

HABAKKUK

Part 1: “God, what are you doing?”

Habakkuk 1:1-11

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Sunday, February 28, 2020 (Lent)

Scripture Reading

“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 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, for they pile up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!” (Habakkuk 1:1–11, ESV).

Lord, we thank you for the gift of your words. Your words are inspired. They are powerful, they are authoritative, and they give us life. May your Holy Spirit give us alert minds and humble hearts that would be able to understand and receive what you are speaking to us today. We pray this in Jesus’s mighty name, amen.

Introduction

In these last few weeks, it’s been really encouraging to see our health situation improve in our community. Likewise, after so many months of being able to see only a fraction of our congregation face-to-face, it’s been so encouraging to see many people we love return to in-person worship.

Last week, I was talking to our church planting resident J.R. Favela, and I told him, “Now, when people start coming back to church, and things are trending in a more encouraging direction, conventional wisdom would say that you would want to begin a sermon series that you would help you ride that wave. You would want to preach something attractational and exciting. You probably wouldn’t want to preach through something like the book of Habakkuk.”

With that said, today, we are going to be studying the Old Testament book of Habakkuk.

But while Habakkuk is not the ideal book for growing a crowd, it is a perfect book for the season of Lent. And even more, I believe it is a necessary book to help us walk through the season we are in and the season we have been in for the last 12 months.

There is probably a sizable portion of this congregation that has never heard of Habakkuk, read Habakkuk, or heard this book taught. And there are a few reasons for this.

Firstly, Habakkuk is not an easy book. Like most prophetic books, if you don't understand the context (the lived-situation in which these words were written), it is easy to get confused and lost.

Secondly, if you are able to dig in and see what Habakkuk is actually saying, you might not like what you get at first glance. Habakkuk is a book that does not square well with comfortable, cultural Christianity in America. In a culture that is drawn toward hype-based experiences and manufactured spirituality, Habakkuk is a brutally honest book about hard questions and even harder answers. In fact, Habakkuk will force us to talk about some of the hardest things I have ever had to address from the pulpit.

In a culture that prefers pat answers and simplistic solutions, Habakkuk is a book that teaches us how to walk with a God who is our shepherd in the valley of our pain. Habakkuk is a book that teaches us to wrestle with God, as the patriarch Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord.

But while Habakkuk might not be a part of the Bible you want. It is a part of the Bible you need! Whether you are in pain now, or will experience pain later, you need to be reminded of how God works in and through the pain of his people. Habakkuk will help us do that.

But the most important reason to study Habakkuk is that Habakkuk is a part of God's inspired, authoritative words, and for that reason, we must pay attention to what God has spoken to us. As Paul writes to his disciple Timothy, *"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work"* (2 Tim 3:16–17).

Exposition

So, with that in mind, for the next four weeks, we are going to study the words of Habakkuk the prophet. We will begin by looking at Habakkuk 1:1-11, which is a picture of those hard moments in life in which we wonder, *"God, what are you doing?"*

As we navigate this passage, I will organize our discussion under three headings: *1.) A Hard Time, 2.) A Hard Question, and 3.) A Hard Answer.*

1.) A Hard Time

Our text begins with these words: *“The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw”* (Hab 1:1).

Now, Habakkuk’s book doesn’t come with a time stamp an exact description of what provoked this book into being written. But there are small clues in the text that give us a hint as to when Habakkuk lived and what was going on in the world around him.

We know that God’s people are in spiritual decline and that there is widespread corruption among their leaders (Hab 1:4). We know that the empire of Babylon is rising in power (Hab 1:6).

Based on this information, we know that Habakkuk lives during the twilight of the kingdom of Judah. Soon the kingdom of Judah will fall, and likely Habakkuk will witness this devastating event with his own eyes. He will see the temple be destroyed and the line of David come to an apparent end. He will see the day when the Ark of the Covenant goes away, and not even Indiana Jones will be able to recover it!

But who is Habakkuk? Again, we don’t know much. We know that he is a “prophet” (נָבִיא). We know that God has given him an “oracle” (אִשְׁמָה), which is a weighty, official prophetic pronouncement. We know that he is a man of prayer and a man who cares deeply about God’s word. His eyes are open to what is happening in the world around him. He grieves over the sin of God’s people. He is alive in a very scary and transitional time, and, in that hard time, he looks to the Lord. He is compelled to pray. And he is paying attention to what the Lord is saying at this moment. As biblical scholar David Baker writes, *“...he [Habakkuk] ... was recognized in this period of apostasy as one who spoke the message of God.”*¹

It is a gross understatement to say that, in the last twelve months, we have experienced a very difficult and very significant season. Because of the sheer volume and magnitude of these events, it is almost difficult to process what has happened.

