

Series: "The Minor Prophets"
"Habakkuk: How Come? How Long?"

The book of Habakkuk is another one of those very short books in the Old Testament named after a prophet. We don't know much about Habakkuk. All indications are he was a faithful prophet, who spoke God's message to the people. He prophesied somewhere around 600 B.C. By then the northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah survived, but was pretty much morally and spiritually bankrupt.

Some sweeping reforms had taken place under the good king Josiah, reforms that removed idols, destroyed pagan shrines, and restored the proper worship of Yahweh, Jehovah, the true God. Unfortunately, this spiritual turnaround didn't last long. The next 2 kings "did that which is evil in the sight of the Lord." Before long, injustice, violence, and corruption once again dominated daily life.

Not only was there turmoil *within* the country, but the rise in power of the Babylonians threatened Judah's existence. Perhaps Habakkuk could see the handwriting on the wall, as the Babylonian armies conquered nation after nation.

The first part of the Book of Habakkuk is a dialogue between God and the prophet. Habakkuk questions the Lord: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack, and justice never prevails" (Habakkuk 1:2-4). How long are You going to be silent when I cry for help, the prophet asks. How long are you going to do nothing to stop all the violence and injustice all around me? How long are you going to let the bad things happening go unchecked?

Habakkuk complains. He questions God. And God answers. But His response to Habakkuk's questions is shocking and chilling. "Look at the nations and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told. For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own. Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves" (Habakkuk 1:5-7). God is going to punish people who do wrong, but He's going to do it by sending *the Babylonians (or Chaldeans)* to conquer them! God is going to use this dreaded, ruthless, godless nation – the Babylonians – who are a law unto themselves, to accomplish what He has in mind!

Habakkuk comes back at God with more questions: "Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?" (Habakkuk 1:13). How can God, who is pure, use cruel people like the Babylonians to punish Habakkuk's own friends and neighbors? Do you sense that Habakkuk's a bit miffed at God! Then Habakkuk says to God, "I'm going to stand by and wait for your answer."

Don't we have these questions, too? If God is so good, why doesn't God stop the awful things that happen? Nations like China, Russia, North Korea, where citizens are monitored closely,

and those who don't tow the party line are quickly censured or eliminated. Why doesn't God stop the drug trafficking and the sex trafficking that are ruining so many lives? Why does God allow so much crime and violence in our own towns and cities? Why doesn't God stop the Los Angeles Dodgers from signing all the good players at insane salaries!

Sometimes the unfairness and injustice is more personal. Our "enemies" are not only *other people, other groups, other nations*, but disease, or injuries, or misfortunes of one kind or other. Instances where we feel what Habakkuk felt when he asked God, "How long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?" (Habakkuk 1:2a). Remember the bestselling book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. How many times have we seen that played out in life.

Cancer can be the enemy. We know that here in this church, don't we? The loss of some beautiful people, key people, in this congregation. Those battling cancer now.

Dennis Bennett was an Episcopal priest and a key leader in the charismatic movement some years ago. That move of the Spirit where people were baptized in the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit were evident, including the gift of healing. And healings and miracles were often seen. Dennis Bennett's wife passed away with an illness. Dennis tells how one day he was out walking, and keeping in mind the number of people he had seen miraculously healed, he simply asked, "God, how come Elberta had to die?" In so many ways bad things happen to good people in this fallen, sinful world.

Jill Briscoe, a pastor's wife and author, talks about babysitting their three 3-year-old grandson Drew. As Jill waved goodbye to his parents, he looked perfectly all right. She read him a chapter out of his favorite book, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Then she put him to bed and went to sleep. In the middle of the night, she said, "I felt a little hand, and I turned on the light. I looked at Drew: chicken pox from the top of his head to the soles of his feet." "Nana," he said, "Me's having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Why should some things like this happen to I?" How many times have we felt that?

So, Habakkuk questions God. And God doesn't chew him out for it! But does God *answer* Habakkuk? Well...yes, kind of. Let's move on to what the Scriptures say.

God goes on to say He's not overlooking the cruelty and evil of the Babylonians. Their day is coming, and they'll be judged by God, and perish by God, and perish by the same cruelty they've inflicted on others. *God's purpose is moving ahead...slowly...but surely*. "Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay" (Habakkuk 2:2-3). Verse 3 in the New Living Translation says: "This vision is for a future time. It describes the end, and it will be fulfilled. If it seems slow in coming, wait patiently, for it will surely take place. It will not be delayed."

