

How long, O Lord?

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Date: 15 May 2016

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[0 : 00] Our first reading is taken from the book of Habakkuk, chapter 1, verses 1 to 11. 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 paralysed, 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.

[1 : 01] 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.

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. Second reading is from Acts 13, 26-43.

[2 : 09] Brothers, son of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of the salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him.

And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.

But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.

And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second psalm.

You are my son, today I have begotten you. And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, I will give you the holy and sure blessing of David.

[3 : 21] Therefore he also says in another psalm, you will not let your holy ones see corruption. For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption.

But he whom God raised up did not see corruption. Let it be known to you, therefore, brothers, that through this man's forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the prophets should come about. Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish, for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.

As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God.

Well, what do you think when you see evil and injustice in our world? Millions of Syrians dispossessed from their homeland by civil war, the rise of Islamic State, abortion on an industrial scale, tyrannical regimes in countries like North Korea and Zimbabwe that show no sign of ending, people traffickers exploiting migrants, injustice and evil are everywhere.

[5 : 02] Or closer to home, widespread family breakdown, the exploitation of the poor, high-profile child abuse cases, politicians fiddling their expenses, or newspapers hacking phones.

What do we think when we see or hear about such injustice and misery? My guess is that we easily resort to one of two responses.

Either we simply shrug our shoulders, we've become so inoculated to these things, they're so commonplace that we fail to be moved by them. Most of the time we don't really care, we just shrug our shoulders.

Or perhaps rather than reacting with disinterest, our response is one of despair. We kind of give up and assume that God's either unable or unwilling to respond.

And so we abandon faith in him or maybe lash out at him in anger. We despair and lose hope of justice ever prevailing. Well, in our fallen world, injustice and wickedness are present in every generation.

[6 : 09] And this little and perhaps also little-known book, which we're starting over the next few weeks, the book of Habakkuk, tucked away near the end of the Old Testament, wrestles with these very issues. We don't know much about Habakkuk, except that we're told in verse 1 that he was a prophet.

And it seems that he prophesied to the people of Israel during the turbulent days at the end of the 7th century BC, the days before the fall of the kingdom of Judah at the hand of the Babylonians, and the subsequent exile and national disaster that followed.

Habakkuk witnessed great wickedness in his own day. And as we'll see, especially the wickedness of God's own people. And he was disturbed.

He wanted answers, answers as to why evil was allowed to continue unchecked, and what faithful followers of the God of Israel were to do in this world of injustice.

And his little book provides us with an example of responding to evil, which neither shrugs our shoulders apathetically, nor points our fingers angrily at God. We kick off this week in the first chapter, which really divides into two sections which we're going to consider in turn.

[7 : 20] And I'm calling the first section Habakkuk's Searching Question. Habakkuk's Searching Question. Let me read from 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? 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.

As we'll see, much of the book of Habakkuk takes the form of a dialogue between Habakkuk the prophet and the Lord himself. In the first two chapters, we see Habakkuk submitting two complaints to God, as the ESV headings put it, or perhaps more accurately, asking God two searching questions.

And in each case, the Lord answers Habakkuk. And then the book finishes in chapter 3 with a prayer of Habakkuk's in response to what he has heard. And the first complaint or question that Habakkuk brings to the Lord is there right at the beginning in verse 2.

[8 : 35] 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 begins with a list of questions, and they're emotionally charged, aren't they? How long? Why? How long, O Lord? How long before you act? Why?

Why do you seem to be passive in the face of evil? Habakkuk knows enough about God to know that he's a God of justice and peace, and yet there seems to be a mismatch between what he knows of God and the world he sees.

And just notice what it is that he sees. Verse 3. 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. Iniquity, destruction, violence, sounds very like our own world, doesn't it?

[9 : 48] And yet here's the shock. The evil of which Habakkuk speaks, the wickedness which he longs for God to judge, about which he has grown impatient, is that of his own people, God's own people.

Habakkuk grieves over Israel's sin and longs for God to judge Israel, or at least its leaders. Remember the context here.

