

Habakkuk 1:1-4: When Prayer Meets Perplexity

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Preacher: Arthur Jackson

- [0 : 00] The text is from Habakkuk chapter 1, verses 1 through 4. The oracle that Habakkuk, the prophet, saw.
- O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, violence, and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?
- Destruction and violence are before me. Strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted.
- This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated. Good afternoon, and Happy New Year to you.
- It is good to be in this year. It is good to be in this year with you. Wow. Have mercy, Lord.
- [1 : 06] Forgive us, Lord. What a way to begin a year with that kind of orientation, that kind of direction.
- And not only is it appropriate for the beginning of the year. That's the kind of thing that you would like to see sustained throughout the year for the glory of God, for the good of our own souls.
- By God's grace, you and I have been gifted with another year. Another year in a world that at times is extremely messy.
- This world's realities say that we live in a messy, messy world.
- A world leader gives the word to move forward with some kind of aggressive or oppressive action. Countries and peoples are thrown into turmoil.
- [2 : 19] Messy world. Natural disaster or human error calls seismic shifts in the life patterns of thousands.
- The world is messy. Peaceful protests on campuses or in the city square turn ugly in a moment.
- The deaths of innocent children by AIDS or starvation. A daily reality in our messy, messy world.
- The termination of a marriage. Or an engagement. Or employment. A rejection letter from a school that you wanted to get in so badly.
- A doctor's visit yields unexpected, devastating news. A child abandons the faith of his father and his mother.
- [3 : 29] And you and I could go on and on. Any one of these various life dilemmas is enough to generate head scratching and heart searching among us.
- Yet answers elude us. At least the cookie cutter answers that you and I would like to have.
- Just how are we to respond? When life doesn't measure up to our expectations. When things go awry.
- When something is not right in your life and in our world. Habakkuk.

It's a book with just 56 verses. But oh, how these verses can help us, friends. And so today begins the first of six talks from this sharp but powerful prophecy.

[4 : 42] The first four voices are before us. May God help me to speak. May God help us to listen. And every one of us to respond. Please join me as I pray. May God help us. May God help us.

Have mercy on us. Restore us and mold us to the people that you want us to be. shape us, Lord, in the midst of this messy, messy world.

Shape us by the contours of your word. Build us up. Mature us through our worship and fellowship. And yes, Lord, even the rough stuff of life.

May they have a way, Lord, of helping us to conform to the people that you have called us to be. People that you want us to be.

[5 : 52] May it be for the glory of your name. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Look at our text on this afternoon. First thing I want you to see in verse 1 is the prophet and his vision.

You see that there? The oracle that Habakkuk, the prophet, saw. Here's what we can take away from verse 1.

Habakkuk was a prepared prophet. He was a man with a message from God based on what?

He saw. God had prepared him. He was a man with a message from God based on what he saw.

Look at this one verse. The runway into this particular book is very sharp and it's very simple.

[6 : 59] Seven words, friends, introduce the man and his message. Notice, though, what's missing from this introduction.

There is nothing here about the prophet's call. No reference to rulers that perhaps would assist us in dating the book.

These spirit-inspired omissions, if you will, in no way take away from the message or the meaning of this book.

The absence of these things really actually helps us to see the book's values for people of any era.

It's for you. It's for you. And it's for me. The human author is a backup. Comes from the root that means to embrace.

[8 : 01] But according to his byline, he's a prophet. He hasn't been inspired by God.

He is a man, as it were, on God's mission in the world of that day. His message, you notice, it's described as an oracle.

Other versions would translate it burden. But an oracle was a weighty message that was lifted up by voice.

Lifting up, that's the root that it comes from. Nasa, I believe it is. The message could have been a threat or it could have been a promise.

And Habakkuk's message includes both words of judgment or woe, but it also includes words of hope. Notice also the combination of the words the oracle and saw.

[9 : 10] On the one hand, Habakkuk's prophecy was a written prophecy based on what he saw, what he observed. It includes verbal aspects, but visionary aspects also.

Famous verse, Habakkuk 2 and 2, write the vision. Make it plain. Verse 1, briefly, friends, but simply introduces the man and his message, the prophet and his prophecy.

