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# VERITAS

*Equipping Christians to live by truth—  
veritas—from God.*

The Triumph of  
*Trusting God*  
When You Don't  
UNDERSTAND

By Dr. Erwin W. Lutzer



DALLAS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

## DISTINGUISHED SPEAKER



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**Dr. Erwin W. Lutzer** has served as senior pastor of the world-famous Moody Church in Chicago since 1980. He earned his B.Th. from Winnipeg Bible College, a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, an M.A. in philosophy from Loyola University, an LL.D. from Simon Greenleaf School of Law, and a D.D. from Western Conservative Baptist Seminary.

Dr. Lutzer is the author of numerous books, including the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association Gold Medallion award-winner *Hitler's Cross* and the best-seller *One Minute After You Die*. He is also a featured speaker on radio programs heard on more than 700 stations, including *Songs in the Night*, *The Moody Church Hour*, and the daily feature *Running to Win*.

He speaks both nationally and internationally at Bible conferences and has led tours of the cities of the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

Dr. Lutzer and his wife, Rebecca, live in the Chicago area and have three married children and seven grandchildren.

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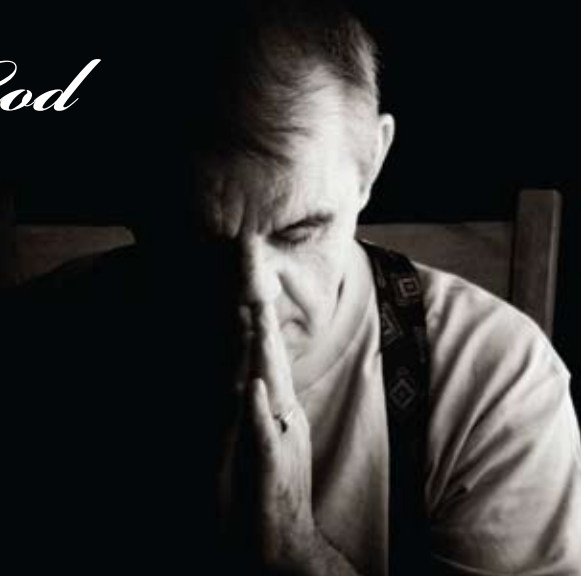
**VERITAS**



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*Veritas* is a publication of Dallas Seminary for our valued friends and partners, designed to provide biblical encouragement and instruction in keeping with our strong commitment to minister to those who stand with us in prayer and financial support. We are pleased to present the messages of outstanding leaders and Bible teachers who speak during chapels and at other events, as a way of bringing you "on campus" with us and giving you the benefit of their insights. *Veritas* is also available online at our website, [www.dts.edu/veritas](http://www.dts.edu/veritas).

The Triumph of  
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*G*od's people have always wanted to know how to respond when God doesn't answer prayer—or when the answer we receive is not the one we had prayed for. The biblical prophet Habakkuk dealt with these issues in his day, and Dr. Erwin Lutzer does a masterful job of unfolding the prophet's timeless teachings.

This message was delivered at Dallas Seminary last fall as part of our annual Nathan D. Maier Memorial Series in Bible Exposition. Dr. Lutzer presented these messages with clarity and a pastoral insight and compassion that will speak to your heart. The entire series is also available on podcasts at our website, [www.dts.edu](http://www.dts.edu)

I want us to think about the dilemma of unanswered prayer—or perhaps more specifically, what to do when our prayers aren't answered or when the answer is not one we were hoping to receive. My text is the Old Testament prophetic book of Habakkuk, which holds marvelous insights for us on these issues. We are going to survey this brief book, noting several key verses and passages that will help us to triumph even in the face of unanswered prayers.

As you read, be thinking of the three biggest fears or anxieties you have right now. Perhaps they deal with a threatened job loss, the erosion of retirement security, or some family or personal issue. Identify your concerns because I am very serious when I say that in the next few moments, God may be pleased to deliver all of us from our personal burdens and the stress that surrounds us. I pray we will give our burdens to God in a new and radical way.

Habakkuk was perplexed with the current situation in Judah. He wrote just before the Babylonians invaded Judah the first time in 605 B.C., about eight years before the people of Judah were fully conquered and carried off to captivity in Babylon. Times were stressful and evil.

## Complaining in Prayer

Habakkuk had two complaints that he voiced to God. He begins by asking how could God let such evil prevail in Judah? The nation had become very corrupt, so Habakkuk asked, in effect: “Where are You God when things go wrong? Where are You when there is injustice? Why don't You do something about all of this evil?”

So we read in Habakkuk 1:2, “How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save?” The prophet went on in verses 3–4 to describe the terrible injustice and strife that were rampant in Judah.

The Lord answered Habakkuk in verses 5–11, but it wasn't the answer the prophet wanted. Habakkuk didn't think God was doing anything about the evil in Judah—but He was! Incredibly, He was sending the dreaded Babylonians to conquer Judah!

