

“A Puzzled Prophet and a Sovereign God”

Habakkuk 1:1-17

Take your Bible and turn with me once more to the little book of Habakkuk, a book in the Old Testament that is found in the section known as the Minor Prophets. I'm taking a break from our study of the book of Acts and will return to it as soon as we are all able to get back together again, which I hope will be soon. Given all that's transpired in our world in these recent days, I've found myself taken up with the message of Habakkuk. It is a little book that consists of only three chapters, but they pack a punch.

One of the arguments that skeptics of the faith will often appeal to is what some have referred to as 'the problem of evil.' Basically, if God is as good as the Bible says He is and if He is all-powerful, why does the world seem to be in such a mess? Why does evil and injustice seem to prevail and bad things happen? Some will reason that either God is not good, or He is not all-powerful. If He were both good and all-powerful, then evil would be abolished. Experience tells us that evil is very much a reality in the world. Evil regimes exploit and murder their own people. Cancer and disease ravage our loved ones. Men and women in their prime become sick and die. Pandemics bring nations to gridlock. Accidents and tragedy often strikes out of the blue. If God is ruling and reigning, why is the world in such a mess? If He is loving and kind, why does He allow suffering and disease, murder and genocide and all the horror that's going on in the world today? Where is God in all of this? Well, these are some of the same questions that Habakkuk faced some 2,700 years ago.

When the prophet Habakkuk looked around at his generation, he saw something that was very troubling. The country was on the brink of disaster. The economy was collapsing and productivity was at an all time low. Famine and hardship was a distinct possibility. Violence and social decay had become commonplace. The law was paralyzed, evil was on the rise, and wicked men held the platform. God's people had forsaken Him and turned to idols and other sinful pursuits. Wickedness and corruption could be found among the highest offices of the land.

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. The nation of Judah was flirting with disaster. And so the prophet cries out to God to intervene. He wants to know just how long he'd have to cry out to the Lord before he got an answer.

“Habakkuk” — *to wrestle or to embrace*

His name is a fitting illustration of his message. His name means to wrestle, and that's what he is doing in the first chapter. He is wrestling with the issues of his day and is perplexed about what God's purpose behind it all must be. His name also means to embrace. 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 worry to a place of worship. His message emphasizes the importance of faith in the midst of crisis. The key verse is **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 no matter what?” Let me tell you, that is the same question that all of us must come to grips with. Habakkuk was a puzzled prophet, especially when he looked around and considered:

1—The IGNORING of God's law (1:1-4)

“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? 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.”

In the first four verses of the book, Habakkuk pours out his soul before God. He expresses his concern with a gut level honesty that we all can appreciate. He paints a grim picture of society, one in which immorality was rampant and God's truth had been laid aside. Now, context here is important. You need to understand the way that the books of the Old Testament are arranged. They're not entirely chronological but are classified by genre. For example:

- Pentateuch (5)
- History (12)
- Poetry (5)
- Prophets (17)

The prophetic books cover events that happen in the historic books. Habakkuk's ministry took place prior to the Babylonian invasion of Judah. In 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded Judah, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and carried away its inhabitants into captivity. The reason was idolatry. Years before it happened, God's people had turned aside to worship idols and had despised God's law. The religious falling away in Judah had resulted in moral, political, and societal decline. There had been reform here and there, but not revival. Habakkuk is deeply burdened by all that he sees. Verse 1 expresses it with the word:

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

Habakkuk was a man who was burdened for his generation, and he longed for God to send revival. Something had to be done to address society's ills, and yet heaven remained silent. He could not quite understand why God seemed to let His people persist in their sin. And it was into such a situation that Habakkuk was sent with a 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. He has his doubts and questions, but he entrusts them to a sovereign God. He begins his message with a question—“O Lord, how long?”

As he looked around at society, Habakkuk had difficult time reconciling what he saw with what he knew to be true of God. How do you reconcile the truth of a good God with the reality of an evil world? (Delay)

Surely God would do something about the situation. But to the prophet, it seemed like He was taking a long time. How long, O Lord, will You allow this ignoring Your law to go on? God answers Habakkuk, but not the way he expects.

2—The INSTRUMENT in God’s hands (1:5-11)

“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. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!”

He had been wrestling in his mind and heart with all that he saw as he compared it to what he knew to be true of a holy and righteous God. Surely, God would do something about the state of affairs before it was too late. This was merely the beginning of his issues because God would answer his prayer, but not in the way he expected. God would most certainly deal with the sin of Judah, but the way He would do it involved raising up a nation even more wicked than they had been. The Chaldeans, or Babylonians, would be an instrument of judgment in His hands. God says, “I am raising them up.” Up until that time, Assyria was the dominant power in the region. Babylon was not really on anybody’s radar. That is until Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612 BC. After that, they literally swept through the earth just as the Lord tells Habakkuk here.

