

Wrestling with God

In the Court of Appeals
Habakkuk 1:12-17

Dr. Garth Leno, Lead Pastor
Heritage Park Alliance Church
Windsor, Ontario www.hpac.org

Two weeks ago we started a new series called Wrestling with God based on the OT book of Habakkuk. We said these writings are approximately 2600 years old now, but the content is as current as yesterday's headlines.

Habakkuk 1:12-17 NIV

O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die. O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish.

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

You have made men like fish in the sea, like sea creatures that have no ruler.

The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad.

Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet, for by his net he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food.

Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy?

In *this* passage of Scripture, Habakkuk is appealing God's judgment.

In the first 11 verses of Habakkuk 1 we saw the prophet Habakkuk questioning God as to what the Lord was doing. Habakkuk charged God with being inactive, indifferent, and inconsistent in his dealings with Israel.

But then we saw God respond. He tells Habakkuk he is going to do an amazing work that even the prophet himself would not believe. His answer to Habakkuk’s complaint had opened up a far more frightening scenario than the one he had brought to God in the first place.

As one author writes, “The violence all around him, which dominated his horizon and dogged his footsteps, was going to be met with even greater violence. The cure of Babylonian invasion is worse than the illness of Judean sin.” (quoted in Prior, p. 218).

God planned to use the Babylonian army against Israel to plunder them and teach them a lesson about trust and loyalty and worship. When that is revealed to Habakkuk he submits an appeal of God’s verdict. He enters the courtroom of God to argue his case again. He presents another argument, hoping to change the mind of God.

Have you ever done that? Have you ever walked into the heavenly court of appeals and presented your best defense? You stand before God to appeal his verdict, question his judgment, examine his conclusion! Through prayer and petition and persistence – perhaps even a little persuasion or pressure – we hope to sway things in our direction.

That’s what I see Habakkuk doing in verses 12-17. He’s making his case in God’s court of appeal. And that’s what I see myself doing from time to time... Much like the prophet I use three different methods to approach the Bench.

1. In the Court of Appeals I Might Address God’s Character

Habakkuk feels himself floundering and he reaches for the Rock.

Habakkuk 1:12

“O Lord, are you not from everlasting?”

In Hebrew, the form of this question requires an affirmative reply. It is as much a declaration as an interrogation.

“Lord, you ARE from everlasting – you ARE the eternal God of heaven and earth.”

The prophet’s confidence in the living, eternal God, contrasts sharply with the previous verse in which the Babylonians considered their own strength to be their god.

Habakkuk continues his appeal....

Habakkuk 1:12

“My God, my Holy One, we will not die.
O Lord, you have appointed them to execute judgment;
O Rock, you have ordained them to punish.”

Humanly speaking, Babylon could very easily extinguish the people of Judah. But the prophet found utterly unthinkable the extermination of God’s people and thereby the destruction of their covenant relationship with God.

He rightly concludes, “We will not die.” *God’s not going to wipe us out! No matter how bad it gets, we’re safe in his hands.*

Remember what the apostle Paul wrote, “To live is Christ, to die is gain.” No matter what happens, we’ll be okay! Habakkuk reminds himself that God had appointed the Babylonians to execute judgment – *judgment* – not total *destruction* of Judah. The enemy was God’s instrument to punish and discipline his people, not destroy them.

And that’s a good point to remember, folks! Sometimes the LORD uses the most awful circumstances to teach us a lesson and to correct our behaviour and to adjust our attitudes.

Even so, a burning question remained in Habakkuk’s heart. Why would the everlasting, preeminent Yahweh, the absolute Holy One, the immutably permanent Rock, the impenetrable Fortress – why would He utilize a wicked people to administer discipline on Judah – the apple of his eye? Why?

Habakkuk reminds God, in verse 13...

Habakkuk 1:13 NIV

*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?*

When Habakkuk is faced with the threat of impending doom and destruction, he makes an appeal based on the character of God.

The Babylonians trust in their own strength says Habakkuk in v. 11. But we trust in the everlasting God, the Holy One, the Judge, the Rock of our Salvation. That’s an appeal based on God’s reputation, his integrity, and his character.

And right at this point we see the worried prophet begin to gain spiritual insight. He reasons that God is eternal and holy and faithful and unchanging, he will not despise the glorious covenant he made with Abraham. So, yes, the Lord may be appointing Babylon to execute judgment, to chastise us, to straighten us out, but eventually He will rescue us. He promised he would! And God does not lie...

But the point I’m trying to make is that there are Biblical examples of men and women who find the verdict of God hard to take. So they go back into his presence to make their appeal ... and God interacts with them.

That’s the amazing thing. If we do it right, with the right heart, the right motive, the right approach – then God often enters into dialogue with us. The book of Habakkuk proves that much!

So, we might begin the appeal process based on the character of God.

2. In the Court of Appeals I Might Admit My Helplessness

Habakkuk 1:14

You have made men like fish in the sea, like sea creatures that have no ruler.

Helpless as fish, Judah’s people were easy prey for powerful invaders. So helpless were they that they lacked the ability to organize themselves for self-protection. And they had no ruler – no leader worthy of leading.

