
Waiting and Wondering about Judgment

Habakkuk 1:1-11¹

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Do you read the news?

There are stories in the world that almost seem too horrible to contemplate.

The beheading of innocent captives by the barbarian Islamists, ISIS...

The slaughter of school children by Boko Haram...

The destruction of Christian meeting places across China...

Our descent into carnality, chaos and collapse...

The rule of law is regularly discarded in favor of rule by persons.

Riots and destructive looting are a regular staple of protests against almost anything...

Gangs and drug lords rule some areas of large cities...

Pornography clogs the internet with its vile filth...

Sex slavery thrives with Eastern European women and young girls...

Same sex couples are a regular staple of TV shows and movies...

Do you think about your own life?

What about your struggles and hardships?

Why do you get sick and have financial reversals?

How is it that your children have walked away from you and church?

Do you struggle with the growing presence, presumption, power and public acts of evil people? Or do you live in a sort of Christian utopia? Do you deep in your heart think that since you have been saved, everything ought to go better? Do you struggle when people wrong you? Do you ever just want to yell at God?

The Prophet's Life and Times

We are taking up a book in the Bible, in the Old Testament called Habakkuk. It is book by one of God's prophets, for whom the book is named. We know almost nothing about him. We don't know his background. We don't know his family. We don't know his calling. We only know the general time period in which he wrote. We know the situation he was addressing.

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He lived and wrote sometime between 640 and 609 BC during the rules of Josiah and Jehoiakim, the kings of Judah. His immediate audience were the people of the southern kingdom of Judah. Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah were also living, ministering and writing during this time. Israel's long sad descent into carnality, chaos and collapse provided the background and the setting for Habakkuk's ministry. Overwhelming evil and violence permeated the culture of Habakkuk's day (v.1-4).

The Message's Burden

Our book opens with the words, "The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw." An oracle is either the messenger or the message from deity. In the days in which the book of Habakkuk was written oracles were priests or priestesses who were sought out to get messages from the gods. They were mediums and often sorcerers and witches. Here, the prophet of the Yahweh sees an oracle. He is given a message. It is not just a false deity speaking through a medium, this is the God of the universe, the creator, sustainer and sovereign One. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the God of Israel and now, of all God's chosen people, Jew and Gentile.

The message is called in older translations, "the burden of..." The weightiness and the importance of the message were felt by the prophet as a burden. God had laid on Habakkuk a weight of words. These words must not be held in. The burden will only be lifted when the words are spoken and written. So, we have here the message of God to His people in weighty words.

The Messenger's Writing

The prophet gives his message in a dramatic rhetorical and literary form. God has a message for His people. He has that message come through a kind of speaking and writing that will grab the people's ears and hearts.

The message from God flows through the interaction between God and the prophet. There are extended dialogs. The prophet speaks. God responds. The prophet is befuddled. God chides. God speaks and corrects. The prophet prays in repentance.

But this is more than just a dialog between God and Habakkuk. Even in Habakkuk's speeches and prayers, the message from God is being framed and focused.

Our Shared Struggle

The book presents a struggle. It is a struggle many have. How do we respond when who God is does not line up with what God does? It appears as though God is fighting fire with fire; God judges sin with sinners. Is it appropriate for God do deal with sin (violence, injustice) with violence and injustice? How is it that God can advance His program in the world through judgment?

The Challenging Aim

The aim of the book is *Theodicy*. Through the dialog that questions God and God answers, the rightness of God's ways is defended. Habakkuk highlights the sovereign providences of God in the correcting/chastening of His people.

The saving deliverance of God's people will come through the violent sin of evil men. This will lead us to think about how salvation comes through the evil violence that crucified the Lord Jesus Christ. How is it possible that deliverance can come through judgment?

The Questioning Prayer of the Prophet

(v.2-4)

The first dialog opens with an outcry I am sure most of us have felt.

² Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?

³ do you *make me see* iniquity,
and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

⁴ So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth (*unborn*).
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted (*still born*).

The Coldness of God

(v.2-3)

The question is "How long?" Day after day and night after night the prophet cries out and God does not respond. These two verses are parallel so that same thoughts are expressed in both but in a way the builds and balances the thoughts. The prophet is deeply distressed at what he sees among God's people. Keep in mind that Habakkuk's description here is about the people of Israel, God's "chose" people. The culture has collapsed into nationwide destruction and violence. Strife and personal fights were widespread. People declaring war on each other culturally, legally and personally. As a prophet this situation has sent him to his knees to cry out to God over and over again.

