

# **HABAKKUK**

## Part 2: “The Problem of Evil & the Power of Faith”

Habakkuk 1:12-2:4

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### **Scripture Reading**

*“Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he? You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich. Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever? I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint. And the LORD answered me: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 1:12–2:4, ESV).*

Heavenly Father, open our eyes that we behold wondrous things from your word today. May your Holy Spirit ignite faith in our hearts. In Jesus’s mighty name we pray, AMEN.

### **Introduction**

Habakkuk, the prophet, is having a heart-wrenching dialogue with God. His nation, the kingdom of Judah, is in a spiritual downward spiral. When Habakkuk looks at the society around him, he sees great division, violence, and perversion of justice. He sees that God’s people seem to no longer pay attention to or obey God’s words.

So, Habakkuk, the prophet, cries out in a prayer of lamentation to express his grief.

Earlier in chapter 1 of his book, Habakkuk asks God to answer some pretty hard and honest questions. He is asking, “God, what are you doing? God, are you blind to the sin and corruption of your people? God, why aren’t you doing something about the state of the world around me?”

God answers Habakkuk's hard questions with even harder answers. He tells the prophet, "I do see. I am doing something about it. I am sending the armies of Babylon to conquer Judah, to take my people from their homeland, and send them into exile."

Sometimes, if we are honest, there are times when we pray to God and have already determined in our own hearts what the right answer should be. We anticipate how God will answer or should answer, and we experience disorientation when God disrupts our expectations.

Needless to say, exile is not the answer Habakkuk the prophet wants to hear from God. He wants God to answer his prayer. He wants drastic reform for the kingdom of Judah. He wants renewal and revival – but he still seems only to imagine renewal and revival within the old paradigm of life.

Revival will happen. But it won't happen in the temple of Jerusalem or even within the boundaries of Israel's ancient Promise Land. Revival will happen alongside the rivers of Babylon, as Jewish people are divinely and uniquely positioned in a place where they must utterly reimagine what it means to be the people of God in exile.

God will bring good from this evil of conquest and exile. But that doesn't mean there won't be true suffering that God's people need to grapple with.

For several months now, I have felt drawn to the book of Habakkuk. I've even felt the Lord leading me in prayer to teach this very unfamiliar book of the Bible to our church.

Part of the reason for this is that Habakkuk gives us an invitation to acknowledge the suffering and significance of our own time with honest and open eyes. Habakkuk teaches us to lean into what God is saying; to look carefully at what he is doing. He reminds us that he is working in and through our pain.

I believe our generation is alive at a transitional moment. The Lord may be fundamentally shifting what it looks like to be Christian in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

I believe that, in His mercy, our God may be removing so many things we rely on; things like power, money, popularity, and predictability. He is shifting our paradigms and bringing us to a place of repentance and faith, wherein we have an opportunity to know the power that comes from relying on God alone.

As our world changes around us, we might be tempted to lament, "God, all that is happening around us just doesn't make sense. Why does it seem like the world is winning and the church is struggling?"

And it is with that question in mind that I believe we can rightly tackle our passage of Scripture today wherein we will explore **"The Problem of Evil and the Power of Faith."**

That's the title of today's sermon, and embedded in that title are the two big ideas that we will examine: 1.) The Problem of Evil and 2.) The Power of Faith.

## **Exposition**

### **1.) The Problem of Evil**

God has just told Habakkuk that he will send the Babylonians to conquer Judah and bring his people into exile. Now, it is Habakkuk's turn to talk again. And, understandably, he has some follow-up questions for his Creator.

Look at the first part of verse 12: *"Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One?..."* (Hab 1:12a).

He is saying, "God, aren't you holy and righteous? God, aren't we your chosen people and the apple of your eye? How can our suffering and exile be the answer?"

The verse goes on: *"... We shall not die. O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof"* (Hab 1:12b).

These words are not disagreement, dismissal, or defiance. Rather, the prophet is wrestling with the reality of God's promises and the reality of Judah's situation. There is an apparent disconnect between what Habakkuk believes and what he is experiencing; there is a disconnect between his theology and his life.

