

The Justification of God: Theodicy in Habakkuk

Yet I Will Wait (Habakkuk 3:1-19)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on November 20, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ In the last few weeks, we've been in a mini-series through the OT book of Habakkuk focused on the theme of theodicy. **We've been trying to understand how God can be a just God – an all-good God and an all-powerful God – despite the persistence of evil and injustice in this world.** How do you keep the faith while at the same time honestly wrestle with the problem of evil? Because it's that problem that has led so many to abandon the faith. So how are we going to respond? That's what this series has been asking.
 - Now it's important to recognize the particular problem of evil being posed in Habakkuk. **Because we're *not* dealing with the typical question of why do bad things happen to good people.** That's what most people are trying to understand. Why do good people – why do the innocent – experience so much suffering and injustice? How is that fair? How is that right?

- ❖ But Habakkuk is *not* posing that question. He's not under the impression that some people – especially God's people – are somehow good and innocent. As if they don't deserve punishment for sins or chastisement for disobedience. No, he actually starts off, in chapter 1, complaining about how God's people – under the reign of wicked Judean kings – are seemingly unpunished. How long are they going to get away with it?
 - **What Habakkuk is wrestling with is why enough bad things don't happen to bad people.** Why are they getting away with their wickedness? Why do evildoers prosper? And God's answer, in the second half of chapter 1, only makes matters worse. Because his answer to the wickedness among his own people is to punish them through the military triumph of an even more wicked people. The Babylonians are coming to destroy them – to serve as instruments of God's just judgment.

- ❖ Now we saw, in chapter 2, the Lord assuring Habakkuk of Babylon's future judgment and calling him to live by faith and not by sight. And here, chapter 3, is Habakkuk's response. His concerns about the wicked prospering and justice failing have been addressed. God has made it clear that perfect justice will be served in the end.
 - **But now Habakkuk has to deal with evil and injustice on a personal level.** Remember, he's being told that devastation is still coming for him, for his people, and for the city he loves. So while, in the beginning of the book, he was asking broader-level, philosophical questions about the problem of evil – by the end of the book, he has to deal with evil and injustice on a personal level, as one who will suffer through the experience of defeat and deportation into Babylonian Exile.

- ❖ Friends, the same would apply to us. I think it's important to address the philosophical questions surrounding the problem of evil. We need to wrestle with these difficult questions. We need a robust theodicy. All of that's important. **But what's more important is how you're going to respond to personal encounters with evil – especially when evildoers seem to prosper at your expense.**

- ❖ How will you respond when that person betrays your friendship, breaks your trust, but goes on thinking they did nothing wrong and feels no remorse? What will you do when that coworker crosses ethical lines, throws you under the bus, and goes on to enjoy career advancements without any repercussions? How will you respond when your abuser exploits your trust, makes you feel at fault, and goes on unpunished while you suffer in silence?
 - I'm sure being told that God will one day bring about perfect justice – that he'll right every wrong and make everything sad come untrue – that's helpful on one level, on a philosophical level. **But on a personal level, what are you going to do with your pain right now?** It's a comfort to know that one day it'll all be set right, but how do you respond to the loss and suffering you experience in the present?

- ❖ When we saw Habakkuk's example in chapter 1, we encouraged you to bring your complaints to God in the form of prayer. Habakkuk goes to God with a prayer of complaint (aka a lament). **But as your walk with the Lord deepens and matures, the hope is for those prayers of lamentable complaint to eventually transform into prayers of enduring faith.** And that's why we see happen to Habakkuk's prayer life as we go into chapter 3.
 - You'll notice that chapter 3 takes the form of a prayer set to music (like a psalm). In this song, we'll hear three exhortations. First, to remember the powerful displays of God's past judgment. Second, to rest in the long view of God's sure justice. And third, to rejoice in the all sufficiency of God's silent presence.

Remember the Powerful Displays of God's Past Judgment

- ❖ So as we begin chapter 3, notice how, in v1, this is described as Habakkuk's prayer, "*according to Shigionoth.*" That's likely a musical term referring to the tune that you would use when singing this prayer. So this means we're not just reading a prophet's personal prayer. We're not just reading someone's private journal. **No, this prayer was intended to be taught and sung corporately in temple worship.** The people of God were meant to learn this song and internalize it as their own prayer to the Lord.
 - So when you find yourself in Habakkuk's shoes – when you feel attacked, when you're being oppressed, when your life is coming undone – remember. **Remember the powerful displays of God's past judgment.** That's what Habakkuk does to bolster his faith – he brings to remembrance the LORD's former deeds of deliverance.