Recently, the U.S. COVID-19 death toll exceeded 500,000 lost lives. To help put that in perspective, that number is the size of the population of Kansas City, Missouri. It’s the equivalent of 1 in every 750 Americans who have died of this disease.

In addition to the public health crisis, there has also been an economic crisis, in which close to 15% of all American adults have lost their jobs. Even more, our nation has witnessed increased racial division and riots throughout several of our major cities. We have witnessed a polarized presidential election and an invasion of our nation’s capitol building. We’ve experienced extreme weather and natural disaster. And all of that is just referring to our nation, let alone the rest of the world.

¹ David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 27, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 49.

Any one of these events in isolation would have been important. But for them all to happen in the last twelve months is remarkable. We should acknowledge this moment for what it is.

When we look at our world through the lens of the Bible, we realize we would do well not to ignore the reality of our situation. We would do well not to sedate ourselves with entertainment or substance, or fall into the trap of blaming all that is hard in the world on those who don't share our political views. Instead, we would do well to stop and pay attention to what God is doing and listen to what he is saying.

So, the question is, after living through the last twelve months, does God have your attention? Have you allowed the Holy Spirit to awaken you from any potential spiritual slumber or distraction? Has this moment provoked you to prayer? Have you been grieved enough to draw near to the Lord?

The book of Habakkuk is a dialogue between the prophet and his God. Habakkuk prays, and God responds. Most of Habakkuk's prayers are what biblical scholars call "lamentation." And I believe it is a part of mature Christian spiritual to learn and lean into the language of lament.

The fact that prayers of lamentation exist means that God has invited us to pray openly and honestly to him. We do not have to pretend in our prayers. We do not have to work through our pain before we can be close with God. The Bible invites us to pray our tears and our fears to a God who has a long history of hearing the cries of his people (cf. Ex 2:23-25). Even more, today when we pray, we can pray with the confidence that Christ the resurrected and ascended Lord sits now at the right hand of God the Father, where he intercedes for us and serves as our advocate (cf. Rom 8:34; Heb 4:14-16; 1 Jn 2:1).

God's love is at work in our pain. Hard times have a tendency to expose hypocrisy and cut through any pretense that we might be clinging to.

As C.S. Lewis once famously wrote, "*Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*"

2.) A Hard Question

Habakkuk has a hard question for God. In fact, he has several questions: "*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*" (Hab 1:2-3).

To put it in other words, Habakkuk is asking, "*How long will these hard times last? Why are you not hearing my prayers? Why are you allowing these bad things to happen? Why aren't you doing something about this situation?*"

While many people seemed to be going on with their lives, the prophet seems to be overwhelmed with what he sees (תָּרָא) happening before him. He sees “iniquity” (וַיִּשָּׂא), which is ongoing, willful, often generational and systemic sin all around him. He sees destruction and violence. He sees strife and contention.

In verse 4, he laments, “*So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted*” (Hab 1:4, ESV).

The “law” or “Torah” (תּוֹרָה) – God’s word – was supposed to be the dynamic source of life and meaning for the kingdom of Judah. But Habakkuk says that it is now “paralyzed.” No one, it seems, is listening to or obeying the word of God. As a result, there is compromise, corruption, and injustice in society.

Habakkuk lives in a time during which there is widespread personal and societal sin; it is a time, to steal a phrase from Psalm 94, in which rulers “*frame injustice by statute*” (Ps 94:20).

If we were to see our world the way that Habakkuk sees his world, I imagine that we would have a similar assessment. Many of our consumer habits help support greed and a world-economy that is built on modern-day slave labor. The porn-industrial-complex contributes to the degradation of men, women, and children, addiction, and human trafficking. We refuse to help the poorest among us by investing in education and public transportation, but we willingly spend trillions of dollars on endless war and for-profit prisons. It costs tens of thousands of dollars to adopt a child, but only a few hundred to abort one. These are all examples of what we can call systemic injustice. From racism to greed to lust to violence, sin has been historically and structurally woven into many aspects of our culture.

To see such evil, and to prophetically call it out, is a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. But Habakkuk goes further. He is not just calling out the sins of “the world.” He is acknowledging and confessing the sins of *God’s people*.

