

HOW LONG IS TOO LONG?

Habakkuk 1:1-11

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Where do you turn when you doubt? Not just doubt, but some trial or circumstance leads you to doubt that God cares? There are times in the Christian life when we become dry spiritually and that barrenness might lead us to doubt or question God. That is the theme of the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk experienced one of those times in his life when he felt as if God was not there, that God did not care, that God was somehow uninformed about his plight. Where did Habakkuk turn? To the very God that he desperately needed to hear from in the midst of his adversity.

What we have recorded in the book of Habakkuk is a series of complaints followed by God's responses to those complaints. It is a book of prayer, of a desperate man crying out to God for help. As we will see tonight, Habakkuk started out in the right place but with the wrong attitude. But God in His grace brings Habakkuk to the point of praise in chapter 3 where he concludes:

Habakkuk 3:17-19 – 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, ¹⁸ yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' *feet*, and makes me walk on my high places.

How do you respond to your doubt? Where do you turn in your adversity? And if you start right, how do you approach God in the midst of your turmoil? As I mentioned this morning, this is one of the most practical of the prophetic books because it hits us where we live. It is my prayer as we embark on this study that we would learn from the prophet Habakkuk, both from his mistakes and from his wisdom in the end.

I. Habakkuk's Honest Complaint (1:1-4)

In the opening verses we are given the first of two complaints, criticisms from Habakkuk in the form of questions. His first complaint sprang from the conditions he faced, the theater in which God had not only placed Habakkuk as a person, but as a prophet. The book opens with the words, **"The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw."** The role of the prophet was to represent God to His people. In God's covenant relations with His people, He chose certain individuals to pronounce blessings from God on the people when they obeyed His will and His ways, and curses upon those who failed to obey. The blessings were encouragements for them to keep on in their faith, and the curses were to lead them to repentance, to return to their God from whom the promises of relationship, along with the stipulations, had been given. The life of the prophet was made difficult when the sins of the people required them to pronounce curses. In those situations, the prophet was typically not the most popular of people because the nature of man is to think more highly of himself than he ought, to think better of their condition than God does. That was the situation that Habakkuk found himself, much like the prophet Isaiah, in the midst of a wicked and perverse people.

Not only that, but the nation faced an imminent invasion from the most wicked people on the earth – the Chaldeans, known better to us as the Babylonians. This invasion that Habakkuk

anticipated happened in the year 586 B.C. when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the people of God were taken into captivity. Habakkuk's prayer would have taken place some time prior as he witnessed what he considered to be God's approval of the Babylonians. Habakkuk's concern was that God tolerated the wickedness of the Chaldeans, which leads to his complaint.

1. Where is God's holiness? (vv. 2-3)

Habakkuk questioned God. His first question, again, honest questions, concerned the holiness of God towards His prophet and His people. "Why," Habakkuk asked, "do You O God tolerate wickedness?" Put another way, Habakkuk asked God, "Why do the wicked prosper?"

We live in a time where we might have the same question. How many of us, in praying for our nation, which, much like the people of God in Habakkuk's time, is on the slippery slope of moral decline? How many of us have asked with great sincerity, "Why do the wicked prosper?"

In this prayer, Habakkuk wanted to know how long he must call for help before God would answer. He is concerned by what he perceived to be a blight on God's character. He began by accusing God for His apparent silence, "**How long, O LORD, will I call for help, and You will not hear?**" Time and again Habakkuk had cried out to God, and Habakkuk felt that God was not listening. The problem with Habakkuk's question was the spirit by which he asked it. David Prior suggests the following:

Behind *how long?* is the unspoken cry, 'I have my limits.' Behind *why?* is the insistence, 'I must have reasons.' God's silence is impenetrable and intolerable. Habakkuk believes that the limits of his tolerance will be extended if he is able to understand why God is acting—or not acting—in a particular way.¹

I wonder how many of us have fallen into the same type of thinking in our prayers. We think, "My circumstances would be much more tolerable if God would only let me in on His plan." But we must recognize, as Habakkuk failed to do on this occasion, that there are times in our lives that we can't handle the truth. Or there may be times that if we knew the truth, we would react in a way that is in direct opposition to God's will. Dear friends, there are times that God is silent – for our own benefit! But that does not mean that God does not care. His silence is a demonstration that He does care. If we knew all there was to know, we would never depend on Him!

