

# PM Habakkuk 1-2:5 Coping with Bewilderment

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[ 0 : 00 ] Chapter 1 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 laws paralyze, and justice never goes forth, for the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted. Look among the nations and see, wonder and be astounded, for I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.

For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own.

[ 1 : 13 ] They are dreaded and fearsome, their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves.

Their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle, swift to devour. They all come for violence, all their faces forward.

They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it.

Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men whose own might is their God. Are you not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One?

We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.

[ 2 : 22 ] You who are of purer eyes than to see evil, and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors, and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He brings all of them up with a hook.

He drags them out with his net. He gathers them in his dragnet, so he rejoices and is glad.

Therefore, he sacrifices to his net, and makes offerings to his dragnet, for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich.

Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and mercilessly killing nations forever? I will take my stand at my watch post, and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

And the Lord answered me, Write the vision. Make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.

[ 3 : 46 ] For still the vision awaits its appointed time. It hastens to the end. It will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it.

It will surely come. It will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up. It is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.

Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol.

Like death, he is never enough. He gathers for himself all nations, and collects as his own all peoples.

Amen, and may God bless to us that reading from his word, and to his name be the praise. Shall we come before the Lord? Please turn back with me in your Bibles to the book of Habakkuk, chapter 1. Habakkuk chapter 1, which I'd like to look at with you this evening under the title Coping with Bewilderment. Coping with Bewilderment.

[ 5 : 11 ] If ever you're tempted to think that a Christian should have no doubts or uncertainties, I think the opening verses of Habakkuk's prophecy provide a dose of biblical realism.

Look at verse 2. 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? Habakkuk was a believer. He was also a prophet. And yet, he really struggled with the things that were going on around him. Let's look at Habakkuk's initial complaint in verses 2-4 under the heading God's apparent indifference.

God's apparent indifference. Habakkuk lived in Jerusalem towards the end of the 7th century BC. It was shortly after the reign of King Josiah.

[ 6 : 31 ] King Josiah was a great king of Judah. He introduced all kinds of reforms. You may remember that he rediscovered the law.

He pulled down the pagan altars and he restored the temple. During his reign Judah enjoyed a period of prosperity and blessing.

But Josiah was now dead and it was his son Jehoiakim who was king in his place. Jehoiakim wasn't a good king.

He quickly reversed all the good work his father had done. Under his reign the people ignored God's laws and gradually a terrible moral and spiritual decline set in.

That was the context for Habakkuk's ministry. He was watching a steady drift away from God. A growing deterioration in the moral fabric of society.

[ 7 : 47 ] As Habakkuk looked around him he saw violence, injustice, strife and conflict.

and the structures which should have maintained order in society had themselves become undermined. They had been undermined and become corrupt.

Verse 4 The law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth for the wicked surround the righteous. So justice goes forth perverted.

Habakkuk was living in a lawless society. A society that was shaped by the determination of people to live life as they saw fit on their own terms.

God's law, his revealed will for his people was frozen out. Justice was replaced by anarchy and the few who did remain faithful to the word of God were surrounded by ungodly behaviour which threatened to snuff out all signs of spiritual life.

[ 9 : 07 ] It was bad enough for Habakkuk to be living in that kind of society but for him the problem went even deeper.

Look at verse 2 again. Oh Lord how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear or cry to you violence and you will not save.

You see Habakkuk had been praying possibly for some considerable time for the Lord to do something about the situation but the Lord was apparently doing nothing.

If anything things were going from bad to worse. Habakkuk's prayers appeared to be going unanswered and so he found himself wrestling not only with the problem of lawlessness in society but also with the problem of unanswered prayer.

For him the problem wasn't simply the appalling deterioration he witnessed among God's people. It was the fact that he cried out again and again to God and it seemed God wasn't listening.

[ 10 : 36 ] That's why we have the questions of verses 2 and 3. The question in verse 2 begins with the words how long how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear.

Habakkuk wants to know how long this situation will go on for. How long will the Lord turn a deaf ear to his cries? How long will he refuse to help?

