

## **“O Lord, How Long?”**

Habakkuk 1:1-5

Let me welcome those of you who are watching. Once more, we find ourselves having to meet through ‘online’ means. I read somewhere this week that for the first time, every child in America is homeschooled and every pastor is a televangelist. And though it is nowhere near as good as being together, I’m grateful for the technology that affords us this opportunity. While I’m thinking about it, I want to ask you to share this live video right now on your social media feed if you have not already done so. If you are on Facebook, liking this video and sharing on your personal page helps broaden our potential reach. So take just a second and do that right now.

The question that is on all of our minds right now is how long all of this is going to last. How long do we think we will be having to do church online only? Hopefully, not too long. But I have been told to prepare for possibly up to 4-6 weeks. Ministry doesn’t stop in a time of crisis. In many ways, it opens up the door for more avenues of ministry. We’ve already given you a list of current needs and ways you can help us with our local ministry. Obviously, not meeting for an extended period of time raises a whole lot of other questions involving our financial needs and budget giving. So we have tried to make online giving as easy as possible. If you have never done that before, I really want to encourage to check into it. I think you will find it very convenient. You can go to [www.greenstreet.org/give](http://www.greenstreet.org/give) or you can send your weekly offering in by mail, or even bring it by during the week. But more than anything, I’m trusting God to provide our every need. I know He’ll do it.

I had fully intended to return to our study in the book of Acts. But in my devotional time this week, I found myself reading through the minor prophets, and one little book in particular. If you have your Bible there in front of you, take it and turn to the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. Yes, it is a book of the Bible, even though it may be one you are unfamiliar with. It’s found after Nahum, before Zephaniah.

As this past week progressed, I really felt impressed to spend some time on the importance of faith in a time of crisis. I kept coming back to the minor prophets in my own devotional life.

Many of them were dealing with nations in turmoil. Society in an upheaval. Their message is very appropriate given what we are all presently experiencing. We'll get back to Acts when we all are able to get together again. I imagine that will be an awesome homecoming!

The little book of Habakkuk consists of only three chapters, but it contains a powerful message. One commentator has said that it begins with gloom, but ends with glory. It starts out on a sour note, but it ends on a sweet note. The first chapter begins with the prophet weeping, but the last chapter ends with the prophet worshipping.

Habakkuk is a dialogue between the prophet and God, and its message was originally intended for the people of the southern kingdom of Judah. It is primarily the account of a man of God dealing with a problem more so than delivering a message. We know that he is a prophet, but outside of the book that bears his name, there is virtually nothing else known about him.

**“Habakkuk”** —*to wrestle or to embrace*

His name is an illustration of his message. When we are first introduced to him in chapter 1, he is a man who is wrestling with God. We know that he is faced with some perplexing issues. There are things going on in his world that he doesn't understand. He is troubled by all that is happening in his world, and he's anxious to reconcile what he sees with what he believes. He has his doubts and questions, but he entrusts them to a sovereign God. The prophet begins his message with a question—“O Lord, how long?” I imagine that is the very same question that many of you have been asking this week. I have found myself asking that question. How long is this pandemic going to last? How long until we are able to meet together again? How long until this thing has run its course? How long until we are able to get back to life as normal? When the prophet Habakkuk asked this question, he wanted to know just how long he'd have to cry out to the Lord before he got an answer.

His name means to wrestle, but it also means to embrace as in a comforting sense. Comfort is perhaps the most distressing problem that people have to face, the question of why God allow certain things to happen. As you read Habakkuk, you discover that the problem he wrestled with and eventually learned the answer to is the same problem we wrestle with

today. He lived in a time not entirely unlike our own, a time when everything seemed to be going wrong. He lived in a time of national corruption and distress, a time of looming crisis. By the time you get to the end of chapter 3, Habakkuk has come to embrace God by faith no matter the circumstance. His message is important because it shows us how God often brings a person from a place of doubt to a place of calm assurance, from a place of panic to a place of quiet trust. His overall message emphasizes the importance of faith in the midst of crisis. The key verse of Habakkuk could very well be **2:4**—“**The just shall live by his faith.**” In fact, this verse is quoted three times in the New Testament. It is found in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38.

