

**Habakkuk:
Making Sense of Today's News**

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Habakkuk 1:1-11

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Making Sense of Today's News¹

Scripture

In just eight days we will be marking the fifth anniversary of Tuesday, September 11, 2001. That is the day terrorists attacked America. It was the most blatant, brutal barrage that has ever occurred on American soil. None of us shall ever forget that day.

None of us shall forget the vivid images of airplanes flying into buildings, skyscrapers collapsing, people falling to their deaths, and the unimaginable carnage that resulted. We felt shocked, numbed, incredulous, afraid, sad, angry, and a whole range of other emotions that put us into emotional overload. September 11, 2001 changed every one of our lives—forever.

Since that day there have been other acts of terrorism, as well as a number of wars, such as the ones in Afghanistan, Iraq, and most recently in southern Lebanon between Hezbollah and Israel.

The questions I want to ask today are these: “How should we think about these events? How do we make sense of today's news? And how does today's news fit into the grand scheme of history?”

There are many things to say in response to these questions. And I am sure that in the coming weeks we shall have a lot more to say. But today I would like to begin to answer these questions in a message titled, “Making Sense of Today's News.”

I would like to do so by turning your attention to the book of Habakkuk, where we find today's text, which is Habakkuk 1:1-11.

Among the questions that Habakkuk raised are these: “Is God in charge of today's news?” and, “If he is, why do things happen the way they do?” In dealing with these questions, the prophet Habakkuk speaks directly to our own times in light of today's news.

We do not know much about the prophet Habakkuk personally, for he is not mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament. It

¹ Much of the material for this message comes from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Faith Tried & Triumphant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987).

seems clear from the situation Habakkuk described that he wrote this prophecy sometime after the decline of the Assyrian Empire and the rise of the Babylonian (or Chaldean) Empire. The Babylonians captured Nineveh in 612 BC and Jerusalem in 587 BC. It is during this 25-year period that Habakkuk wrote his book.

During the earlier part of Habakkuk's life there had been wonderful spiritual reforms instituted under the leadership of the boy king Josiah. But Josiah died in 609 BC and spiritual decline set in and Judah reverted to ungodly, worldly ways.

This was the era in which Habakkuk wrote his book, and it is against this background that we must understand the questions raised by the prophet. Habakkuk 1:1-4 describes Habakkuk's complaint of the spiritual and moral decay in the nation. Apparently, after a long period of time the Lord answered Habakkuk in verses 5-11. The Lord's answer was totally unexpected as Habakkuk learned that a foreign, ungodly nation—the Babylonians—were going to come and bring God's judgment against the people of God.

With that as background, let us now read Habakkuk 1:1-11:

¹ The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.

**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?**

**³ Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.**

**⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.**

**⁵ "Look at the nations and watch—
and be utterly amazed.
For I am going to do something in your days**

that you would not believe,
even if you were told.
⁶ I am raising up the Babylonians,
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwelling places not their own.
⁷ They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.
⁸ Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.
Their cavalry gallops headlong;
their horsemen come from afar.
They fly like a vulture swooping to devour;
⁹ they all come bent on violence.
Their hordes advance like a desert wind
and gather prisoners like sand.
¹⁰ They deride kings
and scoff at rulers.
They laugh at all fortified cities;
they build earthen ramps and capture them.
¹¹ Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty men, whose own strength is their god.” (Habakkuk 1:1-11)

Introduction

The message of Habakkuk is one of the most helpful portions of Scripture to help us make sense of today's news. People have so many questions about what is happening in the world today, and so we must turn to God's word for his answer.

In today's lesson, I would like to suggest two statements of fact, and then draw four lessons we should learn from God's word.

I. God's Ways Are Often Mysterious (1:2a, 5-6)

First, God's ways are often mysterious. We see that in several ways.

A. *God's Inaction (1:2a)*

First, God's ways are often mysterious regarding his inaction. God seems to be strangely silent and inactive in some circumstances.

Why is it that God permits certain things to happen? Why does God allow terrorist attacks? Why does God allow war? Why does he allow so many injustices and atrocities to take place at a national level as well as at a personal level?

