

The Problem of Evil and the Plan of God

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My wife and I have recently gotten into the show the Amazing Race. It's fascinating to watch people in all these foreign countries across the globe, where English is not a first language, to watch them try and navigate without google maps. They let the contestants have smartphones. They go old school with paper maps. Crazy to think there was a time where we actually got places without our phones.

Imagine trying to navigate a foreign country, with only a map and a compass. A country that speaks a different language, where the traffic signs are different and unintelligent, where the laws of the road are all different and confusing, and even if you wanted to ask someone for help you'd struggle to communicate and get any assistance. You have an idea of the general area you need to be in, but not the faintest of how to get there.

That's kind of like our text this morning. We're starting a short series in the minor prophet of Habakkuk, and in the short book, we are going to read a dialogue between Habakkuk and God. And Habakkuk is dismayed. He knows, generally, where he needs to be. But he has no idea how to get there. It's a bit like he's wandering around in a dark room with a blindfold on. The problem he's dealing with is that of evil and injustice. As soon as I said that, undoubtedly, many of us probably feel like we're in the room with him. Not sure how to answer and deal with injustice in a world ruled by a just and sovereign God.

God calls his people to faith, even when we can't see God's purposes in an evil and unjust world. It is a nearly timeless philosophical and religious problem, that of injustice. At the outset, I want you to know, I don't expect to solve the problem this morning. Because even when the problem is addressed in scripture, there is a measure of mystery to our finite rational minds. The way I like to see it, it's a problem we started in the garden, Adam as representative of the human race. But it's a problem we cannot solve. And a problem that reaches much deeper, as the text will show, than simply intellectual and rational wrestling. **1) The Problem of Evil, 2) The Purposes of God, 3) The Faith of the Righteous.**

The Problem of Evil

We are dropping into a point in history. A point in the history of God's people in Israel. If we were to take a timeline of the history of Israel, and then just drop in at any point, there are usually two contexts we would find ourselves in: a faithful and thriving people, or a rebellious and suffering people. Habakkuk drops up into the latter. Israel is in a period of rebellion and injustice.

The reason we can make this simple two context dichotomy is from Deuteronomy 28. Which lays out in the first part what obedient faithfulness looks like, and the flourishing it leads to. And in the second part, what rebellious disobedience looks like, and the destruction and devastation that leads to. Broadly, Israel is in a time of injustice and rebellion. And yet, there is still within God's people a righteous remnant. Habakkuk himself is part of that righteous remnant, seeking to faithfully obey and worship the Lord, follow his law, and love their neighbors with as the Lord has commanded his people.

Habakkuk 1:1-4. There is rampant idolatry and injustice amongst God's people, and Habakkuk brings concern to the Lord. Idolatry is the people's worshiping and reverence for God's other than the true God of Israel. At this time, idolatry is certainly a problem, but Habakkuk's objection is more to the issue of injustice. That is the oppression of weak, or marginalized, or those on the fringes of society, by the strong and the powerful.

The powerful and wealthy amongst God's people are swallowing up the good and obedience people (4). There is oppression of the poor, there is violence and conflict. There is exploitation of finances and labor. You name the injustice, and it probably was an issue. In the eyes of the powerful, the common man was simply a tool to be used to further their own gain. Henry Ford is famously attributed with saying, "Why is it every time I ask for a pair of hands, they come with a brain attached?" Why give me a person when I need a tool?!

This very much captures the environment in Israel during Habakkuk's time. And Habakkuk is concerned, rightly so! And he brings his concerns to the Lord. And they are same kinds of questions we find ourselves asking! Where are you God? Do you not see the injustice? Why do you do nothing? How long must I cry out to you and receive nothing?! Why do you allow your law to be perverted and your name blasphemed? He questions God.

There is a very real and oppressive force weighing down the people of God, and Habakkuk asks, 'Why, my God, why!?' "Are you going to do anything about this?!" An objection not much unlike our own feelings. An objection many, if not all of us have, at one time or another, brought ourselves, sometime to the Lord, often to others. While Israel and ancient world can seem so far away, their problems do not.

If you look throughout the history of the church, you see patterns of injustice and misappropriation of authority all over the place. The crusades come to mind, where power and cultural influence were more important than the fruit of the Spirit. More important than Jesus' instruction about how NC believers are to treat their enemies.

