

What!!!???

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Habakkuk series

Habakkuk 1:1-4
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Intro:

We are turning our attention to the prophet Habakkuk for the next several weeks. Habakkuk is one of 12 books that we call the minor prophets. They are minor because they are small books, unlike the larger books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. All of these books centre on the time in and around the Exile.

The history of Israel as a whole is somewhat complicated if you're not familiar with it. You've heard words like "the Exodus" and maybe "The Exile". The Exodus, of course, refers to the powerful deliverance of Israel after 400 years of slavery in Egypt. That was roughly 1400 years before Christ. At that time, the Lord used Moses to lead Israel to freedom in the Promised Land of Canaan.

In that Land, Israel had various years of walking closely with the Lord and straying far from him. Times when their kings, like David, drew them close to God and helped them see that God was their true and only King. Times when they kept covenant with God, living faithfully with him and for him. These were times when Israel was a light to the nations around them, a blessing that pointed others to their one true God. The time just before Habakkuk was during the reign of King Josiah who was a great reformer, a young king who loved the Lord and, like David, drew God's people to serving the Lord faithfully.

After King David, his son Solomon reigned over the 12 tribes making up Israel. After that, though, Israel was a divided country with two kings. The larger part in the north was usually called Israel and the smaller part, which had Jerusalem as it's physical and spiritual capital city, was called Judah.

Now, the Lord was extremely patient with his people, but after years of repeated disobedience, the Lord used other nations to discipline his own people. These nations would fight Israel and Judah, rule over them and often take most of their people into "Exile." God's people were forced to live away from their homes in a foreign land, under foreign rulers where foreign gods were worshiped. By the time of Habakkuk, Israel—the northern tribes—is already captured and in Exile.

Habakkuk is a prophet in Jerusalem which is in the land of Judah. He served during the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah. And this king was one of those who did not serve the Lord, as his father Josiah did. The timeline of this book is roughly 600 years before Christ. And historical records show that the exile of Judah happened in 597 BC when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Judah's King Jehoiakim and took most of the people to Babylon, including men we might be more familiar with, like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the book of Daniel.

With that intro, let's read the first four verses of the book. Tomas and I have divided the three chapters into 7 sermons. As we work through the book, you'll hear some very familiar verses or themes that resurface in the New Testament, but not so much in our reading today.

Let's pray.

Read with me now.

1 ¹ The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

That's the whole introduction—v.1. Now we get right into the first of what are called Habakkuk's Complaints—vv. 2-4.

² How long, 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 wrongdoing?

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.

This is the word of the Lord.

Dear friends in Christ,

Have you ever felt like crying out to God, "What????!!! What in heaven's name is going on? Why do I have to go through this hardship? And why does it seem like the evil get their way and the righteous have to suffer?" Maybe we don't put it in those words, but I regularly hear people says things like, "Life certainly isn't fair. I don't understand what good the Lord is up to in my life? I wish he would answer my prayers."

Well, you're not alone. Habakkuk is perplexed by God too. He actually sounds ticked off or at least burdened. You might want to picture him as the pastor of God's people in Jerusalem. He's among a group of people trying to faithfully serve the Lord. Meanwhile, all around, he sees lots of things wrong. There are many of his Judean people walking away from the Lord. Immorality and injustice abound before his eyes. People even boast about their sin. Habakkuk's heart aches as he pastors the people in Jerusalem who are faithful to the Lord. He feels—they all feel—like they are getting the short end of God's justice stick. The

evil world seems to be winning, and God can do something about it but he's not even responding to their cries and prayers.

Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like your prayers don't get past the ceiling? Maybe you're praying for a loved one who is sick. Maybe you've got big financial problems. Maybe your family is divided or you're having trouble at work or school. Do all the wars in our world have you feeling overwhelmed? How about the social problems in our country—do you feel like God isn't stepping in to address things? What do we do if we feel like God isn't even listening to our prayers as we see or feel calamity up close and around us?

