

# How Can We Reconcile God's Use of the Wicked?

Habakkuk 1:12-2:20 on July 7, 2024

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

*Please read Habakkuk 1:12-2:20 before going further in this transcript.*

Last Sunday we kicked off our sermon series on the OT Minor Prophet Habakkuk. He began his 1<sup>st</sup> complaint in Habakkuk 1:3, "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? ..." Last week Habakkuk taught us that it's okay to bring God our most difficult questions. So we considered this question of why God tolerates injustice and wrongdoing in our world, including the injustice and wrongdoing right among His own people. God answered Habakkuk's 1<sup>st</sup> complaint in Habakkuk 1:6, "I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own." This was a surprising response: God will judge His people living in Judah by sending in the ruthless Babylonians to punish them. It's an honest answer, but it's a hard truth to swallow.

**This week, the prophet Habakkuk teaches us that...**

**1) We need to trust God in the midst of His most difficult answers.**

In verse 13, Habakkuk says, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" We're moving from last week's, "You wouldn't believe Me if I told you,"<sup>1</sup> to this week's, "Now that I've told you, you need to trust Me." You see, God doesn't always tell us what He's up to, or why He's doing what He's doing, but when He does tell us, we need to respond with trust and faithfulness. The reality is, we don't always get the particular answer that we were hoping for. In fact, maybe not knowing would've been easier. Regardless, our job is to trust Him even in the midst of His most difficult answers.

The prophet's 2<sup>nd</sup> complaint begins in Habakkuk 1:12-13, "LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, you will never die. You, LORD, have appointed them [*the Babylonians*] to execute judgment; you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish. 13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous [God's people in Judah] than themselves?" In other words, "God, how can this be Your answer!!!? How can You punish the wickedness among Your own people in Judah, with the greater wickedness of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Habakkuk 1:5.

Babylonians? How can it be right, or just, for You to ordain them to punish people who are more righteous than they are? You see, last week, Habakkuk's 1<sup>st</sup> complaint was that God didn't seem to be doing anything about the sin among His people in Judah. But now, his 2<sup>nd</sup> complaint is that God's means of punishing His people, seems inappropriate. Last week, in Habakkuk 1:5, God warned Habakkuk that he wouldn't believe Him, even if God told him. Now Habakkuk is saying, "You're right God. I'm struggling to believe what You just told me! This seems like an awfully strange way to go about it, and it's incredibly difficult to trust You when You give such a difficult answer."

So, "How Can We Reconcile God's Use of the Wicked?" Well, first of all, let's keep Romans 3:10 in mind: "There is no one righteous, not even one." So before we get too hasty in pointing our fingers at the wicked Babylonians, let's make no mistake: all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's righteousness requirements. All of us have done and said wrong things, and all of us have left things undone that we ought to have done. So it would be right and just and fair, for God to judge and punish every one of us equally, because we all fall short. This being said, it's still difficult to accept God's answer, because it seems so out of sync with God's character. In fact, that's probably why Habakkuk begins his 2<sup>nd</sup> complaint, with a list of some of God's wonderfully unique attributes in verses 12-13:

- > The LORD is everlasting. He is our Holy One, who will never die.
- > The LORD is sovereign in His appointments to execute judgment.
- > The LORD is our unchanging Rock, who ordains punishment.
- > His eyes are too pure to look on evil; He cannot tolerate wrongdoing.<sup>2</sup>

Habakkuk was wrestling in his faith because his expectations weren't matching up with his experience. What he knew to be true about God, seemed incompatible with his situation. So why? Why then does God tolerate the treacherous? Why is He silent while the Babylonians "swallow up" other nations, including nations like Judah, which is arguably more righteous than they are? In verses 14-17 Habakkuk paints a word picture of people who are "like the fish in the sea." In this word picture, the wicked Babylonians are the fishermen, and the people they're destroying are the fish. Habakkuk continues his complaint, "You have made people like the fish in the sea, like the sea creatures that have no ruler. 15 The wicked foe [Babylonia] pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad. 16 Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet,

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<sup>2</sup> Habakkuk declares God's eternity, His reliability as his Rock, and His goodness as One whose eyes are too pure to look on evil. But these incredible attributes are why God's answer feels so oxymoronic. How can this be your answer!? There's such a strange juxtaposition here of God tolerating the treacherous while at the same time using them for His good and sovereign purposes.

for by his net he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food. 17 Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy?"<sup>3</sup> Isn't God going to put a stop to this!? Well, the answer is "no." How long will these evil Babylonians continue to succeed in their destructive ways? Well, the answer is "as long as God ordains it." We know from history, that the people of Judah will soon be taken into captivity for the next 70 years or so.