In today’s world, that means that we need to willingly acknowledge and mourn the ways that patterns of corruption and sin have been exposed in the church. It is appropriate to grieve over the high-profile Christian leaders who have been exposed as abusers or predators. It is appropriate to mourn the way that many Christians have participated in the culture of outrage and polarized politics at the expense of their witness. It is appropriate to mourn how worship and church-involvement is deprioritized, and the exaltation of the American dream is held as ultimate. It is appropriate to mourn that many who grew up in the church have left the church – not because of what we believe – but because we fail to practice what we preach.

It is appropriate to acknowledge these hard realities and to bring them to the Lord in prayer. It is appropriate to ask, alongside Habakkuk, “God, why is this happening?”

The Bible gives us permission to ask God hard questions because God is big enough to deal with our questions. In fact, I would argue that it takes faith to ask the hard question of “why?”

A mind that is convinced that the universe (in all of its molecular and galactic complexity) is a cosmic accident with no purpose cannot meaningfully ask the question “why?” The question “why?” presupposes that there is a reason what is happening is happening. The question “why?” presupposes that there is meaning in our suffering. The question of “why?” can only be answered only if there a God who is both powerful and good, who stands independent of and over his creation, and who is at work bending history toward redemption.

So, if we define doubt as a willingness to ask God hard questions, doubt can be a good thing. Doubt can help us detect falsehood and bring us toward what is true. Doubt can move us from shallowness and into richness and depth. Doubt can disrupt our pre-conceived notions and bring us into a stronger faith. Tim Keller has written that such doubt is like an immuno-response of antibodies toward disease – it recognizes what doesn’t belong so that can be removed from what we believe to be true.

But in this, I want to offer you a word of caution. Whenever we ask hard questions, we need to determine who has the authority to answer those questions. If we believe that ultimately God has the authority to determine what is right and true, no matter how hard the question will be, we will see that he has the answer. But if we believe that only we have the authority to determine what is true, then we will only find answers that validate our own autonomy and independence from God.

In this way, there is an unhealthy version of doubt. When doubt is untethered to the anchor of God’s authority, it spirals into unbelief. Like an out-of-control autoimmune disease, it can become self-destructive. If taken to its logical end, such doubt can lead us toward a worldview wherein nothing can true, and nothing has meaning.

In much of popular culture today, it is often celebrated to ask hard questions. But it is not as celebrated to do the hard, humble work of finding answers.

To that, I want to say it is intellectually lazy and dishonest to ask hard questions, but refuse to listen to how those questions might be answered. The Christian tradition is filled with centuries of saints who have carefully wrestled with hard questions, many of which are much deeper than the questions that popular culture has put forward.

So, before you reject Christianity, make sure you have taken a good hard look at how some of your deepest questions have been answered throughout Christian history.

In much of today’s culture, deconstructing one’s faith is trendy, easy, and almost romanticized. But allowing hard questions to reconstruct a stronger faith requires diligence, commitment, honesty, humility, and profound faith. That’s because deception is often simple; truth is often much more complicated.

So, may the word of God lead us into truth, and may we have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

3.) A Hard Answer

I told you Habakkuk was hard, right? Habakkuk asks God a hard question. Now, he is going to receive an even harder answer from God.

God begins to answer Habakkuk's prayer in verse 5: *"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"* (Hab 1:5).

Initially, this sounds great. God says, *"Get ready! I'm about to do something big and something new. In fact, it is so big and so new that you wouldn't even believe it if I told you exactly what I am doing."*

I have heard sermons on this verse, and all of those sermons have been super positive. Those messages all said something along the lines of, "Get ready for the breakthrough that God is about to give you!"

But if we keep reading, we will see that God is saying the exact opposite. Look at verse 6: *"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"* (Hab 1:6).

The "Chaldeans" (כְּשָׁדִים) refer to the rising Babylonian Empire. God is saying, *"Habakkuk, I see the sin of my people, and I am sending Babylon to invade Judah, destroy Jerusalem, and send my people into exile."*

The Babylonians are "dreaded and fearsome" (Hab 1:7). They will ride in on horses that are "swifter than leopards" (Hab 1:8). The text says, *"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, for they pile up earth and take it"* (Hab 1:9–10). They are like a windstorm of destruction (Hab 1:11).

God's people will lose their independence and their kingdom. They will lose their temple and their ability to make sacrifices. Many of the Jews will even lose their homes and their ancestral lands. Many will lose their lives. God's answer to Habakkuk's hard question is exile.