And, why is the evangelical Church in the condition it is today? Why has God permitted the gospel to become so diluted that there is widespread ignorance of his truth? Why does he allow so many wrong things to be done—even in his name?

Furthermore, why has God not answered the prayers of his faithful people? We have been praying for God to work mightily in our church for many years. Our prayers have been sincere and zealous. We have cried out to God but nothing seems to happen. Like the prophet Habakkuk many are asking, **“How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?”** (1:2a).

This is a question that confronts not only the Church but individuals as well. We pray, for example, for God to change someone, to bring about his or her salvation. Surely God is concerned about our sincere prayers for the salvation of a loved one. Why then does God seem to be inactive? Why does he not answer our prayers?

B. *God's Unexpected Providences (1:5-6)*

Second, God's ways are often mysterious regarding his unexpected providences. Sometimes God gives unexpected answers to our prayers.

This, more than anything else, startled Habakkuk. For a long time God did not seem to answer him at all. Then, when God did answer him, what he said was even more mysterious than his ap-

parent failure to answer Habakkuk's prayers. Habakkuk was quite clear in his own mind that the need was for God to rebuke the nation and then send a great revival.

But God's reply was the last thing Habakkuk expected: **“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own”** (1:5-6). But that is what God told him, and that is what took place.

We all tend to tell God how he should answer our prayers. We see a certain situation and circumstance and we think that God should act in a particular 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 complete opposite of what we anticipate. He may sometimes overwhelm us by confronting us with a Babylonian army or a terrorist attack or a war.

It is a fundamental principle in our Christian discipleship that we must always be prepared for the unexpected when we are dealing with God.

We have been praying for God to work mightily in the Church. We have been asking God to turn the hearts of people toward himself. Yet God allows terrorist attacks and wars and disasters to happen. It is surely God's unexpected answer. We must hold on to the hope that God allows things to become much worse before they finally become better.

C. God's Unusual Instruments (1:6)

And third, God's ways are often mysterious regarding his unusual instruments. God sometimes uses strange instruments to correct his people and his Church.

The Babylonians, of all people, were the ones God raised up to chastise his people in Judah! Such a thing was unthinkable.

But here again is a fact that is evident right throughout Scripture. God, if he so wishes, can use even a godless Babylonian. In the course of history he has used all sorts of strange and unexpected instruments to bring his purposes to pass.

This is a very relevant truth for today, for it would seem that, according to the Bible, what happens in the news must be regarded in this light. Let me go further and say that terrorism may very well be the instrument God is using to deal with his own people.

We have to recognize the weakness and impotence of the Church, and even of our own Christian lives. We have not been faithful to God. We have ignored God's word, we have neglected prayer, we have trampled God's Sabbath, we have failed to evangelize, we have stopped caring about lost people, and we have become so insipid that the world cannot tell the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian.

We must understand that the plain teaching of Scripture is that God may use very strange instruments indeed, and sometimes the very last instrument we would have expected. It is entirely possible that God is using terrorism as his unusual instrument to awaken his people and his Church to repentance and faith.

II. God's Ways Are Often Misunderstood

But not only are God's ways often mysterious. God's ways are often misunderstood.

God's ways are often strange and perplexing and misunderstood by more than one type of person.

A. *By Careless Christians (1:5)*

First, God's ways are often misunderstood by careless Christians.

In Habakkuk 1:5 God referred to the people in Judah, those who had become religious and slack: **“Look at the nations and**

watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”

Their attitude was: “Here is that prophet telling us that God is going to use the Babylonians—as if God could do anything like that! God would never use godless pagans to chastise us. The whole idea is impossible!” But that is exactly what God did.

The trouble with Judah was that they never believed God’s prophets. People often do not believe God’s preachers.

The most significant illustration of this is found in Acts 13 where the apostle Paul quoted Habakkuk 1:5 and applied it to his contemporaries in his sermon in Pisidian Antioch. Paul declared in effect in his sermon: “No, you will not believe, any more than your fathers did. Because Israel has not recognized Jesus Christ as God’s only Savior, has even crucified him, and now refuses to believe his gospel, God is at last going to act in judgment. He is going to raise up the Roman power to sack and destroy your temple, and you yourselves will be cast out among the nations. I know you will not believe this, for the prophet Habakkuk has already prophesied it, and you are continuing to ignore his message.”

