use the time productively - to share a testimony with others who are also waiting - actually you have a ready audience who are going nowhere!

How long?

Well, I can't answer that - it is in God's hands. But one thing I know, He has walked this same road before us, and He holds our hand; and gently, lovingly, guides us all the way through the storm. I also know that the day of reckoning is coming for the wicked, and until that day, the compassion and amazing grace of our Lord is being extended towards them. Our job then is quite clear -

- 1) to warn the wicked, inviting them to take the offer of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus, and
- 2) to live by faith, trusting God for the daily supply of our bread, and milk, and sugar, and fuel, and margarine, etc.

May I humbly encourage you to *stop looking at your worn-out shoes.*
With your faith firmly placed in Almighty God, *look at the horizon,*
and keep walking! The oasis could be just over the next hill!"

With special love to you all,

Henry D Jackson