The question still lingers: "How Can We Reconcile God's Use of the Wicked?" We already answered this question in part, last week:

"God sees every act of injustice and wrongdoing, and He will judge and punish accordingly." So if He chooses to use the Babylonians as the agent of His judgment on Judah, so be it. God can punish our sin in whatever way He deems best, whether that be...

- > through the Babylonians, or some other agent, or
- > through the punishment that Jesus bore on the cross, or
- > through the final punishment of hell.

Despite his confusion and frustration with God's answer, Habakkuk chooses to trust God. In 2:1 he says, "I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint."<sup>4 5</sup> In other words, Habakkuk stops to *listen* to God's answer; he doesn't just keep ranting and raving about how this doesn't make any sense to him, or how it doesn't seem fair.<sup>6 7</sup>

Habakkuk models for us how prayer can be a dialogue with God, a 2-way conversation, and not just a list of requests or a gripe session. Habakkuk sincerely wants to hear God's answer, even if it's difficult.<sup>8</sup> Habakkuk is prepared not only to trust God with this difficult answer, but also to obediently take God's answer back to his own people living in Judah. That

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<sup>3</sup> Pastor Eric Nygren once said it this way, "Babylon was so good at defeating nations that it was like shooting fish in a barrel." (6/13/2010 sermon notes)

<sup>4</sup> The picture here is of a guard posted at a watchtower. He's looking out from the top of the walls of Jerusalem, waiting for a response. In this case, the response will come from God Himself. See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1522 footnote on Habakkuk 2:1.

<sup>5</sup> See Ezekiel 3:17.

<sup>6</sup> Habakkuk "is direct and forthright in his dialogue with God, but he also listens." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1830 introductory notes.

<sup>7</sup> Habakkuk also paused to listen back in 1:5 and following, which is why we have God's first answer recorded.

<sup>8</sup> Habakkuk teaches us how to respond in faith when God gives us an incredibly difficult answer. Habakkuk's trust and obedience can be described as "faithful incredulity." James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 202.

was his job as God's prophet, and it was a heavy burden for him to carry.<sup>9</sup>

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There's a timeless principle here worth considering today: If we want to be a deeply devoted follower, then we need to listen to the hard things from God's Word. If we avoid these hard things, or ignore them, then we'll never mature and grow strong in our faith. Instead, we'll live in a fantasy world of empty pretending and meaningless faith. We'll remain trapped in a state of arrested spiritual development.<sup>12</sup> Old Testament scholar James Bruckner points out that Habakkuk "is drawn into a progressively more difficult understanding of faith."<sup>13</sup> What impresses me about Habakkuk's faith, is that rather than...

DOUBTING his faith, or  
DISILLUSIONMENT with his faith, or  
DESPAIRING in his faith,  
Habakkuk DEEPENS in his faith.

Last Sunday we considered how asking God our most difficult questions can be a way of maturing in our faith, and increasing our intimacy with God. Today, we need to realize that our faith deepens even further, as we learn to trust God when He gives us His most difficult answers. Wrestling with God's sovereign ways can initially lead us to frustration and confusion, but if we hold our course, and keep trusting Him through the journey, eventually our wrestling will lead us to a deeper faith.

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, the word "prophecy" in Habakkuk 1:1 can also be translated "oracle." It's range of meaning can include "burden."

<sup>10</sup> See James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Comm.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 200.

<sup>11</sup> I must admit, this is sometimes one of my heaviest burdens as a pastor, occasionally delivering difficult and unwelcome messages to God's people. However, these messages are crucial if we're going to stay on track with becoming deeply devoted followers. Therefore, it is both a burden and an honor to say the hard things.