But the year 70 AD inevitably came. The Romans surrounded Jerusalem and destroyed it and the Jews were cast out among the nations.

Careless Christians often do not believe God’s preachers. They say, “God will never do such a thing.” But I am reminding you today that God does act. God may very well be using terrorism to awaken his own people to teach us a lesson. We dare not go on any longer being apathetic. We must not say that it is unthinkable that God could use such an instrument to arouse his feeble people.

B. By Non-Christians (1:11)

Second, God’s ways are often misunderstood by non-Christians.

In verse 11 God said of the Babylonians: **“Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—guilty men, whose own strength**

is their god.” The Babylonians completely failed to understand that God was using them. They credited all their success to their own strength. But God was soon to demonstrate that it was not so, and that he had raised them up so that he could cast them down.

Non-Christians, even more than careless Christians, fail to understand God's ways. Those arrogant powers, which have been used by God for his own purpose at various times in history, have always prided themselves on their own achievements. The modern world prides itself on its achievements in every realm. Because non-Christians see Christians floundering and themselves coming in to the ascendancy, they credit their own success to themselves.

But they fail to understand the true meaning of today's news. Great powers have been raised up and have ruled for a while, but they have become drunk with their own success. And suddenly, they have found themselves cast down by God. The real significance of today's news never dawns on them.

C. By the Prophet Himself (1:2-4)

And third, God's ways are often misunderstood by the prophet himself.

God's ways were baffling even to the prophet himself. But his reaction was very different. His question was how to reconcile all of what God was doing with the character of God. He cried out in verses 2-4: **“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? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.”**

Later God made it clear to the prophet what he was doing, but initially even the prophet was puzzled.

Conclusion

We can learn the following lessons from Habakkuk.

First, today's news is under God's control. We see this in God's reply to Habakkuk where he said to him, **"I am raising up the Babylonians"** (1:6a). Every nation on earth is under the hand of God. There is absolutely no authority or government that is not ultimately controlled by God. Things are not what they appear to be. It seemed that the military ability of the Babylonians had brought them to power. But it was not so, for God had raised them up.

God is the Lord of today's news. He is seated on his throne, and all the nations of the earth and all authorities are under his sovereign rule. The Bible asserts that God is over all. He started today's news, he is controlling today's news, and he is going to end today's news. We must never lose sight of this crucial truth.

Second, today's news follows God's plan. The events that take place each day are not accidental, though they may appear to be so to us. The events of today's news follow God's plan.

There is a purpose in today's news, and what is happening in the world today, even the events of terrorism and war, are not accidents. What may be a surprise to us is no surprise to God.

And here is the really important thing to remember. Christ's Church is at the center of God's plan. Christ is not building America or Iraq. Christ is building his Church in America and in Iraq and around the world, and the gates of hell will never overcome the Church of Jesus Christ! It is the Church that is at the center of God's plan for history.

Furthermore, God is calling Christ's Church to repentance. The proper response to what is happening in the world is to repent of our sins. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached at the outbreak of World War II. He said at the outbreak of that calamity: "This is a real test of our beliefs and of our faith. Without a doubt, we have—all of us—been slack for various reasons, and the first call upon us is to repentance." I have no doubt that we need to repent as a

Church and as individuals for our slackness toward the things of God.

Third, today's news follows God's timetable. This comes out in several places in Habakkuk's prophecy. For example, in verse 5 God said, "**For I am going to do something in your days.**" Today's news not only is under God's control and plan but also follows God's timetable.

And fourth, today's news is bound up with God's kingdom. The key to the history of the world is the kingdom of God. The story of the nations in the Bible is only relevant as it bears upon Christ's Church. What really matters is God's kingdom.