Habakkuk didn't like the way the world around him was shaping up. I'm sure you can identify. However, he had to come to grips with this question—Will I trust in the wisdom of God and in the goodness of God regardless? No matter what happens? Let me tell you, that is the same question that all of us must grapple with. From these verses, notice:

### **1—The CONCERN that the prophet has (1:1-2)**

*“The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and You will not hear? Or cry to You ‘Violence!’ and You will not save?”*

In many ways, Habakkuk's message is like a journal. He writes his complaint, and then he records God's answer. Then he writes again, and records God's answer. It is a dialogue between the prophet and God. He begins with sobs of grief over the situation that he saw in Judah.

**“Oracle”**—*word means burden or ominous announcement*

Most of the Old Testament prophets begin their ministry with something that they hear. However, Habakkuk begins his with something that he sees. And what he sees brings him great concern. He's greatly concerned for the spiritual landscape of his generation.

A brief survey of history helps us understand his concern.

After the reigns of David and Solomon, the throne went to Solomon's son Rehoboam under whom the kingdom was divided. The ten northern tribes formed the northern kingdom of

Israel, while two tribes formed the southern kingdom of Judah. This all happened around 330 years before the time of Habakkuk. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians. The Assyrian Empire fell to the Babylonians or 'Chaldeans' roughly 110 years later. It would be the Babylonians who would eventually bring the city of Jerusalem and all of Judah to ruin.

For a brief time, the kingdom of Judah seemed to be on a path toward revival under the reign of King Josiah. He was just a boy when he began to reign, but we read in:

**2 Kings 22:2—“And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the way of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.”**

He repaired the temple of the Lord that had been forsaken. It was under Josiah that the Book of the Law was found in the house of the Lord, which led to a series of reforms that he introduced throughout the land. The Bible even says in:

**2 Kings 23:25—“Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any arise after him.”**

Things seemed to really be going well under Josiah, that is until the bottom fell out. In 610 BC, Josiah was suddenly killed in battle by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. Josiah's son Jehoahaz became king in his father's place, and only reigned for three months. He was wicked and did evil in the sight of the Lord. Pharaoh Neco took control of Judah and deposed Jehoahaz and put his brother Jehoiakim on the throne instead, who was nothing more than a puppet for the Egyptian king.

All of this serves as the backdrop for Habakkuk's ministry in Judah. As he stood in Jerusalem and pondered the state of his nation, he was puzzled. What in the world was going on?

Things had seemed to be on the up and up, but now the situation changed almost overnight. King Josiah's reforms had been forgotten and his successors had led Judah to the precipice of disaster. Evil seemed to thrive, and God remained strangely silent. Habakkuk's mind began to wonder just how long God would allow the mess to continue before He intervened.

Listen to the questions that he raises in verse 2:

- “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help?”
- “O Lord, how long will You not hear?”
- “O Lord, how long will I cry to You, ‘Violence!’ and You will not save?”

He actually uses two different Hebrew words there in verse 2 that are both translated as ‘cry’ in our Bible. The first word means to call for help, while the second word implies a stronger appeal, to raise your voice and cry out loud as if greatly disturbed. It’s the idea of hanging onto a outcrop of rock, dangling over a cliff, and you call out for help to one who may be just above you. When you’re sure they must not have heard, you cry out again but louder and with more desperation. That’s what Habakkuk is saying here. “Lord, I’ve cried out to You in desperation, but You remain silent!”

Have you ever experienced a crisis, or found yourself in a place where you needed answers, but there didn’t seem to be any? That’s where Habakkuk found himself. But I want you to notice that he takes his questions and concerns to the right One. He’s burdened over life, concerned and full of anxiety, doubt fills his mind, but he’s a man on his knees.

