

WHY DOES GOD SEEM INDIFFERENT TO PRAYER, SUFFERING AND EVIL? HABAKKUK 01:01–04

DIVISION OVERVIEW Habakkuk 01: 01–2:20

The book of Habakkuk opens with several questions, anguished pleas that no doubt take some readers by surprise. At the very start, Habakkuk cries out to God (1:2-4). His first words express a heartfelt complaint to the LORD, essentially asking: “How long will my prayers go unanswered? Why, LORD, are you not answering my cry for help?” These questions have been asked by multitudes of God’s people in every generation and are still being asked today.

To understand the anxiety behind Habakkuk’s pleas, it is helpful to understand the times in which he lived. Judah in Habakkuk’s day was a nation in total rebellion against God. The people had utterly forsaken the LORD, rebelling against His Holy Word. Idolatry, oppression and violence were widespread. As a result, injustice plagued Judean society. Few righteous believers remained, and these faithful few were often persecuted and oppressed. Everywhere in Judah the strong were taking advantage of the weak, the rich and powerful were exploiting the poor, and leaders at every level were abusing the very people they were appointed to protect. Habakkuk looked at all of the corruption and wondered how God could allow such evil to flourish. Why was God not protecting the righteous and innocent? Why was He not punishing the wicked and the guilty?

God’s first reply was, “Look and be amazed!” The LORD was going to act and act swiftly. He was raising up a nation (Babylon) to conquer and enslave Judah (1:5-11). Judah’s inhabitants were going to be judged for their rebellion against God and for their crimes against one another. However, this answer only raised more questions in the prophet’s mind (1:12-17). How could God use such a barbaric and ruthless nation to punish His people? How long would the LORD tolerate the wicked and allow the suffering of His own people? The LORD answered Habakkuk by telling him to write down the revelation he was about to receive. He told the prophet that he must await the appointed time for justice. The LORD was indeed going to act, but He would do so in His own time.

These are the timeless issues and difficult questions Habakkuk wrestled with. As you study this weighty passage of Scripture, keep in mind the untold numbers of people who suffer in any given age as well as those who are being crushed by oppression and injustice. All the while, true believers are still crying out to the LORD every day, wondering if and when their prayers will be heard. To these earnest believers and to the faithful in every age, the great book of Habakkuk has much to say.

Introduction: Habakkuk 01:01–11

Why does evil exist? How can a loving God, a God who is all-powerful and all-wise, tolerate evil and suffering? Questions about suffering and evil have puzzled the human heart since the beginning of time. These questions are not abstract. They deal with real, everyday life. They arise because the world is not as it should be. Rather, the world is sinful and corrupt. Something has gone terribly wrong. We need only to read the daily news or to observe the world around us to know this is true. Evil seems to prosper and virtue goes unrewarded. The guilty often go free while the innocent suffer. Such observations have caused men and women of every generation, believers and unbelievers alike, to ask:

- When will justice ever be achieved ?
- Why does God at times seem indifferent?
- Does the LORD not hear our prayers?
- Why does God tolerate injustice and evil?
- Why does God allow suffering, especially of the righteous and faithful?

Hundreds, if not thousands, of books have been written and dedicated to these subjects — entire branches of philosophy and religion. Yet, few people turn to God’s Word for help, the one place that provides answers. Thousands of years ago, the prophet Habakkuk confronted the very same issues and was deeply plagued by them. Unlike so many, though, Habakkuk turned to the LORD for answers, not to the world. This is, *Two Troubling Questions That Puzzle the Human Heart — Question One: Why Does God Seem Indifferent to Prayer, Suffering and Evil?* Habakkuk 1:1-11.

I. The question raised about God’s apparent indifference (vv. 1-4).

II. The answer given by God: look at events and be utterly amazed (vv. 5-11).

Habakkuk 01:01–04 Why Does God Seem Indifferent to Prayer, Suffering and Evil?

Habakkuk opens his book by coming straight to the point. He raises a question about God’s *apparent* indifference. In fact, his initial series of questions shows that he was a careful observer of society and that he knew God’s righteous requirements for His people. He knew how God’s people were supposed to live. But as he surveyed his nation and society, Habakkuk was greatly grieved. He was disturbed by all the corruption and injustice he witnessed. The nation was full of strife and lawlessness, greed and oppression. More and more the wicked prospered while the righteous suffered at their hands. God’s servant was genuinely puzzled by the rampaging evil and the fact that the LORD seemed to do nothing about it. Why was God silent in the face of such evil and suffering?