But God does not hear his cry. God has not responded. God has not acted. What is wrong with God then? The prophet's distress is entirely understandable. God is a God of justice. God is one who hears and answers prayers. The prophet has been ordained by God to speak - to challenge the sins of the people and to call upon God to act. But silence from heaven. The swirling chaos deepens as the nation sinks ever deeper in evil.

God does not save from the violent. In a startling turn, Habakkuk sees the truly righteous as being in danger. The wicked are not just generally violent; they are committing acts of violence against the godly. The strife and destruction are now being seen as focused on those who should be shielded by God.

Why is God so distant and cold when His people are suffering so much at the hands of sinners? Why does God continue to allow the almost total annihilation of Christian people from the south of Sudan? Why are Azeri's regularly taken to prison have their feet beaten? Why does God allow governments to oppress and even kill Christians? Why do Christians attack one another? Why are hatred, verbal violence, public attacking websites, turning one another in to government officials not immediately dealt with? How is it that Christians can have people both in the world and in the church who "will them great harm?"

The Collapse of Justice

(v.4)

The challenge is "Why?" Why does this go on? Why were God's people savaging one another and destroying one another? Why is there no justice? Why does evil and wickedness continue? The answers are given in the second phrase of each of couplet. One Old Testament scholar says that the picture is of a birth. Justice is *unborn* because the Law is *still-born*. He helps us to sense the picture Habakkuk is painting. Our translation helps us to see what is meant by the words.

Justice is not preformed because the Law is paralyzed. The Mosaic Law which was the moral and constitutional legislation of the nation of Israel beginning at Mr. Sinai. The Law is limited in that it can only declare and describe what is right and wrong. It can prescribe the punishment for wrong doing and the reward for doing right. But it cannot by its very nature cause obedience. In the Old Testament, when God's people would not live by the Law God gave them, violence, strife and injustice ruled.

Justice is perverted because it is dominated by the wicked. In Habakkuk's day, the judges were corrupt. They accepted bribes for making rulings in the favor of people. They let criminals go. They re-interpreted the Law differently than was intended. They excused punishments and took the rewards for themselves. The people accepted this situation as normal. So the wicked were not punished and the righteous suffered. The very Law that was to produce a righteous nation with justice for all now became the instrument of oppression and injustice.

To the cries of the righteous and the scorn of the wicked God kept silent and did not deliver His people. "How long, O Lord? How long?"

The Surprising Response of the Lord

(v.5-11)

God's response presses us to reinterpret the events around us. God's reply is basically,, "Oh I am at work..."

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.

⁶ 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.

Why it would be Unbelievable**(v.5)**

God tells the prophet he has been looking in the wrong place. You will not see God moving if your theology blinds you to that movement. God has dealt with Israel's sins through the nations around them in the past. So why not now? Why is this so unbelievable?

God is being ironic, yes, maybe even a bit sarcastic. It is as though God is saying, "Habakkuk, you wouldn't have believed it if I had told you before. So I waited all these long years to tell you now." Not believing God is a problem for prophet and for people. This then anticipates "live by faith".

Who He would Bring**(v.6)**

God had raise up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians. In His sovereign providence, He had caused them to begin to rise in ascendancy. Egypt had had its day. Ninevah and the Assyrians had ascended and swept away most of the Mideast including Israel, the ten northern tribes. And now, God would give authority, power, might and rule to that nation.

God would bring the Chaldeans from their fastness in Babylon to sweep across Persia and Assyria. The Babylonian leaders would set their hungry eyes on Israel. They would come and keep coming. And behind Babylon's schemes and strategies and success would be God. The sovereign Lord's hand would bring the scourge of Babylon against the wicked in Judah.

What they are Like**(v.7-10)**

⁷ They are dreaded and fearsome;
their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.

⁸ 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.

⁹ They all come for violence,
all their faces forward.
They gather captives like sand.

¹⁰ At kings they scoff,
and at rulers they laugh.
They laugh at every fortress,
for they pile up earth and take it.

This is God's own startling description of the Babylonian power. It is fearsome and dreadful. They are their own law. Their power serves their own sense of perverted justice. The Babylonians cover the face of the earth in a sea of powerful, leopard like horses. Their cavalrymen lean into the wind and scatter their enemies. They descend upon the nations like a bird of prey. And God is bringing them upon His people.

