

“Where Are You, God?”
Habakkuk 1:1-4
Series: Book of Habakkuk [#1]
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Introduction

“Where are You, God?”

- “Where are You, as hatred and wars are raging, with so many innocent people suffering and dying?”
- “Where were You, when the one I love got sick, suffered and died?”
- “Where are You, as unborn children are killed, and children are abused?”
- “Where are You, as justice is being turned upside down?”
- “Where are You, as people mock you?”
- “Where are You, I’ve been praying, crying out to you as sincerely as I can for so long? *Where are You, God?*”

“Where are You, God?” The question is not new. When Jesus received news that His friend Lazarus was sick, He waited for two days to go. Lazarus died. When Lazarus’ sister Martha saw Jesus, she said, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 22:21). In other words, “Where were you, Jesus?” When Jesus met her sister Mary later, she made the same statement, asked the same question.

Then go back father, to the Old Testament. Go to the Psalms. Consider just two of many that raise the question.

88:13-14, “But I, O LORD, have cried out to You for help, and in the morning my prayer comes before You. O LORD, why do You reject my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me?”

22:2, “O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; and by night, but I have no rest.”

Even earlier, Job, “I cry out to You for help, but You do not answer me; I stand up, and You turn Your attention against me” (30:20).

“Where are You, God?” We are going to look at this question today as we begin a series in the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk is one of the twelve minor, or shorter prophets which are at the end of the Old Testament in our Bibles. We need to start with a few introductions.

Introduction To Habakkuk.

Let's start with the prophet. We don't know much about the man who wrote this book and whose name is its title. We don't even know much about his name. The pronunciation of his name is not clear, should it be Há-bak-kuk, or Hab-ak-kúk—take your pick. As one scholar summed it up, “the word [is] unique [and] the form is unparalleled in Hebrew.” [F. Anderson].

Some suggest the name may have come from a word meaning “enfold” or “embrace”, and have tried to find a link between that idea and Habakkuk's character. But there really is no point to that.

We don't know his family background, hometown or vocation. The book does not give us any information on these things, nor is there any historical information outside of the Bible. There are a number of legends that developed about him. But they are just legends.

He is identified in 1:1 and 3:1 as “Habakkuk *the* prophet.” Other prophets are identified in the same way in the Bible, e.g., Isaiah in his book is identified as “Isaiah the prophet” (37:2). Prophets spoke from and for God. While at times God gave them messages about the future (which we call *prophecy*), their main role was to declare God's truth to the people.

Habakkuk characterizes the times in the opening verses with the words violence, iniquity, wickedness, destruction, strife and contention. The law was being ignored, the wicked were dominating the righteous and so justice was not being carried out.

The Northern kingdom of Israel fell in 722 B.C. The people were carried away never to return to their land. Judah, in the south where Habakkuk was, fell in 586 B.C. The people were out of their land for seventy years before they returned.

The references to God raising up the Chaldeans, or Babylonia (e.g., 1:6) point to a time for these events being late in the 7th century B.C. The Babylonians took Nineveh in 612, marking the end of Assyrian domination and the beginning of their domination in the region. They invaded Judah first in 605 B.C., the time when Daniel and his friends were taken to Babylon. It seems to me the times Habakkuk refers to were shortly after King Josiah's death in 609. Josiah was the last good, godly king in Judah, and his spiritual reforms did not survive him. God's judgment was coming.

And that brings us to the book itself. It was written by Habakkuk. We can't date it with 100% certainty. My preference is around the time when I think the events took place, sometime between King Josiah's death in 609 B.C. and Babylon's first invasion of Judah in 605 B.C.

This three-chapter book is structured with two cycles of questions from Habakkuk to God and God's answers in the first two chapters, and then a psalm in chapter 3. Habakkuk's love for and faith in God and His truth are evident in the first cycle of questions. He asks,

- “Why is evil unrestrained?”

- “Why do the wicked have the upper hand?”
- “How can it be that wickedness and sin are the norms in God’s chosen people?”
- “Where is the restraint? Where is God’s discipline?”
- And, “Where are You, God? I’ve brought all these things to You for so long now, and You haven’t answered, You haven’t dealt with it!”

When God answered Habakkuk and told him judgment was coming through the Chaldeans, Habakkuk was stunned. He shouted, “Wait a minute, God! How can You use a more wicked nation that doesn’t even know You to judge Your own people?” God answered, telling Habakkuk that the Chaldeans would also be judged.