## The Prophet's Response

Habakkuk couldn't believe what he was hearing. Yes, God was working by sending the cruel Babylonians on their way! Just like us, Habakkuk couldn't see what God was doing because God's doings are often hidden from us and they are wrought in secret. But the fact that God would use this wicked nation increased Habakkuk's stress. Little wonder he responded with another complaint.

So his response said basically, “God, I am sorry I asked. I expected You to do something good for Judah, but instead You are raising up the Babylonians who are even more wicked than we are! I am going to stand here and wait to see what You have to say about this complaint” (see 1:12–2:1). Habakkuk's problem was that the God he thought he knew was not the God who had replied to his first request.

Today, we pray for America, and we say to God, “Why don't You do something about the increase in violence in our land? Why don't You do something about the falling stock market? Why don't You protect us from radical Islam?”

And God might be saying to us, “I want you to know that I am doing something. Haven't you been listening to the news? Don't you notice that everything is coming apart? Don't you know that the economy is in distress? Don't you see how

**Our challenge today is the same as Habakkuk's—how to respond when the answer to our prayers is not the answer we had prayed for.**

the media are attacking Christianity? Haven't you heard about the hostility of some politicians to religious freedom? And yes, radical Islam is growing in the land. I'm doing plenty!"

Our challenge today is the same as Habakkuk's—how to respond when the answer to our prayers is not the answer we had prayed for. How do we respond when God does not stop the distress that surrounds us?

## Two Characteristics of God

Habakkuk appears to be in shock. He is now pleading with God, and in the process, he mentions two characteristics of God that don't square with what he has just been told. The first is *holiness*. "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (1:13). In other words, the prophet is asking:

"How can You use a nation as evil as the Babylonians to judge us? How can You tolerate their evil?" The Babylonians delighted in cruelty. They couldn't go to bed at night unless they had done something evil. Using them to bring judgment on God's people violated God's holiness, Habakkuk thought.

The second attribute of God Habakkuk cited is *justice*. He says, in effect, "If it is true that every nation is supposed to get what it deserves, then why don't You judge the Babylonians instead of using them to judge us?" God's use of an evil nation seemed wholly unjust.

Habakkuk now was like a watchman standing on the wall, looking out to see what God's answer would be. God told the prophet, "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false.

**A financial newspaper estimated that 10,000 people would die this year because of the fluctuations in the stock market.**

**People are trembling in uncertainty and fear—including people who know Christ.**

Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay” (2:2–3).

Embedded in God’s response is a statement quoted three times in the New Testament, “The righteous will live by his faith.” What God is saying to Habakkuk, and to us, is that when we are anxious and perplexed, it is time for faith. Yes, we need faith when our prayers are unanswered. In a moment we will see that Habakkuk learned just that.

## Silence Before God

Before Habakkuk gets his answer, God takes the time to list the sins of the Babylonians as well as the sins of Judah. God will use the Babylonians but will also judge them. Habakkuk concludes God’s message by saying, “But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (2:20).

Earlier Habakkuk had asked God, “Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?” (1:13). The prophet accused God of being silent, but now he is silent in God’s presence. When the answers to our prayers don’t make sense, it is time for us and for the whole world to be silent in the presence of our God—silent before a God who *refuses to answer* our prayers.

## Praise to the Lord

Now Habakkuk comes to some answers that satisfy both his mind and heart. He begins by recounting the time when the children of Israel were coming up out of Egypt. Notice these descriptions of God: “His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand, where his power was hidden. . . . He stood, and shook the earth; he looked, and made the nations tremble. . . . His ways are eternal” (3:4, 6).

Habakkuk was reviewing Israel’s history and reminding himself of God’s faithfulness in bringing the nation out of Egypt. Suddenly when he got a grip on what God had

done in the past, he had a new appreciation for God. He began to realize that God is entirely faithful, even when we don't see His hand.

## The Prophet's Conclusion

First we have a word about fear, then a word about faith. In Habakkuk 3:16, the prophet lets us feel his fear of the future: "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us."

The fear of the prophet is ours today. A financial newspaper estimated that 10,000 people would die this year because of the fluctuations in the stock market. People are trembling in uncertainty and fear—including people who know Christ.

**God is in control.  
Even the devil is only  
as powerful as God  
allows him to be.**

Now for a word of faith and hope. Read this and your soul will be blessed. Habakkuk bursts out in praise: "Though 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, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights" (3:17–19).

Question: How did Habakkuk make the transition from complaint to praise? How did he triumph despite the disappointment of unanswered prayer? Two attributes of God changed his perspective.

The first was the *sovereignty* of God; he remembered that God controlled Israel's history, so the prophet reasoned that God could control his future as well. How powerful were

the Babylonians? As powerful as God allowed them to be, and not one whit more! My friend, God is in control. Even the devil is only as powerful as God allows him to be. As Martin Luther said, “Even the devil is God’s devil.” How far will the stock market fall? As far as God allows and not one percentage point more. How strong is radical Islam? Only as strong as God allows it to be. Remember, God is in control of all of your fears!