Woven throughout these stanzas are a frightening depiction of their violence. Israel's wickedness and violence is tamed and domestic. It is like little boys throwing rocks. The Chal-

deans are fierce and fearsome. Their savagery leaves death and destruction. Babylon's violence leaves a trail of blood and tears and fire and wasted lands and ruined cities. Opposition is simply mocked and swept away. And God is bringing them upon His people.

God bares with a probing description of the Babylonian's motivations. They want power. They want violence. They lean into war with eager anticipation. They crave blood on their hands and spears and swords. Violence is not merely a means to an end. The acts of violence are craved with bloodthirsty longing. They hunger for slaughter. The death and destruction are a satisfying meal. And God is bringing them upon His people.

What they Worship

(v.11)

¹¹ Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god!"

The Babylonian might is their god. They worship themselves. They are the gods of the earth. They are who they have been waiting for. And now the world will kneel and bow to them. All the nations will be but states in their world-wide kingdom. They are themselves. They are the power they worship.

So this raises a question, "What are God's people trusting in?" What will God's people, violent, wicked, unjust, disobedient, lawless trust in? If they trust in the power of man what will happen? If they seek to resist the on-sweeping rush of the Babylonians, have they actually begun to resist the power of God? If God is against them, then who can be for them?

Thinking it through...

Habakkuk is deeply concerned for justice and righteousness among God's people. Where there is not righteousness there can be no justice. How will the evil deeds of the people of Judah be set right? The cry for justice is really a cry for judgment. When the people of Judah will not live by God's Word, then justice fails and the violent are victorious. The same is true of God's people in the church. We are responsible to live in righteousness and justice with one another. We are to treat one another according to God's Word. If the children will not, then the Father steps in with chastening, and possibly even hard hastening.

So what about social justice in the world? Is Habakkuk's concern for justice in Israel translate into a social justice concern for the church in the world? No, I don't think so. Israel was not responsible to transform Egypt or Babylon or Assyria. Israel was to be righteous and just as a people and a nation. They were to be haven of God's Word lived out in the darkness of the world. The church is similar. The New Testament does not seek to transform Rome through the church being an agent of social justice, but rather through the preaching of the gospel. The salvation of people who live in righteousness and act with justice is transformational. People living according to God's Word are salt and light in the midst of decay and darkness. **Matthew 5:13-16:** *"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let*

your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. People living God's way hold out the lamp of the gospel in this present age. **Philippians 2:14–16:** *“Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.”* So, do we? Are we, the people of Clearcreek Chapel so living out God's Word and works in our lives that the goodness and glory and gospel of God are clearly seen and heard? How is our salt, light, our lamp?

The unexpected turns of God's ways and works often baffle us. We look around us at the appalling state of the world and the church. We experience our own unexpected and unwanted reversals, failures, hardship and sufferings. It seems so... random. And so wrong. But these twists and turns are the wise ways of God for the good of His people – for your good. A loving Father has ordained this path and these pains for you. Embrace them with deep submission and wondrous delight.

We often have the wrong question. We say, “Why isn't God at work in...” This is unbelief and doubt. The question is better, “God is at work and why can't I see it?” When we cannot see God at work that is not His fault. That is our failing to believe what God says. In all the world, God is at work, using evil and injustice and wickedness on the long trajectory of delivering His people. That is what we must believe. When we believe, then we will see and understand.

Why is this so? Because from the garden to the cross to the Day of the Lord, God is saving His people through judgment. How do I know that this text in Habakkuk brings us to the cross? Is this pulling the theological rabbit out of the Scripture hat? No, listen to Paul in his sermon in **Acts 13:36–43**.

³⁶ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, ³⁷ but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. ³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. ⁴⁰ Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:

⁴¹ “ ‘Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.’ ”

⁴² As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. ⁴³ And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God.

God has saved His people through judgment. The cross stands as the pinnacle of this truth. There, the evil of man, the rebellion of Israel and the injustice of Rome all conspired together to illegally, unjustly execute Jesus, the perfect, sinless son of God. But this was done in the plan and purposes of God to save and deliver His people.

And so the challenge to Paul's audience comes to you. Do you believe? Are you willing to bow to the Lord of the universe? Will you continue in the grace of Christ?

