

How Long, O Lord

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[0 : 00] The following sermon is made available by Lakeside Bible Church in Cornelius, North Carolina.

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Well, let's take our Bibles and turn to Habakkuk chapter 1. Habakkuk chapter 1 is where we are as we continue our study today. Last week, we used the three divisions of verse number 1 to introduce the book of Habakkuk and his burden and the prophet and who he was and the context around that. If you weren't able to watch that study on YouTube, I want to encourage you to do that. You don't have to pause this one to go back to it, but maybe after this one's over with, whenever you have some time, go back to that video.

[1 : 11] It's actually in two parts, the introductory to Habakkuk, and it'll really help you as we jump into this study together. Well, our study today brings us to Habakkuk's initial prayer and question for God.

Let's read it together. Habakkuk chapter 1, verses 2 through 4. Habakkuk cries out to the Lord, O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear?

Even cry out to thee of violence, and thou wilt not save. Why dost thou show me iniquity and cause me to behold grievance?

For spoiling and violence are before me, and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth.

For the wicked doth compass about the righteous. Therefore wrong judgment proceedeth. There are three parts to this study that I want to pull out.

[2 : 13] One really observation for each of the verses here, and the first one is this. It's found in verse number 2. We see the agony of Habakkuk's prayer. The agony of Habakkuk's prayer.

Look with me again at the verse. Verse number 2. O Lord, how long shall I cry? And thou wilt not hear. Even cry out to thee of violence. And thou wilt not save.

Now the anguish in Habakkuk's prayer has less to do with the sin of the nation, and more to do with God's silence and inaction.

Now there's a sense in which he is reverently issuing a complaint against God. There would have been a time in this prayer where Habakkuk's focus in his words was really on asking God to judge the sin of the nation.

Maybe, probably even asking God to bring a revival to the nation. But day by day, the longer God delayed in answering the prophet, the focus of his prayer shifted to the agony of silence.

[3 : 26] It wasn't so much now the wickedness of the nation that burdened him. The agony and the anguish that he felt in this prayer had to do with the fact that God wasn't answering the prayer.

It's as if God was silent and it seemed as if God was inactive in the whole thing. Look at the way in which Habakkuk addresses the Lord here.

Look at verse 2. O Lord, how long shall I cry and you will not hear? That's the question. Not how long is the wickedness going to go on at this point.

How long will you not hear me? Look again, even cry out to the violence and you will not save.

Again, the cry here is not so much in this verse about the violence.

The cry is about the fact that God is not providing action against the violence. Look at verse 3. Why do you show me, and he gives a list of things, iniquity and grievance and spoiling and violence and strife and contention.

[4 : 29] As burdened as Habakkuk was about the wickedness of Judah and its leaders, his agony was a result of the perceived silence and inaction of God.

Now, that doesn't mean that his prayer was sinful. He actually approaches God very reverently, as is seen in the way that he addresses God in verse 2.

Those four capital letters is the name Yahweh or Jehovah. This is the holy, revered name of God. This wasn't a sinful prayer.

He wasn't approaching God sinfully. This isn't the prayer of a carnal man whose heart is lifted up in sinful anger and arrogance.

It is the passionate, humble cry of a child for his heavenly Father to intervene in his distress.

[5 : 27] That's what this prayer is. That's where the anguish is coming from. As he cries out to his heavenly Father and to his God for action, yet he hasn't heard back and he hasn't received an answer.

And so his prayer is not just a burden for the sin, but he agonizes in this prayer because it seems as if God is so distant.

How long shall I cry indicates that Habakkuk had been asking for God's help for a long time. And with each passing day, his anguish became the result of God's silence rather than the people's sin. Now it's at this point that Habakkuk's prayer is so relatable and relevant to us. Habakkuk is the parent that, despite their best efforts in raising their daughter to know God, watches as her life spirals in rebellion against the Lord.

No matter how much they've kept her in church, no matter how much they've kept the Scripture in front of her, no matter how much they've poured their life into training her in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, they watch as she continues to choose rebellion and to choose sin, and eventually they cry out to the Lord, Lord, how long, how long, God, must we watch our children spiral out of control and sin?

[6 : 54] How long until you do something, Lord? How long until you become active in their hearts? Habakkuk is the wife who for years and years has prayed that God would get a hold of her husband's heart and draw him to salvation, yet she can't understand why after all of this time, his heart is so hardened to the things of God.