The psalm in chapter 3 is a great, grand psalm, praising God, His power and purposes, and closes with Habakkuk’s statement of faith in God. The book defends the holiness, goodness and sovereignty of God in the face of evil in our world. It gives us a glimpse into Habakkuk’s journey from questions to continued steadfast faith in very difficult times.

In the first cycle of questions and answers Habakkuk has three questions for God.

Three Questions.

The first question, “Why is the prayer of the righteous not answered?” Go to verse 2, “How long, O LORD, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, ‘Violence! Yet You do not save.’”

The people of Judah, not seeing immediate severe judgment from God on their sin, became indifferent to His holy and righteous demands. So they continued and, without recognizing it, moved into the fast lane on the road to destruction. King Solomon wrote,

“Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil” (Ecclesiastes 8:11).

Habakkuk had his eyes wide open. He knew what was right and was wrong. He knew and was sensitive to God’s holiness, righteousness and sovereign power. And so the pervasive sin, wickedness of the people of Judah deeply troubled and pained him.

He took all this to God. It shows his confidence, his faith in God. It also is an example of bringing anything and everything to God. Nothing is too small or too big for God.

But... *but*... he did not hear or see a response from God. You and I can identify with this. There have been times when we have neither heard nor seen the answer we have sought from God. There have been situations, conditions, people that we have taken to God time after time, day after day, week after week, and even year after year, and we have not seen a clear moving of God.

Habakkuk told God,

- “How long will I have to keep on calling to You for help with no sign of help on the horizon?”
- “How much longer will I have to see sin flourishing all around among Your people?”
- “How does this fit in with Your holiness and sovereign power?”
- “Why haven’t You swept in with revival or judgment?”

We have been there. You may be there now with respect to a number of different things—not exactly the same things as Habakkuk, but the same experience. Like Habakkuk we know we aren’t perfect, but we have been trusting God, calling out to Him, trying to think, speak and act in ways which please and honor Him, *but* we have not heard nor seen God in these things.

- “Will God ever answer? Will He ever do this?”
- “God, why don’t You answer?”

Then, the next question, “Why does God allow sin to dominate everywhere?”

“I cry out to You, ‘Violence!’ Yet You do not save. Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises.” (2b-3)

Let’s do a brief survey of the six words Habakkuk used for the sin that was running rampant in Judah.

- Violence.

It has the basic ideas of wrong, to do violence or to treat violently. It refers to sinful, malicious wickedness toward others, and it was everywhere Habakkuk looked.

- Iniquity.

The original concept of this word was trouble, which then went on to wickedness. It pictures planning and carrying out deception. Habakkuk was tired of seeing people deceiving each other, causing trouble for each other.

- Wickedness.

This word first pointed to, interestingly, the unfulfilling or bad aspects of work, then to being worthless, to not meeting God’s standards and, so, being wicked. It is a very broad term covering all kinds of sinful behavior.

- Destruction.

To create havoc, ruin, destroy. With all the violence, iniquity and wickedness, you could not escape having havoc and ruin.

- Strife.

Meaning to argue, be involved in controversies. And the last term takes this on further...

- Contention.

Pictured here are ongoing arguments, quarrelling.

Everywhere Habakkuk looked he saw all kinds of evil. “Why God? Why is sin dominating everywhere?” You may have the same question as you read the newspaper, watch the news on television, or observe people day to day.

And then, the final question, “Why does God allow justice to take a beating?” Go to verse 4. “Therefore the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted.”

Because of the rampant, pervasive sinfulness the law was being ignored. The word *ignored*, or *paralyzed* in some versions, has the idea of becoming numb and, so then, useless. Just as your hands and feet become numb and useless if you go out a -30° day without bundling up, so the operation of the law in daily life—not just in a formal, judicial sense—had become numb, was useless; it was being ignored. Sin was so pervasive that the wicked not only outnumbered the righteous, but they engulfed or surrounded them.

As a result, Habakkuk cries out, “Justice is never upheld” but “comes out perverted!” Wrong is declared right and right is declared wrong. It was the normal pattern. A pattern we might see in our world, at least at times. Habakkuk asked, “God, why do You allow justice to take a beating?”

These are Habakkuk’s initial three questions:

- Why is the prayer of the righteous not answered?
- Why does God allow sin to dominate everywhere?
- Why does God allow justice to take a beating?

And...this is where we are stopping today, with the questions. We will look at God’s answers next week. But, while we won’t see God’s reply today, there are a number of important lessons to learn and live from what we have seen. I’ve selected three.

