

WHY DOES GOD SEEM INCONSISTENT BY TOLERATING THE WICKED? HABAKKUK 02:01–05

Introduction

Why does God tolerate or put up with the wicked and the evil of this world? Why does God allow...

- the rich to oppress the poor?
- the powerful to subject and enslave the weak?
- the evil to ridicule and persecute the godly?
- the wicked to seduce and cause the downfall of the righteous?

If there truly is a God in heaven — the Creator of the human race — why does He allow such behaviour among His created beings in a world made by His own hands (power)? This question has puzzled thoughtful people from the earliest days of human history. The present Scripture helps to answer the question.

In the previous passage, Habakkuk approached the LORD with questions that troubled him. He was disturbed by the injustice and wickedness he saw in his nation. The rich and powerful were growing richer and more powerful, while the poor and powerless grew poorer and even more helpless. There was corruption throughout government and injustice in the courts. Leaders at every level of society were conspiring together to increase their power and wealth. In short, the Israelites were abusing and exploiting one another. They had rejected the LORD and were pursuing their own interests and insatiable desires. Moreover, they pursued their corrupt desires by any means, even by violence and murder.

Therefore, Habakkuk took his concern to the LORD (1:1-4). He asked the LORD why He was not punishing the wicked or answering the prayers of the righteous. The LORD answered Habakkuk and told him that He would indeed punish the wicked. In fact, the LORD was sending the ruthless nation of Babylon to judge the Israelites. This answer stunned the prophet, just as God had said it would (1:5-6). Naturally, it also deeply troubled Habakkuk. He could not understand why God would use such an evil and wicked nation to punish the Israelites, the nation chosen to be God's people. How could there be justice in this? Burdened in spirit, Habakkuk approached the LORD again seeking answers to these questions. This is, *Two Troubling Questions That Puzzle the Human Heart — Question Two: Why Does God Seem Inconsistent by Tolerating the Wicked?* Habakkuk 1:12-2:20

- I. The question raised about God's apparent inconsistency (vv. 1:12-17).
 - II. The patience needed when seeking answers from God (v. 2:1).
 - III. The clear answer given by God: live by faith (vv. 2:2-5)
 - IV. The answer given by God continued: warn the people of God's coming judgment — His five terrifying woes (vv. 2:6-20).
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I. Habakkuk 02:01 The Patience Needed When Seeking Answers from God

God's people need patience when seeking answers from the LORD. We must be diligent but patient in prayer. We can, be sure that our prayers are heard. God's Word declares so. But we do not always receive the answers we want, nor do we always receive answers immediately. The Lord responds in His perfect timing and according to His will. Therefore, every child of God needs to wait patiently when seeking answers from the Lord. However, as we learn next from the example of Habakkuk, this is not a passive or idle waiting.

1. Habakkuk stood watch like a guard and waited for God's answer (v. 1). The prophet had lodged his complaints. He had pleaded with God for answers to the burning questions of his heart. Now, he knew that he must wait. But he would not wait idly by, nor would he be impatient. He set his heart and mind to stand watch. He determined to be diligent and purposeful, to focus his whole existence on listening for the voice of the LORD. Like a guard or sentinel, he would watch for God's answer and not abandon his post until it came. This is the essence of a true prophet of God, a true minister of the LORD. The true prophet or minister waits for the words of God — the message God has for His people. Only God has the Word of Truth and Life. If our words are merely our own, if they do not come from the LORD, they are vain and empty. Habakkuk knew that he must wait on further revelation from God before he could speak anything of value to his people. Thus, he determined to stand watch.
2. Habakkuk waited expectantly (v. 1). He knew God would answer him. He did not know when, but he knew an answer would come. He determined to wait as long as needed, to be ready and alert when the answer came. As a faithful guard, he would be ready to act at a moment's notice.