God's purposes take time to be fulfilled. God says to Habakkuk, you have to wait patiently for

this, but be assured, it will happen. If we believe in a meaningful life beyond the grave, sometimes it takes eternity for the scales to be balanced. I know you've heard this before. And, frankly, it may provide little comfort when the bad things that happen to good people hurt so much here on earth! But God's ultimate purposes often take more time to work out than our limited time on earth.

The end of verse 4 is so important: "But the righteous live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). *The righteous live by faith.* This verse was so crucial to the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic priest, struggling to find assurance of salvation. That verse spoke to him, convincing him that we are justified, or made right with God, not by the good works we do, but by placing our faith in Christ, and receiving God's gift of righteousness made available in Jesus. "The righteous live by faith." That verse helped birth to the Protestant Church.

But here, in the context of what is happening during Habakkuk's time, this is part of God's answer to Habakkuk. There is so much we can't understand about life, and the ways of God – why so much bad stuff happens – that it all boils down to *trust*: Can we trust God? Can we have faith in God, that there is a purpose in all that happens to us...and that God will finally balance the scales of justice? Or to say it another way: *That God is good!*

Someone has put it this way: "The righteous (person) must face the enigmas of history in faith (faithfulness)...confident that the issues are in God's hands...and waiting patiently for the time when his sovereignty will be made clear." As it says in a New Testament passage: "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

God says to Habakkuk, "I know what I'm doing...I'm not going to vindicate the righteous immediately, but that day will come. Just wait, trust Me, and be faithful. How does Habakkuk respond? He's humbled. He bows in awe before the Lord God Almighty. "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14). "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (Habakkuk 2:20).

When you move into the 3rd and last chapter of this short book of Habakkuk the prophet ends it with a prayer – a prayer in which he acknowledges the glory of God, and commits himself to be faithful to this God.

Habakkuk is regarded as a "minor prophet". His writings in our Old Testament are brief – 3 chapters. Yet what God says through him is so profound and so important. It's one of those Old Testament writings that raise a voice of protest about having a *too tidy and simple* view of whom God rewards and whom God punishes. In some Old Testament writings you get the idea that God punishes bad people with sickness, miseries and a short life. While God blesses the righteous with long life, health and prosperity. But Habakkuk doesn't see it that way. *And neither did Jesus!*

We don't always get what we deserve in life. A lot of God's ways don't make sense. *But God can be trusted!* We can have, what someone has said, is a "deep confidence that life will not

finally sustain evil.”

Habakkuk closes with some of the most marvelous words in the Bible (some of my favorite verses): “Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights”(Habakkuk 3:17-19).

Imagine that scenario: no figs on the fig trees; no fruit on your vines; the crops fail and there’s no food; your flocks of sheep are diminished, and your barn stalls are empty. And yet, Habakkuk says, “I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength.”

Stephen Curtis Chapman is a Christian singer, song writer, record producer, author. He and his family experienced a horrible tragedy in 2008. Their 5 year-old daughter, Maria Sue, adopted from China, died after she was struck by an SUV driven by her teenage brother in the family’s driveway south of Nashville, Tenn. I simply can’t imagine what that family must have gone through. Steven Curtis Chapman, probably reflecting on that sorrow, once said: “I have learned that we can control where we allow things that we can't understand to fall. They either fall between us and God, and we become angry. Or we allow these things to fall outside of us and press us in closer to God.”

Illust. There is a newer song that’s become one of my favorites. We’ve sung it here. It’s the song, “Goodness of God”. And I think it fits well with the Scriptures we’ve looked at in Habakkuk.

“I love You, Lord For Your mercy never fails me
All my days, I've been held in Your hands
From the moment that I wake up Until I lay my head
Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God

I love Your voice You have led me through the fire
In darkest night You are close like no other
I've known You as a Father I've known You as a Friend
And I have lived in the goodness of God

'Cause all my life You have been faithful
And all my life You have been so, so good
With every breath that I am able
Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God

I think Habakkuk could have sung that song from his heart. And so can we, with God’s help.