And she cries out to the Lord, How long must I pray this prayer? How long, Lord, before you hear me and answer my prayer?

Habakkuk is the Christian patriot who for decades prays that God would establish righteousness in leadership. But with every passing administration, things seem to just get more and more wicked. And the nation is only growing more and more secular and more and more sinful. And he cries out, Lord, how long? It's the lover of the church that sees how the Christian church seems to continue to plumb the depths of liberalism and cheap imitations of the gospel and cheap imitations of worship. And they cry out to the Lord. How long, Lord, until you hear our prayer? How long till you revive your church? How long, Lord, will you be silent?

[8 : 26] How long will I cry? And you will not save. Many of us understand what it's like to anguish over sin, only to see our agony increase as God seems to be silent and inactive.

Well, it's the loving forbearance of God that explains his delay in judging the sin of the people. Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3, 9, God's purposes in salvation cannot be stopped.

And sometimes that means he will allow evil to continue in order that he might lead some to repentance and faith. It is his love for man that causes what we perceive to be delays.

And so as Habakkuk is crying out against this judgment, we understand that it's God's mercy that has seemingly delayed judgment. The same mercy that he showed to us in delaying judgment in our lives prior to crying out to him for salvation.

And while the scripture teaches that our own sin will prevent God from hearing and answering our prayers, in the case of Habakkuk, it's not a matter of sin in his own heart.

[10 : 04] He's a righteous man. He's a holy man. It's only the wisdom of God that can answer why this prayer remained unanswered for him and why this prayer may remain unanswered for you.

And therein lies the whole point of the book of Habakkuk, that we must trust God. He may not be answering your prayer because it's not right yet to answer your prayer.

He may be delaying for a salvation gospel purpose. It may be that he's doing a work in you that has not yet come to completion.

But God is always right. And only in his wisdom can we begin to answer why our prayers remain unanswered. What appears to us as God's delays must not be mistaken as indifference or complacency.

Though his work often necessitates patience on our part, he is sympathetic to our prayers. And it should come as a comfort to God's people that it was God who first cried out how long.

[11 : 24] Think about it. Exodus chapter 16 and verse 28. Israel had just been blessed with the manna from heaven. And God had instructed that they not gather it on the Sabbath day, but rather the day before they would gather enough for two days.

But they disobeyed. And here was God's response to Moses. And the Lord said to Moses, How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws?

In Numbers chapter 14, we see as God brings the children of Israel to the promised land, and Moses sends the 12 spies into the land, their responsibility was not to make a determination on whether or not the children of Israel should go into the land.

God had already given them the land. It was theirs for the taking. All they had to do was obey the Lord in taking it. Their job was just to see what the land was like. Well, 10 of those 12 spies come back with an evil report.

They turn the hearts of the people against God, and they rebel against God in that moment, right on the brink of blessing and promise. And here's what God said in Numbers chapter 14.

[12 : 37] The Lord said to Moses, How long will this people despise me? How long will they not believe in me in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?

In Matthew chapter 17, Jesus was frustrated with the disciples' lack of faith. And he said, O faithless and perverse generation, he's speaking to the disciples there, How long shall I be with you?

How long shall I put up with you? Jesus said. God is sympathetic to our cries of how long.

Because he has made that same cry to us so many times. And this is precisely why the Bible says that we can come confidently to him in prayer.

Remember Hebrews chapter 4. We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness. He's been tempted in all the same ways that we've been tempted yet without sin.

[13 : 48] And then the writer says, Let us therefore come boldly, confidently to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

God is sympathetic to our prayers. And that's exactly why we can come confidently to his throne.

That's exactly why we should come boldly to him in prayer.

Because he cares and he understands and he anguishes with us. In times of anguish, God's people can take great comfort in this truth.

Now, Owen Robertson said this, Without doubt, the Lord entered sympathetically into the agonies of his prophet. Although his own long suffering explains his delay in the establishment of justice, He nonetheless agonizes with his people in their grief.

What a wonderful God that is. That though his perfect righteousness guides him in waiting to sometimes answer our prayer, and waiting to sometimes bring the judgment that we're crying for, and waiting to sometimes bring the healing that we're praying for, while his perfect righteousness always does what is right in that regard.