In verse 3 the question is not how long but why. why do you make me see iniquity and why do you idly look at wrong?

Habakkuk wants to know why God doesn't intervene to put things right. Why he doesn't do something. how long and why?

I suspect many of us have asked the same two questions as we wrestle with difficulties perhaps in our own personal circumstances or in the circumstances of others or as we struggle with problems in the church or in the world at large.

[ 11 : 57 ] how long Lord will this situation go on for? Why don't you act? And behind both these questions is the nagging concern that God is indifferent, that he doesn't care.

As far as Habakkuk was concerned it seemed that everything was out of joint. The sinfulness of the people of Judah was bad enough but God's apparent inaction was worse.

It seemed to be a blot on his character. Habakkuk's problem wasn't just intellectual, it was emotional and spiritual and many believers down through the ages have had similar experiences at different times in their lives.

How long oh Lord? Why? When we find ourselves asking questions like that it's important to do what Habakkuk does here.

Because we see how he brings his bewilderment to the Lord. Where else can we go? Again and again in the Bible we see believers doing just that.

[ 13 : 27 ] They bring their questions and bewilderment to God. Habakkuk did it. Jeremiah did it. The writer of Psalm 13 did it.

The writer of Psalm 22 did it. How long wilt thou forget me Lord? Shall it forever be? me? And we also have the example of the Lord Jesus Christ himself as he hung on the cross bearing the awful weight of sin.

He used the words of Psalm 22 as he cried out my God my God why have you forsaken me?

God's apparent indifference that was Habakkuk's complaint that was his problem. But secondly in verses 5 to 11 we have God's surprising reply God's surprising reply.

the Lord begins by encouraging Habakkuk to look and see. Verse 5 look among the nations and see.

[ 14 : 56 ] Habakkuk has been looking and he doesn't like what he sees. But the Lord now encourages him to take a wider look.

he wants him to take in the bigger picture. Look again at verse 5. Look among the nations and see wonder and be astounded for I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.

And now Habakkuk is given a wider perspective on what's going on. in effect he's enabled to read between the lines.

I'd like to highlight two things about God's surprising reply. The first is this that God is at work.

God is at work. He's already at work. He assures Habakkuk that this is the case. Look at verse 6.

[ 16 : 04 ] For behold I am raising up the Chaldeans God says. That bitter and hasty nation who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own.

God says to Habakkuk I am raising up the Chaldeans. God is at work. God is behind the rise of the Babylonians and their empire and he plans to use the Babylonians as the agents of his judgment on his wayward people.

It probably had never crossed Habakkuk's mind that God's plan for chastising his people would involve an empire that would change the course of world history.

He couldn't have dreamt that God was at work on such a broad canvas to address the problem of Judah's sin.

There's a Charlie Brown cartoon in which Charlie is reading a book but he's holding the book right up to his face and Lucy comes along and asks him Charlie what are you doing and Charlie's reply is well I'm reading between the lines well here God allowed Habakkuk to read between the lines Habakkuk was allowed to get a wider perspective on the immediate circumstances which perplexed him often we cannot read between the lines often we are not enabled to understand our own circumstances in that way but sometimes we can the apostle

[ 18 : 24 ] Paul certainly was able to discern how God was at work during his imprisonment in Rome he could have complained about being in chains he was denied his freedom it looked as if his ministry was drastically curtailed but what he writes to the church in Philippi is this I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel that was the case in at least two ways first Paul's guards were from the emperor's imperial guard and no doubt Paul used the opportunity to share the gospel with them and so it became known throughout the imperial guard and to all the rest that Paul was in chains for his savior the

Lord Jesus Christ through Paul's imprisonment the gospel was reaching people it might not otherwise have reached and secondly fellow Christians were encouraged to speak the word of God more boldly and fearlessly on account of Paul's imprisonment on the face of it Paul's circumstances were unpromising but there was another story Paul was able to read between the lines and see that in his circumstances God was at work Habakkuk's complaint was that the Lord was indifferent to the situation in Judah that behind all that was going on God was at work I find that encouraging do you we may not understand why our circumstances are as they are we may not understand why things are the way they are in the church or in the world but the underlying reality is that

