

How Long Shall I Cry?

Habakkuk

With Study Questions

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Preface

And the Lord God of their fathers sent *warnings* to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending *them*, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. ¹⁶ But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till *there was no remedy*. ¹⁷ Therefore He brought against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, on the aged or the weak; He gave *them* all into his hand. ¹⁸ And all the articles from the house of God, great and small, the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his leaders, all *these* he took to Babylon. ¹⁹ Then they burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions. ²⁰ And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, ²¹ to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years (2 Chronicles 36:15-21).

Patience and Compassion

Here we have a record of a specific historic event, namely Israel being taken into captivity by Babylon. This was not an event that took place without warning. Because of God's patience and compassion He sent warnings by His messengers. But they mocked, despised and scoffed at the message until there was no remedy.

Making Sense of Tragedy

On September 11, an event took place that, in one way or another, affected everyone in the United States. And not only in the United States—I received a letter from friends in New Zealand who were horrified. They view the United States as the rock of freedom, at least politically, for the entire free world. Yet fifteen terrorists in four jets managed to kill thousands of civilians on American soil.

I have no expertise as politician, military strategist, or in foreign policy, so I will not, here, discuss what our military response should be. As a pastor, however, I am quite concerned with the theological implications of how Christians view an event like this. One person has mentioned to me that one of the most depressing aspects of this whole event is how he has heard clergy explain it.

Some say, “God did not want it to happen, but He will turn it into something good,” others have gone so far as to say “God simply couldn’t stop it from happening.” How can humanity make sense of this tragedy? How are people who believe in the God of the Bible to view an event like this? How can a good God allow such an awful thing to happen?

Potential Views

Of course an atheist doesn’t have a problem with how a good God could allow such an awful thing to happen, for he doesn’t believe in God. The problem the atheist has is calling it awful with any authority. The people dancing in the streets of Afghanistan didn’t think it was so awful. The terrorists didn’t think it was so awful. Why should the atheist think his opinion is superior to theirs? The atheist has a much greater problem—the problem of demonstrating that anything is objectively evil in the first place.

Perhaps polytheism (many gods) is the answer. There are good and bad gods. Sometimes the good gods win, other times the bad gods win. Then again, if there are good gods and bad gods, who is to decide which are good and which are bad? Man must then put himself in the seat of judging the gods; thus making himself god and we’re back to our original atheistic problem.

Perhaps there is one God, but He is incapable of stopping this kind of event. We must ask then, what qualifies a being to be God? If the being is incapable of stopping fifteen men from running amuck on an airline, should we really consider him a deity? Is this the kind of God in whom we are to entrust our eternal souls? This god would be inferior to the polytheistic god; for he is not merely losing battles to other gods, he is losing battles to mere men.

Let us take a step closer to the God of the Scriptures. Perhaps there is one God who had the power to do something but chose not to. It was not His will that this should take place, but He will make the most of it. God will work it out for good. This may be the most popular view. God now becomes the god of damage control. Tragic events are not something God decrees to take place, but He is fully capable of fixing the mess afterwards. The only problem here is, “How do we know when the bad event ends and the fixing begins?” If God is sitting on His hands during certain events in history, how can we possibly know when He is actually involving Himself? How good does the event have to be before we acknowledge that God is now in the act of reparation? It becomes impossible to discern God’s working at all.

This view is popular because it seemingly relieves God of responsibility for the tragic event. But does it? If God could have stopped a tragic event and failed to, would He not be guilty of negligence? If your child is playing on the roof and you know it, and are capable of doing something about it, but allow him to fall off, there is not a court in the land who will not charge you with criminal negligence. Proverbs 24:11 exhorts us to deliver the needy from bloodshed. According to God's law, negligence is incriminating. So unless we go back to the benign god who couldn't stop the event, this view doesn't help abdicate God from His responsibility.

Preface to Habakkuk

Israel and Judgment

How should Christians view this, or any event in history, in terms of God's hand of involvement? I will pursue a study in Habakkuk for the answer. Habakkuk addresses, very closely, the issue before us. But allow me a few preliminary remarks before we make a brief study of this short Old Testament book.

Habakkuk was a prophet for the nation of Israel. The United States is not the nation of Israel. However, the covenant people of God are very strongly represented in the United States. Christ's kingdom in the old covenant was Israel, in the new covenant it is the church. So whatever warnings and curses we read of in Habakkuk are more appropriately directed to the church. But national implications cannot be ignored. A nation who has God as the Lord is blessed (Psalm 33:12). So, to the extent that the covenant people of God (the church) influence the decisions and moral climate of a nation—it is to that extent that the nation will be blessed or cursed.