If you feel perplexed by God, I'd say you should read the book of Habakkuk. You're not alone. Listen again to Habakkuk's prayer in v.2:

*Hab 1:2 How long, Lord, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?*

That's the question. What!!!??? What's going on God? And, I'm sorry, but you won't get God's answer to that cry till next Sunday. For now, let's just sit with Habakkuk's questions for God—his "What!!!???"

A Heavy Message Received

First, let's get our bearings. V.1 opens with "The prophecy" or "the oracle" that Habakkuk received. These oracles or prophecies were often received through a vision from God. And the thing that is received is called a prophecy, but it can also be translated as "a burden". One Bible translation puts v.1 this way: *This is the burden that Habakkuk the prophet received in a vision* (Berean SB). The message is a burden because it's heavy. It's a revelation of upcoming judgement or warnings of doom that will fall on Judah by the Babylonians.

Imagine being the police officer assigned to tell a family that their teenager was killed in a car accident. That's a heavy burden of doom. Sadness. It's a weighty task.

As Habakkuk will see, God's judgement comes from two angles. There is the obvious one first which Habakkuk will hear about later. This is not Habakkuk's current complaint. Nonetheless, sometimes when God is unhappy with the sinful rebellion of people, he punishes that nation through the means of his choosing. In this case, he'll reveal that Babylon will be his instrument of discipline upon Judah. That's for next week.

But, secondly, judgement also comes through natural consequences of our bad choices. That's Habakkuk's complaint here. When we push against God's way for human thriving—the way of righteousness, you could say—then bad consequences follow. You drive drunk and have an accident. That's a bad consequence that comes naturally for your bad choice to drink and drive. That could also include the police suspending your driver's license, another consequence that is spelled out in the law and which you know in advance will

come to you if you get caught driving under the influence. And if you happen to get in an accident while driving drunk and end up killing someone, that too will come with a heavy judgement which you brought on yourself that could include jail time.

There are times in our lives as there was times in the life of Judah that God allows us to reap the bad fruit of our choices. Habakkuk is crying out to God, “Violence!” according to v.2. That is not Habakkuk charging God with doing violence. No, he’s reporting to God that all sorts of violence is happening in Jerusalem and Judah as a whole. Life was good under King Josiah who served the Lord faithfully. Now Jehoiakim is on the throne and he’s worshipping other gods and promoting the religions that include idolatry and immorality. The people at large—along with the king—are no longer obeying the Ten Commandments but perverting justice and harming one another. In v.4 Habakkuk laments,

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

This is what happens when we forsake God’s good law designed for our protection and blessing. The result is violence, in Habakkuk’s words. One might say it is the opposite of peace or shalom, which is the world turning as God intends. All is well and good when there’s shalom. But that’s not what Habakkuk is experiencing in Judah. His heart is burdened by the violence and God is not responding as he thinks God should. Habakkuk sees violence but God does not save, he says in v.2.

We can see this sort of violence in our own society too. The more God is pushed into the background, the more corruption occurs. For example, greed grows to the point where corporations don’t care what happens to people so long as the business keeps making more money. That greed leads to supporting evil practices—usually abroad—like child labour, sweat shops or even slavery.

Governments fall prey to this too. They are unable to say no to more revenue that comes from things like lotteries and gambling, even though those things hurt people in the process, driving some to bankruptcy, despair, addictions and even suicide.

In our society, more and more children are left to their own devices without proper guidance. Parents and teachers are taught that saying “no” to bad behaviour is somehow damaging to the child’s welfare. And letting them feel the consequences of their bad efforts by receiving an “F” in school is no longer allowed. Consequently, children grow up without respect because they think everyone is here to serve them and don’t owe respect to anyone. That bears bad fruit as those children grow up and enter the workforce and can’t handle being told what to do and especially what not to do. We’re hear reports in our society about the fragile mental health of some young adults today who grew up without

boundaries. No one ever said “no” to them. Yet God says no to us about many things. Think of the Ten Commandments.

Anyway, those are just examples of how turning from God’s ways can lead to a kind of self-destruction. Our society slowly implodes. Violence, in Habakkuk’s words.