Let us not be caught off our guard when surprise events take place in this world. Rather, ask yourself, "What is the relevance of this event to the kingdom of God?" Or, if some unusual providence should come your way, ask yourself, "What is God teaching me through this? What do I need to correct? Where have I gone wrong? Why is God allowing these things to happen?" There is a meaning in God's dealings with us if we will look for it.

You need never doubt the love of God. If God were unkind enough to answer some of our prayers immediately and in our way, we would be very much the poorer for his answers. But fortunately, God sometimes delays his answers in order to deal with our selfishness or laziness or other things in our lives that should not be there. He is concerned about us, and intends to equip us for more useful service in his kingdom. We should therefore judge every event in light of God's great, eternal and glorious purpose.

In the summer of 1939 Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, pastor of the famous Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, PA was in Scotland preaching. His family had been staying at a little summer resort on the coast of Normandy in France. It was a summer full of preaching in Scotland with more preaching scheduled in September in Belfast, Ireland. But there was a week between the end of the first set of preaching conferences and the beginning of the second. And so Dr. Barnhouse decided to join his family in France for some vacation.

As he set out for France from Edinburgh, Scotland officials along the way urged him not to travel to France. Europe was in political turmoil because Hitler had just signed his treaty with Russia and was threatening to march into Danzig, Poland. The possibility of war seemed remote, and Barnhouse decided to travel to France in spite of the warnings he received along the way.

As he traveled by train and plane to France Dr. Barnhouse noticed soldiers and the military everywhere. There seemed to be a frenzy of military activity taking place all around. Nevertheless, he was able to join his family in Normandy on Sunday evening.

Most of the time was spent on the beach, though the atmosphere was tense with uncertain anticipation for what was about to happen. Every time a plane was heard overhead everyone on the beach would stop playing and look up, wondering whose plane it was. Finally, someone would shout, "It's one of ours," and the people would breathe a sigh of relief and their play would resume.

Monday went by. Then Tuesday. Then Wednesday. Finally, on Thursday morning word came that there would be no more flights to England. If Dr. Barnhouse was to return to Great Britain, he would have to travel by train to Paris and then by boat to England. A decision had to be made at once. Dr. Barnhouse left on the next train for Paris.

While Dr. Barnhouse traveled to Paris, the French ordered a military mobilization. A system of church bells alerted people in France to the news of the mobilization. There was a massive call-up of men to go into military service.

When Dr. Barnhouse arrived in Paris there was already a blackout in effect. All windows were covered with thick blankets so that no light would shine out of the windows. It was a strange feeling, knowing that things were changing.

Dr. Barnhouse was able to catch the last civilian train to the coast. Once there he was able to catch the last boat that would transport civilians across the English Channel for many years.

Once on board the boat Barnhouse found and met the Captain. Together they listened to the radio reports. Hitler had moved

into Danzig, Poland. The bombing was terrible. The English Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, called a meeting of his cabinet. He issued a statement saying that if the Germans were not out of Danzig by eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, Britain would declare war on Germany. The Captain of the boat, with typical British calmness, said, "This time there will be no turning back. This is it." It was Friday, September 1, 1939.

Dr. Barnhouse arrived in England and caught a train to London. From there he caught another train to the coast of Scotland, from where he was to take a boat over to Ireland. He spent all day on Saturday traveling, along with thousands of frightened children who were being sent out of London in order to get out of harm's way. At one point he saw a young boy who looked pitiful: he was so scared that he had wet his pants. Thousands of soldiers were also being mobilized for the imminent war.

Dr. Barnhouse finally arrived in the train station in Belfast at about three o'clock on Sunday morning. The committee that had arranged the Belfast preaching conference was waiting, having judged correctly that Dr. Barnhouse would make every effort to get to the preaching conference. After he disembarked from the train, they all prayed briefly. Then they made their way carefully through the lightless streets to the hotel. The hotel was heavily curtained inside because of the blackout. The committee said goodnight. Worship was in just a few hours—at 11:00 a.m. and they would be back to pick him up at 10:30 a.m. In parting one of the men said to Dr. Barnhouse, "I hope you have a good sermon. It may well be the last sermon that some of the men will ever hear." Then they were gone.