Secondly, when God judged a nation He would either annihilate or decimate the judged nation. My credibility is precious to me. What happened on September 11 doesn't come close to the kind of judgments we see in Scripture. I don't want to recklessly say this is God's judgment and then hope no one remembers twenty years from now—if things are back to normal—my foolish speculation. At the same time, as we read earlier, God patiently and compassionately sends His messengers. And there comes a time when the wrath reaches a level where there is no remedy. Where it may be an act of faith to turn to God during times of trouble, it is a greater act of faith to merely be faithful, because God is worthy of our faith.

I am not examining Habakkuk to draw thick, dark lines between the events of September 11 and God's judgment. Not that I think there is no merit in the case. I am examining Habakkuk to help us make sense of How God works in history. What we will learn in Habakkuk has been a stumbling block

for all atheists and many Christians. This will become apparent, so without further introduction, let us examine this minor prophet.

Habakkuk

The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw (Habakkuk 1:1).

The burden could include, not only the seeing of the sin of his people, but the vision of how God would respond.

Habakkuk's Prayer

O Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save. ³Why do You show me iniquity, and cause *me* to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. ⁴Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds (Habakkuk 1:2-4).

The cry of Habakkuk is similar to the cry in the pulpits of America. How long will God allow the evil in our land to continue? Our country is full of adultery, fornication, homosexuality, parents killing children, children killing parents. The law seems powerless to do anything about it and the wicked seem to be winning. When will God ever do anything about it?

The Lord's Reply

Look among the nations and watch—Be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you (Habakkuk 1:5).

This would not be the last time Israel would hear this warning. Paul, preaching in the synagogue quotes this passage.

"Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you: ⁴¹'Behold, you despisers, marvel and perish! For I work a work in your days, a work which you will by no means believe, though one were to declare it to you" (Acts 13:40, 41).

The force of the words seems to indicate that the answer will be both astonishing and perplexing; so much so that many who say they believe in the Bible will not believe in what it says here.

Raising up the Chaldeans

“For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places *that are not theirs*. ⁷They are terrible and dreadful; their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves. ⁸Their horses also are swifter than leopards, And more fierce than evening wolves. Their chargers charge ahead; their cavalry comes from afar; they fly as the eagle *that hastens to eat*. ⁹They all come for violence; Their faces are set *like the east wind*. They gather captives like sand. ¹⁰They scoff at kings, and princes are scorned by them. They deride every stronghold, for they heap up earthen *mounds* and seize it. ¹¹Then *his mind changes*, and he transgresses; he commits offense, *ascribing this power to his god*” (Habakkuk 1:6-11).

God’s answer to Habakkuk is that His patience is rapidly coming to an end. As we learned in Genesis 6:3, God will not strive with man forever. His wrath comes to a place where there is no more remedy. But what is striking is the means by which God will exact His judgments. He is raising up the Chaldeans—people God describes in the most vicious terms possible. It sounds as if God is impressed with the ferocious nature of the Chaldeans. But as John Calvin states,

It was not indeed a subject of praise to the Chaldeans, that they were bitter and impetuous: but the Lord could turn these vices to a good purpose, inasmuch as he elicits light from darkness. When, therefore, we read that the Chaldeans were bitter, and also hasty, God thus intimates that he can employ the vices of men in executing his judgments, and yet contract hence no spot nor blemish; for we cannot possibly pollute him with our filth, as he scatters it far away by the brightness of his justice and equity.¹

It is certainly no easy doctrine, hence the prophet’s second question.

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume XV*, (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 28.

The Prophet's Second Question

Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction (Habakkuk 1:12).

Habakkuk does not first contend with the Chaldeans but with God. Rightly does Isaiah record of God,

“I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these *things*” (Isaiah 45:7)

It is God who brings both peace and calamity. Those who believe in God must not view, even terror, as something beyond the scope of God's decrees. Habakkuk then acknowledges that God has appointed the Chaldeans to judge them and correct them. It is neither sensible, nor comfortable to view events, no matter how tragic, outside the pale of God's orchestration. Calvin states,

Except then we be fully persuaded, that God by his secret providence regulates all these confusions, Satan will a hundred times a day, yea every moment, shake that confidence which ought to repose in God.²

Comfort does not lie in atheism, polytheism, or a benign monotheism. It lies in knowing that there is a God who is in control of every event for His own divine purpose. Again, Isaiah records,

“For I *am* God, and *there is no other*; I *am* God, and *there is none like Me*, ¹⁰declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times *things* that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure’” (Isaiah 46:9b, 10)

And again in Daniel,

All the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, “What have You done” (Daniel 4:35)?

