

Experiencing God in Troubled Times: Trying to Make Sense of Trouble

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This morning we begin a new series on the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. How many of you have ever heard a sermon series on Habakkuk? This summer I have chosen to preach from three Old Testament books: Daniel, Esther and Habakkuk. Each of these books possesses tremendous relevance to the time in which we live. I hope I have aroused a desire in you to explore the Old Testament. If so, I encourage you to attend the overview of the Old Testament that Dr. Sandra Richter, Old Testament professor from Wesley Theological Seminary, will lead the weekend of Oct 17 & 18. She will make the entire Old Testament come alive and enable you to see how all the parts fit together.

Habakkuk is the fifth to the last book in the Old Testament. It is only 3 chapters long. I hope you will read it during this series several times. Little is known about Habakkuk—we are not even sure how to pronounce his name. He lived in Judah in the 600's BC. He lived prior to Daniel and Esther. The Assyrian Empire conquered the Northern part of Israel, but the Southern part known as Judea was still independent. A series of corrupt kings and priests created a climate of evil and injustice throughout Judah.

This book records a dialog between the prophet and God. Habakkuk raises the question: How can a just and holy God allow so much evil and injustice in the world? Let's listen as Habakkuk complains to God and how God responds.

Habakkuk 1:1-11

¹ The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.

Habakkuk's Complaint

² How long, O LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?

³ Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.

The Lord 's Answer

- ⁵ "Look at the nations and watch—
and be utterly amazed.
For I am going to do something in your days
that you would not believe,
even if you were told.
- ⁶ I am raising up the Babylonians, ^[a]
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwelling places not their own.
- ⁷ They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.
- ⁸ Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.
Their cavalry gallops headlong;
their horsemen come from afar.
They fly like a vulture swooping to devour;
- ⁹ they all come bent on violence.
Their hordes ^[b] advance like a desert wind
and gather prisoners like sand.
- ¹⁰ They deride kings
and scoff at rulers.
They laugh at all fortified cities;
they build earthen ramps and capture them.
- ¹¹ Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty men, whose own strength is their god."

Everywhere Habakkuk turned there was trouble. The kings were corrupt. Conflict and violence were rampant. It was a time not much different from our own. Listen to these headlines from a recent issue of the newspaper:

"Men arrested for sexually assaulting two twelve year old girls"

"Mother, boyfriend lock three kids in hotel bathroom for a year"

"Forty Arrested in New Jersey Corruption Probe: 3 mayors, 2 state legislators, and several rabbis"

“Lubbock’s unemployment rate at 6% for only second time in history”

Everywhere we turn there is trouble: greed, fraud, pork barrel spending, abuse, neglect, hunger, homelessness. Often it is innocent children who suffer the most. Habakkuk asks the question some of us do not dare to ask: “Where is God in all this? God, why don’t you do something about all the injustice and evil in the world? If you are a holy and just God, how can you tolerate all this?”

Throughout history there have been good times and bad times. During the good times we think that things will always get better and better. We assume there will be minor downturns and adjustments to the economy—but nothing will last more than a year or two. We believe that our children’s lives will be better than ours. In the long term the stock market will go up and real estate values will increase. There was a period of such good times in the USA and Europe from 1870 to 1910—about fifty years. Then along came WW I, the Great Depression, WW II, the Holocaust and by 1940s famine and mass starvation sweeping across Europe as the war came to an end. For about 40 years there was nothing but trouble.

In the 50s we started another cycle of good times. The stock market and real estate values escalated dramatically. The standard of living in Western countries sky rocketed for most people. We had a couple of tough years along the way, but the trouble never lasted long. We had minor recessions, but no one ever mentioned the “D” word.

In fall of 2008 trouble came big time. Vast amounts of wealth in the market and real estate were lost in a matter of weeks. Institutions we thought were invulnerable faced bankruptcy. The news screamed of a “global financial crisis” and “the possibility of a world-wide depression.” We all wonder: Is this a short term crisis—perhaps a little more severe than normal but one which will pass quickly. Some economists project the

economy will turn around by the end of this year or at the latest the middle of next year. Others project we will never return to the prosperity we once enjoyed. They predict a long cycle of double digit inflation, high interest rates and taxes, and a crippling national debt. If you think it is bad now, wait until the Babylonians get here!!

Who's right? Who knows? Only time will tell. One thing we can agree upon right now: we are in a time of trouble. Many people have lost their jobs. People are struggling to make ends meet. Where is God? What is he up to?

Habakkuk is an amazing book which gives us a model about how to talk with God in times of trouble. Habakkuk asks God boldly: "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? If you really are an infinite and holy God, you should be doing something."

Habakkuk does not approach God gently and meekly. Instead he blurts out his anger and his questions. "How can you allow all this injustice in the world?"

God responds patiently, empathetically: "You think you got trouble now, wait until the Babylonians get here. They are the most ruthless, blood thirsty warriors who have ever swept the earth. And I'm raising them up."