Warren Wiersbe — *“The Babylonians were far more wicked sinners than the people in Judah, so how could God use evil, idolatrous Gentiles to punish His own chosen people? Yes, His people deserved punishment, but couldn’t God find a better instrument?”*

This chapter presents us with the God of the unexpected, and He often does things in ways we would not expect in order that His purposes be achieved. He is the God of the good, the bad, and the ugly. He is Lord over all. This was something that the disciples had to learn. For instance:

Mark 4:35-41 — **“On that day, when evening had come, He said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’ And leaving the crowd, they took Him with them in the boat, just as He was. And other boats were with Him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke Him and said, ‘Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?’ And He awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, ‘Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?’”**

It was only after the fact that they learned the storm was necessary because it taught them something about the One who was in the boat with them. Consider this:

John 9:1-3 — **“As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”**

In other words, this man’s condition was necessary and part of God’s purpose in his life so that you and everyone else would learn something about the power of God. He is Lord over storms, and He is Lord over sickness.

John 11:1-6 — **“Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha...So the sisters sent to Him, saying, ‘Lord, he whom You love is ill.’”**

But when Jesus heard it He said, ‘This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that Lazarus was ill, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was.”

Lazarus was sick and on the verge of death. Jesus gets word of it, and yet He stays two more days where He was. The illness was for the glory of God. The reason was that He intended to raise Lazarus from death, thereby proving His power and lordship over suffering and over the problem that stares us all in the face.

He is the God of the unexpected and unexplained. What if God will indeed bring revival, peace, renewal, but not in the way you expect Him to? Sometimes, He uses painful means as an instrument of discipline in His hands. We like to focus on the end product while ignoring the process. We want the results without the requirements. We want the benefits of salvation without the demands of repentance.

God used a variety of instruments in Israel’s past:

- war and invasion
- natural disasters
- prophets

All of these were among the means that God used to get the attention of His people. And so the people of Judah were without excuse and had failed to learn from history. They had continued and persisted in sin, even though they had been given an abundance of revealed truth.

Things were bad, but they were about to get worse. God was raising up the Chaldeans as an instrument of judgment against them. He tells Habakkuk, “If you think you are uncomfortable now, you’ve not seen anything yet. I’m about to do a work that you would not believe if I told you.” God says that He was raising up the Chaldeans, and they are going to sweep across the world like a plague. But make no mistake about it, the Lord says, “They are under My sovereign Lordship, and I will use them to achieve My purposes—I will receive glory!”

Isaiah 42:8—“I am the Lord, that is My name! I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to carved images.”

He tolerates no rivals. His purposes will come to pass. His objective for the world will not be thwarted, even if it means an end to our personal comfort. He is certainly not lacking in ways of getting the attention of people. His sovereign control over history is the overarching theme of the Bible. And that is a truth that ought to comfort you as a believer—but terrify you if you persist in unbelief. He is a God to be loved and feared, but not a God to be trifled with.

3—The INTEGRITY of God’s character (1:12-17)

“Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, You have ordained them as a judgment, and You, O Rock, have established them for reproof. You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do You idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?”

The fact that God was raising up the Chaldeans baffled Habakkuk. He has a hard time understanding how God could use such an unholy instrument. God’s people had been bad, yes. But the Chaldeans were far worse!

It was hard to comprehend, but look at what Habakkuk says that he knows to be true of the Lord in verses 12-13. He says:

“Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One?”

In other words, what He knows to be true of God by way of His revealed character, this is what he clings to in the face of what he doesn’t understand. There is nothing that will benefit you more when it comes to day-to-day living than knowledge of God. **Daniel 11:32 says that “the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.”** That means it is the knowledge of God and His truth that gives us strength and confidence when it comes to confronting the issues of life.

What are the practical benefits of knowing God?

- Confidence

The knowledge of God gives us the ability to make the right response to the circumstances of life. Those who know the Lord have the confidence and ability to do the right thing. Knowledge of God isn't passive, but active.

- Security

Knowing God as He has revealed Himself is what serves as the basis of our security in life as those who trust in Him. Listen to what the psalmist says:

Psalm 46:1-3—“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.”

Even when the ground shakes beneath our feet, it is the knowledge of God that gives us security. That's not say that we're always comfortable, but we are comforted.

- Wisdom

In addition to giving us confidence and security, the knowledge of God also gives us wisdom. Paul prays in Ephesians 1:17, “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.” Wisdom is heavenly insight for earthly application, the ability to know what God wants and how to apply it where you live.

Wisdom means the ability to take truth and apply it.

Proverbs 9:10—“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

The knowledge of God will show you how to live a wise life. You can have a lot of book sense but no common sense. God gives an uncommon sense.

- Order

The apostle Peter says the knowledge of God can give you a well-ordered life. He says:

2 Peter 1:2-3—“Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted unto us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us.”

It is the knowledge of God that brings order to the chaos of life. Does life ever seem chaotic to you? It does to me! The knowledge of God gives a person grace, peace, and power. It helps us ‘see’ that His divine power has granted to us everything for life and godliness.

- Fruit

It is the knowledge of God that leads to transformation and spiritual fruit in our lives. The apostle Paul wrote in:

Colossians 1:19-10—“For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

Paul says that the knowledge of God will change the way you walk. When you know God, you walk differently. You act differently. You think differently. Why? Because you are filled with the knowledge of God and His will, and this is what transforms your life. This is the kind of stuff that will get you through the valleys of life. Habakkuk knows this.