Habakkuk goes on to ask, *"You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?"* (Hab 1:13).

Habakkuk is laying out a fairly compelling and logical argument to God. He is saying, "Okay, I agree with you that Judah has sinned against you. We have broken the covenant. We deserve judgment. But of all things in the world, you are going to use *Babylon* to conquer us? Not only are they a pagan nation that worships false gods, but they are an infamously brutal and wicked nation."

And Habakkuk isn't exaggerating about the evil of Babylon. Later in this passage, he compares the nations of the world to the fish of the sea; the Babylonian empire is compared to a fisherman who brings up nations by his hook and dragnet (Hab 1:14-15).

This is a symbol at one level, but it is also closer to reality than you might think. Babylon was a vicious nation that was bent on conquest. By their military might, they invaded surrounding nations, they captured the treasure and wealth of those nations and forced the leaders of those they conquered to walk on foot back to Babylon to serve the Babylonians as slaves [show *IANE Captives with hooks and rings*]. As these exiles were bound, it was a common practice in the ancient Near East for their captors to place hooks in their mouths or rings in their noses so that they could be harnessed with a rope and led like livestock (cf. Amos 4:2).

This is a horrific image, and this is what God has told Habakkuk will happen to Judah.

It just doesn't make sense to the prophet. The crux of Habakkuk's complaint is, "How can a holy and righteous God judge my nation's evil by using a nation whose evil is even greater?"

I don't believe that it is that much of a stretch to compare what Habakkuk is articulating and feeling to our own culture and our own moment in history. In the last few years, we have witnessed many high-profile Christian leaders be exposed for doing grossly immoral things in the dark. We have seen major denominations be excoriated for systematically covering up corruption and abuse through investigative reporting. And it is good and necessary for these things to be brought into the light. Yet, often the people who uncover the sin of the church are not Christians, but rather those who take delight in dishonoring the church and beliefs of the Christian gospel.

We, like Habakkuk, might feel the need to say, "God, you are holy and righteous, and I understand that you need to expose the sin and hypocrisy of your people. But do you have to do it through people who delight in our fall? God, I can understand why you might be allowing the American church to lose its influence. But why is it that those who seem to be the most ungodly and worldly are those who are rising in power? God, if you are good, why is it that your people do evil things and experience suffering at the hands of evil people?"

These are hard questions to wrestle with. Perhaps you have witnessed the turmoil of being confronted with such questions, whether in your own heart or the heart is someone you love.

As a person who has personally wrestled with doubt, I believe that it is utterly unhelpful to stick our heads in the sand and avoid the hard questions. The suffering of life will inevitably provoke those questions. And what I have come to love and respect about the Bible is that not only is the Bible not afraid of such deep and difficult questions, the Bible is willing to ask those questions for us.

That is exactly what is happening in the book of Habakkuk. The inspired words of Scripture are leading us to engage what philosophers and theologians have called "theodicy" or "the problem of evil."

The Bible doesn't give us a simple solution to the problem of evil – it gives us *a story*. It is the story of an infinitely good and infinitely powerful God who has not abandoned his creation to the death and destruction of sin but has instead launched a plan of redemption at great cost to himself.

Now, already this should show us some wrong answers to the problem of evil. There are some theological frameworks that would seek to reduce God to a powerful but very limited being who is just as surprised by evil and suffering as we are. In this scenario, God is good, but he is not powerful. According to this view, because God is not sovereign over evil, he is not accountable for evil. But this view of God is not only unbiblical, it is

unhelpful. It gives us zero comfort when we experience the white-hot stab of suffering and grief.

“But,” you might ask, “If God really is all-powerful, how could he allow such terrible things to happen?”

This is an understandable question. But it makes an assumption that we should not make. It presumes that if we possessed God’s power, his wisdom, his perfect sense of justice and goodness, that we would run the universe differently.

However, we do not see what God sees. We were not there when he laid the foundations of the earth. We cannot see with crystal clarity how history will end. We have a very limited vantage point. And just because we cannot immediately understand the purpose of our pain or the world’s pain does not mean that such a purpose does not exist.

