

Roll Down, Justice!
In It for the Long Haul

[Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:2-3](#)

I want to tell you about a young woman named Mala. Mala is from a country in South Asia. In the chaos that the very poor sometimes live in, Mala was separated from her family when she was just a young girl. She was taken and trafficked into an international brothel—the kind of illegal but not-so-uncommon operation it’s hard for us to believe still exists. Young girls were kept—enslaved, really—in a motel just off a freeway, a stop for truck drivers and other men who wanted to buy sex. They were raped repeatedly—10 or 15 times a day. They were kept there by threats; if they tried to run away the traffickers would kill them, or their families. At the age of 15, Mala was trapped. There were only two ways out—to be sold to another brothel or to die.

In 2011, an international group of Christians that was committed to ending human trafficking drilled down on this particular operation. It took them months, but finally they got local police to investigate, and to lead an operation to rescue Mala and the other girls. The police mapped out a rescue, but just before they got there, someone tipped off the traffickers, told them what was about to happen. Months of planning had to be scrapped. The team regrouped, prepared for another raid. Again, the brothel owner was tipped off by someone in the police force. *Seven times* over six months they attempted rescues. Seven times they were thwarted; the place was empty when the police arrived.

The group kept praying. They pushed the police not to give up. Finally, on the eighth try, they found a few girls in the motel, asleep in locked rooms. Mala and most of the others had been chased out by the bad guys before the police arrived. But this time the trafficker was arrested.

The volunteers searched until they found Mala, rescued her, made her safe. But their work wasn’t done. Unless the trafficker was convicted in court, nothing would change. Mala and the other girls were the only witnesses who could make the case. Months more passed, as they waited for a trial. The girls were scared. Testifying would put not only themselves but their families in danger. Finally, in March 2013, they went to trial. The human trafficker was convicted and sentenced to a long prison term. Finally, Mala was free.

Two-and-a-half years of work by this justice-minded organization to free a handful of girls, to take one human trafficker off the streets. And these people had God on their side! No wonder the prophet Habakkuk cried out,

*“Lord, how long will I call for help and you not listen?
I cry out to you, “Violence!” but you don’t deliver us.
The Instruction you’ve given us is ineffective.
Justice doesn’t happen. There’s wickedness everywhere, all around us!
Justice gets warped—bent under the weight of the reality of the world.*

Making justice is long, hard work—as slow now as it was three thousand years ago, when Habakkuk lived. Even small steps take years, often more than one lifetime, to accomplish. I think that’s a big part of why good people like us, people who sincerely want to be part of changing the world for good, are reluctant even to start. There’s no payoff, no result, in our sightline. Stopping gun violence in this country? Not likely. Ending poverty, or homelessness? Eliminating racism? Hopeless. Repairing the environment enough to reverse climate change? Impossible. Peace in the Middle East? Not going to happen. What good will it do to give our lives away for a justice cause that cannot win?

There’s a word for that feeling. It’s *despair*. Despair means no hope. Despair is what Habakkuk felt when he said, “You are not listening to me, God!” Despair is not an unreasonable response to what we see in the world. But despair is not a final word. Despair takes us someplace. If we actually believe that there is a good God alongside of us in this life, despair ought to take us right back to God, righter where we belong. Face-to-face with the God who loves this world even more than we do. The God who can hear our complaint, our discouragement, our wondering if things will ever change. There’s a word for that conversation too. It’s *lament*. Many of the Bible’s psalms begin with lament: “How long will you forget me, Lord? How long will you hide your face from me? Answer me!” (Psalm 13) Lament isn’t doubt. It’s an act of faith. It’s speaking our truth. It’s going to God for what we need to keep going.

When Habakkuk lamented to God, God answered. God said,

Write this down. Write it out in big block letters so that it can be read on the run—so that you can be reminded of it over and over again. I have a vision [God said]. It’s coming. It aches for the coming—it can hardly wait! And it doesn’t lie. If it seems slow in coming, wait. It’s on its way. It will come in the right time. I promise.

The answer to lament is God’s promise. It’s hearing God say—again—that that grace will show up in some way that we can’t engineer and we don’t make happen. The reminder that grace will appear in its own time, and in its own way. In a 15-year-old girl’s courage to raise her small voice against a sophisticated international human trafficking operation. In the strength that comes when we think we’re too tired to take one more step. In other people who will pick up when we cannot carry the burden of this work any longer.

It’s true: we will never be able to make this world a just place on our own. It’s too hard; there is just too much work to do; there are too many forces working against it. We are too small. Repairing a broken world requires more forgiveness and stamina and strength than we possess. No matter how hard we are willing to work, we have to rely on grace—on God—to make it happen. That’s not slacking off on our responsibility. It’s being human and honest. Faithful.

Martin Luther King often said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” I think he really believed it. Here was a leader who gave his whole life to justice work. He had more power and influence than any of us will ever have. And even he knew that he was working for some end he would never see. He had to trust that in the end, in some timing that was not his, that long arc will end in a just world, where every person is equal not only in God’s sight, but in human eyes too.

Along the way, his work was to look for signs of grace, little markers that God was fully engaged. One of those moments came in 1968, just a month before Dr. King was killed. He had been asked to address a group of conservative Jewish rabbis at their convention in the Catskill Mountains. These were not natural allies of a Baptist minister from the South. But as Dr. King came to the podium, those rabbis stood and they sang *We Shall Overcome* in Hebrew. It's hard for us today to feel how surprising that must have been, how much natural suspicion there was in those days between Jews and Christians. It would be like a church today welcoming a Muslim guest by saying a Muslim prayer. It was a moment of pure grace. A small sign that the world could change for good.

But deep, lasting change takes a long time. A long time for even one person to change. A really long time for the world.

There's a story from the Kabbalah, the mystic Jewish writings of the 14th century, about how the world was created. In the beginning, the story goes, there was only darkness. God—the light of the world—was hidden in the darkness. There was a moment in time when the earth, what the Kabbalah calls the world of a thousand things, flew out of the holy darkness as a ray of light. There was a great crash, what scientists call today the Big Bang. As they slammed together, all the vessels that contained the light broke. The light of the world was scattered into thousands of fragments, shards. They fell into every thing and every person—some on the surface of things, some deeply hidden.

The story says that human life is a response to that accident. Every person's purpose is to find the light where it has been hiding. Our work is to search for the little, broken pieces of light. To lift them up and make the light visible again. To keep doing it until all the pieces are put back together, until the hidden wholeness of the world is restored.

In Hebrew this work is called *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. If that repair will ever be accomplished, the work involves—it requires, the myth says—all people who have ever been born, every person who is alive now, and everyone who is left to be born. No one can be left behind. When the work is finished, God's full presence on earth will be possible.

I love that story. It says we are all healers of the world. None of us alone will make a huge difference, but each of us can heal the part of the world that we touch. Not by creating light ourselves, but by finding the light that is already there, hidden, inside every person we meet, every moment we are part of. That's our work. No need to fight for our place or feel more responsibility than we own. We are not powerless. Each of us is big enough and strong enough for this work, just as we are. But neither are we all-powerful. The light is already there—God's light, not ours. God's justice, God's dream for this earth, not ours.

Justice will never be done on earth without our help. It demands our commitment to hard, slow, persistent work. Every one of us is needed, called, to be a part of it. But take heart. God is in it with us. It's his number one project. God has promised to redeem and repair and renew this world. And God will not leave it alone—or leave *us* alone—until that work is done.