

The Justification of God: Theodicy in Habakkuk
How Long, O Lord? (Habakkuk 1:1-2:1)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on November 6, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ One thing I love about the Bible is how willing it is to present biblical characters in very real moments of weakness. There's no attempt to offer a sanitized view of these characters in their best moments. No, we get glimpses of very raw moments where they're struggling. Where they're at their most vulnerable.
 - That's what we see here in the book of Habakkuk. **We get a glimpse of a prophet of God in a moment of vulnerability – where he's wrestling with questions of faith and theology.** Usually in prophetic books, the prophet speaks on behalf of God to his people. But in Habakkuk, we have a unique opportunity to hear a prophet speak to God – asking his own questions – but he speaks as a proxy for us.
 - Because his questions are the same questions that have pestered and plagued people since ancient times. Habakkuk is raising questions related to **the age-old problem of evil and injustice.**

- ❖ The problem can be put like this: **If God exists but does not stop the evil and injustice in the world, then he might be an all-good God *but not all-powerful.* Or he's an all-powerful God *but not all-good.*** Either he can't stop evil or he doesn't want to. That's the problem. How can God be both all-good *and* all-powerful if all this horrific violence and injustice is plaguing our world and effecting our lives?

- ❖ Now some might say this is only a problem for people of faith. **Their solution to the problem of evil and injustice is to reject the notion of God altogether.** Many who arrive at this conclusion were sent down this path after wrestling with all the cruelty and injustice shot throughout the world. That was **C.S. Lewis's experience.**
 - That's why he had originally rejected the idea of God. Until he realized that evil and injustice are more problematic for an atheist. He writes in *Mere Christianity*, "*My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of "just" and "unjust"? . . . What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? . . . Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too – for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple.*"¹

- ❖ **In other words, if you're an atheist – if there's no ultimate meaning or standard of right and wrong in the universe – then why is it a problem that evil and injustice exist?** Isn't that to be expected? How can we complain about something being unjust if there is no objective standard of justice out there? But if we have an intuitive sense that there are real injustices in this world and that evil really is a problem, then it doesn't help us to dismiss the idea of God. **It would be more helpful to query God – to bring these questions to him.**

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (Macmillan, 1960), p. 31.

- ❖ And that’s what we’re invited to do in Habakkuk. This book invites us to wrestle with our questions of theodicy. **A theodicy is an attempt to explain how God is just – and how he is both all-good and all-powerful – despite the presence of evil and injustice in the world.**
 - It’s derived from the Greek words for God (*theos*) and justice (*dike*). So a theodicy is an attempt to demonstrate the justice of God or to justify God. That’s why we called this series through Habakkuk “The Justification of God”. **The goal is to show that God is just; that he is good; and that he is sovereign – and to do so without dismissing the problem of evil and injustice or ignoring the pain they cause.** This morning we’ll be in Habakkuk 1 and consider three points: (1) Man’s perennial complaint, (2) God’s perplexing answer, and (3) Justice’s appalling instrument.

Man’s Perennial Complaint

- ❖ Let’s dig a little deeper into man’s perennial complaint. We can sum it up this way: **Why does God allow evil to persist and evildoers to prosper?** Why does he delay in establishing his righteousness and justice on the earth? This is a perennial problem that has perplexed people for centuries. Long before Habakkuk, biblical authors were asking the same thing. David faced injustice and cried out in many of his psalms, “*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*” (Ps 13:1-2).
 - And outside of Scripture, three centuries before Christ, the Greek philosopher **Epicurus** was asking, “*Whence evil – if there be a God?*” Where did evil come from? And since then, thinkers and theologians like **Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Voltaire** have all tackled this question. The Scottish philosopher and skeptic **David Hume** is the one who put into words the now familiar argument: If God knows there is evil but can’t stop it, then he’s not all-powerful. If God knows there is evil and *can* stop it but does not *want* to, then he’s not all-good.
 - Even **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** addressed this problem through the mouth of his most famous character, the detective Sherlock Holmes. “*What is the meaning of it, Watson? . . . What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable. But what end? There is the great standing perennial problem to which human reason is as far from an answer as ever.*”²
- ❖ Apparently, even the world’s greatest detective couldn’t solve the problem of evil and injustice. And what he said at the end is right. Human reason is still as far from an answer to this problem. But that’s why Habakkuk doesn’t look to human reason. He seeks out divine reason. **He encourages us to go to God with these questions – with our complaints.**
 - Did you notice how Habakkuk’s questions were called complaints? Look at chapter 2:1, “*I will take my stand at my watchpost...and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.*” **So we’re not exaggerating to say that Habakkuk was complaining to God.**

² Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Cardboard Box*, (Kissinger, 2004), p. 22.