It's the end of the 7th century BC. King Jehoiakim is on the throne. And if you know your Bible, you'll know his reign was something of a disaster. He failed to fear God. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, Jeremiah tells us of the neglect of justice and righteousness during Jehoiakim's reign, of his exploitation of workers, for example, in order to enhance the splendor of his palace.

And he writes also of the failures of Judah's shepherds, her priests and religious leaders, to care for the people and lead them in God's ways under his law.

So neither king nor clergy were faithful. Church and state had abandoned God's word. Corruption and self-interest had entered both palace and pulpit.

[11 : 02] Look at verse 4 of Habakkuk 1, for Habakkuk's own summary. So the law, that's the law of Moses, God's law, is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted. The law is ignored, disregarded, and the result is an absence of justice.

Wickedness is simply overlooked. Or when there is a legal judgment, because the wicked rule over the righteous, justice is perverted. Right is painted as wrong.

What is wrong is celebrated as right. So can you see Habakkuk's response to injustice? It's neither one of disinterest, nor of despair, but rather one of distress.

Habakkuk is deeply distressed by what he sees. He's moved and troubled, and so cries out to the Lord. And just in passing, it's worth asking ourselves the question of whether we're affected by evil in the same way.

[12 : 11] When we see the kinds of things Habakkuk saw, do we cry out to God for help and for justice? Do we cry with Habakkuk, violence, and beg God to act? Does it bother us when God's law is sidelined, when his word is ignored, when justice is perverted, when nothing seems to change and things go from bad to worse?

We ought to be so affected by injustice and evil that we bring those things to the Lord in prayer. And like Habakkuk, do so again and again.

I take it that his prayer, O Lord, how long, suggests that he prayed regularly, persistently, about these things. Evil distressed him. And remember, what we're dealing with here isn't evil out there in the world.

It's evil here among God's people. Next week, we'll see Habakkuk's complaint about what's out there when he challenges God to judge the Chaldeans, the Babylonians.

But the focus first is on God's own people and the violence Habakkuk saw among them. So does it disturb and distress us when we see similar iniquity within the church, I wonder, among those who profess to be God's people, especially church leaders?

[13 : 31] I'm not sure exactly where destruction and violence might reside within the church today, but one perhaps thinks of some of the child abuse scandals that have broken in recent years and the ecclesiastical cover-ups that have added insult to injury, or the way the church down the centuries has sometimes exploited people for the sake of acquiring wealth, or when Christians have wrongly taken up arms against one another.

It's perhaps easier to see where the law is disregarded within the church, and so justice or righteousness becomes distorted. Sadly, we live in a day when so many church leaders fail to teach the whole truth of God's word and omit or even deny what's uncomfortable or unpalatable to the modern mind.

Countless clergy and even bishops deny by life or by lip what the Bible teaches about human sexuality, for example, sometimes even flagrantly, and they do so without sanctions or discipline, just like in Habakkuk's day.

While those authentically Christian leaders who continue to teach the truth even when it's unfashionable and who receive flack for doing so are marginalized, just like in Habakkuk's day, the wicked surround the righteous.

Those who deny the Bible's teaching are promoted to positions of authority in the church and given public platforms to propagate their false teaching, while Bible-believing churches are sometimes hindered by church hierarchy from preaching the gospel in new places or their leaders are passed over for jobs.

[15 : 09] The law is paralyzed and it ought to make us cry out with Habakkuk, oh Lord, how long? How long till you act? How long will you allow evil within the church to go unchecked?

I've got friends who've been looking to move to a new church after a curacy has finished and they've applied for church after church and been told that they haven't been shortlisted simply because they hold to the Bible's teaching about the complementary roles of men and women, for example.

The law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth. The Episcopal Church in the USA which has rejected the Bible's teaching about human sexuality and has used lawsuits to force Bible-believing churches and clergy out of their denomination and their buildings was given albeit mild sanctions by Anglican primates back in January and yet those sanctions seem already to have been totally disregarded.

Teaching error, persecuting the faithful can be practiced with impunity it seems. the wicked surround the righteous so justice goes forth perverted.

