

The Weight of Waiting

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[0:00] So we are in Habakkuk chapter 1, and we're going to start at verse 1, which is a great place to start, and we're going to read on down through verse number 11. Kara, thank you for serving us today.

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear, or cry to you, violence, and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?

Destruction and violence are before me, strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted.

Look among the nations, and see, wonder, and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own.

They are dreaded and fearsome. Their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves. Their horsemen press loudly on. Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle, swift to devour.

[1:18] They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, so they pile up earth and take it.

Then they sweep by like wind and go on, guilty men whose might is in their God. Father, we are grateful to receive your word.

Thank you for preserving this portion of scripture for us. Thank you for Habakkuk. And thank you that he was inspired by your spirit to record these words so that we could have them thousands of years later, and so that we could be blessed and encouraged and built up in our faith as we spend time in this book.

Please help us as we continue now. In the name of our Savior, the Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen. There are moments in life when the most honest thing you can say to God is a question.

You believe that God is good. You believe that God is powerful.

[2:44] And then you look at the world and the brokenness and the wickedness in it, and you cry out, God, why don't you do something?

Most of the prophetic books in scripture tell us what God thinks about his people.

But Habakkuk is so interesting. It tells us what one of God's people thinks about God. This book is uncomfortable, not because it lacks faith, but because it refuses to fake it.

Habakkuk does not speak first for God. He first speaks to God. And what he says, what he asks, is shockingly honest.

I think that Habakkuk asks questions many of us have thought, but wouldn't dare to say out loud. And instead of correcting him, God responds to his questions.

[3 : 59] This makes Habakkuk unique among the prophets. It does not begin with, thus says the Lord, or the word of the Lord came to me, Habakkuk. It doesn't begin that way.

Look at verse 1. The oracle that Habakkuk, the prophet, saw. Now, in our English translations, this verse 1 seems redundant.

It almost seems unnecessary. But for the original hearers, there are three words in this first verse that would have been loaded with meaning. The first verse, the first word is prophet.

Prophet. Habakkuk is not sharing his thoughts. This is not his social commentary on the world. These are not his personal reflections.

He is called, set apart by God, to deliver a message on his behalf. He is a prophet.

[5 : 04] The second word is saw. We almost missed this one. What follows in this book is not something that Habakkuk just thought or felt.

The word suggests perception. Perhaps this was even a vision that Habakkuk had. Finally, the word oracle.

The Christian Standard Bible translates it pronouncement. New International Version says the prophecy. The Hebrew word underneath how it's translated for us is more tangible.

It means something that is lifted up. Something carried. A burden. Think about packing up all of your Christmas decorations into the big 30-gallon bins and then carrying those bins back out into storage.

That's the word underneath the word oracle or prophecy or pronouncement. You might also think of slinging a backpack over your shoulder.

[6 : 15] Carrying it a ways. This is not a vague sense that something just feels off. Habakkuk carries this message like a burden.

Because the political, spiritual, and moral life of his world is like a car on ice sliding towards a busy intersection with no way to stop.

Habakkuk will summarize for us what he sees, what his world is like. He will summarize it in the form of poetry, which is why the book of Habakkuk can be a little challenging for us.

But the prophet Jeremiah states explicitly what Habakkuk summarizes into poetry. The situation in the southern kingdom of Judah was not a sudden moral collapse.

In Jeremiah chapter 7, the Lord says that his people have rebelled ever since I delivered you from Egypt. He says, you've been rebelling since then.

[7 : 30] You've always rebelled against me. And in chapter 6, we learn that this corruption in Judah is systemic.

From the least all the way to the greatest. No one is guiltless. Like a sharp prosecuting attorney, Jeremiah stacks up the charges against Judah.

He exposes corrupt leadership. Priests who rule by their own authority. Prophets who no longer delight in the word of God.

Kings who hire workers to build their homes and then refuse to pay them wages. Leaders who lie about the state of things in the world.

He also exposes corrupt worship. Rampant idolatry. People who are just going through the motions.

[8 : 30] The temple is treated like a good luck charm. As if you can just show up one day a week for an hour. And that's going to be good enough. There is a shocking lack of conscience.

As people bring offerings to the Lord. While sacrificing their children to idols. Corrupt leadership.

Corrupt worship. And also, Jeremiah exposes a corrupt culture. Lust and betrayal are normalized. The legal system favors the wealthy and the powerful.

The poor, the widows, the orphans. They are ignored. Immigrants and blue-collar workers are crushed with no recourse. And those who dare to speak up about this are silenced and sometimes murdered.

The northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Habakkuk writes somewhere between 640 and 605 BC.

[9 : 42] And this exposes something very interesting. Judah has had almost a hundred years. To see what happened to Israel.