Thought 1. Note Habakkuk's faith and trust. Again, we have much to learn from the prophet's example. His faith was proven by his willingness to wait. His trust in the Lord was real, evidenced by his willingness to stand watch. This is genuine trust. People with little or no faith are impatient. They are not willing to wait. Like an impulsive child, they demand an answer immediately, and if they do not get it, they grow impatient and move on to the next thing. But true faith requires patience, and patience brings about maturity in Christ. Therefore, all believers are called to be patient in prayer. We must wait expectantly for answers and be willing to stand watch. This simply means that we must focus our minds on listening for the voice of God, being prepared and ready to receive His Word. This may require us to change our priorities. We may have to rearrange our schedules to spend more time in God's Word and in meditation. We may even need to seek new friends or godly counsel. The point is that if we truly want to receive answers from God, we must do whatever it takes to prepare ourselves. We must not only wait for answers but also wait expectantly, in faith. Like Habakkuk, we must be alert and ready to act when the

answer comes. Listen to what God's Word says about seeking Him humbly, diligently and obediently:

Mat 26:39 *Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."*

Heb 10:22 *let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*

James 4:8 *Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*

1 John 3:22 *And receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.*

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.*

Josh 5:14 *Then Joshua fell face-down to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my LORD have for his servant?"*

Psa 27:14 *Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.*

Psa 62:5 *Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.*

Isa 40:31 *But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

Isa 58:9 *Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk.*

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

II. Habakkuk 02:02–05 The Clear Answer Given by God: Live by Faith

When God's answer comes, it always comes clearly. The LORD unmistakably reveals His will to those who wait on Him and who are willing to obey. His answers to our prayers may not be what we expect, but God does answer and He answers decisively, telling us what to do. He may not explain why, and we may not understand the reasons for His answer or for His instructions. But by trusting the LORD and obeying His Word, the reasons usually become clear. The key is obedience. We must obey the Word of the LORD by acting on it.

1. Write down God's answer and revelation: others are to read and spread God's message (vv. 2-3). "The LORD answered me." What beautiful words! The LORD answered the prayers and pleas of His dear servant. Imagine the prophet's emotions at this point in his long conversation with God. He had stood watch and waited expectantly, likely for a very long time. Now, God's message had finally come and Habakkuk was ready to receive it.

What did the LORD say? God's first instruction to the prophet was to write down the vision. Habakkuk was to record the Word of God. This was a critical message; therefore, it had to be recorded for all people to read. It had to be preserved for those living both then and now, for the whole human race. People in future ages would need to read and hear about God's message to all mankind.

- a. God's revelation (His vision and plan) will be fulfilled in an appointed time: the end times, at the return of Christ, Heb 10:37-38; 2 Pet 3:3-13 (v. 3a). These are beautiful words, though words that are difficult for some people to accept: *an appointed time*. God told Habakkuk that His plan for dealing with evil — for establishing justice on earth — would be revealed according to God's time-frame, not Habakkuk's time-frame nor that of any other human being. This meant that once again the prophet had to wait. God's vision plan would be fully disclosed and fully accomplished in God's perfect time.
- b. God's plan is a certainty (v. 3b). The LORD's message to Habakkuk spoke of the end. This refers to the end of Babylon's dominance and to the end times when Christ returns to set up God's kingdom on earth (Heb 10:37-38; 2 Pet 3:3-13). The Hebrew words in this verse suggest that God's revelation — His ultimate plans for Babylon and the last days — hastens or pants toward its end. This did not mean that God's revelation would be fulfilled quickly or according to Habakkuk's desired time-frame. It meant that the fulfilment of God's plans would not be delayed beyond the time He had appointed — not even for a moment. In fact, though the end may seem to *tarry* or to be delayed, it will surely come. God's judgment of evil and His establishment of justice on earth are certainties. They will be accomplished at their appointed time. All of history is moving toward this climactic finish.