Second, Habakkuk remembered that God *cares* for His people. The God who cared for Israel in the desert is the God who cares for us centuries later. The God who saw Habakkuk through the hard times is the God who is here for us when life falls apart. The devil wants us to call into question God’s care for His people. But in the New Testament, Paul assures us that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:37–39).

Let me give these last verses of Habakkuk a contemporary twist: “Though the stock market fluctuates, though I have just been fired from my job and I don’t know how God is going to supply my needs; though my body is falling apart, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God is going to be my strength. He is going to see me through this time. God is going to deliver me in the midst of the trouble that is coming.”

**Everything is in God’s hands—our finances, our relationships, and our burdens.**

## Give It All to God

We think that times are tough, and we all struggle with stress, strain, and anxiety. Let’s have the faith to give our anxieties to God. Here is an illustration that might help.

Let’s suppose that I am on a long flight overseas, and

as we fly into the night, I say to a flight attendant, “I am worried about the pilots. I think they may have fallen asleep. Would you check to see if they are awake?” Let’s say she does and then assures me that they are awake.

But half an hour later, I say to myself, “*Those pilots could have fallen asleep by now.*” I ask the flight attendant, “Could you check on the pilots again?” She checks and comes back to say they are awake. When I ask the third time, she tells me very emphatically that I am insulting the pilots and the entire airline! And, of course, I would be if I had such incessant fears.

But I think you and I insult God like that every day. We commit a matter to Him, then we keep checking to see if He has done anything about it; we wonder if He has fallen asleep at the switch.

Remember Potiphar, the Egyptian official who bought Joseph as a slave? According to Genesis 39:6, Potiphar had such complete confidence in Joseph’s running his household that he “did not concern himself with anything [that was in the house] except the food he ate.”

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could trust God like that? To have such a sense of commitment that we can say we are not concerned with anything except that we are alive and doing what we need to do. Everything is in God’s hands—our finances, our relationships, and our burdens.

Wouldn’t it be a credit to our faith if we could say in the midst of a world with a thousand problems, “Yet I will rejoice in the Lord”? We can! Today let us transfer the burdens from our shoulders to God’s. When we realize that He can bear them, we won’t have to!

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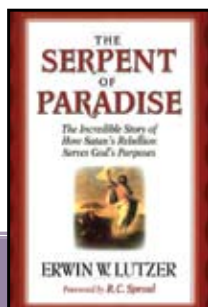


## Learn How God Has Defeated Satan on Your Behalf—So You Can Live Triumphantly in Any Circumstance!

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Dr. Erwin Lutzer calls *The Serpent of Paradise* “a modest attempt to put the devil in his place.” He points out that although the angel Lucifer rebelled against God so that he might no longer be God’s servant, he still is. Even today, Satan cannot make a move without God’s express consent because his bid for independence from God was fatally flawed the moment he sinned.

Dr. Lutzer contends that we cannot properly understand Satan unless we first understand God. When we stand in awe of God, we will find it unnecessary to stand in awe of Satan. *The Serpent of Paradise* will also challenge popular conceptions of Satan that play right into the enemy’s hands.



Here is a book that will stimulate your faith and lead you to worship a God who does not lose—even when Satan appears to win. It will also be a helpful companion to Dr. Lutzer’s powerful message in this issue of *Veritas*, so be sure to request your copy today!

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*Dr. Mark L. Bailey*

## When the Answers to Prayer Don't Seem to Fit

In this issue of *Veritas*, Dr. Erwin Lutzer has done us a great service by helping us wrestle with the issue of unanswered prayer—or even answers to prayer that surprise us.

There are times when it is a good thing that God doesn't answer our prayers, for we do not know how to pray as we should (Romans 8:26). At other times, God answers in ways different from what we asked for or expected. This was the prophet Habakkuk's dilemma.

These are the occasions when we must trust that God has a better plan or answer to our prayers than we have. My family saw this in the death last summer of my older brother Paul, who was a special needs patient all of his life. God chose not to heal Paul or reverse that circumstance, and so for 62 years, we had to trust that God had a better plan for Paul.

Sometimes we pray, wanting God to deal with problems in other people's lives, when God may want to use that prayer to convict and change us. Sometimes God wants us to wait for our prayers to be answered because we have a lot to learn about Him and ourselves first.

Dr. Lutzer did a superb job of helping the Dallas Seminary family think through such prayer issues during his lecture series on "The Triumph of Unanswered Prayer." He is a good communicator who has the unusual ability to be creative and relevant while staying biblical. He is a model of what we'd love to multiply by the hundreds as we train students for ministry here at Dallas Seminary.

Providing these dedicated men and women with Bible-centered training requires the sacrificial giving and prayers of many friends like you—and I could not be more grateful to you!

Our desire to help you grow in Christ is only right, because it is your prayers and financial gifts to Dallas Seminary that enable us to prepare godly leaders like Erwin Lutzer. We continue to rely on your commitment—and we continue to thank God daily for you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark Bailey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mark" and last name "Bailey" clearly legible.

**Dr. Mark L. Bailey**, *President*  
Dallas Theological Seminary