[15 : 14] In the midst of our prayer, he grieves with us. And he's sympathetic to us. What an awesome God that is. So if that's you, and you're in a place now where you've been crying out to the Lord, maybe even for a long time, and you're at the point where you're crying out, how long, Lord, am I going to have to say this prayer?

How long before you answer? How long will you be silent? Remember that not only is his way perfect, but he grieves with you in that.

He is sympathetic to your plight. And he loves you. And he desires for you to continue bringing that prayer to him.

And so we see in verse number two, the agony of Habakkuk's prayer. And if there's nothing else we see, that's really the main thing that's important for us to understand in these verses.

But let's quickly look at the other two things. Secondly, in verse three, we see the substance of his prayer. The substance of his prayer. Now, while the agony of Habakkuk's prayer can be explained by the absence of an answer from God, his burden over the sin of the nation was not diminished.

[16 : 33] The entire purpose of his prayer was to seek for God's judgment against the wickedness of Judah. And he gives us a general idea of what type of sin had become so prevalent.

Now, I don't want to take a lot of time with this one because the text doesn't take a lot of time with this. But I do want to just mention a couple of things about the sins before we move on. He gives a series of six sins, but he groups them in three categorical pairs.

And I want to mention just each category. I want to focus mainly on the first one, and then we'll just touch on the other two. The first category of sin that he brings up is idolatry.

Idolatry. Look at verse 3. Habakkuk prays, Now, this is the primary one that I want us to pay attention to for our purposes this morning.

Iniquity can be a reference to idolatry. In fact, it's often used in regards to idolatry throughout the Old Testament. And grievance is really just a general word for wickedness that must be understood in connection to iniquity in idolatry here in this particular passage.

[17 : 55] Now, God had been abundantly clear in the law that idolatry would not be tolerated, and Habakkuk couldn't understand why God was allowing it to continue unfettered.

Now, the categories of sin listed here in this verse are not meant to be understood as a progression. But the fact that sinful behavior is initiated by a departure from true worship is unmistakable.

All sin begins with man's heart turning from God in order to pursue his own will and passions.

Idolatry may not always involve a carved image or a pagan ritual, but sin is always born out of an idolatrous heart that seeks to please self rather than God.

Calvin said, The human heart is a factory of idols. Our heart left to itself produces nothing but sinful behavior as we seek to please ourselves and worship our own passions.

[19 : 09] And Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, At the moment of sin, God is quite unreal to us. Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God.

And it is here that everything within me rises up against the word of God. Therefore, the Bible teaches us in times of temptation in the flesh, there is one command.

Flee. Flee fornication. Flee idolatry. Flee youthful lust. Flee the lust of the world. Any sin that we fall into is initiated first by a departure from God.

It's either a departure from genuine worship of God, or it's a departure from the faithful study of the word of God. And we follow our own pursuits. And what that leads to inevitably is an abundance of sin.

Any struggle of sin in your life is initiated by a departure from God. And the sin of the church is a result of its departure from God.

[20 : 14] And the sin of the nation is a result of its departure from God. Therefore, the only solution for overcoming temptation is faithfulness to the word of God and genuine worship of God in the way that God has determined in his word for us to worship him.

Any other sin prevailing in Judah began with the idolatry. And Habakkuk couldn't understand why God seemed to be allowing it to take place.

Because what it was bringing about was just more and more and more sin. And he says, how long, Lord, are you going to make me see this? How long? That's the main substance of his prayer here.

Let me just mention the other two categories and we'll move on and wrap up for the day. The second category is violence. And he uses the word spoiling and violence here.

Now, spoiling speaks of destruction or wreaking havoc, while violence is a reference to cruelty.

Now, removing the restraint of God's word frees the heart to explore the extremes of its own depravity.

[21 : 29] And that was certainly rampant among the Israelites as they pursued idolatry. How long would God allow this lawlessness and cruelty to continue without judgment is Habakkuk's prayer.

How many children would be sacrificed to Moloch before God would take action? And it's really not that different from our own society now.

Between 2010 and 2014, an estimated 56 million babies were aborted worldwide. And that's a statistic that doesn't come from a Christian organization.

It comes with a pro-abortion organization. 56 million. In four years. 2019 saw the highest homicide rate in Charlotte since 1993.

In 2018, it's estimated that more than 700,000 women experienced a threatened, attempted, or completed rape in the United States alone.