- ❖ In chapter 2, the LORD already promised to one day punish Israel's enemies – to topple the Babylonians. **So most of Habakkuk's song builds off that and is filled with stanzas recollecting the many times God has intervened in human history to fight for his people and defeat their enemies.** He's heard all the stories, and he's left in awe as he recounts them.
 - Look at v2, "*I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear.*" Habakkuk is essentially saying, "Lord, when I think back to all the famous stories of you delivering your people from invading nations or enslaving oppressors – I stand in awesome wonder, in holy reverence, in proper fear of you and your mighty works."

- ❖ And if you survey the following verses, you can tell which biblical references he has in mind. For example, when he describes the LORD, in v3, as marching from Teman and from Mount Paran. Those locations are in the region of the Sinai Peninsula where Israel took refuge after crossing the Red Sea, after the LORD defeated their Egyptian overlords. **That's when the LORD began to visibly manifest his presence and power.** Through the Red Sea. Through the pillars of cloud and fire. Through lightening and thunder. Through shaking the earth at Mt. Sinai. All of that fits Habakkuk's description of God in these verses
 - **And not only does he reference God's defeat of Egypt, Habakkuk alludes to how God led Israel into battle as they settled the Promised Land.** For example, the mention, in v11, of the sun and moon standing still in their place is an obvious reference to the victory the LORD delivered to Joshua over the Amorites. Or in v7 there's the mention of Cushan or Midian. Those are some of the nations that the LORD drove out on behalf of his people – all by mighty displays of power.

- ❖ **The whole point is that – as Habakkuk remembers the LORD's past deeds of deliverance – he is pleading for God to revive those works once again in his day.** Look back at v2, *“In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known.”* When he says, *“in the midst of the years,”* the prophet sees himself living between two key points in history. Context would suggest that he sees himself standing between the Exodus and the day of judgment the Lord was promising in chapter 2. **So he's asking God to repeat the same deeds of deliverance in this day.** That's how the NIV translates it, *“Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known.”*
 - Habakkuk is praying and hoping for God to intervene today – through another visible manifestation of his mighty power – to not wait for that future day. *“Today, O LORD, would you please inflict judgment on Babylon and stay off their coming invasion.”*
 - He knows God's people have sinned. He knows they deserve holy wrath and justice. But he pleads for mercy. *“In wrath remember mercy.”* **Habakkuk is praying for the possibility (however remote) that God would mercifully pull off, in their day, a miraculous defeat of the Babylonians – just as he did with the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Assyrians, etc. Revive your mighty works – repeat it, in our day, O LORD! That's how he starts off his prayer.**

- ❖ So what can we learn that would apply to our prayer lives? **What this means is that when you're faced with evil and injustice in your own experience – remember that God is not powerless.** Remember that God has (and God will) put a stop to evil and right all wrongs. He will establish his perfect justice.
 - **But until that day comes – as you struggle in the face of evil – just know that there is an appropriate place for praying down judgment on evildoers.** There is a type of prayer in Scripture known as the imprecatory prayer (or psalm). The **imprecatory prayer** comes out of a posture of lament, where you're crying out to God in the face of injustice and suffering, and you're essentially praying down a curse upon God's enemies.

- ❖ It sounds strange and inappropriate. Which is why it's so jarring when you come across an imprecatory prayer in Scripture. Consider **Psalm 139**. It's a beautiful psalm that magnifies God for his omniscience and omnipresence. "*O LORD, you have searched me and known me!*" (v1) "*Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?*" (v7) It speaks of how God formed us intimately and knows us personally, "*You knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*" (v14)
 - I remember the first time I read Psalm 139 to my daughter. I was excited to introduce her to this beautiful language describing a relationship with God as so precious and personal. And then I kept reading into v19, "*Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me!*" Well, that went in a different direction.