To observe the destruction. To hear about how bad it was. And to repent and return to the Lord. But instead, God's patience is treated like permission.

And in Jeremiah chapter 2, we read about this assumption. There's an assumption that we can sin and get away with it. God is not going to do anything about it.

This is what Habakkuk sees. And this is his burden. And this is why he cries out to God in verse 2.

Oh Lord. How long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Or cry to you, violence.

[10 : 53] Look, look. I'm trying to get your attention. Cry to you, violence. And you will not save. Why do you make me see iniquity?

And why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me. Strife and contention arise.

You hear Habakkuk's frustration. His confusion. His grief. His lament. Lord, I'm asking you for help here. And you're not responding.

I'm expecting you to do something. But you don't. I'm forced to see this rebellion against you every day.

Why do you tolerate it? Injustice and violence. They are right in front of my eyes all the time.

[11 : 51] And Lord, the situation is getting worse. Not better. Not better. Habakkuk is not confused because God does not see what's happening.

Habakkuk is confused because he knows that God sees it. And he isn't doing anything about it. But God seems indifferent.

And you say, well, isn't this Judah? Aren't we talking about Jerusalem? Aren't these God's people?

Don't they have God's law? They do. But there's a problem.

Look at verse 4. So the law is paralyzed. And justice never goes forth.

[13 : 05] For the wicked surround the righteous. So justice goes forth perverted. This law being paralyzed is such a stunning metaphor.

The same word is used in Genesis chapter 45. Let me remind you. Joseph has been sold by his brothers into Egypt. But his father has been told that his son Joseph was ripped apart, ripped to shreds by some sort of a wild animal.

And when Jacob learns that his son Joseph is not only alive, but also the prime minister of Egypt, scripture says that Jacob's heart became numb.

He was so shocked that he was just frozen in disbelief. That's the word here underneath paralyzed. The law is not absent.

It's paralyzed. Justice isn't missing. It's perverted. The wicked outnumber and surround the righteous. And what was meant by God to protect his people has lost its power because of their systemic wickedness.

[14:26] God seems indifferent. And God's law seems ineffective. Habakkuk is horrified by what he sees.

He's confused. From his perspective, God's ongoing patience with his people is making the situation worse. And now he is shaken to the core by realizing that God's law no longer works amongst God's people.

And if God's law is no longer working among God's people, then what hope is left? And so he cries out, O Lord, how long?

And God responds to his question. Verse number five. Look among the nations and see, wonder and be astounded, for I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.

I think this is the turning point of the passage. Not only does God see, not only is he fully aware of everything that is happening in Judah, God says, I am already at work.

[16:04] In fact, the language here, lost in our translation a bit, the language is emphatic. I am working a work. Plans are already in motion.

We are no longer in the planning stage. Those plans are in motion. I am working a work. These are plans.

This is a work. So significant. So disruptive. So beyond Habakkuk's expectation that God says, you wouldn't believe it even if I explained it to you.

Habakkuk's problem is not that God is indifferent. His problem is not that the law seems ineffective. His problem is a perspective that is way too small.

So God invites his prophet, lift up your eyes. Put your attention on the world stage. You have no idea what I am doing.

[17:04] My purposes are not confined to Judah. Look at verse 6. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans.

This is synonymous with the Babylonians. This is a bitter and hasty nation who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own.

They are dreaded and fearsome. Their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves.

Their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle, swift to devour. They all come for violence.

All their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff. And at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress.

[18:05] Why? Because they just pile up earth and overtake it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on. guilty men God says whose own might is their God.

This animal imagery in verse 8 is striking. Babylon's army is described as fast fierce predatory like wolves and eagles.

This should not surprise us because even today nations our own and others name their tanks, aircraft, naval vessels after animals.

Perhaps you have heard of the M10 Wolverine Wolverine tank or the F-15 Eagle. Why do we name our implements of war this way?

Because animals capture our imaginations. They're powerful. They're quick. They are fierce. But this little detail as interesting as it is is not the main point.

[19:19] Tucked into God's response to Habakkuk's question are three major reversals. Three reversals that would have stunned Habakkuk.

In Genesis 26 after the conflict after there is a conflict over a well Isaac moves and then he digs another well.

And when he finds that there is no conflict with the people of the land in this new place where he has settled he names the place Rehoboth. That name means the Lord has made an open space for us.

here's the first reversal in verse six God says the Chaldeans Babylon will march through the breadth of the earth literally they are going to march through the open space what once represented God's gracious provision now becomes a pathway for judgment on his people.