The opening of Habakkuk’s heavy prophecy comes across as a lament to God. He’s wondering why God watches all of this self-destructive behaviour among his people and doesn’t do anything about it when he very well could. When evil is allowed to grow unchecked, Habakkuk laments, justice will be perverted. That’s a heavy message. And it’s not only for Judah and the rest of God’s chosen people. It’s for all nations, even today.

A Desperate Cry Given

In response, to the heavy message of impending judgement, Habakkuk raises a desperate cry to God: the “how long, Lord?” The thing to note here is that Habakkuk is crying out to God. He’s a praying man. He’s not screaming at the wall. He’s praying to God, his covenant God. He’s not necessarily happy with God’s response, as we’ll see more in the coming weeks. But he’s still praying TO God. This book is not so much a prophecy against Judah as Habakkuk’s dispute with God over all that’s going wrong with the covenant people.

We’ll see in the coming weeks more clearly that Habakkuk is a bit like Job. Lots of questions, lots of frustrations. He’s lamenting life’s hardships as you seek to follow God. He’s wondering why God doesn’t do something—anything—when you know God can just speak a word. You know he can just lift a finger and everything will be different. And better! But God doesn’t act—at least not right away and not the way Habakkuk thinks he should.

This is the age-old question of theodicy. Why evil when there’s a good God? We’ll dig into that in different ways throughout this book. For today, it’s recognizing that we have a relationship with God that allows us to cry out to him. It is the gift of faith that he’s given us that enables us to keep praying even when we don’t feel like we’re getting the answers we want. Even when we feel that we aren’t getting any answers. Not even a word. That’s how Habakkuk feels here in the opening verses of this book. He’s frustrated that God doesn’t seem to be engaged in the covenant relationship with Judah, not even with the people of Judah like Habakkuk himself who are trying to live righteous lives.

We’ll see in the coming weeks that God does answer Habakkuk’s questions. He is faithful to his children but his ways are higher than ours. His timing is not in sync with ours. But he’s always up to something in every struggle, trial and judgement. These are all invitations to trust him more, trust him again, trust that he’s got a plan and it’ll be good in the end.

As followers of Jesus, we all know that *in* this world nothing is perfect. We are living in the “already but not yet” time. The time when Jesus has definitively and decisively defeated Satan. Easter has come. Death is defeated. But we still die for now. We do not yet have resurrected bodies. We are not yet in the life where there is no more sorrow, pain or death. But the battle to spare us from eternal judgement is done. Jesus paid the price when he cried out to the Father “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” in Psalm 22, the lament psalm we looked at this past Good Friday.

Jesus felt the pain of no answer from God. He bore the wrath of God for us, the punishment for all of our sin that is displayed in the silence of God when Jesus died on the cross. But now his victory over death and sin guarantees that we have the ear of the Father all the time. Jesus has guaranteed that we can live in the confidence of the Father’s love for us. And because of his love for us there is not a single tear or drop of blood or agonizing groan that is wasted in the providence of God. We may not fully understand what God is up to but we can have the assurance that—because of Jesus’ Easter victory—we have the ear and the love of the Father in heaven.

Remember, when God seems silent, we must always look to the cross of Jesus and the empty tomb. There we see that God has an answer to the evil of the world, the evil we experience and the things for which we cry out, “What!!!???” The answer is Jesus. Jesus ensures that God will always answer us. It’s not a guarantee that we’ll get what we want and when we want it. It does however show us that Jesus is victorious and, because of our faith in him, we can be confident that—as Paul says—*all things will work together for the good of those who love him*. That’s true because of Jesus. It’s true for us when we’re in the trenches of life and we know God can deliver us immediately but he doesn’t.

Friends, with Habakkuk, we trust the Father, first of all, enough to cry out to him. We have a guaranteed relationship of love with him. Then we trust that he does hear and care, even if we *feel* he’s not listening.

Jesus ensures that God cares for us, loves us, hears us and has a definite answer for us in our struggles. That is our comfort in the storms and questions of life.