Three Lessons.

The first lesson is to live with your eyes wide open. First, this means that we, like Habakkuk, should clearly know what is right and what is wrong. For quite some time now our culture has not liked and even opposed right/wrong thinking. There is the relativism

that says any person's, or culture's or religion's ideas are as valid as any others'. As well, we are told, situations and circumstances are unique. So, what may be morally right for me in one situation may not be in another.

Then there are those who tell us that no one can ever know anything with certainty, that it is arrogant to say you know *the truth*. For them, as it has been said, "truth is not absolute, but obsolete" [Hayes Wicker].

Yes, there are difficult questions and decisions. Yes, there are some gray areas. Yes, there is freedom in areas that God has indicated and where He has not spoken, but the kind of thinking dominating today makes everything a sea and sky, a world of gray.

God has spoken and, as Francis Schaeffer wrote, "He has not stuttered." His authoritative, universal and timeless truth is not an invention of the modern, rational age, but is eternal and He has spoken it to us from the very beginning of creation.

To live with our eyes wide open, to see God, our world and ourselves clearly, to put the pieces together, we must know what is right and what is wrong.

Then, living with our eyes wide open also means we, like Habakkuk, must be sensitive to God's holiness, righteousness and sovereign power. Coupled with that, the pervasive sin and wickedness of our world should trouble and pain us.

We can close our eyes and become insensitive, dull to God's holy and righteous demands and sovereignty over every area and detail of our lives and world. We can try to insulate ourselves in our homes and church from the terrible things that go on in our world, and become dull, insensitive to problems and needs all around us.

Habakkuk teaches us that we must live with our eyes wide open.

The second lesson is to go to God, keep going to God with all your questions. Habakkuk, like the Psalmists and Job before him, took all his questions to God. He did not stop taking things to God when he did not hear or see an answer.

He was not a fatalist, talking to God about his questions and then sitting back passively and saying "What will be will be." He kept thinking about them, exploring them. He kept asking God to act in accordance with His character and promises. He went through the pain and even desperation of waiting, and waiting, and waiting.

This was tough for him. It is tough for us. That is one reason why we need to keep growing in knowing God personally and from His word. As well, it is good to remember, even record how God has been with us and brought us through times of deep questions and problems. This will reassure us in the tough times that God never will leave or forsake us. It will reassure us of God's faithfulness, love and power to us in everything we face.

Go to God, keep going to God with all your questions.

The third lesson we should learn and live is that truth about and from God must move from being facts in our minds on through the feelings of our experience to be complete.

Sometimes we talk about *heart* and *head* people. While these are oversimplifications, we recognize some people tend to lead with their feelings or emotions and others with their thinking. Of course, we all have both aspects, and the balance varies.

One of the things I have learned and relearned from the Bible and life is that when we come to difficult questions and experiences, no matter what our initial responses may be, we must start the process of understanding and working through them with a solid foundation of facts.

- What does the Bible say?
- What does it tell us about God and His character?
- What does the Bible teach us about this?
- What are we to do and not to do?
- What has God promised us?

Without this solid base, we can easily get an inaccurate view of God, the situation, what He is doing or not doing, and ourselves.

For example, Habakkuk could have looked at the sinfulness all around Him and concluded that:

- It was beyond God's control, that God couldn't do anything about it. This is the view of some liberal Jewish thinking today that God is nice and would like to help us, but He can't.
- Or, Habakkuk could have concluded that God had written the people of Israel off once and for all. That God would never again be with them.

The first does not square with God's nature revealed in the Bible, and the second does not line up with His promises to Israel in the Bible.

But, as we see in Habakkuk, you can't simply know the facts of God's truth to work through tough questions and situations, even if you know them forward, backward and sideways. The facts must move on through the feelings of our experience to be complete—to *be real* to us, to build faith and hope, to release God's power.

While working God's truth through our feelings about our questions and problems can be a long and difficult process, it is a required process in order to hear from God, to grow in faith and faithfulness by His strength.

There are other lessons here, but learn and live these:

- Live with your eyes wide open.
- Go to God, keep going to God with all your questions.
- Truth about God and from God must move from being facts in our minds on through the feelings of our experience to be complete.

Conclusion.

As you go to God now, thank Him that He is the eternal, almighty, loving, compassionate God who never changes. Tell God that above everything and everyone else in your world, He is the One you love and need. Ask Him to help you learn and live the lessons we looked at this morning.

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