

Wrestling with God

God's Mysterious Ways
Habakkuk 1:1-11

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Eventually everyone wrestles with God. Even if we believe that God is good, and he has a reason or a purpose for everything he does, we still struggle to follow him.

Today we begin a brand new series in the writings of Habakkuk, an Old Testament prophet who wrote down his message sometime between 609 and 605 BC. So this message from Habakkuk is at least 2600 years old!

But it could have been written yesterday. I was amazed as I began to study this book just how relevant and current it is. The words of this minor prophet, contained in 3 chapters – just 56 verses in all – are so powerful, and so appropriate, and so fitting for us...

I have been using bits and pieces of Habakkuk lately as I mentor others or have a chance to give spiritual advice or comfort, because it is so connected to what's going on in our lives today. It really is. And we hope to uncover much of that for you in this series called *Wrestling With God*.

Let me give you a quick overview.

Habakkuk is a freethinking prophet who is not afraid to wrestle with issues that test his faith. And I believe that if we're going to have a strong, defensible faith *we also* have to wrestle with some of these tough issues. He openly and honestly directs his problems to God and then reverently waits to see how God will respond to these probing questions.

After two rounds of dialogue with the Lord, Habakkuk's increased understanding of the person, power, and plan of God cause him to conclude with a psalm of unqualified praise. The more he knows about the Planner, the more he can trust His plans. No matter what God brings to pass, "the just shall live by faith" (2:4).

So the two divisions of this book are:

The problems of Habakkuk (chapters one and two), and

The praise of Habakkuk (chapter three).

Very simple *outline*, but very challenging *content!*

Habakkuk looks at his native Judah, observes the violence and injustice on every hand, and cries out to God with some perplexing questions: Why are the wicked prospering in the midst of God's people? Why are the righteous beaten down? And why is God seemingly inactive and indifferent in a day of wickedness?

It doesn't seem right...!

God's reply is even more shocking than the conditions in Judah. God assures his prophet he is doing something. The Chaldeans – a people even more corrupt than God's chosen nation – are about to descend as God's rod of chastening. When Habakkuk reacts with shock and dismay, God patiently instructs his messenger until at last the prophet is able to respond with a psalm of praise.

The book opens in mystery and questions, but closes in certainty and affirmation. The contrast is startling, but then again, so is the life of faith.

In this man Habakkuk I see some of myself. I see him move from worry in chapter 1 to worship in chapter 3. I watch this man of God transform his fear into faith. And I've been there. I understand worry and fear...

We hear at first a call of despair and at last a shout of confidence. And in this we find courage to go on.

If Habakkuk wrestled with God,
so can we!

The Scripture says in

Psalm 30:5

...weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

So there's hope. There's a silver lining in the clouds...

That's a quick overview of the entire book. A Cole's Notes version of Habakkuk. So let's jump into the text, and we'll begin our adventure!

Habakkuk 1:1-4 NIV

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

Let's be honest. Aren't there times when we wrestle with God, using some of the same questions? There are times when there seem to be no answers on the horizon, and God seems far away. At times like that, I find it very helpful to remember these two statements... Are you ready?

God's ways are often mysterious, and
God's ways are often methodical.

Let's have a look at this first statement.

1. God's Ways Are Mysterious

Why is that so? What makes the ways of God so puzzling for us at times?

A. God's ways are mysterious because sometimes he appears indifferent.

Habakkuk 1:2 NIV
*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?*

How long, O LORD, how long...? The call for help had gone up again and again, but it got no response. In utter misery, Habakkuk cries out, "Violence!", but God does nothing. Or, so it seems...

Injustice prevails, the innocent suffer, judgment is perverted, iniquity and violence are rampant in the land.

Not much different than our day, is it?

Talk about violence -- My daughter Kristin and I were in Mexico last week. On Friday, the day we left, a noon shootout left six police officers and a civilian dead on the streets of Juarez, Mexico. Five of the dead were federal police officers and one was a female city officer, all part of the joint police task force formed to combat drug violence.