There was rampant corruption and greed in the church at the dawn of the Reformation with Martin Luther. Pastors, elders, bishops and even popes were "selling" grace and forgiveness for actual gold. Church leaders were more concerned with nationalism, ethnic identity, and political influence than they were the word of God, the care of his people, and evangelizing the unbeliever. There are these same issues at almost any point in the history of the church. We have a lot of those same problems in the Western church today, in some form or another.

I want to first point out, that Habakkuk's response, our response, of disgust, to injustice, is appropriate. Prov 21:3, Nahum 3:1. God hates injustice and evil, and so should his people. Treating people in a way that dehumanizes them, and robs them of their image bearing status in this earth, is an act worthy of indignation and outrage.

Further, this totally goes outside the bounds of the commands and patterns that God calls his people to. The two greatest commands, love God and love your neighbor. Unjust treatment of others not only sins against the oppressed, but it is sin against a holy God. We are right to be outraged when we look at the people of God appropriating their influence and power, and using their religion as a tool for their own ends, and abusing those that they can.

We have to be careful when drawing straight lines from Israel in the OT, to the New Covenant church. And something we cannot do, is draw straight lines from Israel as the people and nation

of God, to our country as a nation of God. We can't do that. First, Paul tells us, god's people are no longer an ethnic, physical people, but a spiritual one. Bound by the gospel, not by borders. Which means there is no more a chosen nation, but a chosen people, from every tribe, tongue and land. It can certainly be a temptation, if you're enjoy history, culture and political involvement to read ourselves into the OT like that. But, gloriously, because of the gospel of Jesus, we just can't.

But we can find appropriately close analogous situations today looking inside of the church. If you follow the news in the last decade or so, you'll be familiar with abuse inside the church. There's been physical, spiritual, emotional abuse inside the church, perpetrated by those with power. And some churches and pastors have even hid it, lest it damage their reputation and influence. This is evil and injustice. Fortunately, justice, at least in part, can be served still, when it is discovered.

Another example, you may be familiar with the prosperity gospel. It's a belief that has co-opted scripture and the label Christian. It preaches that positive thinking, the power of faith, and donating large sums of money to the church will lead to material, emotional, and spiritual prosperity. It really is no gospel at all, it is not good news, except to the charlatans that preach it.

Using the word of God, using message of the gospel, using the church, or the name of Jesus as a tool for selfish and greedy ends, is worthy of outrage. Which, begs the question, what do you do with that outrage? Habakkuk, on behalf of the righteous in Israel, went to the Lord. He went to the Lord with his struggles and objections. He didn't wallow in it or allow it to consume him without bringing it to God and his word. And the Lord answered.

The Purposes of God

God begins, by setting up his answer. Adding a qualifier while answering the Habakkuk's questions about injustice. **Hab 1:5.** Funny enough, God's answer to Habakkuk's objection, begins by answering the heart of his questions: "I am doing a work." God says, I am not idle. I am not ignoring you. I am not indifferent to the struggles of the righteous. I am doing a work.

There is simplicity here for Habakkuk and for us. God is never idle. God is never not working. As John Piper has said, God does not drive and ambulance. He is never surprised at what goes on, on the earth. He remains God. He remains ruling and reigning over the heavens and earth. He remains sovereign.

He goes on to tell Habakkuk he's not going to like the answer. If Habakkuk had simply heard it, God tells him he wouldn't have believed it. In other words, God's response to the problem of evil in Israel, is an unbelievable one. One that requires that Habakkuk see for himself. Fortunately, looking back at verse 1, we are inside of an oracle that Habakkuk is receiving. He is *seeing* all of this. This is God telling Habakkuk to settle in. Prepare yourself. You are not gonna like what you're about to hear.

Hab 1:6. God tells Habakkuk that he is raising up a powerful and mighty nation. An angry and impetuous one, the Chaldeans. We know this side of the text, in history, this was the Babylonians.

One of the reasons that these prophets in the OT don't need to be terrifying for us to read, is most of what is prophesied in them, has come to fruition already. Everything we read today has come to pass. Unambiguously it has come to pass. At a point history, Babylon will go on to

conquer Assyria, the reigning global superpower, and replaced them. They then went about and conquered the surrounding nations, enslaving and subjugating the people of those nations, Israel included.

This is what the Bible means when it talks about exile. When God's people are taken out of the land that God promised to them and apportioned for them, to other nations and kingdoms to serve pagan and unbelieving rulers. When Babylon conquered the kingdom of Judah, all of God's people are said to be in exile. You can read about these specific events in the books of Daniel and Jeremiah.