Habakkuk then questioned God's inactivity, "**I cry out to You, 'Violence!' yet You do not save.**" Habakkuk addressed six problems in this book that he "**saw**" concerning the corruption in Judah in matched pairs.² "Iniquity" and "wickedness" or "wrongful suffering" we find in v. 3. "Destruction" and "**violence**" form the second pair played out in the book. "Strife" and "contention" are legal terms that form the last couplet. All of these things Habakkuk "**saw**" going on around him and he questioned God's inactivity in the midst of the wickedness. How could a holy God tolerate such things?

The context suggests that Habakkuk also questioned God's wisdom, "**Why do You make me see iniquity and cause me to look on wickedness?**" It is as if he is saying, "God, if you want me to be your prophet, then you must know that I disagree with Your approach." Habakkuk felt trapped, choked by the situation which God had placed him in, rather than recognizing that God was all-wise and would not give him more than he could handle.

¹ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*, 209.

² James Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 209-210.

Habakkuk's problem lay in the spirit in which he approached God. He thought that he knew better than God.

2. Where is God's justice? (v. 4)

What Habakkuk perceived about God and witnessed in the world around him led him to question God's motive for and understanding of his current situation. Habakkuk had taken a few correct facts, things that he had not only observed but correctly discerned, and drawn some faulty conclusions from those facts. The result of God's silence, His inaction, was that **"the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted."**

Habakkuk had rightly discerned what was happening around him, but he placed the blame in the wrong place. The problem was not with the Babylonians, nor was the blame with God, but with the sins of God's people. Martyn Lloyd-Jones showed how the people had gotten themselves into this mess, "Serious religious falling away had been followed, as invariably happens, by a general moral and political decline."³

As I read those words I could not help but think of the moral degradation we see in our society. How did we get to the point of such low moral values in our nation? Could it be that the people of God have ceased to be the people of God? Could we, much like Habakkuk and his people, be right where God wants us to be? I think I can say with utmost confidence that we in America face times of judgment from our God for our religious ineptness. We are in such a state of moral decline because the people of God have become lax in their relationship with God, have slowly declined in their fervor to "love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and to love their neighbor as themselves." We have failed to "deny self, take up our cross, and follow Him." We have become spiritually lazy, cozy in our creaturely comforts, serving God when it is convenient, rather than serving God in the theater that He has placed us for His glory. Perhaps we have, like Habakkuk, put the blame elsewhere, perhaps even believing that God is inactive, questioning His justice, without realizing that *we* might be part of the problem.

II. God's Faithful Response (1:5-11)

Donald Gowan wisely stated the following:

Most people... who have longed for the privilege of arguing with God, of questioning the way he does things, of seeking God's explanation of his ways, have not been given that opportunity... What Habakkuk has recorded here is something extraordinary: a dialogue in which he twice complains to God about the world's injustice, and twice God answers him.⁴

Gowan reminds us that Habakkuk's dialogue with God is the exception, not the rule. Habakkuk's approach to God was correct in that he went to the God he questioned. His problem lay in the fact that he questioned God. Many a man has been made the worse for this. We must recognize that God showed great grace with Habakkuk in responding to Habakkuk as He did. God did not have to respond, but did so according to His faithfulness to His covenant.

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith*, 11.

⁴ Quoted by David Pryor, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*, 212.

1. God's unexpected providences (v. 5)

God's response was not what Habakkuk expected, not at all in line with the plan that he had formulated in his mind. Habakkuk thought that *when* God heard his prayer and *when* He proved so by His actions that surely His actions would be in judgment against the wicked Chaldeans. Habakkuk had in his mind that the only way that God's holiness could be vindicated in this morass of moral decline and His justice upheld was in punishing those who hated Him and demonstrated that hatred in their actions towards His people.

However, God had a plan much different than Habakkuk envisioned.

Habakkuk 1:5 – Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because *I am* doing something in your days (I have heard you, Habakkuk, and I am not inactive) – *You would not believe if you were told* (that is why I have been silent).

Habakkuk had formulated God's plan for Him in his mind, the way that God should have responded to his pleas. He had prescribed God's actions for Him. Habakkuk failed to recognize what Lloyd-Jones wisely pointed out:

We all tend to prescribe the answers to our prayers. We think that God can come in only one way. But Scripture teaches us that God sometimes answers our prayers by allowing things to become much worse before they become better. He may sometimes do the opposite of what we anticipate. He may overwhelm us with a Chaldean army. Yet it is a fundamental principle in the life and walk of faith that we must always be prepared for the unexpected when we are dealing with God... We must hold on to the hope that He has allowed things to become worse before they finally become better.⁵

God told Habakkuk, "**Look! *I am doing something in your days.***" The situation was not out of God's control. What was happening *was* according to His purposes, purposes described in Isaiah 55:7-9 with a reminder of God's infinite wisdom:

Isaiah 55:7-9 – ⁷ "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. ⁸ For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts."