Dr. Barnhouse stood alone in the hotel room with his baggage piled around him. Slowly he moved over to the desk. He picked up a piece of paper in order to write the outline for his sermon that morning. He knew that it had to be a sermon hammered out on the anvil of life, not one that smelled of the study in any way. Years later Barnhouse said, "I stood there and prayed, and suddenly I thought of the perfect text for that coming hour. With great

rapidity I wrote down the text and three or four thoughts that would be my subheads and then went to sleep.”

In the morning, some of the committee members arrived to drive him to St. Enoch's Church, perhaps the largest church in Ireland. There the minister, who was exceedingly anxious, greeted him. It was Sunday morning, September 3, 1939 (67 years ago today), just a few minutes before 11:00 a.m. Prime Minister Chamberlain had announced that he would speak on the radio at that very hour, and everyone sensed that he would declare war on Germany. The minister thanked Dr. Barnhouse repeatedly for being there. “The church will be full of lads who will never come back,” he said. “I pray God will give you something for them.”

As the group walked toward the sanctuary, Dr. Barnhouse thought that there would probably be very few people at worship because everyone would be at home listening to the Prime Minister on the radio. But he was wrong. The sanctuary was completely packed. There was not an empty seat in the building.

The worship service began. They sang a few hymns. An elder slipped a note to the pastor, who then handed it to Barnhouse. It read, “No reply from Hitler. The Prime Minister has declared war!” A moment later Dr. Barnhouse was introduced to preach.

Dr. Barnhouse began by telling how he had outlined his sermon at four o'clock that morning but that, in spite of the circumstances, he had a text for them that was the most wonderful text in the Bible for such a day, September 3, 1939. It was spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ, and it was a command: “And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: *see that ye be not troubled*” (Matthew 24:6, *KJV*).

Dr. Barnhouse then recounted the series of experiences that he had had on his way to Belfast. After each account he repeated his text: *Do not be troubled!* He told of the church bells sounding: *Do not be troubled!* He told of the mobilization of soldiers: *Do not be troubled!* He told of the frightened children: *Do not be troubled!* He told of the millions of homes that would be broken up: *Do not be troubled!* He told of the thousands of children that

would be torn from their mothers and would represent in their cries all the anguish going up from the world: *Do not be troubled!*

The tension was mounting in the sanctuary. But then, when monstrous grief had been piled on agonizing horror, Dr. Barnhouse stopped and said: "These words are either the words of a madman or they are the words of God."

He shook his fist toward heaven and said, "God, unless Jesus Christ is God, then these words are the most horrible that could be spoken to men who have hearts which can weep and bowels which can be gripped by human compassion and sympathy. Men are dying. *Do not be troubled?* Children are crying in their naked loneliness with no beloved face in sight. *Do not be troubled?* O God! How can Jesus Christ say such a thing?"

But then came the answer. Jesus Christ is God. Jesus Christ is the Lord of history. Jesus Christ is the God of today's news. Jesus Christ is the God of every detailed circumstance. Nothing has ever happened that did not flow in the channel that God has dug for it. No event has ever flamed up in spite of God or left him astonished, bewildered, or confused. He is our God. The sin of man has reduced the world to an arena of passion and fury. Like wild beasts, men tear at each other's throats. Yet in the midst of the news today of which Jesus Christ is Lord, each individual who has believed in him as the Savior and Lord of life will know the power of his resurrection and will learn that today's news, however terrible, cannot separate us from the love of God.²

Brothers and sisters, Dr. Barnhouse's message 67 years ago this morning is the lesson that God taught Habakkuk and is teaching us as well: God is in control of today's news, it follows his plan and his timetable, and it is all bound up with his great, glorious, eternal and kingdom purposes. Amen.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), 79-82.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

O Sovereign God, thank you for what we have learned in making sense of today's news.

Help each one here today to believe that you are indeed in control of today's news, that it follows your plan and timetable, and that everything that happens is ultimately bound up with your great, glorious, and eternal kingdom.

All of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

May the God who controls today's news help each one of you to trust him fully. And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.