² John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XV*, (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 42

Habakkuk's Dilemma

Habakkuk reveals his own humanity in rendering the same questions as the modern Christian,

You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he? ¹⁴ Why do You make men like fish of the sea, like creeping things that have no ruler over them? ¹⁵ They take up all of them with a hook, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their dragnet. Therefore they rejoice and are glad. ¹⁶ Therefore they sacrifice to their net, and burn incense to their dragnet; because by them their share is sumptuous and their food plentiful. ¹⁷ Shall they therefore empty their net, and continue to slay nations without pity (Habakkuk 1:13-17)?

In short, Habakkuk wonders how a righteous God can have anything to do with such evil people as the Chaldeans. He is curious as to why God holds his tongue when person devours another more righteous than he. Why has God made men like fish with no one to protect them? Evil men gather less evil men in their dragnets and then worship the net. Certainly this must be offensive to God.

Questioning God's Answer

Habakkuk's first prayer concerned God's lack of judgment of his own people. Habakkuk's first prayer concerned itself with zeal for God's glory. Now he questions the means by which God answers his prayer. "Certainly Lord we desire you to be glorified and judge evil in our land, but this is a bit much." Habakkuk was bordering on the edge of heresy. He now stops and waits.

I will stand my watch and set myself on the rampart, and watch to see what He will say to me, and what I will answer when I am corrected (Habakkuk 2:1).

There are a couple of things this might mean. Either Habakkuk is waiting for an answer from God so he can respond apologetically to other men, or how he will respond to God's answer. Either way, Habakkuk has the disposition we all ought to have. The answer is the answer God gives me. This is our pursuit this morning.

The Just Live by Faith

Then the Lord answered me and said: “Write the vision and make *it* plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it. ³For the vision *is* yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.⁴ Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:2-4).

Habakkuk is instructed to write something that can be quickly read. There is a time when God will bring about what is to happen. It may take a while, but wait. The proud will not receive this, but the just shall live by faith. Those who are justified by the faith of God will live by that faith. We cannot say we are saved by faith and walk in utter unbelief—that is hypocrisy. God now turns His words toward the destiny of the Chaldeans.

Woe to the Wicked

“Indeed, because he transgresses by wine, *he is* a proud man, and he does not stay at home. Because he enlarges his desire as hell, and he *is* like death, and cannot be satisfied, he gathers to himself all nations and heaps up for himself all peoples. ⁶Will not all these take up a proverb against him, and a taunting riddle against him, and say, ‘Woe to him who increases *what is not his*—how long? And to him who loads himself with many pledges?’ ⁷Will not your creditors rise up suddenly? Will they not awaken who oppress you? And you will become their booty. ⁸Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the people shall plunder you, because of men’s blood and the violence of the land *and* the city, and of all who dwell in it. ⁹Woe to him who covets evil gain for his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of disaster! ¹⁰You give shameful counsel to your house, cutting off many peoples, and sin *against* your soul. ¹¹For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the timbers will answer it. ¹²Woe to him who builds a town with bloodshed, who establishes a city by iniquity! ¹³Behold, *is it* not of the Lord of hosts that the peoples labor to feed the fire, and nations weary themselves in vain? ¹⁴For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁵Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbor, pressing *him* to your bottle, even to make *him* drunk, that you may look on his nakedness! ¹⁶You are filled with shame instead of glory. You also—drink! And be exposed as uncircumcised! The cup of the

Lord's right hand *will be* turned against you, and utter shame will be on your glory. ¹⁷For the violence *done to* Lebanon will cover you, and the plunder of beasts *which* made them afraid, because of men's blood and the violence of the land *and* the city, and of all who dwell in it. ¹⁸What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it, the molded image, a teacher of lies, that the maker of its mold should trust in it, to make mute idols? ¹⁹Woe to him who says to wood, 'Awake!' To silent stone, 'Arise! It shall teach!' Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, yet in it there is no breath at all. ²⁰"But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him" (Habakkuk 2:5-20).

Judging the Chaldeans

Habakkuk wondered how the pure eyes of God could look upon, let alone use, the Chaldeans for His purpose. God answers that the Chaldeans will be judged. The cup of His right hand will be turned against them. All of men's efforts and rebellion against God will be of no avail, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

God has now answered both of Habakkuk's questions. God will judge His people by raising up a more evil people to sack them, and then judge the more evil people for what they did. God will draw a straight line with a crooked stick, and then break the stick. At first glance it appears paradoxical—some might even say contradictory. How can God not be held responsible for using the Chaldeans as His puppets? But there is a monumental difference between men and puppets. Puppets don't desire to do evil—men do. A true contradiction cannot be found. There is no violation of the laws of logic, nor can any logical fallacy, whether formal or informal, be found. Is it incomprehensible how God ordains the free choices of men? Perhaps. It is, at least, incomprehensible to me. But it does not violate truth.