Talk about poverty -- Poverty is still very much a women's issue in Canada. While there have been improvements in the past decade or so, women are still more likely than men to be living in low income. That's not right...!

Talk about the innocent suffering -- Today, over one million Canadian children live in unsafe housing, face hunger or poor health, and have limited opportunities.

And so we pray. Sometimes we pray fervently, asking, seeking, knocking, and yet we seem to get no answer to these huge social and spiritual problems.

We pray that God's people would get stirred up, wake up, clean up, and stand up against that which is wrong in our society and in our city. But He doesn't answer. He *appears* indifferent.

Habakkuk thought so. And maybe you do too. But remember that Habakkuk approached the whole issue with honest inquiry, not pathetic skepticism or a bitter spirit towards the Lord or a critical attitude. He really wanted to know. But the Lord was not ready to reveal himself. Not just yet...

Furthermore,

B. God's ways are mysterious to us because sometimes he appears inactive.

Habakkuk 1:3-4 NIV

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.

*Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.*

*The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.*

In v. 2 Habakkuk began Question Period with “How long?” Now, in v. 3 he asks “Why?”

I remember when our children were small – and some of the questions they would ask:

Why is the grass green, Dad?
Why is the sky blue?
Why do my eyes shut when I sneeze?
Why can't I touch Jesus?

Some of you are asking why today. But your questions are more sophisticated than a child's question....

*Why aren't you listening to me God?
Why don't you hear me?
Why aren't I growing spiritually?
Why is my marriage such a struggle?*

Is it okay to ask “why?” I think so. I think it's okay to wrestle with God... Habakkuk did. He asked a lot of questions: *Why the injustice, why the destruction, why the violence, why the paralyzed law?* In other words he was saying, “God, You are inactive.” And sometimes, *sometimes* that's the way things *appear*.

C. God's ways are mysterious because sometimes he appears inconsistent.

In Habakkuk's day, God used a nation far more wicked than Israel to punish them.

But wait a sec.... The Jews were the covenant people. The Babylonians were outsiders. The Jews had at least tried to serve God in the past. The Babylonians were a wicked and rebellious bunch who worshipped idols. And it seems inconceivable to Habakkuk for God to use an unclean vessel to teach Israel a lesson. It seems inconsistent with the character of God.

But before you discharge this prophet as a godless, irreverent, and impatient man, look for your own experience in his.

I see myself when I study this passage.

*Why doesn't God do something for me?
Why doesn't God answer my prayer?*

*Why doesn't God give me a job?
Why doesn't God heal my body?
Why? Why? Why?*

I see myself in this Scripture, and maybe you do too...?

Why doesn't God save my wayward son or daughter? Why won't God put my parents back together again? Can't God do something about the wickedness in this city? Why doesn't God help the poor and the disabled with more tax dollars? Why doesn't he do something?

If your heart is anything like mine, you've asked yourself questions like those before. And they are disturbing questions. They worry me. They make me fearful.

But remember, we are only finite, he is infinite. We are the creatures. He is the Creator. And because of our limitations, we now see but a poor reflection, and at times God seems to be indifferent, inactive and inconsistent. But is he? Is he really?

Perhaps the second statement will help us ... Namely,

2. God's Ways Are Methodical

When you read through the Bible, you see God's divine control, divine plan, and divine timetable begin to unfold itself. The Lord is very orderly, efficient, and methodical in dealing with people and events. His ways are orderly, systematic, and precise. God always knows what he is doing. He never gets mixed up or confused. His ways are meticulous and disciplined.

For example, the plagues of Egypt were an orderly manifestation of God's divine control over nations and nature. The dietary laws of Leviticus express the meticulous extent to which God will carry health standards and holiness. The march around Jericho was made seven times. Not six or nine times around the city, but seven.