Some people do not want to hear that answer. They find it easier to believe that there is no God, that meaning in life is something we must determine for ourselves, that right and wrong are common sense realities that we must come together as a society and define according to our needs and the spirit of the age.

But herein lies an even bigger problem. Are we really willing to say that morality is just something that society invents and changes at will? Are we willing to let morality become a truly relative reality that we can define and redefine based on the desires of a given society? History is littered with societies that thought genocide was good. History is filled with nations that thought it was morally acceptable for people to enslave other people. History is filled with cultures that thought it right to treat women and children as second-class citizens. If morality is determined by societies of people and not by God, who are we to say such genocide, slavery, and abuse are evil?

No, deep in our bones, we know there is such thing as goodness and evil. Even when we cannot agree on what is right and what is wrong, all people have recognized there is such thing as right and wrong. Even more, there is a sense that we commonly experience wherein we feel *obligated* to do what is right. There are things we ought to do and ought not to do.

But the word “ought” makes no sense if all we are is matter-in-motion, and morality is a construct of society. No, as soon as we say the word “ought,” we have entered into a theistic worldview. As soon as we grant the notions of “right” and “wrong” and make the claim that we should do what is right and not do what is wrong, we have entered into a framework of reality that only makes sense if there is a God.

But can a being that is so beyond us in every way actually love us and give us comfort when we experience the brokenness of this sin-fractured creation? Is it possible that while God did not author evil, he can still sovereignly use it for his glory and our good?

The answer to those questions – and, indeed, the most profound answer to the problem of evil – is *the cross of Jesus Christ*. Jesus did not go to the cross by accident or

happenstance. Acts 2:23 tells us he was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.”

The cross is God’s way of confronting evil. The cross shows us that God is not unsympathetic to our suffering. In Christ, God has personally felt and experienced the brokenness of this world. He has known the pain of grief and the sting of betrayal. He has been broken and abused by corrupt religious and government institutions.

But on a spiritual level, the cross shows us something more. The cross shows us that evil must be judged. However, instead of causing his people to pay the cosmic penalty for sin, Christ Jesus has paid that penalty himself. At the cross, God has made a way to end evil without ending us.

## **2.) The Power of Faith**

Habakkuk has prayed his doubts and his fears. He has not denied God’s goodness or his power. He has chosen to lay his cares before God. And after Habakkuk honestly prays to the Lord, he determines to sit and wait for the Lord to respond to him. Look at verse 1 of chapter 2: *“I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint”* (Hab 2:1).

The image is of an ancient watchman standing guard at night on the walls of his city. His posture is one of expectation and vigilance.

Waiting on the Lord is not easy or passive. I once heard an older pastor say, “Waiting on the Lord is not like laying in your backyard hammock, drinking ice tea on a summer evening. Waiting on the Lord is like *holding a plank* until the coach says to let go.”

There are times in our lives when the Lord positions us in a place where we must wait on him. But in the waiting, he is at work within us. In the waiting, we are tuning our hearts to hear what he is saying. In the waiting, he is often preparing us for something new.

And God does respond. Verses 2 and 3: *“And the LORD answered me: ‘Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay’”* (Hab 2:2–3).

God is saying, “I will show you a vision. This vision is not just for you but for your community for history. This vision culminates in a plan for all people an all time.”

And then here is the big verse; the verse that is arguably the thesis of Habakkuk and the reason it was written: *“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith”* (Hab 2:4).

Look at the first half of this verse: *“His soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him.”* Who is this referring to? In an immediate sense, this is talking about the king of

Babylon, who, in his pride and greed, want to conquer the world. But there is a broader meaning.

God is saying, on this side of eternity, empires like Babylon have always existed, and they will always exist. For sinful man, the only solution for the pain in this world is only more power. Men will always be tempted to exalt of some version of the kingdom as that which can give us ultimate hope.

But this is not the way for the people of God. For the people of God, “...*the righteous shall live by his faith*” (Hab 2:4b).

For the people of God, our hope will be in the goodness of our God. Our hope will be in the promise that our God has a plan for history. Our hope will be in the God who has shown himself faithful in the past will be good in the future.