[22 : 36] More and more support every year worldwide is being given to euthanasia and assisted suicide. A departure from God inevitably leads to a devaluing of human life.

Because if we don't regard God, we won't regard those who have been made in His image. And that just brings mass murders and violence.

And this caused Habakkuk to cry out to God for help. And to be honest, it should cause us to cry out to God for help as well. I pray that we don't become callous and complacent to the violence that we see in our nation day by day.

But that we cry out for God. To act. Thirdly, we see hatred. And He uses the word strife and contention.

And of course, it comes as no surprise that a society overrun with violence would also be overflowing with hatred for others. And we don't have time to jump into the depths of those words, but we understand what they mean.

[23 : 47] And the holiness of Habakkuk's heart is seen in his hatred of sin. He desperately wanted God to intervene by judging the wickedness and bringing back revival.

His example should drive us to our knees to beg God to work. And our understanding that the eradication of sin can only come from the power of God should drive us to faithful evangelism. We should be driven to our knees for God's help. And then we should be driven to evangelism to do our part. Thirdly and finally, we see the potential fault of His prayer.

The potential fault of His prayer. Look at verse 4. Therefore, the law is slacked. And judgment doth never go forth.

For the wicked doth compass about the righteous. Therefore, wrong judgment proceedeth. Habakkuk was clearly a godly man.

[24 : 54] And I want to be careful not to assign a sinful attitude to him that's not clear in the text. But I do think that there's an element to verse 4 that at least reveals a potential danger of Habakkuk's prayer venturing into the realm of a sinful attitude towards God.

And the key word here is therefore. Look at it with me again. Therefore, the law is slacked. Therefore, judgment doth never go forth.

Therefore, the wicked doth compass about the righteous. Therefore, wrong judgment proceedeth. There was lawlessness among God's people.

And the main context of this verse has to do with the corrupt political system and justice system in Judah.

Because of the idolatry and the violence, it permeated the hearts of the leaders who were responsible in their God-given responsibility to actually benefit the nation, to benefit the righteous.

[26 : 07] But because of their idolatry and their own violence, they actually weren't benefiting the righteous. They were benefiting the wicked. The whole system was corrupt. And that's the context of what Habakkuk is saying.

But when we see the word therefore, we see that Habakkuk is connecting this corrupted judicial system, the worst of the worst. He's connecting that as a result of something else that he's already mentioned in the previous verses.

Now, he could simply be saying that the departure from God and the prevalence of hateful violence had resulted in injustice and political corruption. And acknowledging the fact that he was a holy man, that's probably exactly what he meant by this.

But I think we must at least notice that given that Habakkuk was struggling with the silence and seeming inaction of God, it's possible that the therefore is a means of casting some blame towards God.

It's as if to say that the depth of corruption in Judah was a result of God not answering Habakkuk's prayer, of God not being more active in judging the wicked and allowing them to go unpunished.

[27 : 27] It could be that Habakkuk is somewhat saying, if you had only answered sooner, if you had only judged the wicked like you promised, things wouldn't be as bad as they are now.

And there's a subtle danger sometimes in our prayers when God is silent and it seems like he's inactive. There's a subtle danger that as we come to him in prayer, our seeking for answers actually becomes a form of blaming God for the sin of the nation.

Blaming God, becoming angry at God. Jesus had a couple of believers approach him in a similar way in John chapter 11.

Mary and Martha and Lazarus were three siblings and Mary and Martha had sent Jesus' word that Lazarus was very sick and was about to die. And upon hearing that news, Jesus decided in John chapter 11 not to go to Bethany.

He stayed where he was for a couple of more days. And then it was only after Lazarus died that Jesus went and visited the family and wept with them and grieved with them.

[28 : 34] But when we read down through the chapter, we see that Mary and Martha loved Jesus and they trusted him fully. But even despite that trust, when Jesus arrived, both of them, the first question or the first statement that they made to Jesus was, Lord, if you had only been here, he wouldn't have died.

If you had only come sooner, he wouldn't have died. But you're late. And now our brother's dead. And they trusted that God could do something fantastic there.

But their first statement was almost to cast some blame on Jesus. Not so much in the form of a rebuke. But as they questioned, if you had just been here, our brother wouldn't have died.

Things wouldn't be as bad as they are now. If you had just listened to our prayer. But what they didn't understand at the time was what seemed like a delay to them on the part of Jesus was actually a means for Jesus to demonstrate his awesome power and love for them and Lazarus as he walks up and he raises Lazarus from the dead.