Habakkuk is a prepared prophet, a man with a message from God based on what he saw. But as we look further, not only is Habakkuk a prepared prophet, he's a praying prophet, isn't he?

We see that in verses 2 through the first part of 3a. Habakkuk is a praying prophet who approaches God with questions.

Oh, Pastor Jay, did you say that right? Yes, he approaches God with questions. Here, the reader of the book of Habakkuk is privy to a dialogue between the prophet and God.

[10 : 44] Now, dialogue and prophecy is not new, but there is a surprise here in our text on this afternoon. Normally, in prophecy, you have the word of God coming down to a prophet and through a prophet, a human messenger.

But here, initially, we have the words of the prophet going up to God, directed to God, as we see in the text.

Habakkuk is the one initially doing the speaking, doing the talking. But not only is the flow of the conversation from the bottom up, the tone is also different, isn't it?

It is like the prophet is taking the Lord to the third degree with all of his questioning. Who would dare interrogate the sovereign God of the universe?

You notice the questions? Look at them. Oh, Lord, how long shall I cry for help? Lord, you're not, you're not working on my timing, Lord.

[12 : 04] Set your clock by my clock. Huh? You're not in sync with me, Lord. How long will you, shall I cry for help and you not hear?

Oh, cry to you, violence! Thoughts! Mugging! Uh-uh. You will not say, you're not doing anything about it.

Look at the third question in verse 3. Why do you make me see iniquity and why do you, do you idly look at wrong? Lord, you're inactive and you are indifferent and our clocks are not set by the same time.

We're not in sync. one way of looking at what we have here is that you and I get to look at Habakkuk's prayer and prophecy journal.

Huh? How many of you have ever kept a journal or diary? Many of us have. One of my file cabinets at home has a lot of different spiral kind of journals.

[13 : 18] Huh? Oftentimes, in our journals, you and I write things to God that are good for God's eyes and ears only. Huh?

A journal can be very, very revealing, can't it? And such is the case here. There were things that were very heavy on the prophet's heart and underneath that particular burden, the prophet is crying out to God.

Huh? But there's a sense in which the prophet's complaints actually reflect the Lord's heart as well as the concerns of the godly within the nation.

So, in a sense that Habakkuk was not only God's representative, but he was the representative of God's people. Habakkuk's prayer here fits the description of what is known as a lament.

A lament is an expression or a song that is inspired by grief. Turn with me to Psalm 13, which is a personal lament, individual lament, and you will hear echoes of that particular psalm in Habakkuk in these particular verses that we're looking at.

[14 : 56] Beginning at verse 1, listen, how long, oh Lord, will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

it's a lament, a song of grief. It's a cry of one confused by what she's experiencing.

It's a, it's something wrong with this picture kind of prayer. Ever pray that kind of prayer? Out of being burdened or confused or bewildered, something is not right and you're expressing that prayer to God out of your grief and confusion and bewilderment?

Yeah. He's burdened. He's burdened for several reasons. He's burdened by what he interprets as the Lord's being indifferent and inactive.

[16 : 16] The phone's ringing, but the Lord's not picking up. He refuses to take the call. He can feel the vibration of his, of the phone in his pocket as it were, but he's not picking it up.

Cries for help in verse 2 had been ignored. Prophet is being seemingly, at least in his estimation, ignored in prayer and it's uncomfortable and it's not satisfying him.

His prayer prayer is unanswered. Let me ask you, how soon is it that you give up that God is not seemingly answering you or answering in your timing?

His cries for help had been ignored. Verse 2, first part. His cries about violence had not yielded any help. You see that there? In his day, Habakkuk was witnessing, or you might in his mind, made to witness violence, but the Lord was seemingly uninterested to stop the cruelty that was taking place.

Amongst God's people, there were those who were being mistreated and exploited and oppressed, yet the Lord had not lifted his hand to prevent that kind of brutality.

[17 : 41] so the complaints of the prophet had been registered, but no action from the Almighty.

In the prophet's mind, God's ears were closed and his hands were closed. Nothing was going on. Look at the questions about indifference in verse 3.