<sup>12</sup> One of Habakkuk's contemporaries was the prophet Jeremiah, and he had a similar complaint against God. God answers his complaint in [Jeremiah 12:5](#), "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" (See Jeremiah 12:1-17 for the fuller context of Jeremiah's complaint and God's answer.) So, what God is saying here is that even more challenging times lie ahead for this prophet. As bad as things are in Judah now, it's going to get even worse before it gets better. This probably wasn't the answer that he wanted to hear, but it's the truth that he needed to hear. So both of these prophets teach us to LISTEN and LEARN from our current struggles, so that we're better prepared for our future struggles. As deeply devoted followers of Jesus, this probably isn't the answer we WANT to hear either, but it may very well be the truth that we NEED to hear. (Consider 2 Corinthians 1:3-7.) [Psalm 23:4](#) says, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (Proverbs 14:32 says, "...even in death the righteous seek refuge in God.") Sometimes God's path for us leads right through the middle of the darkest valley, "the valley of the shadow of death." God doesn't spare us from this part of the journey, but He does accompany us through it, and He does use it for His purposes. Daniel 3:28 says, "Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."

<sup>13</sup> James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: NIV Applic. Comm.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 197.

**Habakkuk also teaches us that...**

**2) We need to live by faith while God works out His mysterious ways.**

God begins to answer Habakkuk's 2<sup>nd</sup> complaint in 2:2-3, "...Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. 3 For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay."<sup>14</sup> In verse 3, "the end" to which God's revelation is referring, isn't immediately clear. All that we know so far, is that Habakkuk is supposed to write it down and make it plain, so that a herald could deliver it. Up to this point, Habakkuk's message was incredibly difficult; the message from chapter 1 was that God was raising up the Babylonians to defeat Judah and take its people into captivity. So, what is verse 3 referring to? What is this "revelation that awaits an appointed time?" Well fortunately, this revelation is NOT referring to the end of God's people, but actually quite the opposite. God is now predicting that an end will most certainly come to the Babylonians. Although this revelation will be fulfilled quite a while later in history, God is urging Habakkuk, and the people of Judah, to wait for His appointed time. They "need to live by faith while God works out His mysterious ways." In fact, the rest of the verses in chapter 2, will now describe God's final judgment on the Babylonians. You see, God will punish the Babylonians for their wickedness. And, after a certain amount of time, God will restore His people.

Habakkuk 2:4-5 declares, "See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness—5 indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples." In verse 4, God continues with His answer by contrasting their enemy, the Babylonians, with the righteous remnant of God's people in Judah, who are living by faith. God recognizes that some of His people in Judah have remained faithful to Him, and He now encourages them to press on in that faithfulness, while He works out His sovereign plan.<sup>15</sup> (*In the meantime, God's faithful ones will need to endure some of the collateral damage.*)

In verse 5, God begins to detail the wickedness of the Babylonians. They are arrogant, and they are greedy. And even though God is mysteriously using these wicked people to take Judah captive, He is in no way letting them off the hook for their treacherous behavior. In fact, verse 6 begins a series of 5 future woes against the wicked Babylonians. Habakkuk 2:6

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<sup>14</sup> As Pastor Eric once put it, "When God decides to act, He is never late." (6/13/2010 sermon notes)

<sup>15</sup> "Though God's ways are sometimes mysterious, "the righteous shall live by his faith" (2:4) while awaiting salvation." (Logos digital notes on The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Habakkuk.)

begins, “Will not all of them taunt him [their enemy] with ridicule and scorn....” The “him” refers to their common enemy, the Babylonians; the “all of them” refers to “all the peoples” who will be taken captive back in verse 5. So together, all of them will one day taunt their enemy. In other words, eventually all of the people who’ve been conquered by the Babylonians, will see God’s justice come full circle. One day in the future, they will pronounce 5 woes on the Babylonians.

Habakkuk 2:6-8 lays out the 1<sup>st</sup> woe: “...‘Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion! How long must this go on?’ 7 Will not your creditors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble? Then you will become their prey. 8 Because you have plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you. For you have shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.” God’s ways are mysterious; this seems like a long and confusing way to go about bringing things back around to a just and righteous condition. And yet, it’s God’s prerogative to run His universe the way that He sees fit. It’s our prerogative to trust and obey, “to live by faith while God’s works out His mysterious ways.”