And such false teaching and hostility to those who hold to biblical truth is of course a form of destruction and violence to use Habakkuk's words because what could be more destructive or more violent than to lead people away from the Lord Jesus to deceive people into thinking they'll be okay whatever lifestyle they lead to fail to hold out to people the loving warnings of the Bible concerning God's just judgment and the non-negotiable need for repentance.

[16 : 51] the New Testament teaches us that the equivalent of Old Testament Israel today is the church and like Habakkuk we live in times where God's law is widely neglected in the church and where iniquity goes unpunished.

and if we share Habakkuk's concern for God's word to be exalted and his name to be honoured for the faithful to prosper and the unfaithful to be dealt with then we will like Habakkuk be moved to cry out to God to beg him to act to say how long oh Lord incidentally we shouldn't be slow to cry out for God to judge or even to judge his own people we may feel a bit squeamish about doing so but it's right to want justice and the whole Bible especially the Old Testament think of some of the Psalms is full of cries for God to judge when we see faithful Christians being oppressed we ought to want discipline as well as deliverance in fact normally deliverance can't come without discipline and in his love God disciplines his people so let's not despair or not care about evil within the church perhaps Habakkuk ought actually to be an encouragement to us as it reminds us that it's normal for the faithful to be oppressed even among

God's own people and it also ought also to drive us to our knees in prayer to follow Habakkuk's example in asking God to act to save his people from injustice and wickedness maybe some of us first need to pray that we'd be shocked and troubled by the compromise we see in the church and so to be distressed about it in the same way Habakkuk was so here we have Habakkuk's searching question an example of how to respond to wickedness among God's people and yet although Habakkuk's concern for God to act was right he did get one thing wrong and that leads us on to our second and other heading the Lord's surprising answer Habakkuk's searching question and the Lord's surprising answer you see Habakkuk had complained in verse 2 that God hadn't heard his prayer in verse 3 he laments that God idly looks at wrong in other words that he won't act that he doesn't care that God seemingly shrugs his shoulders and in verses 5 to 11

God responds to his accusation and we discover that he had heard he did care and he would act and yet he would do so in ways which Habakkuk could never have imagined just notice first of all how God deliberately picks up on Habakkuk's own language in his reply in verse 3 Habakkuk had complained why do you make me see iniquity and why do you idly look at wrong but notice verse 5 the Lord replies to Habakkuk look among the nations and see wonder and be astounded Habakkuk may have seen iniquity but if he opened his eyes to what God was doing he'd soon also see God's response it may have looked like God was looking idly at wrong but if Habakkuk looked he'd also see God's hand at work now I guess at this point halfway through verse 5

Habakkuk would have expected that God was then going to say that he would act by removing Israel's sinful leaders and replacing them with faithful leaders by using the good guys to defeat the bad guys a peaceful revolution rather than a bloody coup more Mandela than Mao God but God had other ideas so often his ways are not our own and here he was pulling the strings of history in a different direction yes he would judge the wicked but not as we or Habakkuk might ever have expected in fact his response is shocking let's read on from 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 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 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 the Lord says he's about to do something astounding almost unbelievable have a look at verse 6 he promises to raise up the Chaldeans the Babylonians that is the superpower of the day to exercise his judgment against his own people now can we see how shocking that is the Babylonians were not only a superpower they were arrogant and evil if anything they made the sin of Israel look trivial verse 6 they were a bitter and hasty nation who seized dwellings not their own as they conquer other countries verse 7 they are dreaded and fearsome verse 8 speaks not only of their power but also their pride verse 9 listen to this they all come for violence violence they too were guilty of the very thing Israel was guilty of in verse 3 verses 9 and 10 they gather captives like sand and at kings like Jehoiakim

[23 : 10] God's anointed ruler they scoff and so verse 11 in summary they are guilty men whose own might is their God they worship themselves and their strength not the God of Israel and yet God would use these wicked Chaldeans to exercise the judgment for which Habakkuk longed it's shocking astounding and must have made Habakkuk feel very uncomfortable you see this is manifestly not a picture of the good defeating the bad but the bad defeating the bad it's not a picture of peaceful revolution but a bloody coup I guess it's the sort of thing we've sadly seen in Libya one tyrant Colonel Gaddafi being replaced in some areas by the even more brutal regime of Islamic State or Lenin and Stalin replacing the Tsars in Russia it's like God using