I bring this up to help dispel any mysticism and fear you may have as you read these sometimes confusing poetic works of the prophets. You say the word prophecy and it can be terrifying. What comes to mind may be white boards with arrows going in every which direction, talking about revelation, the second coming and the significance of the recent solar eclipse. That's usually not a good interpretation of the OT prophets. Today we're in a real, historical event that already took place.

God is raising up Babylon, they were a terrifyingly real nation, with terrifyingly real power, anger and violent. Power that could only be properly expressed poetically through metaphor and imagery. **Hab 1:7-11.**

God is raising up Babylon to be the tool of judgement upon the people of Israel for their rejection and rebellion against God. With the hunger of a wolf, with the swiftness of an eagle, with the speed of leopards, Babylon will sweep across the globe, conquering, enslaving, and killing. Included in their list of victims, as a tool of judgement, are the people of Israel.

Makes more sense why God prepared Habakkuk for this answer. Because how is that gonna make sense? We already can intuit the response that Habakkuk will have. This response by God does not satisfy Habakkuk. It does not satisfy his weary and broken spirit. And so, we return again, to the problem of evil, this time from the perspective of a tool in hands of a sovereign God. **Hab 1:12-17.**

Habakkuk has similar, if not the same, questions as before. He looks out, in this oracle, at might of Babylon, and he is seeing how they use and abuse the weak. He sees how they take captive and enslave others, how they perpetrate violence on the innocent, how they have no regard for the God of Israel, the true God of gods. And he wonders to God, "why?" **Hab 1:13.**

How could God use a nation even more depraved than Israel to bring punishment and judgement upon them? If injustice is what is being punished, why use an even more unjust nation to remedy it? Rather than the evil coming from amongst the people of God, the problem of evil arises around them. More than that, *God* is raising this oppressive, angry, and violent people. The God of Jacob, of Abraham, the God of David and Moses, is working to bring to power to a nation with zero regard for the true God. Habakkuk cannot make sense of it.

I referenced Deuteronomy 28 at the beginning of the sermon, I want to turn there really quickly. This is a description of the curses, that is the consequences, should Israel abandon their God and covenant, and pursue other gods and perpetuate injustice: **Deut 28:45, 49-50.**

Sound at all familiar?! I bring this up, to point out, that this unbelievable response from God, this response that Habakkuk would scarcely believe lest he see it himself, shouldn't have been much of a surprise. God bringing the curse of judgement upon his people, in this manner, in

many ways, should be expected! The people of God have brought this upon themselves by breaking their covenant with the Lord. And what is about to happen to them is exactly what God told them would happen should they forsake their God.

Yet Habakkuk remains confused, as would the rest of the righteous in Israel. Hab 1:13 he raises the question of how God could use an even more depraved people to judge his own. And in verse 17 he asks God if Babylon will ever see this kind of judgement. He concludes his questioning of the God of universe with a narration, **Hab 2:1**. He remains unsatisfied. He remains confused. He remains unsettled in his spirit at the plans and purposes of the Lord.

The Faith of the Righteous

God's plans demand the faith of his people, as the Lord himself will point out. **Hab 2:2-3**. This is not yet God's response to Habakkuk's second objection, but God again, like earlier, preparing Habakkuk for the answer. This time, he tells him to write it down, and make it plain on tablets of stone. This oracle is not only for the benefit of Habakkuk, but for all of God's people. And to be made plain, so even the densest in Israel can understand. No one will be without excuse. And it's written on stone, to be recorded and remembered. It will be a response that demands action, "so that he may run" those who read it.

And yet, as important as the response is, it will require patience. Patience that waits for fulfillment. It is surely going to come to pass, everything the Lord says will come to pass. But even when it seems as if God is idle in the face of injustice, even if it seems as if the word of the Lord has evaporated in the presence of a world that rejects him, it will surely come.

What is this vital response? **Hab 2:4**. A verse quoted several times in the NT. A verse etched into the minds and hearts of Christians throughout history. A verse Paul uses as a sort of theme verse for the entire letter to the Romans.

There is a contrast made here. There is the 'righteous' and the 'not upright' or the unrighteous. The righteous live 'by faith' or faithfulness. And the unrighteous are 'puffed up,' that is they live by their rules. Hab 1:11, 16. In Babylon, their might is their own God. They live by their strength, they live by their violence and power. They live by bloodshed and how many nations and peoples they can enslave.

But it was not only Babylon who were puffed up. What did we see at the outset of Habakkuk's oracle? An unrighteous Israel. An Israel that had forsaken the law and their God. An Israel where the unrighteous would swallow up the righteous. These vital words were not only to answer the second objection of Habakkuk, but the first as well.

