

# Why Does God Tolerate Injustice and Wrongdoing?

Habakkuk 1:1-11 on June 30, 2024

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

*Please read Habakkuk 1:1-11 before going further in this transcript.*

Before we jump into our sermon series on our next Minor Prophet, we should probably begin by making sure that we all know how to pronounce it. How do you pronounce “H A B A K K U K”? Is the emphasis on the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> syllable? Well, my research indicates that the accent should land on the 2<sup>nd</sup> syllable: “huh BAK uhk”<sup>1 2</sup> Now if you pronounce it “HA bakkuk” or “habakKUK,” we can still be friends! The message of the book is much more important than whether we get the emPHAsis on the correct sylLABle.

Now unlike the book of Jonah, which we just finished digging into last week, Habakkuk is one of those minor prophets that we don't hear about very often. However, you may be more familiar with it than you realize. For example, did you know that Habakkuk 2:4 is referenced in the New Testament 3 different times, “...but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.” (See Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38-39) And, did you know that these familiar words come from Habakkuk 3:17-18, “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”<sup>3 4</sup> Unless we've read through the entire Bible lately, it's unlikely that very many of us have read Habakkuk recently (unless of course it was in preparation for this sermon series). And yet, it's just as much a part of God's Word as Romans or Jonah or whatever else. So it will be good for us to spend a few weeks digging in and prayerfully considering what this book has to teach us, and how we can apply it to our lives.

Habakkuk 1:1 begins, “The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.” The prophet Habakkuk doesn't begin his book with much background information; he doesn't tell us anything else about himself, or where he's living, or about his family of origin, or anything. And although his original first readers likely knew this information, those of us reading his letter today, some 2,600 years later, could use a primer. After all, it's going to be

---

<sup>1</sup> W. Murray Severance and Terry Eddinger, *That's Easy for You to Say: Your Quick Guide to Pronouncing Bible Names* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Julien Miquel pronounces it correctly: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duNk4JX2nEA>

<sup>3</sup> And the crescendo of the book ends with Habakkuk 3:19, “The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.”

<sup>4</sup> Job 13:15 comes to mind, “Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him.” See also Proverbs 14:32.

pretty tough to understand what this book is saying, if we don't first get some context as to when and where it was said.

Habakkuk was written around 600 B.C., during a time when the 12 tribes of Israel were divided into two groups. 10 of the tribes were in the north; they were called Israel. The other 2 tribes were in the south; they were called Judah. Now, by this time in history, the 10 tribes in the north, had already been taken into captivity by their enemy, the Assyrians. The prophet Habakkuk lives in the south, in Judah, where he's writing primarily to the 2 southern tribes. At this time in history, Judah's primary enemy was the Babylonians (aka the Chaldeans<sup>5</sup>). Habakkuk is writing just before the Babylonians take Judah into captivity for some 70 years.<sup>6</sup>

The book is structured in 3 main parts::

Habakkuk 1:1-11 = 1<sup>st</sup> Complaint/Answer

Habakkuk 1:12-2:20 = 2<sup>nd</sup> Complaint/Answer

Habakkuk 3:1-19 = Habakkuk's Hymn of Rejoicing<sup>7 8</sup>

One of the unique aspects of the book of Habakkuk is that it doesn't record any direct messages to the Israelites living in Judah. To be clear, it was written FOR them, just not directly TO them. The book is a back/forth dialogue between the prophet Habakkuk and the Living God, Yahweh; under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Habakkuk records his own wrestling with God.<sup>9</sup> And yet, even though it's a personal dialogue, this book represents the corporate questions of the faith community. My Study Bible says it well, "No doubt it represented the voice of the godly in Judah, struggling to comprehend the ways of God."<sup>10</sup>

How about you? Have you ever struggled to comprehend the ways of God? If you've been following Jesus for any substantial amount of time, then it's very likely that you've run into some challenging situations in your faith journey. Perhaps you've even been so bold as to ask God a few questions about things that have confused you or frustrated you; questions about how God is choosing to run His universe.

---

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.google.com/search?q=pronounce+Chaldeans&sc\\_esv=](https://www.google.com/search?q=pronounce+Chaldeans&sc_esv=)

<sup>6</sup> See Jeremiah 29:10.

<sup>7</sup> Part 1: Question #1 (1:1-4) and Answer #1 (1:5-11). Part 2: Question #2 (1:12-2:1) and Answer #2 (2:2-20). Part 3: Habakkuk's Prayer/Psalm (3:1-19).