Note that the LORD warned the prophet to be patient. He commanded Habakkuk and the people to *wait*. The command was meant for us also — all who read and hear God's Word today. Again, patience is required. This is because we live between the time of God's revelation and the complete fulfilment of His revelation. God has promised to execute perfect justice on earth, to bring all things to a perfect end. He has revealed His plans to us through His Holy Word. As believers and ministers of His Word, *we cannot wait passively*, we must stand watch, be alert, be ready to act. Until the glorious day of fulfilment arrives, we must do everything possible to share God's revelation — His Word — with the whole world.

Mat 24:44 “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

Mark 13:35 “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back — whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn.”

James 5:8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

Rev 3:11 *I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.*

Rev 22:7, 20 *“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.” He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

Thought 1. God’s revelation will be fulfilled at its *appointed time*. This fact reveals two essential truths about the LORD and the world in which we live:

⇒ First, the LORD is in control of this world and of human history. He rules the earth despite appearances to the contrary, despite the existence of evil. He does not condone, endorse or cause everything in this world that happens — not the sin and evil that abounds all around us. But He will redeem, restore and use everything that happens for His ultimate purpose. There may still be evil and corruption in the world, but the whole force of history, the whole current of time, and all of creation are moving toward their ultimate climax. This climax will be the culmination, the conclusion of all things. In the last days, all the world will be brought under Christ’s rule, and His Kingdom will be established forever. God’s Word makes it clear that Christ is Sovereign over all the earth and that He is moving history toward this awesome end. All things were created through and for Christ and for His ultimate glory. All things will be brought under His righteous rule. Listen to what God’s Word says:

Luke 1:33 *“And he [Christ] will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”*

Eph 1:9-12 *And he [God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment — to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

Phil 2:10 *That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.*

Col 1:16 *For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*

Heb 1:1-2 *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways. But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.*

Heb 1:8 *But about the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the sceptre of your kingdom.”*

Rev 11:15 *The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever."*

⇒ Second, there is also an appointed time for everything in our lives. This means that we can relax and have absolute confidence and peace knowing that the LORD is working all things out for good to all who love Him. We do not need to rush or push or force anything in our lives. Everything will happen according to God's timing. The book of *Ecclesiastes* says there is a time for everything and a time for every purpose under heaven:

Eccl 3: 1-8 *There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.*

God's Word also tells us not to worry or be anxious about anything, but to pray about everything:

Phil 4:6 *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

1 Pet 5:6-7 *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

2. Look at the self-sufficient: their desires are crooked or corrupt (v. 4a). God had just told Habakkuk to record the revelation and to wait — it would surely come to pass. Now the LORD came to the core of His message. He told His prophet to consider the proud and self-sufficient Babylonians. Then God began with a stark contrast between the unrighteous and the righteous. The unrighteous are arrogant and puffed up. Their souls are lifted and puffed up within them; they are proud and haughty. They are self-reliant, depending on their own strength and power. Their souls are also corrupt or crooked, not straight and upright. They are swollen with evil desires and wicked schemes. Like the Babylonians, they live by the lusts of their flesh. All their desires, ambitions and plans are crooked and perverse. They are faithless and untrustworthy.
3. Look at the just or righteous: they live by faith (v. 4b). In direct contrast to the proud and faithless are the righteous who live by faith. This means more than just faith or trust in God. The Hebrew (emunah) implies faithfulness and steadfastness. Thus, the righteous live faithfully and steadfastly. They live in trusting fellowship with the LORD, depending on Him for their strength and daily needs. This includes living according

to and in obedience to His Word. Faithfulness is not only an outer behaviour but an inner attitude and stability (Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *New American Commentary*, 324). It is this inner trust and reliance on the LORD that makes the righteous person faithful, stable and strong. In contrast to the unrighteous, the righteous are completely trustworthy. They are loyal, steadfast, and reliable.