Habakkuk may not understand God’s ways, but He trusts in God’s character. What does he know about the Lord God?

He is everlasting. When the world around him was falling apart, it was the truth of God’s eternal nature that brought him stability.

He is self-existent. Look at the covenant name of God that is used in verse 12, “O LORD, my God.” It was the name that God had revealed to Moses in Exodus 3—“I AM.” Do you know why Habakkuk reminds himself of this? Because people in his day were running around saying that God was dead. Regardless of what other people said, Habakkuk will go right

back to what he knows to be the truth. God is not at the mercy of nations. He doesn't depend upon anyone or anything for His existence. He is 'I AM!'

He is totally righteous. Notice how he refers to God as 'my Holy One.' It means completeness or wholeness. It simply means that God is always consistent within Himself. He is what He is, and He always is, and He's never different than who He has always been. He never has a bad day, and never needs a day off. His temperament isn't shallow and constantly changing like ours. He is holy and righteous and good. He is unchanging in His character and in His person, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

He is all sovereign. Notice how Habakkuk refers to the Lord God as his 'Rock.' Other translations say render it 'mighty God.' It is the idea that God is all powerful. When the world around him seemed to be sinking in quicksand, all of his trust and all of his confidence was found in the Rock, the One who has absolute power. He is the Almighty One. The name 'El Shaddai' reflects this truth. What is an impossibility with man is possible with God.

Psalm 9:10—“And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.”

The God who promises is also the God who performs. One has even said that it is God at His best when man is at his worst. It means that God is working out the details of His plan, right on time and according to schedule. When the bottom falls out of life, when the world seems to be coming apart around us, we can be encouraged by the truth that our God is the Rock. He is the mighty God who will perform what He has promised. He will not abandon you to the pain of affliction, but will use it in your life.

Psalm 91:1—“He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”

He is always faithful. Notice how in verse 12, Habakkuk says, “We shall not die.” It is his way of expressing his knowledge of God's covenant faithfulness. He is a God of promise, and He will never go back on His Word. God had made a promise to Abraham and Israel, that they would be a nation as numerous as the grains of sand on the sea shore, as innumerable stars

in the night sky. And so the prophet remembers this and says to himself, “God has made us a promise, and so whatever His intentions are with these Chaldeans, no matter how bad it may have to get, it will not result in our utter destruction.”

He understands the reason behind God’s actions. He says, “O Lord, You have ordained them as a judgment, and You, O Rock, have established them for reproof.” It is for discipline’s sake that He is raising up the Babylonians.

Warren Wiersbe—*“When God permits His children to go through the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat.”*

God is always using a variety of means to bring discipline to our lives as His children. I’ve heard it said that God is never at a lack when it comes to carrier pigeons to get His message across. And no matter how painful those means may be, they are always expressions of His mercy and grace because of the end that He has in mind for our lives.

Hebrews 12:5-8—**“And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as sons: ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.’ If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.”**

The immediate context of this passage is the great hall of fame of ‘faith’ chapter, Hebrews 11. The great examples of faith all had to endure their share of trials and hardships. No matter what adversity they faced, it was evidence of God’s formative discipline in their life. Whether it was Abel or Enoch, Noah or Abraham, Moses or the judges. Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, the writer of Hebrews says:

Hebrews 12:1-4—**“Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the**

cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.”

There are some helpful principles here for you to remember when you find yourself facing problems you don't understand...

- Avoid an **emotional** reaction to the problem
- Review the **character** of God in your mind and heart
- Apply what you know about God's character to the **situation**
- Commit the **unknown** to God in faith and trust

If when you look around at the world and wonder how God could allow viruses and cancer, or wicked and corrupt men in positions of power, remember this—the world we know is not what it was when God originally made it. Nor is it yet what it will one day be when Jesus comes again in all of His glory. The world as it is now is a world under judgment and the curse of man's sin, and is ripe for final judgment. But God did the unexpected, the unthinkable. At the cross, God dealt with my sin in all of its blackness and has judged it as His wrath was poured out on His Son in my place.

No matter the pain, no matter the problem, those of us in Christ can say with Habakkuk, “We shall not die.” The only reason we can say that is because Christ died for us, and He is risen from the dead. If you're one of these who have a hard time understanding why there is so much suffering in the world, always wondering if God is ever going to do something about sin and evil in the world, take a good long look at the cross. The greatest need in your life is not material comfort. The greatest need in your life is eternal salvation. Sin is what separates us from God, but God in His mercy gave His own Son to die on a cross so that we can be saved. Now, those who desire to be saved must repent of their sins and trust Christ as their one and only hope of salvation.

The cross of Jesus Christ must be the filter through which I view my pain and disappointment in life. Habakkuk is able to say in the end:

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.”

The problem remains and there pressure is still there, but he knows a joy deep down in the inner man that makes the heart rejoice even when the bottom falls out of life.

The Lord is both my salvation and my strength.