

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOD DOING?

Hab 1:1-2:20

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The ways of the world weary me. War looms on the horizon, and words of accusation, animosity, and aggression fill the air. I wonder, “What is God’s will in all of this?” “Why is He seemingly not hearing my prayers?” “For heaven’s sake, what in the world *is* God doing?” Baffled and bothered, I look to Habakkuk, the prophet who shares the hurt of my heart.¹

A startled, tormented man is Habakkuk. He is distressed at the fact that violence prevails and he is dismayed by the thought that God tolerates evil. He pleads, “Why?” And he prays, “How long?” His pleading and praying do not go unanswered; however, the answer given to him is not the comfort of an explanation. On the contrary, the voice of God adds amazement to agony, for God’s design appears to be—in the words of Winston Churchill (A.D. 1874-1965)—“a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” It is Habakkuk himself who attempts to unravel the mystery and to solve the riddle. He offers this assessment: the nations are guilty; punishment must follow guilt; and even wicked nations can be the instruments of God’s justice.

Habakkuk is not a typical prophet, for he declares his complaint to God rather than declaring God’s complaint to the people. Instead of calling Israel to account for straying from the covenant, Habakkuk calls God to account because His actions do not seem to correspond to the covenant.

Habakkuk was employed in the Jerusalem temple as a prophet who composed oracles and songs for the service of worship that took place there. He worked and wrote during the time when the great Chaldean king, Nebuchadnezzar, was threatening the freedom of Judah, sometime near 600 B.C. In a time of turmoil, terror, and tragedy, Habakkuk asks God how much longer injustice and violence will triumph. God responds that He will use

¹“Habakkuk is above all else a book about the purposes of God and about the realization of his will for

the Chaldeans—the Babylonians—as His instrument of judgment on the perpetrators of injustice and violence in Judah. But God’s answer raises even more questions for Habakkuk. Yes, the chosen people are evil, but the Babylonians are even worse! How can a good God use a wicked nation to judge His wayward people? To Habakkuk, the “cure” of a Babylonian invasion is worse than the “illness” of Judean sin. God again responds: the foreign nation used as an instrument of judgment will itself be judged, while in Judah the righteous remnant will survive through their steadfast faith.

We begin, then, with Habakkuk’s opening questions in which he suggests that God does not seem to answer prayer, and that God does not seem to control human evil.

^{1:1}The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

²O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?

³Why do you make me see wrong-doing
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

⁴So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.
(Hab 1:1-4, NRSV).

God responds:

^{1:5}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.

⁶For I am rousing the Chaldeans [Babylonians],²
that fierce and impetuous nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth
to seize dwellings not their own.

⁷Dread and fearsome are they;

his world.” Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1986), 31.

²“Chaldeans” refers to the tribes in southern Babylon who took control of the state in 627 B.C. and engineered its return to strength and freedom from Assyrian control. The newly powerful Babylon sacked and destroyed the great cities of Asshur (614 B.C.) and Nineveh (612 B.C.), and eventually took on the Egyptians in conflict at the Battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.). The Book of Habakkuk probably dates from the reign of the Judean king Jehoiakim II (609-598 B.C.). Nebuchadnezzar subjugated Jerusalem in 597 B.C. and eventually destroyed the city in 587/586 B.C.

their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.
⁸Their horses are swifter than leopards,
 more menacing than wolves at dusk;
 their horses charge.
 Their horsemen come from far away;
 they fly like an eagle swift to devour.
⁹ They all come for violence,
 with faces pressing forward;
 they gather captives like sand.
¹⁰ At kings they scoff,
 and of rulers they make sport.
 They laugh at every fortress,
 and heap up earth to take it.
¹¹ Then they sweep by like the wind;
 they transgress and become guilty;
 their own might is their god!
 (Hab 1:5-11, NRSV).

As unsettling and unexpected as this answer may be, the fact is God *does* respond to the prophet's prayer. Habakkuk is wrong in thinking God is not at work. God *is* in action, if only Habakkuk had the eyes to perceive it. The sword of Babylon will cut down all in its path. And swinging the sword—using it as an instrument of judgment—is God, the Lord over all nations and history. There are lessons here for us: (1) If God answers prayer in a way that appears initially incomprehensible, perhaps the question was inadequately expressed in the first place. (2) Furthermore, the turmoil, terror, and tragedy in our world may not be evidence of God's absence; instead, it may be the witness to His presence in judgment as He pursues His purpose.

Habakkuk is deeply disturbed by the divine response.³ While he understands the substance of God's words, he cannot square it with how he thinks God ought to act. It is as if he objects, "God, don't You know who You are? How can You do such a thing?" We continue to read:

^{1:12} Are you not from of old,
 O LORD my God, my Holy One?
 You shall not die.
 O LORD, you have marked them for judgment;

³The prophet's shock makes sense only if the "wicked" of 1:4 are a group within Judah and the "wicked" of 1:13 are the Babylonian invaders sent by God to punish the wicked of Judah. The "righteous" of 1:4 are those within Judah who are faithful, whereas in 1:13 the "righteous" are Judah considered as a whole in contrast to the much more evil Babylonians.

and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.
¹³Your 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?
¹⁴You have made people like the fish of the sea,
 like crawling things that have no ruler.
¹⁵ The enemy brings all of them up with a hook;
 he drags them out with his net,
 he gathers them in his seine;
 so he rejoices and exults.
¹⁶Therefore he sacrifices to his net
 and makes offerings to his seine;
 for by them his portion is lavish,
 and his food is rich.
¹⁷ Is he then to keep on emptying his net,
 and destroying nations without mercy?
^{2:1}I will stand at my watchpost,
 and station myself on the rampart;
 I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
 and what he will answer concerning my complaint.
 (Hab 1:12-2:1, NRSV).