The questions that he asks had been asked before:

**Psalm 13:1-2—“How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?”**

**Psalm 22:1-2—“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; and in the night season, and am not silent.”**

Why? This is a question that comes up a lot in our lives. When things happen around us that we can’t process or understand, we often want to know why. Habakkuk asks the ‘why’ question, but directs his complaint upward. His message serves as invitation to look at the “Who” when we don’t understand the “why” of life. And even though he’s a perplexed man who lacks answers, he’s also a praying man who cries out to God.

The apostle Paul had something to say along these same lines:

**Philippians 4:6-7—“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”**

Don't be anxious about anything. Don't let fear grip your heart and cloud your judgment. Maybe the best thing you can do right now is turn the media off. The sky is always falling with some folks. Hype and hysteria generates clicks and views. Anxiety robs you of the peace and the joy that God intends for you to live with as one who trusts Christ.

Our faith grows stronger when we deliberately release our anxieties and remember that Christ is our strength and our peace. When life doesn't seem to be going in our favor, we can still praise God even when we can't grasp what He is doing. We can trust that He knows what He's doing, and nothing is outside of His providential control.

## **2—The CRISIS that the prophet sees (1:3-4)**

*“Why do You make me see iniquity, and why do You idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.”*

Habakkuk is concerned because he sees a crisis that is looming on the horizon. Judah's leaders had led the nation in a downward spiral. Now, the nation was in a nosedive and on the brink of total disaster. And so the prophet wonders why God would allow His people to pursue such an ungodly path without calling them into account. No matter where he looks, Habakkuk sees rampant injustice and a society that thumbs its nose in the face of God.

Look at the words he uses to describe his generation:

- Violence (v. 2)
- Iniquity (v. 3a)
- Wrong (v. 3b)

- Destruction and violence (v. 3c)
- Strife and contention (v. 3d)
- Law is ignored (v. 4a)
- Justice is withheld (v. 4b)

It seems like he's been reading our newsfeed! I mean this is just as current as anything we've read this week.

Habakkuk can see where all of this is headed. He knows that God's judgment is swift and has a purifying effect. Yet he wonders why it is being delayed.

You know, it wasn't too long ago that we were reading about all of those devastating fires that were raging out west. Devastating forest fires don't suddenly erupt by full force. Instead, they begin with a spark. Conditions like dry weather and Santa Ana winds lead to a tinder box. And before you know it, you have a fiery monster on your hands that threatens the lives of millions. Decades ago, Billy Graham wrote a book that he entitled "World Aflame" in which he warned of a coming time in history when life as we know it would be consumed by evil. He said that an evil wave—like a forest fire—would begin incipiently, virtually unnoticed, but eventually unchecked would blaze across our culture with devastating results. Little by little, society rejects God's truth and comes up with its own morality. Evil begins to be tolerated and legislated then celebrated. And before you know, you begin to read it in the headlines:

- Mass shooting leaves 59 dead in Las Vegas
- Bombing kills 22 at Manchester Arena in London
- Major Financier arrested for molesting minors

Violence, iniquity, wrong, destruction, strife and contention, God's law ignored and justice withheld. And before you know it you have a raging inferno of evil on your hands. A crisis soon erupts that shakes society to its core.

To be sure, there were always problems in the life of the Israelites. Life in a fallen world is never a bed of roses. These same problems that have been with us since fall of man were on the mind of Habakkuk as he wrote this prophecy. But when things get really bad, man often wants to blame God for his problems. There are some who look around at the lack of justice in the world and wonder how God could let the world get into such shape. And so they reject God because the world seems to be in such a mess.

Such devastating world problems become very difficult to reconcile with a loving and benevolent God. Because we are so forgetful, we tend to overlook the fact that sin is man's number one problem. God isn't to be blamed with society's ills—we are.

Habakkuk is troubled by what he saw in the world. God's people were backslidden. They had forgotten God and had turned their hearts away from Him. And the prayer of the prophet is this: "God, we're in a mess! I've been asking and crying out for You to change it all. Why don't You do something about it? How long am I going to cry and You not hear?"