That the just or righteous would live by faith was a brief revelation — so brief it could easily be overlooked. But it was full of wisdom for life both then and now. The message was critical for God’s people at that time, essential to their survival. They would need faith to endure the judgment that was coming. They would need to trust in God in order to persevere through the suffering and trials ahead. Babylon was a cruel and ruthless nation, and God’s people would suffer greatly at her hands. Given that it would be crucial for Habakkuk and the people to live by faith, they would have to cling to the promises of God during the most difficult times — days filled with doubt, uncertainty, despair, even terror. Not only would they have to depend upon God for courage, strength, and the will to press on, but they would also have to be faithful and loyal to one another in order to survive.

This message is no less critical today. It is so important that it appears in other Scripture besides *Habakkuk*. These words, “the just will live by faith,” are directly quoted on three occasions in the New Testament (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). In addition, there are dozens of other references to righteousness and justification by faith. The LORD knows how important this message is even to our own survival, and He reminds us of it continually throughout His Word. Consequently, we must wholeheartedly determine to live by faith no matter our circumstances. We must trust the LORD to carry us through every trial, every experience of suffering, just as He did the remnant of Israel.

Thought 1. The righteous live by their faith and their faithfulness. It is our faith in Jesus Christ that saves us. We are justified or counted as righteous even though we are not. It is Christ’s righteousness that is given to us when we believe and trust Him for our salvation. It is also our faith in God’s goodness and in Christ’s love for us that brings us through the many trials of life. As believers, we all suffer hardships, even persecution. But it is our faith and trust in God that makes us faithful and steadfast in spite of all the hardships. Our faith is not in ourselves but in the LORD who is faithful. Truly, we are justified by faith in Christ and must also live by faith daily. Listen to what God’s Word says about justification through faith — being counted as righteous by faith in Christ and about living by faith:

Rom 1:17 *For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*

Rom 3:26 *He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

Rom 4:3 *What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

Rom 5:1 *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Gal 2:16 *Know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.*

Gal 3:11 *Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.”*

Gal 3:24 *So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*

Phil 3:9 *And be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.*

Heb 10:38 *But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.*

Heb 11:7 *By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*

4. Know the sins of the self-sufficient: they are deceived or betrayed (v. 5). After having declared how the righteous are to live, the LORD further described the sins and lifestyles of the unrighteous, the self-sufficient. This list of sins, like God’s message itself, was brief but remarkably complete. These sins described first the Babylonians, but were true for most of Judah and Israel as well. In addition, the sins exposed the corruption of the people’s hearts and lifestyles. Note the sins of the self-sufficient: they are deceived and betrayed by...

- wine
- arrogance
- restlessness
- greed and dissatisfaction
- war and slavery

First, wine is said to betray the self-sufficient. However, wine is only one example. The abuse of any substance has the same effect. The self-sufficient seek to satisfy the lusts of their flesh in any way they can. They live only for themselves. They care more about their own pleasure and satisfaction than they do about the needs of others.

The use of the word wine also implied intoxication and drunkenness, not just selfishness. The Babylonians were known for their drunken celebrations and debauchery (see Dan 5). Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the abuse of wine was associated with carelessness, arrogance, injustice and unrighteousness (actually,

the loss or forfeiting of righteousness, see Prov 31:4-7; Isa 5:11-12, 22-23; Amos 6:6) (Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *New American Commentary*, 326). The reasons for this warning are clear. The abuse of wine leads quickly to all sorts of additional sins and unrighteous behaviour. Drunkenness and the abuse of any substance are expressly forbidden by God's Word. Most of us living today know the pitfalls all too well, and we see the tragic effects of alcohol and drug abuse throughout our communities and cities — perhaps even in our own families. People under the influence of wine or strong drink are much more inclined to become careless, thoughtless, rowdy or violent, sad or depressed, neglectful of duties, intolerant, abusive and a number of other things. In truth, being given over to wine or strong drink is closely tied to — and leads to — many, many others sins that are often far worse.