Empires will rise and fall. After Babylon will come Persia; after Persian will come Greece; after Greece will come Rome. But over and above the kingdoms of men, God is working his plan. Rome will build the cross that will crucify Christ and the amphitheaters where Christians will be martyred. But Rome will also build the roads, which will bring the gospel into the western world.

Right before the fall of the kingdom of Judah, when Habakkuk lived and ministered, we know that the kings of Judah were working hard to save themselves. They thought that their political persuasion or military alliances might save them. They were even flirting with making an alliance with the Pharaoh of Egypt! But they never considered placing their faith in the God who gave them their Promised Land in the first place.

And even today, the kingdoms of men are vying for our allegiance and hope. There are so many voices asking us to place our trust in some work of man. But Habakkuk reminds us, the answer of the righteous is faith.

American Christians are often under-disciplined in the writings of Habakkuk. But Paul and the early apostles weren't.

Habakkuk 2:4 “...the righteous shall live by his faith” will be quoted three times in the New Testament (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11-12; Heb 10:38). This verse will become the thesis of Paul's letter to the Romans (Rom 1:17). In turn, when Martin Luther rediscovers Habakkuk's words in Romans, he will launch the Protestant Reformation.

The fact that this verse features so prominently in the New Testament reminds us that there is this ever-present temptation to twist Christianity into a religion of performance.

But the gospel will be about salvation by faith. Religion is man getting to God. Gospel is the announcement that God has come to man. Good advice is about something you can do. Good news is about something that has been done. We don't earn good news – but we can respond to it. We can have faith in it.

The righteous shall live by faith. But what is faith? Faith is not wishful thinking, or pretending like something is true when it is not. Faith is not something we do to control God. Faith is a response to God.

As some of the medieval theologians have taught, faith has three layers. Faith is *knowing* that God is true. Faith is *believing* that God is true. And finally, and most importuning, faith is *trusting* that God is true.

In what or whom do you trust when the world falls into chaos?

I remember when my son was three years old playing in the backyard, and he attempted to climb our wooden fence. Thankfully, he wasn't able to make it over the fence, but he did succeed in lodging a massive wooden splinter in his hand, just beneath his thumb. He wept at the pain, but he wept even more when I told him I now needed to dig that splinter out his hand.

Even though his mind could not possibly understand what was happening in that moment, I knew the only way I could save him from an even greater problem and an even greater pain was, in that moment, to do something that would cause him pain. And he raged against my wife and me, as my wife held him down, while I pressed the shard of wood from his body.

I wasn't angry at him for his weeping or fear. But I remember longing for the day when he would be mature enough to trust me.

And as much as I love my children with fierceness and passion, my love for my sons does not even for a moment compare to the love that God has for you. There may be times when he must send his people into exile. There may be times when he wounds us for the sake of our healing. There may be times when we do not know what the future holds. But we can trust the character of the one who holds our future.

## **Conclusion**

So, Redeemer Christian Church, in our when we are confronted with the problem of evil, may we learn to direct our gaze to the cross of Jesus Christ. And when we feel like life is out of control, may we learn to trust and rest in the goodness of our God, who always in control, and who is always ordering all things for his glory and our good.

AMEN.

## **Discussion Starters for Gospel Community**

1.) Read Habakkuk 1:12-2:4. How would you summarize Habakkuk's complaint to God? How would you summarize God's response?

2.) The kingdom of Judah will be judged for their wickedness, but God will use Babylon – an even more wicked nation – to discipline Judah. Can you think of



moments in the Bible, world history, or even your own story when God has used the power of evil for the good of his people?

3.) How is Habakkuk 2:1 a picture of waiting on the Lord? Have there been moments when you have had to wait on God? What have you learned in these seasons?

4.) Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times directly in the New Testament (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11-12; Heb 10:38). Look up these passages and discuss what they mean. What does it mean for us to “live by faith”?

5.) Faith can be defined as knowing, believing, and trusting in what is true about God. What does it mean for you to trust God? How should we cultivate trust in God?