1. These critical issues concerned Habakkuk (vv. 1-3). He received or saw a vision from God (v. 1). The Hebrew word for saw (hazah) commonly refers to visions received by the prophets and means *to see in a vision* (see Isa 1:1; 2:1; 13:1; Ezek 12:27; Amos 1:1; Mica 1:1). Thus the book of Habakkuk records an actual vision of judgment that God gave His servant. Note that Habakkuk called the vision *a burden or hardship* (massa). Massa is sometimes translated as oracle, meaning a prophetic message from the LORD, one that is heavy and burdensome. These same two words, burden and saw, are also used in the book of Isaiah: “The burden of Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz did see” (Isa 13:1). No doubt, God’s message to Habakkuk was burdensome. The prophet was first burdened by the sins of his people, and then, for a time, by God’s response to his questions — a response that promised judgment on the whole nation (1:5-11). God’s first response would burden the prophet greatly, so much so that he became discouraged and perhaps even disillusioned. However, he did what all believers should do when discouraged or burdened: he prayed. He took his burden to the LORD and poured out his heart to God.

a. In prayer, Habakkuk asked several bold questions. His first question was: Why did God not answer his prayer and help His people (v. 2)? Habakkuk had apparently been pleading for God’s help for some time, but so far had received no answer. For this reason, he cried out asking God how long he must call for help, how long before the LORD would hear and answer his prayers. We do not know how long the prophet had been praying and seeking God’s help, but we can imagine it was quite some time, perhaps months or even years. He had been waiting for an answer to his prayers at least long enough to reach the point of frustration.

We can see just how frustrated the prophet had become by his choice of words. The first instance of “cry out” is the Hebrew word shawa. It simply means to cry for help. This word is used frequently in *Psalms* and *Job*. However, the second instance of “cry out” is a completely different word. The Hebrew is zaaq and means to shriek and to cry out in great distress. It is an urgent cry due to anguish or danger (*Strong’s Concordance*). Habakkuk was in anguish over the condition of his nation, and the nation was in danger because of its rebellion against God. So Habakkuk prayed fervently, shrieking and crying out in distress, wondering why it was taking the LORD so long to answer.

b. Habakkuk asked a second question: Why did God not save His people from violence (v. 2)? The Hebrew word used for violence is hamas. It does not mean physical violence or violence from natural disasters. It refers to the violence of sin and extreme wickedness. In this sense, *hamas* was the cause of the flood (Gen 6:11, 13). It also carries the added meaning of total corruption and transgression of God’s law (Ezek 22:26; Zep 3:4). Therefore, Habakkuk was essentially asking the LORD why He allowed such extreme wickedness and corruption among His people. Why was God

allowing the wicked to prosper and the righteous to suffer? The writer of Ecclesiastes made a similar observation:

Eccl 8:14 There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless.

- c. Habakkuk asked a third question that is as relevant today as it was in the prophet's day: Why did God seem to tolerate evil (v. 3)? Why did it appear He was doing nothing about all the wickedness, corruption and injustice in the world? Why did God not stamp out...
- evil and wickedness?
 - injustice and oppression?
 - destruction and violence?
 - strife and conflict?
 - pain and suffering?

The prophet's questions reveal just how low Judah had sunk. Judean society had become utterly corrupt. (Other prophets such as Jeremiah, Micah, Joel and Amos describe in more depth just how depraved Judah had become.) The nation was crooked from the top levels of government to the lowest rungs of the social ladder. People greedily sought to defraud and cheat one another. Leaders, rulers and the upper classes were especially guilty, even priests and ministers. Rulers were exploiting and oppressing the people under them. Leaders were hungry for money and abused their power and positions. Priests and ministers cared more about growing rich than about teaching the truth of God's Word. The result was unrestrained greed, unfairness, strife, conflict and violence. Habakkuk witnessed the people's crimes and saw how wicked the people had become. He not only grieved over all the suffering caused by their wickedness, but he was also confused and frustrated. Why had God allowed things to get this bad? How could God let His people sink this low?

2. The consequences of evil actions were several-fold. Therefore, Habakkuk continued his complaints to God (v. 4).
- a. The law was ineffective (v. 4a). It was being ignored; in fact, it had become paralyzed (slacked). This is a fitting description because God's law no longer had any effect on the people's behaviour. Its strength and influence had been sapped. The people had continued in sin so long that God's Word had lost its power for them.

The prophet may also have been protesting that God's silence and inaction had caused the law to become feeble and weak. In the prophet's mind, God was doing nothing about the evil in Judah, and wickedness was growing stronger than righteousness. In either case, it is clear that the people had strayed so far from God's Word that it no longer had any effect on how they lived.

- b. God's servant further complained that justice had become corrupted (v. 4b). Here Habakkuk was likely referring to the people's greed and selfishness, their total

lack of concern for each other. The rich and powerful were exploiting the poor and powerless. And the poor and powerless had become covetous — lusting for things that others possessed. People of every social class were trampling on each other to get what they wanted. Government at every level had broken down:

- => Social support systems had fallen apart.
- => Courts and the judicial system were plagued by corruption.
- => Judges were taking bribes.
- => Officials were demanding payoffs.