God is at work perhaps in the most surprising ways the second thing I'd like to highlight about God's surprising reply is that God is in control God is in control God is raising up the Babylonians he's going to use them as the agents of his judgment but that doesn't mean to say that he's not aware of what they're like he's under no illusions as to what they're like he knows they're utterly ruthless they fly like an eagle swift to devour they all come for violence all their faces forward they gather captives like sand at kings they scoff and at rulers they laugh they laugh at every fortress for they pile up earth and take it then they sweep by like the wind and go on guilty men whose might is whose own might is their

God God knows that the Babylonians rely on their power and might he knows that they recognize no authority outside of themselves and yet God chooses to use them to fulfill his purposes because he is in control even of the ruthless Babylonians John Calvin has an interesting comment on these verses he says God can employ the vices of men in executing his judgments the wicked are led here and there by the hidden power of God God can employ the vices of men in executing his judgments the wicked are led here and there by the hidden power of

God the military prowess of the Babylonians was awesome their ruthlessness was legendary but although they wouldn't have recognized it it was God who was in ultimate control he is the God of history history is his story we see that illustrated again and again in scripture remember how the apostles Peter and John were arrested and put in prison shortly after Pentecost after they were released the young church in Jerusalem joined together in prayer in their prayers they recognized how Herod Pontius Pilate Gentiles and Jews had all conspired against Jesus but they also recognized that their enemies had done only what God's hand and plan had predestined to take place yes the human agents had acted freely they were responsible for what they did but they were unwittingly fulfilling the plan and purposes of God the Christians in Jerusalem took heart from the knowledge that God was in control even of the opposition they faced the Babylonians might have thought they were in control after all they promoted their own honor and prided themselves in their own strength but ultimately it was God who was raising them up and they could do only what he permitted them to do and that's still the same today the rise and fall of nations and empires of dictators and terrorists is in

[ 24 : 57 ] God's hands as are the circumstances of our tiny lives things that should encourage us here God assures Habakkuk as he addresses his complaint that he is at work and he is in control that's how he addresses Habakkuk's concern but God's surprising reply raises its own difficulties for the prophet and so we come to Habakkuk's second complaint in verse 12 of chapter 1 through to verse 1 of chapter 2 under the heading God's apparent inconsistency inconsistency Habakkuk's original complaint was that

God was doing nothing about the moral anarchy in Judah he wanted God to intervene in judgment and put things right God had now indicated that that was exactly what he was going to do but Habakkuk had a new problem he was now perplexed about how God was going to do it about how God planned to intervene you see what God was going to use as the agents of his judgment are people who were even more lawless than the people of Judah themselves the cure as Habakkuk saw it was worse than the complaint and so Habakkuk protests in verse 13 you who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he

Habakkuk is all too aware of the shortcomings of his own people he's convinced judgment is called for but he doesn't think it's right or fear of a holy god to use people who are even more guilty people who are guilty of even more flagrant sin to execute that judgment if he's a holy god how can he possibly judge his own people by means of a people who are even more treacherous and wicked does that not make god look inconsistent probably tied in with this is the concern that the planned punishment may prove to be excessive judgment is required but surely not at the hands of the ruthless Babylonians they were famed for their ruthlessness

Habakkuk imagines the Babylonians having a fishing net in which they catch nation after nation verse 17 is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever Lord does the punishment fit the crime Habakkuk is perplexed but he sets his hard actions conscience in the context of what he believes about God that's interesting isn't it he prefaces his complaint with what is effectively a statement of what he holds to be true look at verse 12 are you not from everlasting O Lord my God my Holy One we shall not die