Next remember the Exodus because of God's plague on Egypt plagues on Egypt and because of his destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea the nations of Canaan the nations in the promised land were filled with dread and fear we hear this in Rahab's words to the spies in Joshua chapter 2 they were filled with dread and fear why because they understood Israel's God fights for them here's the second reversal in verse seven Babylon Babylon will now be dreaded and fearsome the dread the fear that once surrounded God's people as they came into the promised land now surrounds the enemy of

[21:42] God's people as they advance in judgment and finally let me remind you of Genesis 22 it is there that God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the sand on the seashore a sign of God's blessing and covenant faithfulness here is the third reversal in verse number nine Babylon will gather captives like sand the image of promise now becomes an image of judgment what is God's message to Habakkuk I see what's happening

I know what's going on it matters to me I have this under control and I am already working a work Habakkuk your perspective is too small your vision is too narrow your understanding too partial your life too short what feels to you like indifferent patience is actually infinite planning my purposes are unfolding at a scale that is far greater than this little moment they are unfolding across empires across generations across the whole span of human history and from an eternal perspective no wonder

God says verse five Habakkuk you wouldn't believe this if I told you what I was doing so trust me trust me even when it doesn't make sense yet when you stop and think about it our world isn't all that difficult isn't all that different from Habakkuk's there is corrupt leadership in the world in politics and even in the church we are not surprised when leaders lie and deceive us I think we've actually come to expect that haven't we we see corrupt worship people who go through the motions of religion maybe sometimes that's us co-workers who treat going to church like a good luck charm as if showing up for an hour on

Sunday is enough for their soul I can't possibly be the only one among us who rolls my eyes at the post game interview at the coach who says all glory to God when we have seen him repeatedly on the sideline cursing corrupt worship and we also have corrupt culture aren't we shocked by the general lack of conscience in the world lust and betrayal aren't they normalized doesn't justice bend towards the wealthy and the powerful aren't immigrants crushed by political scheming aren't employees robbed by corporate greed maybe you've spoken up or maybe you know someone who has and you've been silenced when violence escalates and when oppression of the weak is not only accepted but celebrated when the poor get poorer and the wealthy become more powerful and bullies are honored for being abusive isn't this our world too do you ever feel like you know better than

God you ever wish God would ask for your advice do you ever think about explaining a situation to him from your perspective yeah me too here's God's word to us from the first half of Habakkuk 1 hear your sovereign Lord say this I see what's happening in your world I know what's going on there it matters to me and I've got this I am already working a work something that you would not believe even if I tried to explain it to you what feels like indifferent patience is actually infinite planning my purposes are unfolding at a scale far greater than this little moment that you are living in purposes that span countries and generations and the whole span of history and all of it from an eternal perspective we know that

[28 : 11] God is working a work because God sent Jesus and when God's plan seemed like it was most delayed we've been waiting for so long when it seemed like God's plan was most delayed unlike Judah he did not give us over to our adversary that does not mean that God's plan was easy to understand a baby what are we doing here what what are we doing here this is your plan or when God's plan seemed like a failure and Jesus was dead in the tomb when evil seemed to win and heaven was silent it was then that

God was working his greatest work the cross looked like a failure it looked like indifference it looked like injustice triumphing and yet it is through the death and resurrection of his son that God was reconciling the world to himself if God was faithful then when no one could understand what he was doing we can trust him even now when it doesn't make sense to us just yet how should we respond if your prayers have become vague and guarded or polite Habakkuk invites you to tell God exactly what you see exactly what you feel and exactly what you don't understand maybe this week we could stop sanitizing our prayers and tell

God exactly what we feel perhaps you would commit to praying one unedited prayer this week and young people this includes you as well God is not looking for fancy words or perfect prayers when you are confused and frustrated and afraid you go ahead and tell God about it he wants to hear from you Habakkuk does not withdraw from the world and he does not become consumed by the wickedness that surrounds him he stays engaged without surrendering to despair I think some of us have checked out emotionally from the situation in the world because frankly it's just too overwhelming and

I think that others of us may live in a state of constant outrage God calls us to neither apathy nor outrage but to ordinary faithfulness and so I wonder if you would commit to ordinary obedience this week have integrity at work when it would be easier not to be faithful to your spouse when no one is watching be generous with your time and your talents and the good things that God has given you stand with the outcast defend the abused keep showing up among people who need to hear the gospel love your neighbors and your co-workers young people this might look like telling the truth when it would be easier to stay silent or how about this one obeying your parents when you don't understand why living this way does not mean that we are doing nothing waiting on

God is not about doing nothing it means trusting him trusting him and then taking the next step of faith where is God inviting you to trust him without explanation Habakkuk is uncomfortable not because it lacks faith but because it refuses to fake it Habakkuk speaks to people like us people who are learning to trust God while we are surrounded by corruption and wickedness so pray honestly and obey ordinarily and remember God is always doing more than you can see and what sounds like silence is not absence and what feels like delay is not indifference our

[34 : 15] God who planned the cross and the resurrection is working a work even when it doesn't make sense yet let's pray