<sup>8</sup> "Each section of Habakkuk is best understood in its specific historical context. In 1:1-4 Habakkuk complains about 609-601 BC, when the corrupt Jehoiakim ruled in Jerusalem. In 1:5-17 we see references to the Babylonian attacks on Jerusalem in 597/586 BC. In 2:1-20 Yahweh promises the defeat of the Babylonians that results in the exiles' return to the land in 538 BC. Chapter 3 is a song that rests in God's faithfulness to act in history." James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Commentary*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1518 introductory notes.

<sup>10</sup> "...God's answers therefore spoke to all who shared Habakkuk's troubled doubts. And Habakkuk's confession became a public expression – as indicated by its liturgical notations [in 3:1]." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1518-1519 introductory notes.

## **The prophet Habakkuk teaches us that...**

### **1) It's okay to bring God our most difficult questions.**

Questions like these:

- > Why does God allow SO much evil in this world?
- > Why does God allow SO much evil in some churches, and in some supposedly Christian homes?
- > If God is both good and powerful, then why doesn't He put a stop to more of the wrong things that are happening?
- > HOW many more times do I have to pray about my pain and suffering before God will answer me?

Our journey through Habakkuk will be a great opportunity to bring some of our most difficult questions to God. But I warn you, some of the answers we discover, might be tough to receive, and some of the answers may lead us, to even more difficult questions. And to be fair, one particular sermon can't answer all of our questions.

Romans 15:4 says, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."<sup>11</sup> Some 2,600 years ago, God's people had some difficult questions, very similar to the questions that you and I are asking today. And as we consider God's answers to Habakkuk's questions, let's allow it to teach us endurance, and to provide us with the encouragement and hope that we need. With all of this in mind, let's dive into the text together.

Habakkuk 1:2-4 begins, "How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?" 3 Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. 4 Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."

Do you see how direct Habakkuk is with his questions, how bold he is in his conversation with God?

- > Why aren't you listening to me God!?
- > Why aren't You saving me God!?
- > Why are You tolerating all of this injustice and wrongdoing?

Habakkuk almost seems a little disrespectful here, or at least out of line, but he's not. In fact, much the opposite, his prayer comes out of his deep respect for God. Habakkuk has a close walk with God, and he knows that it's ok to ask God difficult questions.<sup>12</sup> In fact, I would suggest to you today, that if you don't have these kinds of deep and searching talks with God,

---

<sup>11</sup> Also consider Luke 24:27 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

<sup>12</sup> "The bluntness of the prophet's reproach – a daring move – is at the same time a testimony to the prophet's intimacy with God." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1832 footnote on Habakkuk 1:2.

then maybe that's what's holding you back from greater intimacy and maturity in your faith. Friends, we need to become so well-acquainted with God, that we learn to respectfully bring our complaints and concerns to Him. We need to know that we can go to our Heavenly Father with anything that's on our mind, with any of our hurts, any of our anger or disappointments.<sup>13</sup> Habakkuk knows that it's safe, and appropriate, to bring his deepest struggles before the Living God who created him, and loves him. Habakkuk's honest questions reveal a deep and abiding faith: an authentic walk with God.

So what exactly is Habakkuk's complaint? Old Testament scholar, James Bruckner, gives some helpful background: The historical context for Habakkuk's 1<sup>st</sup> complaint is corrupt local politics. This is a time in Judah's history after the good King Josiah "had returned the country to...righteous living... However, after good King Josiah was killed, his son became king, the evil King Jehoiakim, who "ruled corruptly during the time of Habakkuk.... The corruption of Jerusalem's government under Jehoiakim is the main historical context for Habakkuk's [1<sup>st</sup>] complaint."<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> In other words, the opening verses of Habakkuk, verses 2-4, are referring to injustice and wrongdoing that are occurring within Judah; this violence and strife is happening right in the midst of God's chosen people. The wicked Babylonians haven't even entered the conversation yet, which is how we know that Habakkuk is referring to his own people. *This is a dark and difficult time in Israel's history.*

### **The prophet Habakkuk teaches us that...**

#### **2) Sometimes injustice and wrongdoing happen right in the midst of God's people.**

Verse 3 points out the injustices being committed by the perpetrators in Judah which were resulting in the wrong that was being suffered by their victims in Judah."<sup>16</sup> It goes on to mention "Destruction and violence," which highlight the damage that's being done to this faith community, as sin is running wild. Healthy, godly communities are intended to provide wholesome, life-supporting infrastructure that contributes to everyone's wellbeing. But the destruction and violence in Judah had become so widespread that they were tearing apart the fabric of their own faith

---

<sup>13</sup> The book, "Disappointment With God" by Phillip Yancy, comes to mind.