- ❖ Now that might feel wrong to you – to complain to God. But remember, these are inspired words of Scripture. This kind of complaint can't be wrong if it's divinely inspired. **There's another term in the Bible for a complaint directed towards God. It's called a lament.** And laments are found throughout Scripture. A third of the Psalms are classified as psalms of lament. There's an entire book of the Bible called Lamentations.
 - Here's the key: As long as the complaint is directed towards God, it's considered a lament. **But when it becomes a complaint about God directed towards man – that's when the Bible uses another term and calls it grumbling or murmuring.**
 - So to whom that complaint is being directed makes all the difference. If you're complaining to each other about God and the problem of evil, then you're guilty of grumbling. **But if you're willing to bring it to God in the form of prayer or lamentable praise, then you're demonstrating a very mature form of faith.**

- ❖ **If you think about it, all forms of lament – all genuine questions of theodicy – are ultimately rooted in faith.** It's *because* you believe that God is real; and he is good; and he is sovereign – that's why the persistence of evil and injustice is a problem to you. So what Habakkuk is doing in posing these questions to God is that he's trying to understand. **What he believes to be true about God's character as revealed in the Word doesn't seem to square with God's action (or inaction) as observed in the world.** There's a disconnect, and he's trying to find the connection.
 - This is what St. Anselm (1033–1109) described as “**faith seeking understanding**”. Habakkuk doesn't have blind faith. If someone were to tell him, “Hey Habakkuk, stop asking your questions. Stop complaining to God. Don't you have faith? Just believe.” He would probably push back and say, “I do believe. Which is why I want to understand.” These questions (complaints) are a form of faith seeking understanding.

- ❖ So let's look more closely at his first complaint found in vv2-4. “*2O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? 3Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?*”
 - **In his first complaint, Habakkuk's eyes are on domestic problems – on the moral and legal corruption plaguing the nation of Judah.** Why, OnLord, would you tolerate all this wrongdoing? Why do you idly watch as justice is perverted?

- ❖ Now some historical background would be helpful. **Habakkuk issued this complaint sometime after the untimely death of the good king Josiah.** Last week, Minister Stan reminded us that Judaeen society experienced a sharp moral decline under the reign of **Manasseh**. And his grandson **Josiah** tried to turn things around. But all hope of reform was dashed when he died in battle against the king of Egypt. Josiah's chosen heir was deposed and another son of his named **Jehoiakim** was set up as a vassal king.

- ❖ Jehoiakim, we're told, did what was evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Kg 23:36-37). **In the book of Jeremiah, it describes how corrupt society became under Jehoiakim's rule.** The rich were exploiting the poor and shedding innocent blood (22:13,17). The priests were self-serving (23:1). The prophets were liars (23:9-11). That was life under Jehoiakim's rule.
 - Now that makes sense of what we read in vv3-4. **Habakkuk identifies six aspects of corruption** (v3). Iniquity and wrong. Destruction and violence. Strife and contention. **Which resulted in three consequences** (v4). The law is paralyzed. Justice is stifled. And the righteous are surrounded by the wicked.
 - And what did all this lead to? Look at the end of v4, "*So justice goes forth perverted.*" Not only is the land filled with injustice and wrongdoing, the legal system is now paralyzed. There is no remedy in the law. There is no justice.

- ❖ And Habakkuk's complaint to God is why – **Why do you look idly upon all this injustice?** Why do you delay your judgment? How long, O LORD, will you tolerate this state of affairs?
 - **Friends, you may be feeling the same as you look upon the moral degradation and corruption in our society.** How long, O LORD, will the ugliness of racism and the stain of our nation's racist past continue to plague us? How long, O LORD, will the rich and powerful be allowed to exploit the poor and needy? How long, O LORD, will the most helpless and vulnerable among us – widows and orphans, unborn children, refugees – how long will they be marginalized and ignored?

- ❖ **And you probably have experienced evil and injustice on a personal level.** Maybe you're the victim of a gross injustice. The wrongdoer may have gone unpunished. They're enjoying life. They've moved on. But you're left with the wounds and a gnawing sense of injustice. **If that's you, what I hope you're taking away is the knowledge that it's okay to question. It's okay to even complain.** Just bring it to the Lord. He can handle it. He even invites it.

God's Perplexing Answer

- ❖ But be prepared – how God answers may surprise you. **He may not answer in the way you would expect or how you would like him to.** That's what Habakkuk experienced. Let's move on to vv5-11 and consider God's perplexing answer.
 - Habakkuk's attention, up to this point, has been on domestic problems within his own nation. But starting in v5, the Lord directs his eyes to the international scene and what he's been doing there. "*5Look 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. 6For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation.*"

- ❖ Habakkuk has been complaining about the moral corruption of his nation and how justice is a long time coming. And God's response is, "Yes, you're right. Judah is guilty of evil and injustice. So look, I'm raising up the Chaldeans to carry out my justice."
 - Okay, that is *not* what Habakkuk was expecting. **God's answer doesn't point to better days on the horizon – but to worse days!** To being besieged and overrun by a nation more evil and more corrupt than them.