Prov 31:4-5 *It is not for kings, Lemuel — it is not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.*

Isa 5:11-12 *“Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine.” They have harps and lyres at their banquets, pipes and timbrels and wine, but they have no regard for the deeds of the LORD, no respect for the work of his hands.*

Isa 5:22-23 *Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent.*

Second, the self-sufficient are arrogant. Their pride is evidenced by the fact that they rely on themselves and not on God. They foolishly believe they can meet all their own needs. They do not consider the fact that they were not born by their own power or will. Their birth was by the creative power of God through the laws of nature and birthright that He established. They do not acknowledge or consider that it was God's desire for them to be born and to live. They stubbornly reject the idea that they have been created for a purpose — a higher purpose than merely living for themselves on this earth. They deny the truth that they need God and that every breath they breathe is a gift from God. Indeed, Holy Scripture says that every hair on their heads has been counted. To reject God is not only folly, but it is also the epitome of arrogance. It is the ultimate pride.

1 Cor 3:16 *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?*

Heb 2:7 *You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honour.*

Gen 01:26 *Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”*

Deut 32:6 *Is this the way you repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?*

Third and fourth, the self-sufficient are restless, greedy, dissatisfied and ungrateful. Babylonians were a good example. They were restless for more and more territory, more and more power, more and more wealth, more and more glory — more of almost everything that cannot satisfy the human soul. They were restless because they were greedy. They never had enough and were never satisfied. Like so many today, they were not grateful for what they already had; therefore, they always wanted more.

The example of Babylon shows just how closely linked ingratitude and dissatisfaction are. People who are not thankful for what they have inevitably become dissatisfied. Then they want more and more. They become greedy. This is the very definition of greed: wanting more than we need, more than we can use, more than we can even enjoy. Like the Babylonians, we frequently seek more of everything we can get our hands on, even to the detriment of others. But note a significant fact: if we want more and more of something, it only proves that the thing — whether wealth, position, power or any other object of desire — does not satisfy us — that it can never satisfy us. Dissatisfaction in life is proof that we are pursuing the wrong things, proof that we are missing the purpose for our existence. People cannot be satisfied if they are missing the whole point of their lives. Every person alive is created for fellowship with God and for honouring Him and His Son. Therefore, we can never be satisfied if we ignore and reject our Creator. Dissatisfaction is proof that we are ungrateful and that we have failed to find the true meaning of life. In fact, dissatisfaction can only be cured by a grateful heart.

Rom 1:21 *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

Phil 4:6 *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

Col 3:15 *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... And be thankful.*

1 Th 5:18 *Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

2 Tim 3:2 *People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy.*

Fifth, the Babylonians chose war and slavery as the means to fulfil their lusts. They set their hearts on conquering and enslaving nations to get the many things they wanted — worldly things such as power, revenge, wealth, land, fame and world domination. They sought all this and went to war because they were dissatisfied. Nothing they owned or accomplished satisfied the depths of their souls. They always felt the need for more. It was this vain pursuit to satisfy their lusts that continuously drove the leadership to war, but it was an empty and futile pursuit. All of the world's

wealth — its riches, knowledge, wisdom, resources, power, glory, fame and honour — could never satisfy them. Only the LORD can truly satisfy. And only the pursuit of God and His righteousness can satisfy eternally. Christ Himself proclaimed that He alone can meet mankind's deepest needs.

***Mat 5:6** Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

***John 4:14** “But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*

***John 6:35** Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”*

Finally, consider the irony of the Babylonian people — and all people who enslave others: they themselves become enslaved. People always become slaves to their own greed and appetites. They become slaves to their own arrogance and brutality. And they become slaves to their own futility. Nothing they ever do nor gain will bring lasting satisfaction. In fact, God's Word promises judgment against those who enslave and mistreat others.

***Acts 7:9** Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him.*

***2 Pet 2:3** In their greed these [false] teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.*

***Amos 2:6** This is what the LORD says: “For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.” ■*