Islamic State today to defeat President Assad or Stalin thwarting Hitler seemingly allowing evil people to prosper in order to judge other evil people it's shocking unexpected stuff especially when the judgment is directed against God's own people so what are we to make of it well three particular applications first of all these verses assure us that God will act to judge it may not be how he'd expected or would have wanted but God would answer Habakkuk's cry the wickedness about which Habakkuk was rightly troubled wouldn't be allowed to go on forever God would judge and isn't that encouraging I don't know if you watched that documentary on the Hillsborough disaster last Sunday night and the quest for justice from the families of the victims that lasted 27 years until the truth finally came out at the recent inquiry for years justice had been perverted lies had been told the innocent had been oppressed but eventually justice has prevailed and we too can be sure that justice will prevail in the church and the world

God will act those who teach or practice error in the name of Jesus who oppose the work of the gospel and faithful Christian leaders will one day be brought to account and that ought to encourage us enormously and move us to pray that God would indeed act but then secondly God's surprising response to Habakkuk's question also reminds us that despite appearances God does pull the strings of history just look at verse 6 once more for behold I am raising up the Chaldeans God says Israel may have looked puny compared to Babylon but it was her God who gave Babylon her strength the regional dominance that Babylon had been enjoying throughout this period of history was given to her by God and even her impending defeat of Israel was planned and executed by God himself for whom Babylon was simply his instrument to carry out the long awaited and long deserved punishment of his own people

God pulls the strings in our world he is in control even over unjust regimes now of course we need to be careful in applying this because we're not Habakkuk we don't have the benefit of God given insight into what exactly God is doing in the world today and why he acts as he does how he's using particular world events to work his purposes and perhaps sometimes to exercise his judgment but it is nonetheless a great encouragement to know that God is sovereign in our world the political correctness that increasingly outlaws biblical teaching the arrogant western political elite that poor scorn on so much that the Bible teaches the unfaithful church leaders who yet seem so powerful all those things or people are controlled by God he pulls the strings he does see wickedness he will judge it he's not idle and in fact is far more powerful than any human movement empire or individual sometimes he even uses the wicked to accomplish his divine purposes now as I said I don't know what that looks like in our context or how God might be acting today we're not told what the equivalent of the Babylonian judgment might be for God's people in unfaithful people in our day maybe God will in his mercy relent from punishing and wonderfully bring about repentance within the church as it happened a generation earlier for

Israel under Hezekiah or maybe an ever increasingly compromised church in this country will in God's divine will be judged and overrun by something very unexpected perhaps Sharia law will replace God's law perhaps a secular agenda will be used to strip the church of England of the special place it holds in our constitution and nation who knows maybe God will again use the wicked outside the church to judge the wicked within it's a chilling and uncomfortable thought we just don't know what will happen but what we can know is that God is in control and he will act when he sees iniquity both in this world and ultimately of course on the final day and then finally by way of application these verses also teach us of course that God doesn't necessarily answer our prayers or fulfill his purposes in the ways we might expect sometimes things may even seem to be getting worse for a while

[29 : 15] I imagine for Habakkuk the only thing worse than seeing God do nothing in response to Israel's sin was to watch him use the wicked Babylonians to exercise his judgment against his own people the Babylonian exile was terrible for faithful people like Habakkuk it brought great distress and suffering and yet it was nonetheless God's just judgment of his people his answer to Habakkuk's complaint that he hadn't acted so passages like this are helpful because they remind us that we can't constrain God or hold him to act in the ways we might want that we mustn't complain that he's not heard us simply because he's not responding to our prayers in the way we think he should and they give us reason to trust God even when it doesn't seem like our prayers are being answered to have confidence that God is at work despite appearances perhaps in fact just as God used the Chaldeans to work out his purposes throughout the Bible we see that he is the expert at using wickedness for good remember how he used