The end result was that justice was completely perverted. Corruption and dishonesty were the rule of the day and no one could get a fair deal.

- c. The prophet's last complaint was that the righteous were being surrounded by the wicked; they were hemmed in and being persecuted, treated unfairly (v. 4c). Clearly, the few faithful believers left in Judah, those who followed God and lived by His Word, were being oppressed by the corrupt and wicked people around them. Since justice had been perverted, the righteous had nowhere to turn; they had no one to stand up for their rights. Keep in mind that the righteous would not use corrupt means to get what they wanted. They feared the LORD and sought to obey His Holy Word; therefore, they would not bribe judges, pay off officials or exploit the system to get what they needed. In this way, they were helpless and easily taken advantage of by those with no conscience, those who had no concern for obeying God's laws. Habakkuk thus complained that the righteous were hemmed in, surrounded and trapped by the unrighteous.

Note the overall force of this verse (v. 4). It captures in a few words the tragic state of affairs in Judah. God's laws were being ignored; justice was therefore perverted, and the righteous had nowhere to turn for help. This sad situation broke the prophet's heart and sent him to his knees before God. He was troubled, bewildered, frustrated. His questions arose out of his grief and frustration. Still, Habakkuk knew where to turn, and he did so. He took his great burden, his grief and all his emotions to the LORD in prayer.

Thought 1. Evil in this world is a fact — a shocking and undeniable fact. In every generation, corruption and injustice wage war against God and His Word. All creation groans at the human race's rebellion against God (Rom 8:20-2). Human beings can be particularly evil. It is we who commit the greatest atrocities against God and His created order. It is we who commit the most hideous crimes against nature and each other. The phrase "man's inhumanity to man" is a sad portrait of human life (Rom 8:20-22). We were created to be human — placed at the pinnacle of God's created order, made to rule and govern and take care of the earth, even to fellowship with the LORD Himself. Instead, we abuse one another and the earth itself. We act inhuman

and inhumane — worse than beasts and brutes. Consider some of the violent and depraved acts people commit against one another every day...

- murder
- incest
- slavery
- war
- pornography
- discrimination
- oppression
- exploitation
- genocide
- physical, sexual and mental abuse
- child, spousal and elder abuse
- prostitution
- rape

...and on and on. Every one of these crimes is occurring somewhere in the world today, right at this very moment — and not infrequently. In truth, these acts take place continuously, every day, all over the world. They are happening in every nation and city, in our own towns and neighbourhoods. To anyone with eyes half-open and the courage to look, evil is a glaring truth. It cannot be denied. The question is not whether evil exists, but what are we doing about it?

All of us need to ask ourselves truthfully: Do the things that break God's heart break our own hearts? Do the wicked deeds, the corruption, the injustice and all the inhumane acts we witness and hear about every day disturb and distress us? Or, have we become calloused, cold-hearted and insensitive to the evil around us? Are we ignoring the cries of those who suffer or who are in despair? Or do we shriek in desperation as Habakkuk did and plead for the LORD's justice and mercy?

Every minister and every believer should pray as Habakkuk did. We should observe, stay informed, be on watch and pray for the LORD's justice. We should be willing to be burdened and broken by the evil around us. And, like Habakkuk, we should take our godly burdens to the LORD. Not to do so would be an even greater burden!

Mark 7:21 *“For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery.”*

Rom 3:10-18 *As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” “The poison of vipers is on their lips.” “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

Rom 3:23 *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

Isa 64:6 *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. (See also 2 Pet 2:12; Lev 18:25; Deut 32:5; 2 Chr 7:14; Psa 14:3; Isa 58:9; Jer 16:12.)*

Thought 2. Habakkuk was heavily burdened by the corruption and injustice of his day. As a result, he cried out to the LORD, pleading for God's help and deliverance.

Habakkuk's heart-wrenching pleas should lead us to examine ourselves:

- Are we, like Habakkuk, burdened by the evil we see around us?
- Are we burdened by the sins of society, our community and our nation?
- Do corruption and injustice cause us grief?
- Are we pleading with God for His justice and righteousness to prevail?

The point to grasp is that we need to be burdened by the same things that burden the LORD. We need to be grieved and broken by the sin around us. And like Habakkuk, we need to take our burdens to Him. If we want God to hear and respond to our prayers, we must care about the things for which He cares, acting upon the things dear to God's own heart. Listen to what God's Word says about seeking the LORD and praying according to His will:

Deut 4:29 *But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all our heart and with all our soul.*

2 Chr 7:14 *If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

Jer 29:13 *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*

Jer 33:3 *'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.'* (See also John 9:31; Isa 58:8-11.) ■