The wicked Babylonians were pictured catching men with hooks, sweeping them into a net, and gathering them in a large dragnet.

Habakkuk 1:15 NIV

The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad.

The imagery is vivid, isn’t it!? And it’s hard to understand why God would permit such humiliating brutality. How can this be? We’ve seen this kind of thing in Vietnam, Rwanda, and Bosnia. With my own eyes I saw the evidence of this kind of carnage in Kosovo years ago. So Habakkuk cries out, *God, your people will be so helpless in this coming invasion. Are you sure you won’t change your mind about this?*”

When my friend Charlie Cook was a missionary in La Pas, Bolivia, he learned what it means to be helpless.

Charlie was living with two young men who also were involved in mission work. One day Charlie was upstairs and the roommates, Kelley and Dennis, were in the kitchen making some fireworks for a festival when the gunpowder exploded. The house caught fire, Kelly was maimed and bleeding (I think he lost an eye and part of his hand), and Dennis was killed by the blast.

My friend Charlie was later imprisoned on charges of terrorism and covert activity. In Bolivia you are guilty until proven innocent. And he was totally helpless sitting in that dark prison cell. Helpless because no one knew where he was. Helpless because the police wanted to frame him. Helpless because he wasn't even allowed to call someone for help.

In that dark, dingy, damp prison cell Charlie not only made his appeal by addressing God's character but also by admitting his own helplessness.

I think that God directs the circumstances of life to humble us, if we're not willing to humble ourselves. I believe God allows all kinds of unpleasant stuff to happen to us, so that we learn to depend on him and declare our helplessness to the heavens.

Maybe that's right where you find yourself today. Is it? Are you struggling with a sense of helplessness or vulnerability? Then why not declare it, and start leaning on the Lord instead?

3. In the Court of Appeals I Might Even Arraign My Enemies

While God, apparently in silence, looks upon this merciless and endless genocide, the Babylonians start to worship their own weaponry.

Habakkuk 1:16-17

¹⁶ Therefore he sacrifices to his net
and burns incense to his dragnet,
for by his net he lives in luxury
and enjoys the choicest food.

¹⁷ Is he to keep on emptying his net,
destroying nations without mercy?

The language may be vividly metaphorical, but it depicts a rampant paganism in a highly successful and affluent nation. *Lord, what's going on? How long are you planning to let this go?* The enemies of God

captured prisoners and property. They boosted their own coffers and bolstered their own economy. Their lifestyle was opulent. Greed for more became the driving force in their military campaigns.

And you see, here's the thing: Whenever pride, greed and cruelty come together, whether in an individual or a family or a church or a company or a government, methods will be employed which are essentially no different from the violence portrayed by Habakkuk.

So in the court of appeals, Habakkuk accuses the Babylonians for their idolatry, he charges the enemy with treason hoping that God will rule in Israel's favour.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the same posture – accusing our so-called enemies – hoping that God will rule in our favour. *Lord, why should John get that promotion? I work harder than he does! I put in more hours than he does. That's not fair!*

Today is Mother's Day and maybe your complaint sounds like this: *Lord, my husband and I have been waiting too long to get pregnant. Now my friend, who doesn't even believe in God, is pregnant for second time in 3 years. Why don't you hear my prayers?*

In the court of appeals we hope God will change his mind or change his plans to accommodate us. That doesn't always work. Does it? It didn't work for Habakkuk. It may not work for you...

Notice how he begins in v. 12 with a question. Notice how he ends in v. 17 with a question.

12 *O LORD, are you not from everlasting?*
17 *Is he to keep on emptying his net,
destroying nations without mercy?*

Both times there are no answers given by God. Both times the prophet is left wondering what God is up to... Sometimes the answers are slow in coming. Sometimes God is silent on matters that are important to us. His timing is not the same as ours. He is never in a hurry. Sometimes we are left to live with mystery and ambiguity...but still walking by faith.

My friends, God is not obligated to answer our questions.

But when we address God's character we are reminded that he is sovereign and unchanging and capable of handling our problems, big and small.

When we admit our weakness we are reminded that God's power is perfected in our feebleness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV

But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

And when we accuse our enemies we are reminded that we were once *just like them...*

Ephesians 2:1-8 helps us look in the mirror:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

So be careful! When you go into the court of appeals, trying to make sense of what God is doing, be careful what you say about your so-called enemies – the "Babylonians."

Why? Because we all come from the same place spiritually. We were all dead in our transgressions and sins. All of us, by nature, were objects of wrath.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

In the end, when the Judge of the earth is silent and His verdict is yet unknown, as we stand in the court of appeals, we must remember his great love for us. We must remember that God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ through faith.

Somehow, even in the midst of all the trials and struggles of life, even when answers are elusive, he will show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

When we stand before him, we are confident that unresolved problems left in his care will eventually be solved.

We can say with the apostle Paul,

2 Timothy 1:12 NIV

“...I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.”

Friends, sometimes, in the court of appeals, there are no answers given, no verdict, no solution. But God’s timing is perfect, and we can be certain that he is working out his perfect plan and purpose.

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.

And in the meantime, we can pray, “Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.”

Amen.