Joseph's slavery at the hands of his jealous brothers to put into motion a rescue plan to save his people the clearest example of course is the cross where God used man's wickedness in executing Jesus to enable Jesus to bear the penalty for sin as we'll see next week these good outcomes don't in any ways excuse such human wickedness the fact that God used the Chaldeans in his plan didn't mean that they were let off the hook it didn't justify their evil actions it's just that God in his wisdom uses all things to work out his purposes and again I think that's enormously encouraging in an uncertain confusing world where we Christians can so often feel on the back foot now earlier I said that we can't always know what God is doing in his world or when he's using world affairs to work out his purposes as he does here with the Chaldeans but actually there is one other place in the Bible where we can be sure that God was doing something similar because in

Acts 13 the apostle Paul quotes from this very passage in Habakkuk so turn with me if you would before we finish to Acts chapter 13 in that passage that we read earlier Acts chapter 13 page 1111 it's always important when studying an Old Testament passage to see if the New Testament quotes from or alludes to that passage so we can get the Bible's own authoritative take on it and this is one such example let me read from verse 40 of Acts 13 Paul is speaking in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch and quoting Habakkuk 1 he says this verse 40 beware therefore lest what is said in the prophets should come about look you scoffers be astounded and perish for I am doing a work in your days a work that you will not believe even if one tells it to you Paul warns the Jews of his own day that they were in danger of making the same mistakes and suffering the same fate as their ancestors in Habakkuk's day because if they continued to reject

Jesus as the true Messiah as their rescuer then they would suffer God's judgment and have to watch him do something even more remarkable than the Babylonian invasion it seems from what follows that Paul was probably thinking of how God would reject Israel and extend his promises to the Gentiles instead just as it was Gentiles who'd overrun Israel all those centuries earlier you see God has done something even more astounding than what he did in the 7th and 6th centuries BC in enabling people like us to hear the gospel to receive the promises given to Israel to be rescued through the death of his son the judgment at the hands of the Babylonians pointed forward to the judgment of Israel in Jesus' day and the gospel going out instead to the Gentiles in fact if you think about it what could be more astounding and unbelievable than how God has responded to his people's sin in the person of the

Lord Jesus you see in Habakkuk's day God judged his people's wickedness in a shocking way by raising up the Chaldeans and yet the uncomfortable truth is that all of us are guilty before a holy God but the way God has responded to our sin in the person of Jesus is even more extraordinary than what Habakkuk was told once again we see that God does judge sin he's not unmoved by it but no one would have expected that he'd judge your sin and mine by taking it upon himself in the person of his son so that we might be spared the kind of fate suffered by Israel in Habakkuk's day we should look and be astounded by what God has done at the cross and is doing across the world today in bringing men and women from every nation to himself who would have believed it even more astounding than raising up the evil Chaldeans to judge sin is the raising up of the innocent

[34 : 42] Jesus on the cross to pay for my sin and yours it's wonderful news and yet notice that Paul also says God's people are to beware to beware not to be scoffers who end up rejecting the Lord we also must beware that we ourselves don't become complacent or ignore God's word or tolerate sin or harden our hearts as Israel did indeed we're to listen to Paul's words in verse 38 let it be known to you therefore brothers that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses Jesus offers us forgiveness and freedom God won't ultimately turn a blind eye to sin inside or outside the church his answer to Habakkuk proves that but he has done an astounding thing in judging human sin in the most surprising place so let's not neglect that forgiveness but rather claim it afresh for ourselves so

Habakkuk begins his book by asking God a searching question he got an answer but a surprising one not quite as he would have expected and it means that we're now left with another question as we continue in Habakkuk chapter one how could God possibly allow the wicked Chaldeans of all people to judge his own people we may rejoice in the downfall of Gaddafi but what about Islamic State if anything they're even more wicked can they be allowed to get away with their crimes could the Chaldeans surely the wicked we see out there in the world need punishing just as much as sin within the church and next week the story continues with that precise question thing in the world downfall of the mystery and so on to the times in the world where women shall which be the wanted to attract people to e the pic you know ago life can