- ❖ That is an imprecatory prayer. And it's inspired Scripture, so it can't be wrong to pray. **There is a place for praying that God would intervene to stay the hand of the wicked; to bring judgment upon them; to bring about their demise if necessary.** But, of course, we have to be careful – careful that our prayers are not motivated by personal spite or revenge. Remember, we're still commanded to love our enemies (Mt. 5:44).
 - **But loving your enemy should never come at the expense of seeking and expecting divine justice.** So on one hand, an imprecatory prayer asking God to punish the wicked is not necessarily unloving. That's how OT psalmists and prophets prayed. **But as NT believers, on this side of the cross, it's imperative we pray for repentance to be granted to the wicked before we ask for curses to fall on them.**
 - You can pray for their punishment, but pray first for them to trust in Christ as the one who took their punishment upon himself as he died on the cross. As Christians, we know that's how divine justice is satisfied in our case.

- ❖ So an imprecatory prayer for a wicked, oppressive dictator can sound something like this, "O LORD, let your kingdom come and your will be done. Please convert this man in Christ. But if he's not going to repent, then please remove him from power. Bring about an early demise if necessary." Sounds a little nicer than, "Oh that you would slay the wicked."

Rest in the Long View of God's Sure Justice

- ❖ But, in the end, a true imprecatory prayer will still trust in the Lord's sovereign will and good timing. **So, even if God never intervenes and stops the wicked in their tracks, we can still rest assured that no one ever escapes divine judgment.** You can always rest in the long view of God's sure justice. That's the second exhortation from our text.

- ❖ You actually see Habakkuk go through this maturation process by the end of chapter 3. By v16, he relinquishes his plea for God to miraculously intervene and comes to accept their coming judgment at the hands of the Babylonians. **As a song, you can imagine v16 as the start of a bridge, where perhaps there's a key change or tempo change.** In the previous stanzas, he's been singing about the visible manifestations of God's power and judgment upon their enemies. But now the key changes, and in this bridge, he accepts God's warning that judgment is coming against them in the form of the Babylonian exile.

- ❖ Listen to v16 again, *“I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.”*
 - Habakkuk accepts that the Babylonians will invade, and he’ll just have to quietly wait for the day of trouble (prophesied in chapter 2) to come upon them. It won’t happen now. He accepts that. But that doesn’t come easy. He says he’s trembling and shaking to his bones. **He’s truly afraid. And yet, at the same time, he truly believes.**

- ❖ Friends, biblical faith calls for a long view of God’s justice. You can hope and pray to see his justice carried out in your lifetime. **But faith instructs you to take the long view.** Look back at what God said in chapter 2:3 when he promised a day of judgment for his enemies, *“If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”* So you can be assured that God’s justice will ultimately prevail over your oppressors – but perhaps not in your lifetime.
 - **The promise of perfect justice is like a seed planted. It very well may lie under the dirt until we lie there too, and then spring up one day to the glory of God and the vindication of his righteousness.** Biblical faith takes all of that into view.

- ❖ **This struggle of faith to quietly wait for perfect justice to spring up continues on in the NT, expressed in letters like 2 Peter.** The apostle is responding to scoffers who question the delay of divine judgment. Who scoff at believers who are trying to quietly wait for the Lord to return and establish perfect justice on earth. Where is your God? Where is this perfect justice you’re waiting for?
 - Peter says in **2 Peter 3:8-9**, *“⁸But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”*

- ❖ So yes, from man’s perspective, the ongoing delay of perfect justice seems way too long. It feels as long as a thousand years. But from God’s perspective, it’s only a day. Only a day before the Judge arrives in town. **When you take the long view – when you take God’s view – you can better endure the wait.**
 - And don’t lose sight of what Peter says about God’s patience. What we’re tempted to interpret as slowness on God’s part should be understood rather as patience on his part. Patient for more sinners to reach repentance. **Again, be careful not to pray so intently for your oppressor’s judgment that you fail to pray for their repentance.**

- ❖ **Around this time last year, I remember reading in the news about a 100-year-old man on trial in Germany.** He was accused of assisting in the murder of 3,518 people. Because seventy-six years earlier, as a twenty-four year old man, he had served as an SS guard in a Nazi concentration camp where 3,518 prisoners of war were either shot or gassed to death.
 - This past June, the verdict came down, and he was found guilty. It was a long time coming. The family and friends of all those victims had to patiently wait seventy-six years, but justice was eventually served. The long arm of the law prevailed.

- ❖ **Friends, take comfort in the fact that human justice is so doggedly persistent.** If human justice is willing to press on and persevere for three-quarters of a century to track down a frail, wheelchair-bound centenarian to keep him accountable for the evil he perpetrated as a young man – **if human justice is *that* patient and *that* persistent, then how much more divine justice?** How much more can you be sure that divine justice will never fail you – that it will surely come! That's the long view of God's sure justice.