Far greater than healing Lazarus' sickness was his ability to raise Lazarus from the dead. And there's a similar answer that God gives to Habakkuk in this chapter.

[30 : 00] We'll study it next week. But basically, God says, I am going to judge and I'm going to do something, Habakkuk, that you wouldn't believe. It would blow your mind. I'm going to demonstrate my power.

I'm going to demonstrate my holiness. I'm going to demonstrate my justice. And I'm also going to demonstrate my love in a way that you would never even believe. Sometimes God's delays or what seems like God's delays is not a punishment to us.

It's that God is doing something that we wouldn't understand, that we might not even believe if he told us. And we must be careful not to allow our questions to venture into the realm of blame.

There are some Christians that believe it's wrong to ask God why. But that's not true at all. 1 Peter 5, 7 says that we are to cast all of our care on him because he cares for us.

And that certainly includes seeking answers. So many faithful people in the scriptures did. Again, Owen Robertson is helpful here. He said, The danger that we must be mindful of is when our asking for answers turns into blaming God for evil.

[31 : 28] God is not the cause of evil and of sin. Though he does allow it to take place and even uses it to accomplish his purposes.

He can never be blamed for evil because evil is the result of our sin. God cannot sin.

He can only do what is right, as James tells us in James 1, 13. Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God. For God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.

And think about Deuteronomy 32, 4. He is a God of truth and without iniquity. Just and right is he.

He cannot sin. And we must be careful not to insinuate that he has done wrong. We must acknowledge his sovereign reign in using evil to accomplish his righteous purpose and his perfect will.

[32 : 36] These two realities, evil being the result of man's sin, but under the guiding hand of the sovereign God, these two realities must be held in tension because the scripture clearly teaches that both are absolutely true.

There's nothing wrong with seeking answers from God when we're perplexed by his ways. But we must never allow our distress to lead us in accusing God of being sinful or unjust.

Even when we don't understand how he is working, we must trust that God is always right. As David said in Psalm 18, this God, his way is perfect.

The word of the Lord proves true. He is a shield for all those who take refuge in him. I want to close by looking at Psalm 13.

Would you just take your Bible quickly and we'll turn there. Psalm number 13. David here is praying a prayer just like Habakkuk's.

[33 : 49] Except what we see in Psalm 13 is the complete cycle. And we're going to get there in our study of Habakkuk. Habakkuk. But David gives it to us in a really concise way.

And I think it would be helpful for us to close here. There's six verses, each divided into a section of two. There is despair.

There's desire. And there's delight. Let's read it and you tell me if it sounds familiar. How long will you forget me, O Lord? Forever?

You ever prayed a prayer like that? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?

How long shall mine enemy be exalted over me? That's his despair. Here's his desire. Consider and hear me, O Lord my God.

[34 : 50] Lighten my eyes. Give me understanding, lest I sleep the sleep of death. Lest mine enemies say I have prevailed against him. And those that trouble me rejoice when I am moved.

Now here's his delight. This is how the cycle is completed, not only for David, but eventually for Habakkuk as well. But I have trusted in thy mercy. The word for mercy here is often rendered steadfast love.

I love that. As David prays this prayer, he says, what I have trusted in is that God's love is established forever. It is steadfast and it is immovable.

And though I don't understand, though I am in despair, though I am perplexed by why God is allowing what he is, and though I am perplexed by the fact that it seems like he's not hearing my prayer and he's not answering my prayer, I have trusted in the fact that he loves me.

And that love is steadfast and it's immovable. And he says, my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation, in the deliverance that God will bring in one way or another.

[35 : 56] I will rejoice in that. I will sing unto the Lord because he hath dealt bountifully with me. I love this psalm. In it is encompassed the relatability of being perplexed by why God seems to delay.

In the despair that we feel in those moments when we pray and pray and pray and nothing seems to change. We relate to David and Habakkuk's desire that God would just do something, but then we see that without God doing anything, David prays, but I will trust in your love.

It all boils down to trust. Ask your questions to God. He wants you to cast your care on him. But be careful. Be careful that you don't become sinful in your attitude towards him, but rather trust that his way is perfect and that he is always right.

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[37 : 27] We meet every Sunday morning at 10 a.m. We'd love to meet you.