His Holy Purpose

How are Christians to view the events of September 11? Was it the hand of God? Was His fingerprint on this? To say "no" is to defy the God of Scripture and cast ourselves into a pool of irrational thoughts. But did God do this as a rash, impulsive, and vicious dictator? No! I cannot tell you specifically what purposes God has for the tragic events He ordains. But I know the purposes are divine. I know that from eternity I will see more clearly the purpose for every stitch of His tapestry of history. The human mind ascends just so high. To offer less is to defy the God of Scripture. To offer more would be presumptuous. But there is one more thing I must understand in order for all of this to even begin to make sense.

The Glory of God

I must understand that God's main concern is His own glory. Individuals and kingdoms are a distant second to God's own glory. Habakkuk's original question was proper; it was a concern for God's glory among His people. We might agree that a human life—a human soul—is not as important as many human souls (Romans 9:3); we might even agree that it is proper for human lives to be dashed to pieces for a nation and its ideologies. But there is a person above all ideologies. We might fight and die for truth, love, freedom, justice, and life. But these words have a source and the meanings of these words are contained in this source and this source is the person of Jesus Christ. To die for truth is to die for Christ. We must not think of God as some sort of whimsical deity. He maintains His glory for in His glory is contained all that is good.

The Prophet's Prayer

Habakkuk no longer questions God but acknowledges His power and prays for mercy.

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, on Shigionoth. ² O Lord, I have heard Your speech *and* was afraid; O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years! In the midst of the years make *it* known; in wrath remember mercy. ³ God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. SELAH His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of His praise. ⁴ His brightness was like the light; He had rays *flashing* from His hand, and there His power was hidden. ⁵ Before Him went pestilence, and fever followed at His feet. ⁶ He stood and measured the earth; He looked and startled the nations. And the everlasting mountains were scattered, the perpetual hills bowed. His ways *are* everlasting. ⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian trembled. ⁸ O Lord, were *You* displeased with the rivers, was Your anger against the rivers, was Your wrath against the sea, that You rode on Your horses, Your chariots of salvation? ⁹ Your bow was made quite ready; oaths were sworn over *Your* arrows. SELAH You divided the earth with rivers. ¹⁰ The mountains saw *You and* trembled; the overflowing of the water passed by. The deep uttered its voice, *and* lifted its hands on high. ¹¹ The sun and moon stood still in their habitation; at the light of Your arrows they went, at the shining of Your glittering spear. ¹² You marched through the land in indignation; You trampled the nations in anger. ¹³ You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for salvation with Your Anointed. You struck the

head from the house of the wicked, By laying bare from foundation to neck. SELAH ¹⁴ You thrust through with his own arrows the head of his villages. They came out like a whirlwind to scatter me; their rejoicing was like feasting on the poor in secret. ¹⁵ You walked through the sea with Your horses, through the heap of great waters. ¹⁶ When I heard, my body trembled; my lips quivered at *the* voice; rottenness entered my bones; and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble. When he comes up to the people, He will invade them with his troops. To the Chief Musician. With my stringed instruments (Habakkuk 3:1-16).

A Hymn of Faith

Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls—¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ The Lord God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's *feet*, and He will make me walk on my high hills (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

Once men recognize the priority of God's glory and the power of God's providence, they find a joy and security in a God whose character never fails and whose power knows no boundaries.

Questions for Study

1. What are some potential views of how we can look at tragedy? What are their strengths and weaknesses (pages 3, 4)?
2. What are some lines we can draw between how God dealt with Israel and how He deals with mankind today (page 4)?
3. What was Habakkuk's original prayer (page 5)? How can it relate to the prayers of the church today?
4. How did God respond to Habakkuk's prayer (pages 5, 6)?
5. What was confusing to Habakkuk about how God would judge Israel (pages 6-8)?
6. What was God's response to Habakkuk's dilemma (pages 8-10)?
7. Was it illogical for God to use the Chaldeans to judge Israel, and then judge the Chaldeans (page 10)?
8. How are we to view tragedy (page 10)?
9. Why is it important to understand that God values His own glory (pages 10, 11)?
10. Examine and discuss Habakkuk's hymn of faith (page 12).