Habakkuk is almost at the point of saying, “Better not to be judged, than to be judged by a people more evil than we are!” But Habakkuk is losing his sense of justice. If a murderer is condemned to death, the justice of his execution does not depend upon the moral integrity of the hangman! The evil of the executioner is a separate issue that requires its own judgment.

Habakkuk raises the question as to God’s very nature, and then he provides his own answer, drawing on the ancient hymns and traditions of the Hebrew faith. Faith . . . faith . . . Habakkuk’s crisis of faith is caused by his faith. His faith raises the questions he seeks to answer by his faith. He is weary with the world as it is. “What is this world coming to?” is his question and the question of every faithful soul like him. His questions do *not* rise out of doubt, but out of his faith in God.

The Broadway version of the story of Job states the dilemma of faith this way:

If God is God He is not good
If God is good He is not God.⁴

If God is God, if He is all-powerful, how can there be anything in the world that is not the result of His will? If God is good, how can there be evil in the world? Evil *is* real, and very few would deny it.⁵ *How then can we reconcile our faith in an all-powerful, all-good God with the reality of evil in a world created and controlled by Him?*

I do not intend to engage in philosophical speculation in this sermon, although there is certainly a time and place for such. What I want us to see is what Habakkuk needed to see; namely, the fact that I view the world through eyes of faith is the very cause of my dilemma. If I did *not* believe that God *is* God and that He *is* good, I would not have a problem. It is my belief in God that creates my bewilderment with the world. So, will I trust my eyes of faith or my eyes of sight? In this time of turmoil, terror, and tragedy, will I trust in the God I say I believe in? *Will I be faithful when faith is all I have to face the facts?*

In the light of Habakkuk's protest as to how a holy God can use a pagan people to punish God's people, the Lord proclaims the pending destruction of Babylon. He does so through a vision that includes five songs that taunt or deride the Chaldeans. Verses 5-20 of chapter 2 reinforce the revelation of verses 2-4. Each of the five "woes" indicates that the wicked one is doomed, that the instrument of God's judgment will eventually become the object of God's judgment; God's justice will be done. Habakkuk is beginning to perceive a moral order in the course of human history. The tyranny of human empires may seem to succeed in the short run; but in the long run, it becomes clear that all human tyranny has within it the seeds of its own destruction.

We come now, along with Habakkuk, to the answer we have anxiously awaited:

^{2:2}Then the LORD answered me and said:

Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.

³For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.

⁴Nickles, in the Prologue to *J. B., A Play in Verse*, by A. MacLeish (Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

⁵"If God is good and God is all, therefore all is good and evil does not really exist." So reasoned Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. Quoted by Donald E. Gowan, *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk* (John Knox Press, 1976), 32-33.

If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.
⁴Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.
(Hab 2:2-4, NRSV).

God's answer provides assurance, but it is no solution to the riddle of how God governs His world to accomplish His will. Although the end has not yet come, God assures Habakkuk and us that the waiting *will* come to an end; that we do not wait in vain. And then God tells us how we can get through this time of waiting. *The righteous are those who remain faithful to their God during the times when faith doesn't make sense.* When it does not seem reasonable to believe in a good God, when God's justice and mercy are *not* evident to all, when the righteous do *not* get rewarded for their goodness—precisely then, as in no other time, do they prove their righteousness by continuing to be faithful. God's answer puts a great deal on our shoulders. We, like Habakkuk, have come to God for help and He turns it back on us saying, "What are *you* going to do now?"

God's time is not man's time. Habakkuk knows that God ought to act in response to evil, and in this he is right; he thinks he knows *when* God ought to act, and in this he is wrong. He must learn the difficult lesson of waiting in patience.

God's answer is not a rational explanation; it is a relational exhortation. It is not an intellectual solution; it is an existential statement. We are not told why, what, or when; rather, we are told how to live in the world as it is—"the righteous live by their faith." In our next lesson, we will explore the nature of such faithfulness.

Let's be honest—God's answer is not exactly what we want. We would prefer the comfort of an explanation. We say we believe God is just and good and in control, but yet the world seems out of control and we come to Him asking, "Why?" His response is that we live by faith and not by sight. *We are not wrong to ask the questions; they are prompted by faith, but the crisis is whether faith can continue when what we see does not support what we believe.* God's answer can only be lived, but it can only be lived if it is believed.

But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him! (Hab 2:20, NRSV).⁶

Habakkuk is a book for all faithful people, of whatever time, who find themselves living “between the times”—in the time between the revelation of the promises of God and the realization of those promises.

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) wrote: “Faith is to believe, on the word of God, what we do not see, and its reward is to see and enjoy what we believe.” The Apostle Paul penned: “We walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). Therefore, since I do not *now* see what I believe, I will choose to believe until some day I shall see—because “*the righteous live by their faith.*” To each of us, God asks, “So, what are *you* going to do?”

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⁶Note the context of this statement. It is so much more than simply a song to be sung at the start of worship service to urge people to sit down and shut up.

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