God's ways are always methodical. And they were no less so in Habakkuk's day.

Let's have a look at the next section.

Habakkuk 1:5-11 NIV

*"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.*

*I am raising up the Babylonians,
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwelling places not their own.
They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.*

(In other words they lifted themselves up. They recognized no law or judge but themselves and their superiority and authority was gained by their own ruthless conquests.)

*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; they all come bent on
violence.*

(Certainly the Babylonians, likened to ferocious beasts and birds, were a terrible enemy. He goes on to describe their success in v. 9...)

*Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like
sand. They deride kings and scoff at rulers.
They laugh at all fortified cities;
they build earthen ramps and capture them.
Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty men, whose own strength is their god."*

(Their major sin was clearly recorded. They considered their own strength as their god.)

In verses 1-4 Habakkuk laid out his complaint, and he didn't have to wait long for God's response. Ordinarily a complaint would be answered by a promise of deliverance, or a salvation speech, but here deliverance comes in the form of the vicious Babylonian army.

Habakkuk complains. God's sends an invading army! (So we should be careful when we complain, right!?)

And it's very clear that God is arousing these ferocious conquerors to bring justice to Judah. Why would he do that? It seems to add insult to injury!

And.....What can we *possibly* glean from all of this that will help us to understand God and his mysterious ways?

Most of the answer to that question will have to wait until next time, when we deal with verses 12-17, but let me come at it from a different angle today...

From this passage I want to affirm that:

A. God is always in control.

As we study what God is saying here, we come to realize that all of history is under His control. Yesterday, today, and forever. God is in control.

The Scripture says that God

Job 12:23 NIV

He makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations, and disperses them.

Psalms 22:28 NIV

*...dominion belongs to the LORD
and he rules over the nations.*

Proverbs 21:30 NIV

*There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan
that can succeed against the LORD.*

Why? Because he's in control.

So, even when we can't figure out what's going on in the world, and we look up to heaven, and say with Habakkuk...

God, why do you tolerate wrong?

... there is strife, and conflict abounds.

... the law is paralyzed, and

...justice is perverted...

...even then, yes, even then, God is in control.

So trust the Word of God, my friends, and don't rely on human logic to get you through. Trust in the sovereignty of God, and not the ways of man.

Second, Habakkuk also affirms that

B. God always has a plan.

Things don't just happen. Events aren't accidental. God has a plan.

Ephesians 1:11 NLT

...he makes everything work out according to his plan.

No event in creation falls outside of his providence. The individual steps we take each day are directed by the Lord. We read in

Proverbs 20:24 NIV

The Lord directs our steps...

And what about this:

Romans 8:28 NIV

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Yet, there are times when God's plan just doesn't make sense...times when his plan is not very pleasant or easy to swallow. I acknowledge that. I understand that! But these trials come, the Bible says...

1 Peter 1:6-9 NIV

...all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

There is a divine purpose in the plans God has ordained for you and me.

So...

1 Peter 4:12-13 NIV

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Habakkuk and his family didn't have access to this New Testament perspective, but we do!

God is in control, and God has a plan, and...

C. God's timing is always perfect.

In Psalm 31:15 David acknowledges that his times are in God's hands.

Psalm 31:15 NIV

My times are in your hands

You may be discouraged today for one reason or another. Take heart my friend. God says I will leave you not forsake you. I am with you always. There may be fear in your life today, but God knows your heart and he wants you to have peace.

Psalm 37 says

“Do not fret...Trust in the Lord and do good. He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn.”

You may be worried about a loved one, or a friend. But you can move from fear to faith and from worry to worship today.

Trust in the Lord.

Commit your way to him.

Delight yourself in the God Almighty. Admit that his ways are more wonderful than yours and past finding out.

He can be trusted today. God's ways are perfect and peaceful and purposeful. Move in the direction of worship, not worry. Don't be fearful – be faithful, and watch the Lord work out his will in your life.