But, in exile, God's people will be refined in their faith and holiness. In exile, they will find repentance and purity, and they will rediscover the hope that comes from God alone. In exile, the Prophet Ezekiel will imagine a day when God will give his people new hearts and a new spirit (Ezek 36:26). In exile, the Prophet Daniel will see a vision of one like a Son of Man who will be given authority over all kingdoms of the earth (Dan 7:13-14).

God is sending his people into the nations. But despite the pain, this moment is one step closer toward Jesus; one step forward in God's plan of redemption.

In this way, Habakkuk reminds us there are times when God's discipline is demanded by God's love. He reminds us there are times when God's mercy at times is manifested in his judgment. He reminds us that while God is never the author of evil, his is sovereign enough to bend the power evil for the purpose of his glory and our good.

And that brings us to our own time. The pandemic has certainly resulted in a humbling of the church. It's been a time when so much of what we are able to do has been stripped down.

In a recent article, Thom Rainer predicted that, post-pandemic, the median attendance in American churches will be down by 20%.² That means whether it was about politics, the response to the pandemic, a crisis of faith, or simple complacency, roughly one out of every five people who were attending church this time last year will not be returning to church once the pandemic is over. That is a devastating blow for communities of faith that are already navigating the rise of secularism and political extremism.

But as we read the words of Habakkuk, might we wonder what the Lord is doing among us? The church in America has enjoyed centuries of power and privilege. And in this position, like the kingdom of Judah, perhaps we have fallen into a comfortable, cultural Christianity.

It may be that the Lord, in his mercy, is refining us in this trial. It may be that the Lord, in his mercy, is taking the church out of the place of being a moral majority that controls society from the top down and into being a prophetic minority that influences society from the margins. Perhaps he is placing us, our children, and the generations of Christians that follow us into a position where we know the costliness of following Jesus, so that we might embrace the identity of "elect exiles" (1 Pt 1:1). Perhaps he is removing all the things that are so easy to rely on – money, power, predictability, popularity – so that we would learn to rely on him and him alone.

I was recently visiting with Dane Welch, who serves as one of our elders here at Redeemer. For the last several years, Dane has been a part of a ministry called Crisis Aid that provides key aid for people in this world who are experiencing great suffering and pain. This mission, at times, has caused Dane to travel and meet with Christians in countries where being a Christian is illegal.

Dane told me, "You know there is something the Lord has reminded me of recently. In my life, I have personally known three men who became true martyrs; men who lost their lives because of their faithfulness to Jesus." He said, "You know what they all had in common? In places like America, we teach Christians to make Jesus first. But for these men, Jesus wasn't first. For them, Jesus was *everything!*"

² <https://churchanswers.com/blog/five-ways-the-post-place-church-will-look-different-after-covid/>

Might it be possible that our current season could bring us to a place where Jesus is our everything?

God is at work purifying the church. He may be at work purifying you too. Might our personal renewal precede a work of corporate revival that God would bring about in our generation?

Conclusion

Exile comes first. But there will be a return home. Suffering comes first. But redemption draws near. Death comes first. But resurrection is coming.

In the weeks to come, we will see how Habakkuk teaches us to understand all suffering and pain through the lens of the cross and resurrection. He will teach us to recalibrate our vision with eternity and God's plan for history in view.

Habakkuk's words are often piercing and convicting. But they will help us in this season of Lent to turn away from sin and toward God.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we have eyes that look to the Lord in our trials. May we have the faith to ask the hard questions when life hurts. May we have the trust to yield to what God is doing, even when it is uncomfortable. May we learn to rest in the truth that though our God is not tame, he is good.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

- 1.) Read Habakkuk 1:1-11. This may be a hard passage to understand on your first reading, but ask some basic questions of the text. Who wrote these words? What was happening when these words were written?
- 2.) Why is it important to study hard or unfamiliar parts of the Bible? How have such studies benefited you in the past? What are some good strategies that might help you understand more difficult biblical passages?
- 3.) Put Habakkuk's questions in Habakkuk 1:2-3 into your own words. The Bible gives us permission to cry out to God and ask him hard questions. Have you had prayed such prayers in your life? How has God responded to those prayers?
- 4.) In this passage, God tells Habakkuk that the Jewish people will be sent into exile. Yet, we know that the purpose of exile was ultimately redemption. How might God be refining you in this last season? How might he be refining the church?
- 5.) How do you plan to steward this season of Lent to focus on Christ?