In particular, look at what he says in verse 4:

*"So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted."*

**"Paralyzed"** —comes from a Hebrew word that means sluggish or slack

He's saying, "Lord, Your law has been laid aside!" What's right is now wrong, and what's wrong is now right. Justice has been perverted. And no matter where he goes, the righteous is surrounded on all sides by the wicked. Now, I'm sure you've felt that way as a follower of Jesus in the midst of such a broken, crooked culture. As a disciple, you feel surrounded and outnumbered on all sides, helpless and weak to effect any lasting change. The church seems to be losing ground in society. What can you do?

### **3—The COUNSEL that the prophet receives (1:5)**

*"Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told."*

The Lord God answers Habakkuk and assures him that He is at work in the world, even though the prophet see it. He reminds His weary prophet that He has not abdicated the throne, He's not wringing His hands in despair, and He's not forgotten His promise. He is in complete control and is working out His purposes. God tells Habakkuk that He was planning on allowing the Babylonians to invade the land and carry His people away into exile. Now, that certainly wasn't the answer he was expecting. He was hoping that God would bring about revival, purge the land of its evil, and establish righteousness. Instead, God tells him that things would get worse before they got better—but things would get better.

We get the impression here in chapter 1 that the pressures and disappointments of life had taken their toll out on Habakkuk. Problems had started to pile up to the point that he couldn't think straight. Worry and fear has gripped his heart. If God didn't intervene in the situation, the nation would be done for. Personally, what do you do when uncertainty is in front of you, when you're afraid of what's next, and when God seems silent? I have heard it said that the unbelieving world around us looks at negative situations and has only three options:

- Resignation—"I guess that's the way things are!"
- Detachment—"I just don't want to think about it!"
- Bravado—"I can take it!"

We're going to see from Habakkuk that rather than giving him an explanation, God is going to give him a revelation. What starts in the valley of struggle and disillusionment is going to end on the mountain peak of victory. And as he wrestles with God and comes to embrace God's will, he goes from worrying, to waiting, all the way to worshipping.

Listen to the final verses of the book:

**3:17-19—“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like the deer's; He makes me tread on my high places.”**

Let me give you some things to remember when you feel you're in over your head...

- Just because you can't **see** God at work doesn't mean He isn't at work.
- He often works in ways and through means we do not **expect**.

God's kingdom agenda will indeed prevail. Jesus said:

**Mark 4:31-32—“The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”**

In other words, just when you think that sin and unbelief and darkness is prevailing, God's kingdom breaks in with glorious power. Habakkuk reminds us that God's ways are mysterious, often misunderstood, but they are always true. He always works to achieve His purposes, even if we can't see it our own lives.

That's why faith is so important. We walk by faith and not by sight. The just shall live by his faith. William Cowper said it so well more than two centuries ago:

*God moves in a mysterious way*

*His wonders to perform:*

*He plants His footsteps in the sea,*

*And rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in un-fathom-able mines*

*Of never-failing skill,*

*He treasures up His bright designs,*

*And works His sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;*

*the clouds ye so much dread*

*Are big with mercy, and shall break*

*In blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour:  
The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan His work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.*

Right now, the bud of life may have a bitter taste for you. Sickness, job loss, fear of the unknown. The day is coming when every wrong will be made right, every broken thing will be mended, and every tear will be dried from our eyes. This is our hope because the fire of God's perfect judgment consumed Jesus Christ in the sinner's place. And that is why the saints can have fresh courage and optimism in a time when it seems like the world is falling apart. And the clouds we dread are simply full of fat rain drops of mercy. It is usually in the storms of life that God's presence is most real to His own. Because Jesus died and rose again, the night is as bright as the day and the desert blossoms. Until He comes for us, we're going to keep right on trusting Him. We know that this too shall pass!

When situations and crises arise in life, it gives us ample opportunity to evaluate the way we've been living and what we've been living for. When the storm clouds break, how will you be better for having come through it?

- Pray to receive Christ as your Savior
- Surrender to His call on your life
- Determine to live for what is most important