O Lord you have ordained them as a judgment and you O Rock have established them for reproof what Habakkuk does here is something we need to do when we are bewildered we need to ask our questions in the context of what we already know to be true I remember hearing the late George B. [ 29 : 44 ] Duncan say in a sermon never doubt in the dark what God has said in the light never doubt in the dark what God has told you in the light here Habakkuk reminds God as he reminds himself of four certainties to which he clings first there is God's commitment to his people Habakkuk speaks to God in direct and personal terms he calls him Lord my God my Holy One he's effectively saying you are the faithful covenant keeping God we are in relationship with you we belong to you God is bound to his people by covenant and in view of that

Habakkuk expresses his conviction that God will not let his people be wiped out he will not give up on them altogether since he's a faithful God who keeps his promises Habakkuk also appeals to God's eternity are you not he says from everlasting the world around Habakkuk might be in turmoil but Habakkuk knows that his God is the eternal one the everlasting one who never changes he is the rock he is utterly stable against the backdrop of an unstable world if things are shaking in our lives and in our world God's eternity and changelessness guarantees stability we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree that's how the hymn writer puts it we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree and wither and perish but not changeth thee

Habakkuk appeals to God's eternity he also acknowledges God's sovereignty verse 12 oh lord you have ordained them as a judgment and you oh rock have established them for reproof it seems that Habakkuk takes on board however reluctantly that God has indeed ordained the coming Babylonian invasion he accepts that God rules in the affairs of men and finally the prophet appeals to God's purity he says in verse 13 you are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong Habakkuk lays out before the Lord these core beliefs now in some ways they accentuate his problem it's because he believes

God is perfectly pure that he wonders how he could possibly use wicked men in the furtherance of his purposes it's because he believes God to be committed to his people that he questions how he could let them be overwhelmed by a foe of incredible ferocity but at the same time what he believes about God gives stability at a time when he could so easily drift we mustn't jettison what we believe whenever our faith is under pressure we may not have any answers we may not understand what God is doing but we shouldn't doubt in the dark what God has said in the light finally and briefly in chapter 2 verses 2 to 5 we have the opening statements of

God's reply to Habakkuk second complaint we could call it God's reassuring reply reply God's reassuring reply there are two things that stand out in this reassuring reply one is that judgment awaits the Babylonians too God assures the prophet that the Babylonians will not go unpunished he's not indifferent to their wickedness any more than he is to the wickedness of Judah the Lord recites the various sins for which woe will one day be visited on the Babylonians God is not indifferent to their sin either indeed one day God's righteousness will be demonstrated and vindicated and the whole earth will be filled with the glory of

[ 35 : 29 ] God the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea the time for the Babylonians to be punished does not yet come but come it will as God assures the prophet in verse 2 still the the vision still the vision awaits its appointed time it hastens to the end it will not lie it will surely come it will not delay punishment awaits the Babylonians but the second thing that stands out in God's reply is that Habakkuk needs to exercise faith the promised punishment of Babylonian may seem slow in coming but he's to wait for it verse 3 if it seems slow wait for it it will surely come it will not delay because in the words of verse 4 the righteous shall live by his faith

Habakkuk must cling to God's promises even in the darkest days and take him at his word the righteous shall live by his faith these are words that are repeated I think on three occasions in the New Testament the New Testament writers cite these words to make the point that the Christian life is a life of faith from first to last we are saved by grace through faith through taking God at his word and the Christian life is one of walking by faith not by sight so what do we learn from

Habakkuk about coping with bewilderment one we bring our bewilderment to the Lord two despite appearances God is at work often in unseen and unexpected ways three God is in control even of the most chaotic circumstances four we hold on to what we know of God and five we trust God's promises and live by faith Habakkuk begins his prophecy wanting to tell the Lord how to run his world he finishes his prophecy with these well known words Habakkuk 3 verses 17 to 19 though the fig trees should not blossom nor fruit be in the vines the produce of the olive fail

and the fields yield no food the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls yet I will rejoice in the Lord I will take joy in the God of my salvation God the Lord is my strength he makes my feet like the deers he makes me tread on my high places Habakkuk ends up content to trust the

Lord the righteous shall live by his faith shall we pray