<sup>14</sup> James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Commentary*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 209.

<sup>15</sup> See Jeremiah 36 where the evil King Jehoiakim burns Jeremiah's scroll in the fire.

<sup>16</sup> "The injustice of the perpetrator and the wrong suffered are two parts of the same human problem." James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Commentary*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 209.

community.<sup>17</sup> The end of verse 3 mentions “strife” and “conflict,” which are both legal terms in the original Hebrew. So this is referring to the excessive number of God’s people who were taking each other to court in Judah.<sup>18</sup> James Bruckner explains, “the courts do not work any longer. ...It is a ruined society, and the prophet wants to know why Yahweh tolerates the flourishing of such wickedness.”<sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> Verse 4 says that the law has been paralyzed; Justice has failed because it’s been perverted in the courts by the wicked who “hem in the righteous.” None of this is ok; it all runs completely counter to God’s righteous design for His people.

My Study Bible has a helpful note regarding this word “justice.” “Its meaning is broader than ‘fairness’; it entails something like ‘honorable relations,’ as defined by GOD’S character and will.”<sup>21</sup> So the fact that justice is being perverted among God’s people, doesn’t just mean that you couldn’t get a fair trial, but also that God’s honor was being perverted. God’s character and will were being perverted in the courts of His own people. You see, Judah was supposedly made up of God’s special covenant people. These men and women should have been...

- ...Champions of God’s justice, not corrupt.
- ...Doers of what’s right, not doers of what’s wrong.
- ...Menders of their community, not destroyers.
- ...Gentle and kind to one another, not violent.
- ...Peacemakers and mediators of grace, not bathed in strife and conflict.

In verse 3, the Hebrew word for “tolerates” “has the sense of ‘stand by and watch.’”<sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> The *ESV* captures this nuance, “Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? ....” Habakkuk wonders why God seems to be idly sitting by and ignoring the injustice and wrongdoing among His people. From His human perspective:

In verse 2, God wasn’t listening, and God wasn’t saving.

In verse 3, God wasn’t addressing the injustice and wrongdoing. It seemed as though God was allowing destruction and violence. Strife and conflict were abounding, going completely unchecked.

---

<sup>17</sup> See James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Comm.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 209.

<sup>18</sup> “The last pair of problems, ‘strife’ and ‘conflict,’ are legal terms in Hebrew... indicating that there are many lawsuits and legal quarrels in Judah’s courts.” James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Comm.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, pp. 209-210.

<sup>19</sup> James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Comm.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 210.

<sup>20</sup> Consider Micah 3:11, 7:3, and 1 Corinthians 6:7-8.

<sup>21</sup> *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1832 footnote on Habakkuk 1:4.

<sup>22</sup> “Nabat” James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Comm.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 209.

<sup>23</sup> “Habakkuk is troubled by God’s [seeming] indifference and inaction.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1832 footnote on Habakkuk 1:3.

In verse 4, God's law was paralyzed and ineffective, His justice wasn't prevailing, but was instead being perverted for wicked purposes. Understandably, the evidence piling up around Habakkuk was causing him to wonder what God was up to? He knew in his heart that God was good, He knew that God was in control, but the circumstances surrounding him in Judah, weren't matching up with the goodness and righteousness of God.

Fortunately, in verses 5 and following, God reveals that He's not been idle about anything. In fact, He's been actively moving forward with a response: His plan to send in the Babylonians to punish His people.

**The prophet Habakkuk teaches us that...**

**3) God sees every act of injustice and wrongdoing, and He will judge and punish accordingly.**

In Habakkuk 1:5 God says, "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told."<sup>24</sup> "Your" "you" and "you" are all in the plural, meaning that God is addressing His people in Judah as a whole.<sup>25</sup> There's a play on words here between verse 5 and verse 3, "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?" In response to Habakkuk's "look" and "tolerate" in verse 3, God tells him to "Look" and "watch" in verse 5.<sup>26</sup> You see, "watch" and "tolerate" are translating the same verb<sup>27</sup>, so God replies using the same verbs that Habakkuk used.<sup>28</sup> So clearly God is not ok with justice failing or being perverted; He's been actively working on a plan to address it. Justice is already being carried out, exactly according to God's timetable, according to His good and sovereign plans.