Rejoice in the All Sufficiency of God's Silent Presence

- ❖ But, as we said earlier, taking the long view might help us philosophically endure evil, but psychologically, it's still extremely difficult to wait. But this is the direction mature faith goes. Notice how this bridge in Habakkuk's song continues on in vv17-19.
 - Earlier, he was singing about the visible power of God on display – in lightening, thunder, earthquakes, and the like. **But now the key changes, and he's singing about his joy and satisfaction in God even when the Lord's presence and power are no longer visible.** Even when all has gone silent.
 - But that's how you know your faith has matured. When you can rejoice in the Lord – not just when his presence and power are unmistakable and indisputable – but especially when they're seemingly absent. **Can you rejoice in the all sufficiency of God's silent presence?** That's our third exhortation.
- ❖ Let's listen again to Habakkuk's declaration of faith starting in v17, *"¹⁷Though 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, ¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places."*
 - **The prophet's point is that even though all outward signs point to more suffering and further loss, yet he will rejoice in the LORD.** Though my flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Ps 73:26). That's what it means to live by faith (2:4) and not by sight.
- ❖ **It's surprising how quick Habakkuk is able to shift from terror in v16 and deprivation in v17 to joy and satisfaction in vv18-19.** In just four verses, from v16 to v19, the prophet goes from trembling at the thought of invasion and all the loss it will bring – to rejoicing in God and finding strength in him alone!
 - How is that possible? What explains the sudden shift? **Notice how Habakkuk is no longer putting his hope and joy in what he sees but in what he hears.** What he sees are poor circumstances. But what he hears are rich promises. What he sees is scarcity and want. But what he hears is that the Lord can be your strength when all else fails.
- ❖ Friends, this is what it means to live by faith. **It's natural to rejoice when the harvest is good; when the fig tree is flourishing; when the herd is healthy and the stalls are full.** Everybody rejoices in those circumstances. That doesn't require faith.

- ❖ **The real question is whether you'll still rejoice when the harvest is poor? When the circumstances are hard? When the opportunities are scarce?** Though the marriage should not blossom with romance; nor life plans come to fruition; though your efforts yield only loss and disappointment; and your resources are cut off; and there be no money in your wallet – **will you still take joy in the God of your salvation?** Will he be your strength when all else fails? That's the real test of faith.
- ❖ And this is where Habakkuk serves as inspiration. **In hope, against hope, he put his trust in the Lord.** All around it seemed like evil reigned and the wicked prospered. There was no visible sign of hope – no tangible evidence to hold on to – and yet somehow he kept his faith. Because the righteous shall live by faith.
 - **And we're not talking about some sort of nebulous faith in the general idea that God works all things for good.** That he can take all the hurt and pain in your life and make something beautiful out of it. To be honest, you can believe that without truly knowing Christ.
- ❖ No, we're talking about living by faith *specifically in the gospel*. The righteous shall live by faith in the good news that God took the sin, suffering, and sadness in this world, put it on the back of his Son, and nailed all of it to the cross.
 - **God used the most sorrowful event in human history to bring about the greatest joy for mankind.** Our Sinless Savior died. And yet, on the third day, he rose again, proving that joy is greater than sadness. That love is stronger than hate. And now this kind of joy and this kind of love is available to anyone who receives Jesus by faith. If you have yet to put your trust in Christ, today is the day. Open your heart and receive him as your Savior and Lord.
- ❖ But let me be honest. **If you put your hope in Christ, it doesn't mean the problem of evil suddenly goes away.** You'll still find yourself, from time to time, the victim of injustice or the target of abuse. Becoming a Christian won't make you immune to the pain of betrayal, or the sorrow of loss, or the bitterness of injustice. So then what's the point?
 - The point is that you'll have Christ. You'll have a Savior who experienced the ultimate injustice and the greatest abuse at the hands of sinful man. **You'll have a Friend who experienced the ultimate loss of all goodness and all grace – so that you could live forever in the goodness of God and the sufficiency of his grace.** Christ was forsaken and cried out to God only to hear silence – so that you will never be forsaken. And you can be sure that, even in the silence, you will still find the presence of God. That's the point. And that's how you can live by faith.