We can almost hear God graciously asking Habakkuk, "Who do you think you are?" Paul put it like this in Romans 11:33-34, ³³ "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴ For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR?" That is what Habakkuk needed to learn.

2. God's unusual means (vv. 6-11a)

Lloyd-Jones commented:

A surprising feature of God's ways is *that He sometimes uses strange instruments to correct His Church and people*. The Chaldeans, of all people, are the ones whom God is going to raise up to chastise Israel! Such a thing was unthinkable. But here again is a fact which is evident right through Scripture. God, if He so wishes, can use even a godless

⁵ *From Fear to Faith*, 17.

Chaldean. In the course of history He has used all sorts of strange and unexpected instruments to bring His purposes to pass. This is a relevant fact today, for it would seem that, according to the Bible, much of what is happening in the world now must be regarded in this light... The importance of all this lies in the fact that, if we do not view these things in a right way, our prayers will be wrongly conceived and wrongly directed. We have to recognize the true state of the Church, and recognize its iniquity. We must understand that it is possible that the forces which today are most antagonistic to the Christian Church are possibly being used by God for His own purpose.⁶

Lloyd-Jones was speaking to the particular problem of Communism in his day, a problem which we no longer encounter. However, the principle of God using the ungodly and the unrighteous as a means of judgment on His Church remains. Our battle today is postmodernism, the belief that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Tolerance towards all belief systems is the mantra. But again we must ask the question, “How did we reach the point in this nation that truth no longer means anything?” Could it be that God is using this culture to wake the Church up? Remember Lloyd-Jones words we read earlier, “Serious religious falling away had been followed, as invariably happens, by a general moral and political decline.”

Walt Chantry alludes to this:

After all is said, God has placed us in a corrupt and provoking nation at a time when he is permitting morals to plunge to ever-lower depths and permitting the church to become ever weaker. He has appointed that we live through such times filled with sorrow and distress. It is a time when God has given up formerly Christian nations to spiritual darkness and uncleanness. Our prayers have not reversed this trend. *Why?*⁷

There is a silver lining in all of this. We as believers can take great comfort in that we see that God is sovereign over not only the end of His purposes, but the means He uses to accomplish His purposes as well. It is His prerogative as God to use whatever He chooses to fulfill His purposes. He is sovereign over the means as well as the end.

But lest Habakkuk leave this part of the discussion with a further false impression of the holiness and injustice of God, God concludes with...

3. God’s unequivocal promise (v. 11b)

“But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god.” The Chaldeans were the instruments that God ordained to bring His people to their senses. Yes, they were wicked. But the fact that God used them for His purposes did not mean that they were off the hook for their wickedness. God told Habakkuk that the wickedness of the Chaldeans contained the seed of their destruction. God had ordained the end, that being the restoration of His people, and the means by which this was to take place. And He promised that they, the Chaldeans, would be judged according to the wickedness of their own hearts.

Of course, all of this seemed distant to Habakkuk who heard God say that violence would be quelled by more violence, destruction by more destruction, lawlessness by more lawlessness, and he comes to God with a second complaint that we will address next week.

⁶ *From Fear to Faith*, 18.

⁷ Walter J. Chantry, *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, Issue 521, February 2007, 30.

Conclusion

1. We are never right to question God.

David Powlison makes the following keen observation, “When people think about God by instinct, not by revelation, they ask many of the wrong questions.”⁸

Why? is a valid question. Habakkuk cried out in effect, “Why do the wicked prosper and why do your people suffer?” That is a question that seeks God’s answer, His purpose, His motive. If Habakkuk had stopped there, all would have been fine. But he continued. Habakkuk’s problem was that he did not ask *Why?* to know God’s purpose but he questioned God’s understanding, His purpose, and His motives. Habakkuk’s questions were not so that *he* (Habakkuk) might gain understanding but were in fact accusations against God, asked so that *He* (God) might gain understanding. Therein lay the problem – a huge problem because it questioned the very character of God! It is right to ask God questions, but it is never right to question God.

2. We should guard our hearts against indifference to God’s Word

v. 5 – “You would not believe if you were told.”

3. We should seek God, both corporately and individually, as to how we are to confront our culture.

⁸ David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 44.