Rather than God pointing those things out to the prophet, the prophet is pointing those things out to God. Look here, Lord. what's going on? No help found in God.

He's not seeing. He's not hearing. He's not saving. It's not like the prophet's concerns are frivolous.

These are the very things that are part of the heart of God. He cares about oppression. He cares about violence. And when human evil triumphed, God certainly cares.

[18 : 44] In the prophet's mind, God was supposed to act in accord with his covenant faithfulness, protecting the righteous and punishing the wicked. And let me just say this.

Don't be confused about God's silence are because of the lack of action of action by God.

There is a factor, there is a dimension in the wisdom of God that we often do not factor in. That is the aspect of timing. the area of timing.

Habakkuk. He's a prepared prophet, verse 1. He's a praying prophet, verse 2 and the first part of verse 3.

But in verses 3, the rest of 3 and 4, we see what it was that actually prompted the prophet's prayers. Habakkuk's prayers are prompted by the messiness that was in his world.

[19 : 55] No longer in verse 3, the last part of verse 3, are his complaints expressed through questions. His complaints are about what he is witnessing, actually seeing in the land.

what was going on in the land in that day. Though there's very little in the book that helps us to pinpoint the exact time of writing, the context was likely 7th century B.C.

Three specific times of moral and spiritual decline were possible. Someone hold that this took place in the days of Manasseh, the long-reigning evil king of Judah.

Others see the era as the time of Josiah, 740 B.C. to 609 B.C. The other possible possibility is the reign of Jehoiakim, 609 to 598 B.C.

From what we can see in this particular book, Babylonian power and internal social ugliness were on the rise. These were certainly conditions after the rise of Josiah.

[21 : 08] The days of Jehoiakim are the most probable day. Now, the prophets who had preceded Habakkuk, like Isaiah and Micah and Amos, they, through the grace and the prompting of God, they railed against God's people because of similar kinds of injustices.

Jesus. What did Habakkuk see that prompted his lamentations and his prayers? Here's the deal.

When he looked over the landscape of his day, he saw some very ugly things. Like some of the things that we've seen recently in our own city.

A policeman was murdered less than a half a block from the church that he used to pastor in Oak Park at Division in Austin. More close to us recently at a church's chicken, a senseless kind of shooting where someone took their fight from off the street into the restaurant there.

And those who were victims, as I understand it, were not even a part of what was going on. of the violence that we see on L platforms or in stations.

[22 : 34] He's saying, huh? What would things that would have made the news ugly things, but we see some very ugly things mentioned in verse 3, B, and 4.

Destruction and violence caught his attention. Strife and contention were on the rise. What was happening? These were people against people violations.

Where people were taking advantage of other people. Where personhood and personal rights were ignored out of greed and selfishness.

That's what was going on. Where civility gave way to brutality. That's ugly. Notice also the law was ineffective. Verse 4.

Appeal to the law did no good because it had grown cold and numb and it was in effect useless. Another way of saying it, the system was broken and when the system is broke, friends, that's ugly.

[23 : 45] Social order then and now needs the principles and the practices of righteousness. Justice and righteousness where those things, friends, are absent, the bad guys win and things get ugly.

The wicked are winning over the righteous and righteousness and justice were twisted. Those were the things that prompted the prophets prayers.

You say, well, Pastor J, so, what? The backup was perplexed by the realities, friends, of living in a messy, messy world.

That was the reality then. And this little book reminds us afresh that all is not right, friends, even in our world.

A world that sometimes surprises us with its dark depravity. A world that includes premature death and devastating divorce and life-tripling and life-consuming disease.

[25 : 01] And dirty old men, some of whom are in our own families. It includes long-reigning dictators and cruel and hard and painful discipline.

It is peppered with violence and riddled with injustice. That's the world that we live in. And, friends, while there are no commands here, the prophet is not telling us to do anything.

The passage is nonetheless instructive and deserves our sober reflection. Habakkuk helps us to see that you and I, how we should posture ourselves in a world where we are faced with the realities like we see in the text.

Here we're reminded that life's perplexities and inequities must be met with sincere, heartfelt prayers from God's people.