Here is where we need a little theology lesson. Does this mean that God sends greater trouble into our lives to punish us? Is God a vindictive God who zaps us when we do wrong? That is not the overall portrait that the Bible paints of God. The God of the Bible is loving, forgiving, holy and just. He does not bring trouble and evil into our lives. As a sovereign God he built a system of justice into all of creation. Injustice carries its own punishment. When we do wrong, we suffer the consequences. Sometimes innocent people around us suffer those consequences as well. The Israelites turned their back on God. Their political and religious leaders were corrupt and taking advantage of people. When a nation separates itself from God and ceases to live

according to the principles he built into creation, it becomes vulnerable to collapse from within or invasion from without. God is not sending the Babylonians to punish Israel. The Babylonian conquest is a consequence of the evil and injustice rampant in Israel.

God tells Habakkuk the Babylonians are coming. Because of the rampant evil in your land things are going to get worse. Evil begets even greater evil. That is way the world operates. God says to Habakkuk: “You think things are bad now, I’ve got news for you, things are going to get worse.”

Habakkuk is not satisfied. He rails back at God, “You call that an answer? I ask why you are letting all this injustice and evil happen, and you say that more is coming?” What I love about Habakkuk is that he fully engages God. He feels free to ask him anything. He feels free to challenge him even with anger. He has the kind of relationship where he is free to wrestle through his feelings with God. He does not have to go off in a corner somewhere and process his feelings until he can come back and reverently talk to God. His relationship is real and honest. I think God prefers that rather than glossed-over emotions and empty platitudes. God loves us so much he wants a real relationship with us. Habakkuk lets God have it. God made sure this tiny little book of prayer got into our Bibles so we would know how to talk with him during times of trouble.

Habakkuk complains to God about trouble. God says, “Get ready, you ain’t seen nothing yet.” Habakkuk says, “What kind of God are you?” In the coming weeks we will see that God reveals he is powerful enough to bring good out of evil. We cannot understand the timetable of God and the ways of God. We especially do not understand it during time of trouble. The Babylonians will come and defeat the Israelites and carry them off into exile far from their Promised Land.

The irony here is that God will use the Babylonians to do something that the Israelites refused to do on their own. When God first called Abraham he promised him

that he would make of Abraham's descendents a great nation and that all the nations of the world would be blessed through them. However, the Israelites chose not to bless the world. They chose to sit on their blessings in the Promised Land. They even chose to turn their backs on God.

God said, "The Babylonians are going to scatter you all over the world. That is what I wanted you to do voluntarily—send out people all over the world to tell them about the God who blessed you. Even though the Babylonians meant it for evil, I will use it for good." Because of the Babylonian exile Jewish communities settled all over the world. During the time of exile, they turned their hearts back to God and shared the good news of God's love with their new neighbors. Later they would build synagogues in practically every city in the known world. They would invite others to join them in worshipping the Creator God.

Five hundred years later the Apostle Paul became a missionary to spread the news about Jesus Christ, God's Messiah who came to save the world. Wherever he went in the Roman Empire, Paul found people who knew about the Creator God and his promise of a Messiah. He did not have to start at square one and explain everything. God used the Babylonian captivity to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus. God brought good out of evil. He used adversity to spread the people throughout the world, because they refused to go on their own.

When the Communist regime took over China, they kicked out all the Western-Anglo missionaries in 1954. Many saw this as trouble. Why would God allow this to happen? Missionaries had invested 150 years in spreading the gospel. Now, it all would be for nothing. China would be lost. But God had other plans. As soon as the Western-Anglo missionaries were gone, the Chinese Christians took over. They went underground. They were persecuted, arrested and killed. But the church of Jesus Christ

in China began to grow more rapidly than ever. Some predict that in 50 years China will have the greatest populations of Christians in the world. No one would have guessed that at the time of the Communist takeover.

God's purposes and timetables are different from ours. Even when God tells us what he is doing, we don't understand. How many of you have been around a 3 year old who screams every time he does not get what he wants? The kid asks his mom for another piece of candy. She responds, "No you have already had enough." "Wahhh!" This mom could sit the 3 year old down and give him a lecture on nutrition and what refined sugar does to the body. There is no way a 3 year old can comprehend why candy is not good for them. The parent finally says: "I know you don't understand why you can't have another piece of candy, but you will have to trust me on this one." But of course the kid keeps screaming. So did Habakkuk and so do we. "God, I just don't understand why you are letting all this trouble happen." God responds: "I know you don't understand. You are just going to have to trust me." His ways are higher than our ways. His timetable is different from ours.

How long will troubled times last in our world? Will it get worse before it gets better? I don't know. But God knows. We may not understand what he is doing, but I'm convinced he is going to use this trouble for our good and the world's good. God is realigning things in our world. Sometimes that process is painful.

As we look at the message of Habakkuk over the coming weeks, we will see some signs about the things that God may be up to in our world. But no matter what happens or how long it takes, God is still sovereign. Even if we don't understand him, we can still trust him.