Habakkuk 2:9-11 lays out the 2<sup>nd</sup> woe: “Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain, setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin! 10 You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life. 11 The stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.”

The 3<sup>rd</sup> woe is in verses 12-14, “Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by injustice! 13 Has not the LORD Almighty determined that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire, that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing? 14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” Verse 14 is the verse on the front of today’s bulletin. Habakkuk is actually quoting here from Isaiah 11:9, and he adds an emphasis on God’s glory. Not only is this verse near the middle of Habakkuk’s book,<sup>16</sup> but it’s central to the message he’s teaching us.<sup>17</sup> It speaks directly to our question: “How Can We Reconcile God’s Use of the Wicked?”

The fact is, one of the primary ways that we can reconcile God’s use of the wicked, is to recognize how He uses world powers like the Babylonians to display His glory. Verse 13 highlights how all of the exhausting work that the Babylonian’s have put in, to build a great and mighty empire, will ultimately end up in ashes. It will be “fuel for the fire” and it will ultimately be

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<sup>16</sup> Verse 31 of the 56 that make up these 3 chapters.

<sup>17</sup> Also consider Isaiah 2:2-5.

“for nothing.” None of it will last; the Babylonian dynasty will end up in the rubble heap of history. What will last, is God’s glory. The everlasting LORD<sup>18</sup> will fill the earth “with the knowledge of [His glory] as the waters cover the sea.” (*That is how we reconcile it.*)

You see, God approaches all of the injustice and wrongdoing in our world on a cosmic scale. He sees everything from a much broader perspective than we do. He views things from all of time and eternity, way beyond the perspective of our human limitations. God’s priorities are vastly different than our priorities; His ways are not our ways.<sup>19</sup> So let us not presume to understand the mind of God, or to suppose that we can ever fully comprehend the when, and why, and what for, of how He does things in this world. He is God and it’s His prerogative to do as He sees best; it is our prerogative to live by faith, as best as we can by the enabling power of His Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

Habakkuk 2:15-16 goes on with the 4<sup>th</sup> woe: “Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies!<sup>21</sup> 16 You will be filled with shame instead of glory. Now it is your turn! Drink and let your nakedness be exposed! The cup from the LORD’s right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory.” Babylon’s turn is coming! In verse 16, the glory of their warfare and treachery is contrasted with God’s divine glory back in verse 14. “The cup from the LORD’s right hand” speaks to the future cup of God’s divine retribution, which will come against them at God’s appointed time. Verse 17 adds, “The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and your destruction of animals will terrify you. For you have shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.”

The 5<sup>th</sup> and final woe is found in verses 18-19, “Of what value is an idol carved by a craftsman? Or an image that teaches lies? For the one who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. 19 Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’ Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’ Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it.” We know from back in Habakkuk 1:11 that the Babylonian’s god was their own strength. They worshipped conquest, and gods they

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<sup>18</sup> Remember Habakkuk’s description in 1:12.

<sup>19</sup> God sees the entire forest; we tend to focus on one or two particular trees.

<sup>20</sup> Consider Romans 11:33-36.

<sup>21</sup> Date rape comes to mind, but so also does the injustice committed against many of the lumberjacks living in northern Minnesota some 100 years ago. For anyone who has read, “The Last of the Giants” by Harry Rimmer, the taking advantage of these hardened lumberjacks, through spiking their drinks, was an example of how wicked people abuse others by first getting them drunk.

could make with their own two hands. There was no fear of the *living* God before their eyes; at least, not yet.<sup>22</sup> (*Not at this point in history.*)

God concludes His answer to Habakkuk's 2<sup>nd</sup> complaint in 2:20, "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him." These handmade idols cannot speak, but the living LORD of heaven sure can! He now commands that "all the earth be silent before him." God has by no means been idly ignoring the wickedness and injustice of the Babylonians. He is in His holy temple, and He is working things out according to His own mysterious plans. At the end of chapter 2, as all the earth waits in reverent silence before the LORD, Habakkuk then presents his hymn of rejoicing in chapter 3. Pastor Eric will share about this next week.

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<sup>22</sup> Take some time to read all of Psalm 36. Also consider this insightful article on fearing God: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/grace-has-taught-our-hearts-to-fear>