What did this answer mean to Habakkuk and the faithful who received this record? Stay the course. Remain faithful to the promise and covenant that God had made with them. God is working, God has not forgotten them. Even though they are about to become an exiled people, and all will seem even worse, there is a divine method to what seems to them like madness. The God who is above the earth, above all the conflict and strife and injustice, is working to bring about his glorious justice. There is a plan for justice.

And a glorious justice it will be! For God will raise up a nation even mightier than Babylon, that will stretch to the edges of the known earth, that will reign for a thousand years. Who will also oppress the people of God. And they will bring down the cruelest of their injustices upon the most righteous and obedient inside of Israel. The incarnate Son of God will suffer agonies at the

hands of lawless men. An injustice that will dwarf even the worst cruelties of Babylon. And God will use it. God will use that injustice to bring peace to souls of not only the ethnic people of Israel, but will fulfill the covenant promise to Abraham, and bring salvation to every tribe, tongue, and people. The prosperity of Babylon is a mere pebble in the ultimate plan of the Lord to bring redemption to his people.

I want to bring up a couple of points of application from our text this morning. Points of specific application for us, as we filter the historical moment, and Habakkuk's interaction with God, through a NC lens. That is the lens of the gospel.

1) Trust the loving purposes of the Lord. The question most of us have undoubtedly heard, or even asked ourselves: How can an all-powerful and loving God, allow evil and injustice to prosper? The objection follows, he cannot be both! Either he is all-loving, and can't do anything about the evil in the world. Meaning he isn't all powerful. Or he is all-powerful, but not loving. For if he were all loving surely he would do something about the evil in the world.

Church we need not doubt the love of God on account of the presence and prevalence of evil and injustice. For we have more than Habakkuk or the righteous remnant of Israel. Dare I say we have less a burden of faith, than they. For the messiah, the Christ, Jesus has already come. He has done that which they longed for. Christ suffered the greeted injustice.

If oppression and evil are reason enough to challenge the love of a sovereign God, then surely God could not have loved his only Son? If that objection were true, then the historical death and sufferings of Christ would not be true. But of all the realities that Christians believe, that is not a matter of faith! It is not only the Bible that records the brutal sufferings and death of Jesus, be the histories of Josephus, the Jewish historian, and Tacitus, the Roman historian. We may have many questions about the nature of evil, the prosperity of those who use and abuse others, but may we rest and remember that regardless of our struggles to reconcile that reality, we can know that God loves his people. And none of the sufferings we experience wander outside the boundaries of his sovereign rule.

2) Don't let doubt discourage you. So many of us struggle with doubt. Whether that doubt be intellectual wrestling with ideas and doctrines that we find difficult to make sense of, or it be circumstances like our text where we wrestle in soul and heart with the prevalence and prosperity of wickedness and evil. The hardest thing about doubt is that it makes us feel like sub-Christian. Like there is something wrong with us. Like we're somehow broken and extra weak. Friends, doubt puts us in good company.

Doubt rises inside of us from an inability to reconcile what we experience in life, namely evil and suffering, with what we know to be true from scripture, namely a good and powerful God. There is a difference in posture.

Habakkuk describes the prayers and doubts we all have. Of course, the righteous remnant would find it difficult to trust truly trust, in every moment, the promises of God! But even in his doubt, throughout the text we read today, he assumes a posture of humility and worship. He describes God as eternal (12), he acknowledged God's rule over the political conflicts (12), he calls God "Rock" (12), he calls the Lord Holy (12, 13), he acknowledges God as creator (14). And when he has voiced his objections, he waits patiently on the Lord for an answer (2:1).

Doubt may question God. It may even argue with God, for even after receiving an answer, Habakkuk raises another objection. But unbelief abandons the Lord and his promises. It rejects the answers of the Lord and refuses to accept him as ruler, sovereign, and king. Doubt is the inevitable consequence of broken hearts and broken minds. If you aren't experiencing it now, or can never point to a time when you have, then prepare yourself with this text. Surely it will, at some point arrive at the front porch of your faith.

Church, bring your doubts to the Lord. Seek his wisdom, his love, his purposes, his promises, seek him in his word. Wrestle faithfully with doubt. Know, with the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not yet seen, that the plan of the Lord is good. That there is divine method when all we can see is madness. For while we yet await consummation of the kingdom of God and the glorious return of Christ, we can now taste the glories of gospel of Jesus.