Today, we might phrase the end of verse 5 this way, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you!" Even so, God decides to give Habakkuk a peek into His plans, which begins to provide the answer to Habakkuk's complaint. It's a surprising answer! It's an utterly amazing answer, and not one that any of us humans might have expected. The destruction and violence in Judah are going to get much *worse*, because God is sending in the Babylonians to carry out His discipline. The biblical principle of "you reap what you sow" comes to mind. God's people living in Judah had been sowing injustice and wrongdoing, now they would reap the terrible discipline of Babylon's attack.

This foreign nation would become the agent of God's judgment against the sin of His people. God now gives Habakkuk a detailed description, in verses 6 and following.

---

<sup>24</sup> Check out Paul's quotation of this verse in Acts 13:41.

<sup>25</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1521 footnote on Habakkuk 1:5.

<sup>26</sup> This play on words is a little easier to see in the *ESV* translation: "see" and "look" in verse 3 are contrasted with "look" and "see" in verse 5.

<sup>27</sup> "Nabat."

<sup>28</sup> See James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Comm.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 210.

In Habakkuk 1:6-11 God explains, “I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops headlong; their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle swooping to devour;<sup>29</sup> they all come intent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand. They mock kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities; by building earthen ramps they capture them.<sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—guilty people, whose own strength is their god.”

We know from historical records that “once the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians at Nineveh (in 612 B.C.) and the Egyptians at Carchemish (in 605 B.C.), no one could stop their might. [In the words of verse 10] They could ‘[confidently mock] kings and scoff at rulers’.”<sup>32</sup> God would tolerate the injustice and wrongdoing of His people no longer, so He sent in the ruthless and dreaded Babylonians to render His fierce judgment.

This leaves us to consider 2 specific applications from today’s text; the first one is quite sobering:

**1. If you’re a perpetrator of injustice and wrongdoing, then you’d best repent right now.**

If you’re responsible for committing acts of violence and injustice...

If you’re responsible for destroying other people’s lives...

If you’re a source of the strife and conflict that abounds in our community...

Then run to Jesus while you can! Beg Him to have mercy on your soul!

Hebrews 10:30-31 says, “For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

You see, this isn’t just an Old Testament principle, hidden away in some obscure Minor Prophet; this is a lasting principle of God’s divine right to judge sin.<sup>33</sup> <sup>34</sup> The prophet Jonah recently taught us that when God sees

---

<sup>29</sup> See Deuteronomy 28:49-50 regarding “eagle.”

<sup>30</sup> Regarding “earthen ramps” see Jeremiah 32:24. This brings to mind pictures of the city of Jerusalem being sieged by the Babylonian army. God’s people were hunkered down in their city, praying for God to rescue them, not realizing that they’d brought this on themselves through their own wrongdoing and violence.

<sup>31</sup> This brings to mind scenes from the Lord of the Rings movie, Two Towers, specifically the siege of Rohan’s Helm’s Deep.

<sup>32</sup> James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Comm.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 211.

<sup>33</sup> Consider this insightful article on fearing God: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/grace-has-taught-our-hearts-to-fear>

<sup>34</sup> Jonathon Edwards famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” comes to mind. Read more here: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-wrath-of-god/>

wickedness, He responds by sending warning. But once that warning has been issued, and once it's been ignored and rejected, then all that remains is judgment.<sup>35</sup> The prophet Habakkuk now teaches us that when God sees wickedness, in the midst of His people, whether that be Old Testament Judah, or the modern-day church, He will render His judgment.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> application of today's text is far more encouraging:

**2. If you're a victim of injustice and wrongdoing, then be assured that the Lord hears your cry for help, and He will execute His judgment on your perpetrator.**

The answer to Habakkuk's opening question, "how long LORD must I call for help?" is that the Lord has heard your cry. He's not ignoring your plea; He's not letting your offender get away with their wrongdoing. In God's perfect timing, recompense will come; justice will be served. In just a little while, the wrongs and injustices committed against you, will be fully compensated. They will be satisfied to their full extent, by God's mighty wrath on sin. Any sin that hasn't been brought under the blood of Jesus Christ and His cross, will be made right another way: the awful, final punishment of God. Habakkuk assures us of this, initially, through the Babylonians or some other agent of God's wrath. But ultimately, all wrongs that haven't been made right through the cross, will be made right through the sentence of hell.

---

<sup>35</sup> Article 10 of our church's Statement of Faith says it this way: "Response and Eternal Destiny - We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen."