

When God Seems Idle

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[0 : 00] The Christian journey is called the journey of faith. The journey of faith. But anyone who serves the Lord for any reasonable period of faith.! But anyone who serves the Lord for any reasonable period of faith.

And soon comes to realize the sobering reality that sometimes this journey of faith is marked by doubt.

And when I talk about doubt, it's not doubt in terms of God's existence. But it's doubt in terms of God's character, especially in the area of prayer.

When we have prayed prayers for long periods of time and God delays in answering them. And sometimes when he does answer them, he answers them in a way that we did not desire or expect. And sometimes we wonder if God really cares. We wonder if he even hears. And we question when he does answer.

[1 : 14] And although this is a widespread experience among Christians. It is ignored in preaching and it's also ignored in conversations.

We tend to just go along and pretend that all is well. And we kind of harbor. It's kind of like being, like talking to someone. And all is not right between you and the person.

Of course, the person doesn't know. But things are not settled in your heart. But God knows. And many times we're talking to God and we're relating to God. But deep in our hearts, we're wondering, does he really care?

Does he hear my prayers? And why does he relate to me in the way that he does? And some people, some who profess to know Christ, have fallen prey to false teaching.

Some have fallen prey to the so-called word of faith movement. And who will tell you that you just need to have positive thoughts and have positive confession. And you just need to speak things into existence.

[2 : 25] And sadly, many professing believers give in to those humanistic and unbiblical practices. Rather than bringing their doubts and their questions to God in prayer.

For this morning, we are commencing a three-part sermon series in the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. And from the very outset, in this book of Habakkuk, we come face-to-face with Habakkuk's doubts, which he brings to God, as he desperately tries to make sense of how God is not responding to his prayers that he has prayed for a very long time.

My prayer for us as a church family is that we, over the next three weeks, will hear and heed the message of the book of Habakkuk. And the result would be that we will be honest and bring our doubts and our questions before the Lord and trust him to answer us in his time and in his way.

So if you have not yet done so, please turn in your Bible to the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. And we'll be, this morning, considering chapter 1 through verse 1 of chapter 2.

If you are using one of the church Bibles, it's on page 785. Habakkuk is one of those Old Testament books that could be a little difficult to find if you're not so familiar with your Old Testament, but look in the index if you need to do that.

[4 : 04] But if you have a church Bible, it's 785. Please follow along as I read. I'm reading from the English Standard Version. The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

Oh, 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.

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 I told.

[5 : 16] If told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation who march through the breadth of the earth to see of 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.

[6 : 23] 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 judgment. And you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. 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, 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.

[8 : 02] Let's pray together. Father, we thank you once again for the privilege of gathering. We thank you now for the privilege of hearing your word.

this is your word, Lord. Would you speak it through your servant to your people? And God, meet us where we are this morning in our varied places.

We trust your providence. We trust your time for this word for your people. Would you apply it to our hearts for the glory of your great name we pray.

Amen. As I prepared this sermon, the opening lines of a very popular hymn came to mind.

It's the hymn What a Friend We Have in Jesus. I think many of you are familiar with it. What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear.

[9 : 07] What a privilege to carry everything. to God in prayer. I thought about those lines because it is an amazing privilege that God's people have to bring everything to God in prayer.

But I think if you're honest with me we don't bring everything to God in prayer. And one of the things we don't bring to God in prayer is our doubts. Our doubts about God and how he deals with us and how he deals with others.

and our questions. But what we see immediately when we come to this book of Habakkuk this passage that we have just read is Habakkuk is doing exactly what the words of what a friend we have in Jesus tell us to do.

To bring everything to God in prayer including our doubts. What we see from not only the passage that we have read this morning and what we will see as we go through this short sermon series is that even faithful believers sometimes doubt God's character and question and question his ways. Even those who have served the Lord for many many years who live faithful lives on this journey of faith even they sometimes doubt God's character and they doubt and question his ways.

[10 : 55] and that's what we see Habakkuk doing. He's not doubting God and his existence but instead he's doubting an aspect of God's character he's questioning one of God's ways and he's bringing his doubts and his questions before the Lord in prayer.

For those of you who are taking notes I've structured this sermon around two aspects of this dialogue between Habakkuk and God and they are Habakkuk's doubts about God's character and Habakkuk's questions about God's ways.

So I have two simple points this morning they are number one doubt in God's character and number two questioning God's ways and I'll consider them in order. First doubt in God's character.

Typically when we come to a prophetic book we find at the very outset of the book that it tells us something about the prophet tells us generally who his father was or which land he was from but

with this book of Habakkuk we don't have the same kind of introduction all we have in verse one is the oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw and this brief opening seems to point to the fact that Habakkuk obviously was well known needed no introduction and though we don't know who his parents his father in particular was based on verse 6 where God tells Habakkuk that he's raising up the Chaldeans another name for the Babylonians and he's raising them up we have an idea of the time that Habakkuk lived he would have lived around the time when the Babylonians were preparing to invade Judah and finally invaded Judah around 586 BC and so we know that Habakkuk was ministering as a prophet around that time he would have been a contemporary of Jeremiah and Zephaniah and perhaps even Daniel and Ezekiel and this first verse of his prophetic book refers to this as an oracle says it's an oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw an oracle is another word for burden burden is this burden that he had he received this burden that he was to deliver to God's people and that's what a message is a message from God becomes a burden on the one who receives it until it is delivered to God's people but the book of Habakkuk is very unusual it's unusual because normally what we would find in prophetic books is we find the prophet in God's presence receiving a word from

[13:58] God and then being charged to go and give that word to God but the opposite is happening here instead of the dialogue starting with God speaking to Habakkuk the dialogue starts with Habakkuk speaking to God and not only speaking to God he's complaining to God and he still gives us a written account of this engagement with God so it is still a word that we need to hear but we need to see from the outset it's a different word it's not from God to Habakkuk and then to the people it's from Habakkuk to God and then to the people and there's a message that we need to hear from this as well in verses 2 and 3 we see Habakkuk asking God three questions starting in verse 2 oh Lord how long will I cry for help and you will not hear or cry to you violence you will not save why do you make me see iniquity and why do you hardly look at wrong destruction and violence are before me strife and contention arise and so we see Habakkuk amazingly confronting God and saying

God how could you do this I've been crying out to you for so long I've been saying to you violence is all around I've been saying to you you make me look at iniquity in the land and God all you're doing is you're just standing idly and watching you're just looking on and you're doing nothing about it and Habakkuk is lamenting the condition of the land look at what he says in verse 4 he says so the law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth for the wicked surround the righteous so justice goes forth perverted this was the condition of the land of Judah they had fallen in such sin and in such disobedience to God and Habakkuk the prophet is lamenting about the condition of the land he says the law is paralyzed and even when you think you get justice it's perverted justice I want us to think for a moment just imagine if we were in I mean in this country right now we often complain about laws not being enforced but just imagine if it was just a free for all your stuff gets stolen don't call the police someone threatens you don't go make a complaint someone has wronged you don't go to court because there's no justice there bribes will be left right and center this was the condition of the land the land had fallen into deep darkness and was a sad state of affairs and Habakkuk had been praying about it for so long that now he gets to the place where he cries out to God this complaint and he's saying God the wicked are surrounding the few righteous and everything is perverted there's no justice in the land and really in this complaint Habakkuk is questioning God's justice and to question God's justice is to question God's character he's doubting does this really matter to God this bothers me but does it bother God and he's exhausted and he actually accuses God of being idle of looking at wrong and doing nothing I look around the room and I could imagine that we have all lived long enough to be able to identify where Habakkuk was and maybe we have done so in very personal ways you prayed and prayed about a situation or different situations that were wrong and unjust and there was no change there was no answer from

God perhaps you're there this morning perhaps you are praying about long standing situations that are wrong or unjust in your family or at work or in our nation or in the world and things remain the same and sometimes they even get worse and perhaps the wrongs and injustice are personal perhaps they've been done to you and this is raw and real for you this morning and you've prayed and you've cried out to God but God's responses seem to be like what they were for Habakkuk he seems to be idly looking on looking at the wrong and doing nothing about it perhaps it's not a situation of wrong or injustice perhaps it's a situation of suffering maybe someone is sick you've

been praying for them for a long period of time and that prayer for healing that prayer for relief has gone unanswered perhaps the person even died and we know that

[20 : 15] God has the power and the ability to hear and to answer but he doesn't and how easy it is to question his goodness does he care is he even interested and so as we consider these words of Habakkuk this morning I want to encourage you don't just harbor it in your heart don't just relate to God the way we would relate to someone else who we're reluctant to tell they're wrong or they're perceived wrong engage with God as Habakkuk did as he brought these things before the Lord and poured them out to the Lord to say God why are you just standing there and not hearing my prayer that I prayed time and time and time again it's okay to complain to God in prayer as Habakkuk did but in verses 5 through 11 the Lord answers

Habakkuk he doesn't rebuke him doesn't rebuke him for the complaint doesn't rebuke him for doubting his character does rebuke him for doubting his sense of justice instead he tells Habakkuk he says I am doing something about all the sin and all the injustice in Judah but I'm dealing with it in a manner that if I told you you wouldn't even believe it let's look at how he says this to Habakkuk verses 5 and 6 look 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 I told or 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 in these words the Lord is telling

Habakkuk that he is not only the sovereign lord of the land of Judah but he's the sovereign lord of the nations he says and I am doing something far beyond the nation of Judah he says you look at the nations and obviously Habakkuk would have been aware of the rising up of the Babylonians at that time how they were just invading and conquering nation after nation and God says Habakkuk they're not doing that in the vacuum he says I'm doing that I'm the one who's sovereign over all of that and I am doing a work and not only am I involved in that but I am doing that work and I'm going to use those Babylonians I'm going to use the hasty nation this ruthless nation I'm going to use them as part of my plan to bring judgment upon the people of

Judah because of their wickedness that's my sovereign plan that I'm working out he says if I told you you wouldn't believe and then he goes on verses 7 through 11 he describes the ruthlessness and the wickedness of the Babylonians and so far from looking idly on wickedness and injustice in the land the Lord was preparing judgment but he was doing it in a way that Habakkuk couldn't see and in a way that Habakkuk would not understand and we should bear this in mind we should remember that though we may think God is idly looking by that God is working out his plans and his purposes in ways that we just are not able to see or understand in the moment he is acting but his ways and his time are not ours and in truth if he told us we wouldn't believe it if he told us we wouldn't understand it and that's exactly what we see with Habakkuk the Lord has told him what he is going to do the Lord has told him

I'm not idly looking by I'm not just looking on I am going to bring judgment and when the Lord tells him Habakkuk is confused by God's plan and so having now doubted God's character he now questions God's ways this brings you to my second and final point questioning God's ways here in verse 12 despite all of Habakkuk's doubts about why God does not judge the wicked Habakkuk clings to God as his God I want you to see that in verse 12 he says to the Lord 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

[26 : 02] I want you to see this and see brothers and sisters this is the kind of honest faithful engagement we can have with God when we don't understand when we have doubts we have questions we can come to God holding on to him as our God holding on to him as our rock and yet pouring out our complaints before him and so Habakkuk does not waver in his faith in God although he had doubts although he had questions he held on to God he acknowledges God you're from everlasting thing he's saying you're the eternal one you you you you are the alpha and the omega you're my holy one he says Lord you've ordained them as judgment and you oh rock have established them for reproof and see that's his dilemma his dilemma is this eternal

God who is absolutely holy is somehow tolerating wickedness in the land and now he is actually going to deal with the wickedness in a way that seems to contradict every single thing that I know about him you're trying to why are you going to do it this way he accepts that God is going to raise the Babylonians he's now confused he expresses his confusion in verse 13 he says you who are of purer eyes and to see evil and cannot look at wrong why do you idly look at traitors and are silent

when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he and he's recognizing the Babylonians the Babylonians were ruthless as we see described here and he's saying they're actually swallowing up nations that in terms of degrees of wickedness these nations are more righteous than they are he says

God how could you look on that how could you allow that to happen how can a pure and holy God allow a wicked nation like the Babylonians to swallow up other nations who are less wicked than they are now his particular concern is about Judah and as wicked as Judah was Judah was a saint compared to the Babylonians and he's saying God how can a pure and holy God choose to judge the wickedness of Judah by raising up the Babylonians who are far more wicked than them saying God how could you possibly use them to bring your judgment why would you do that of all things so notice he's not ever questioning

God's character in terms of doubting God's justice because now he knows God is not idle he's not blind to what's going on he is going to address it but now he's questioning how God is going to address it he's questioning!

And then in verses 14 to 16 Habakkuk underscores the wickedness of the Babylonians he says to God he says God you have made men like helpless fish and the Babylonians are coming and they are just catching them the way you would throw a hook in the water and pull up a helpless fish or throw the net in and just drag them in says that's what the Babylonians are doing nation after nation and the way that fishermen would rejoice with their great catch that's what they're doing they're indifferent to the fact that it is people that they're catching and in their wickedness they're believing that it's some pagan god that's giving them success in all that they're doing they're plundering the nations and they are enjoying the wealth that they have plundered from these nations they're living in luxury He's bringing all this to God He says God how could you use them how could the eternal holy

[30 : 41] God use this method to bring about his judgment God you could do better than that you're everlasting you're all powerful you don't need to use this nation doesn't seem right to do it that way and then he asked this concluding question to God in verse 17 he says is he meaning the Babylonians is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever God hasn't he done this enough God are you going to allow the Babylonians to continue to do this nation after nation he's questioning God's ways and brothers and sisters we're no different you know there are a lot of us who really believe that if we were

God for a day we'd do things differently but you know what I've heard it said if you're God for a day you do exactly the same thing God does because he's perfect in all of his ways perfect in all of his ways you know as much as we like to change things in our lives the psalmist says that the Lord has caused the boundary places for our lives to fall in pleasant places and because he is God he's able to work in ways that are far beyond our comprehension for our good that we are not able to see and that he's working out all of his good and perfect purposes that our limited minds are not able to comprehend God and God is no longer idle looking by and he answers our prayers we like God how in the world could you have thought that that's what I wanted you to do maybe it's a difficult relationship at work and you pray Lord Lord would you do something the Lord gets the person of promotion the person gets promoted and they are no longer in your way the transfer you've been praying for God gives it to them sometimes we watch in nations we watch the politics of nations and we watch a wicked leader or a more wicked government replace one that's less wicked and we like God how could you do that it's one thing if these things were just random and they happen on their own but when you accept that there's a sovereign God over his entire universe and nothing happens outside of his sovereign world you say

God how could you do that Or perhaps it's on a very personal level you've been praying and asking God to answer the deepest desires of your heart crying out to him laying your petitions before him and you watch and see in the lives of others around you some not serving the Lord and you see those things being manifested in their lives and you are like God how is that possible what else do I need to do it reminds us of the song that we hear sung in funerals very regularly no doubt sung this weekend father along that line that says never molested though in the wrong and we can easily question

God's ways and more than question God's ways sometimes we wonder is it worth serving God we can fall in the doldrums like the psalmist in Psalm 73 the Troy open up with a portion of this morning verses 13 and 14 where the psalmist says all in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my

hands in innocence for all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning the psalmist is saying why why why am I living for God why am I keeping my heart clean and my hands from sin if every day I go about suffering but then the psalmist says he did something he says that in verse 16 he says but when

[36 : 04] I thought to understand this it seemed to me a worrisome task until I went into the sanctuary of God then I discerned their end truly you have set them in slippery places you make them fall to ruin how they are destroyed in a moment swept away utterly by terrors the psalmist tells us that something happened to him when he went into the sanctuary of God into the place of prayer into the place of communion with God the place of waiting on God for insight and understanding beyond what we can naturally see with our eyes he said it was in that place that God opened his eyes and enabled him to see that all was not as it appeared to be he says God they're in slippery places as securely as they look to me God they're in slippery places and they can be destroyed in a moment they're here today and gone the next day he says there's no need to question you about them because you're working out your plans and your purposes evidently

God did not give Habakkuk an immediate response to all the questions that he raised including this last one in verse 17 it appears that a response was not immediate and we know that from the very next verse in verse 1 of chapter 2 where Habakkuk says 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 so he basically is saying you know God I'm staying right here I'm going to sit I'm going to wait you need to answer me concerning this complaint about how you could use the Babylonians to bring judgment on the land of Judah he is resolved brothers and sisters this is the place that we need to find ourselves in prayer this is the posture that we need to have in waiting on God and trusting him to answer us when we bring our questions before him God this is not an expression of doubt anymore see doubt will cause us to go say well you know whatever will happen will happen and we go about our merry!

way we don't engage God and we harbor in our hearts questions and doubts and complaints against the Lord but Habakkuk's response is one of faith he expects that God is going to answer him and he is committed to being patient and waiting on the Lord to answer this complaint and so must we brothers and sisters we must pour our hearts out to the Lord bring those questions before him and wait patiently in faith for him to give an answer and as we'll see in next week's sermon God does answer Habakkuk and his answer is surprising and so I trust you'll join us next Sunday for the second part of this sermon series you know when we think about

God delaying judgment on the wicked we should remember that it's part of God's patience it's part of God's kindness giving people room and time to repent and you know throughout the pages of scripture if there's one thing that we see that marks God's dealing with sin yes we see judgment against sin but you know what is the strongest accent about how God deals with sin in scripture patience mercy and grace we think back to Adam and Eve we think back to how they failed they were supposed to die God went looking for them God called them he clothed!

[40 : 49] them and then he gave them a promise he says the seed of the woman is going to come it's going to crush the head of the serpent and that took a long time took a long time as God was being patient with sin and with sinners over thousands of years and then finally when he did act he acted in a surprising way he didn't just send someone to die he sent his own son he sent his one and only son to be that sacrifice if you thought about Adam and Eve as they contemplated that whatever they were able to understand from this promise of this one who's going to come and crush the head of the serpent I don't think that they would have thought it would have been

God incarnate who would come down and crush the head of the serpent God acted in a way with his son! that's! far more surprising than using the Babylonians to bring judgment against the land of Judah!

Brothers and sisters may we be more amazed at that may we be more amazed that God sent his son and judged his son for the sin of sinners like you and me so that we don't have to die for our sin and so that we can know mercy and grace we who deserve judgment and wrath have been surprised by mercy and grace and may God's grace through Christ fill all of our hearts who have trusted in Christ today maybe be surprised at that that God has sent his son and judged his son instead of judging us