- ❖ **“The Chaldeans” is an older term for the nation that we know as the Babylonians.** But before they defeated the Assyrians and established Babylon as their capital, they were known as Chaldeans. They already had a reputation for being cruel and fearsome.
 - Under Nebuchadnezzar, they besieged and defeated the Assyrians at Ninevah (612BC). Then, they defeated the Egyptians in open battle at Carchemish (605BC). So the two most dominant empires at the time were crushed by the ascendant Babylonians. From this point in world history, Assyria ceased to exist, and Egypt was no longer a force in the Ancient Near East. It was all about the Babylonian empire.

- ❖ All of that corresponds with the way they’re described in vv6-11. They were a *“bitter and hasty nation”* – cruel and impetuous. Quickly taking over huge swaths of land and disrupting the power balance on the international scene. Look at how v7 describes them, *“They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.”*
 - The Babylonians were so dreaded because they didn’t abide by any international norms or standards of warfare. Their justice went forth from themselves meaning they were a law unto themselves. **They did whatever they wanted – and what they wanted was often violent and atrocious.** And they didn’t care.
 - Look at v10, *“¹⁰At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. ¹¹Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!”* (vv10-11)

- ❖ Their own might was their god. That is, they idolized their military might. Sure, they had a pantheon of gods. **But if you were to examine their fundamental religious beliefs – it came down to might makes right.** Because they were stronger than other nations, they believed they could take whatever they wanted. That they deserved whatever they wanted.
 - And what they eventually wanted was Jerusalem. That’s what God predicted. At this point, it had yet to happen, but eventually – because of the revolt of Jehoiakim (that wicked king of Judah) – the great Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon would lead his army to besiege Jerusalem. And the city would fall in 597BC.
 - And after a subsequent revolt by the vassal king that Nebuchadnezzar put in place, the Babylonians would return to destroy the city in 586BC. They would end up demolishing the temple of God and deporting people to Babylon.

- ❖ **So God’s answer to Habakkuk’s complaint is the infamous Babylonian Exile.** Yes, my people have grown corrupt. They have sinned against me greatly. So discipline is coming. I will chastise them. And look, I’m going to use the Babylonians to execute this justice!
 - Now don’t get the wrong impression. **It’s not as if the Babylonians were willing servants of the Lord.** No, they are a wicked and guilty people, as emphasized in v11. They’re still accountable for their own violence and corruption. As God makes clear in chapter 2, judgment is still coming for Babylon.

- ❖ But the main lesson to draw is this: **God is completely sovereign – even over the wickedest of nations.** Godless kings are not trying to serve the Lord. Their own might is their god. They worship their own power and serve their own purposes. But in the end, powerful kings are mere pawns within the sovereign purposes of God. **Proverbs 21:1** says, *“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.”*
 - Again, king Nebuchadnezzar is still morally responsible for his evil actions as ruler of an evil nation. He’ll get his. But the point is to stress the absolute sovereignty of God – in that the free-willing actions of every person, even the most powerful, are somehow folded into God’s sovereign purposes. **So that even as we’re doing our heart’s desire – the Lord is turning it wherever he will.**

- ❖ I know it’s hard to understand. It was hard for Habakkuk to understand. That’s why the Lord said I’m about to do a work that you wouldn’t believe if I told you. But there’s a reason why the Lord *did* tell Habakkuk. Why he wanted his people to grapple with his perplexing answer to the problem of evil. There’s a reason why he wanted people of faith to seek understanding.
 - **So it would better prepare them for a future day when he would do another work in their midst – one even more perplexing.** One day, in the same city of Jerusalem, God would gather together a wicked king, a pagan governor, Roman soldiers, and religious leaders. And he would fold together all of their wicked intentions into his sovereign purposes to provide a final answer to evil and injustice.
 - Peter put it this way in **Acts 4:27-28**, *“²⁷for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”*

- ❖ **Friends, do you see how the cross of Christ is an even more perplexing answer to the problem of evil?** It involves the raising up and gathering together of even more wicked people to accomplish an even greater injustice – all for the purpose of divine justice.

Justice’s Appalling Instrument

- ❖ That was hard for Habakkuk to grasp. That’s what led to a second complaint in vv12-17. Let’s look back at the text and consider our third point: Justice’s appalling instrument.
 - Notice what Habakkuk finds so appalling. It’s not the fact that God would bring judgment against his people. That’s what the prophet was asking for in the first place – in his first complaint. He agreed that judgment was necessary. He wanted God to address their injustices. **But Habakkuk was appalled that the Lord would use the Babylonians, of all people, as his instrument of justice!**

- ❖ Based on some hints at the beginning and end of chapter 3, it’s likely that Habakkuk not only served as a prophet but as a temple musician. **So as someone familiar with temple worship, he would’ve been well aware of the importance of purity.** All the objects and instruments of temple worship had to be pure and consecrated for holy use. **So how can a pure and holy God use an instrument so profane and impure as the Babylonians?**

- ❖ Listen to how he voices his complaint in v13, “*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?*”
 - Habakkuk is essentially saying: Lord, I’m glad to hear that justice is coming to answer the problem of evil – **but why would you use a people more wicked than your own to accomplish this end?**

- ❖ This is, as we’ve noted, not just a question he’s posing but a complaint he’s lodging. But it’s not a sinful complaint. It’s not a grumble. Because it’s coming out of a posture of faith. Notice how, in v12, Habakkuk addresses this complaint to the LORD (Yahweh), to my God, to my Holy One, to my Rock.
 - **So even while he’s genuinely perplexed, Habakkuk’s underlying faith in God remains firm.** His convictions are deeply rooted. His faith is built upon the Rock. Which makes him certain that “*we shall not die.*” God’s people will be preserved. Because his eternal purposes to redeem a people for himself will certainly be fulfilled.

- ❖ But while Habakkuk acknowledges, in v12, that the Lord has ordained the Babylonians as instruments of judgment and reproof, his hangup, in v13, is that God would use such wicked people to accomplish his plans.
 - He goes on, in vv14-16, to describe the Babylonians like fishermen who mercilessly catch peoples in large nets and profit off of them. And after making a great catch, these fishermen go on to worship their nets. That’s another way of saying the Babylonians are worshiping their strength and might.
 - Habakkuk ends his complaint in v17 by questioning if God will let them get away with this? Will he allow them to continue terrorizing the nations?

- ❖ Again, the prophet agrees with the need for chastisement. Israel deserves to be punished. **But utter destruction and deportation at the hands of these wicked Babylonians?** Lord, isn’t that a bit excessive? I know we’re bad but are we really that bad? Isn’t that going too far?
 - But there’s a good reason why God would use such an appalling instrument to carry out justice. **Because it would better prepare God’s people for the day he turned to an even more appalling instrument – the cross of crucifixion.**

- ❖ **Have you ever wondered, “Why the cross?”** Wasn’t that a bit excessive. Perhaps you’ve seen a movie depicting Christ crucified. It’s a horrifying sight. **Isn’t there another way to deal with evil and injustice without resorting to such violence?** Isn’t God too pure to use such a horrific, appalling instrument of torture? But it had to be the cross. Because we really are that bad. Our sins are that appalling that only the cross could bring justice.
 - If anyone questions or complains to God about the evil and injustice in the world being too much to bear, he can say, “**Look at the cross of crucifixion – where my Son bore the guilt of evil and injustice that he himself did not commit.** There he bore the full weight of justice and was crushed under it. That’s my answer if anyone questions whether I care to do something about the evil and injustices of the world.”

- ❖ **Friends, the big takeaway in Habakkuk is that perfect justice is coming.** It may take longer than you expect. It may arrive in form you find perplexing. And it may use an instrument you consider appalling. But judgment is coming. No evil will be idly ignored. Perfect justice will be carried out.
 - The only question left is a question for each of us to personally answer. **It's the question of where – where will this perfect justice be carried out?** On you – at the final Day of the Judgment? Or on Jesus – at the cross of crucifixion? Where will the wrath of God's justice burn?

- ❖ In the pioneer days, living out in the prairies, settlers would sometimes find themselves in great danger of being burned alive. Prairie fires burn hot and fast. They can reach up to 700 degrees Fahrenheit and travel at speeds of 600 feet per minute – too fast to outrun, even on a horse. **So if you saw a prairie fire bearing down on you, what would you do to survive?**
 - You would do what all homesteaders were taught to do. You would grab your family and run out to the edge of your harvest field. You would stoop down and light your field on fire and watch your livelihood become a burnt patch on the ground. Then, you would take your family out into the middle of what was once your field.
 - And you would huddle together as that prairie fire roars toward you. You would feel the heat as it draws near. Raging up to the edge of your field. But there it would stop. Finding no fuel to burn, the fire would turn to the left and to the right and rage on. **But you and your family would be safe because you hid in the spot where the fire had already burned.**

- ❖ That, my friends, is a picture of the gospel. Perfect justice is coming, burning hot and fast. **The only safe ground is where the wrath of God's justice has already burned. And that safe ground is Christ crucified.** You find safety by hiding in Christ.
 - We're going to keep wrestling with the perennial problem of evil and injustice in the rest of this series in Habakkuk. We're not done with the subject. But let's make sure to deal with the personal problem of our own evil and injustice manifested in our own sins. The gospel invitation stands: **Come and hide in Christ where justice has already been served and mercy awaits.**