Sincere, heartfelt prayers from God's people. When perplexed by the stark and dark and ugly realities of life, yeah, yeah, yeah, pray!

[26 : 29] Habakkuk's praying, friends, helps us to pray. How then should we pray? Pray honestly. In an honest praying, guess what?

Questions or fair game in honest praying? Habakkuk's prayer was anything but passive. Honest praying can and should include lamentation, and lamentation can't include questions.

Look at the book of Lamentations, it shows you that. Question for us, who is it among us that laments the injustices of our day?

Are we a people minus mourning? If so, what does that say about us?

Do I pray passively or passionately even to the point of wading into territories that may be strange to the point of asking God questions?

[27 : 46] Pray honestly but also pray attentively. You say, well, Pastor J, what is praying attentively? That means praying with your eyes open. Not literally, but we must be in touch with the world that we are in.

Are we in touch with the issues of life in our day that should demand our attention? Things that actually need Christian perspective and Christian prayer.

and as our vision is to see the city of Chicago transformed by the power of the gospel, the city of Chicago includes more than your neighborhood and mine.

people and we must be on guard against being insulated by comfort and isolated from the painful realities that we are numb to the injustices of others that suffer in their daily experiences.

we cannot be so insulated and in a bubble that we can't function or posture ourselves in the world in a similar way as Habakkuk the prophet did.

[29 : 09] Such issues could well be the things that we really need to give ourselves more to. Praying with open eyes helps us to pray more with an open heart.

To put it another way not only should we pray honestly and attentively we should pray sensitively. Habakkuk was in touch with his times. He was sensitive to the matters of law and justice things that were near and dear to the very heart of God.

Bob Pierce was the founder of two relief agencies that are having impact in our world today. World vision is one of those and Samaritan's Purse is the other.

2005 Christianity Today article described Bob as an imperfect instrument. If you know anything about his life there were definitely challenges and the byline was he led a tragic and inspiring life.

here are the words that were found on the fly leaf of his Bible. Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God.

[30 : 32] Various accounts suggest that Bob, the Lord did just that for Bob. This is what Franklin Graham, how Bob Pierce responded to his questions about how to shake people out of their complacency.

Pierce said that he had become a part of the suffering. I literally felt the child's blindness, the mother's grief. It was all too real to me when I stood before an audience.

It's not something that can be faked. Dick Halverson wrote of Pierce that he prayed more earnestly! And importantly, that is persistently or insistently than anyone else I have ever known.

It was though prayer burned within him. Bob Pierce functioned with a broken heart. Yes, Bob Pierce was one of a kind kind of God, but there is room for you and me, it's room for us to grow in our sensitivity to the Lord and to the issues of our day that really grip the very heart of God.

Praying sensitively demands that we share more of what's on the heart of God. But then there's our Lord's example himself.

[31 : 58] When he faced the darkness of Calvary, so instructive for us, Jesus met perplexity with prayer.

both before the cross in Gethsemane and while on the cross dying for your sins and mine. Matthew 26 reminds us of this.

In Gethsemane, he began to be sorrowful and troubled and listen to his honest prayer. Let this cup pass.

his persistent prayer. He went away the third time saying the same words. And then on the cross his prayer included a lament.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Habakkuk calls us to faith in God in the midst, friends, of a messy world.

[33 : 08] And one of the greatest expressions of faith is prayer. prayer. So, when faced with perplexity, may we find ourselves praying.

Whether it's looking out on the landscape of this world, or city, or neighborhood, or even in your own home and in your own life, pray.

How? Honestly. Sensitively. Persistently. And after the example of Jesus our Lord, let's pray even as we prepare to sing our last song in this afternoon.

Father, thank you for this prophet that you prepared for his day. Thank you, Lord, that he was a praying prophet.

His prayers were prompted by the perplexities, Lord, that he saw in this day. Lord, and while there's no command for us in our text today, we are instructed may we embrace what we see for the glory and honor of your name, for the good of our souls, for the well-being of our homes and families and city and nation and even our world.

[34 : 57] Pray these things in your name. Amen.■