

HABAKKUK Why Does God Do Nothing?

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[0 : 00] In December 2004, many of you will know, remember, that there was a massive tsunami that killed more than 250,000 people around the rim of the Indian Ocean.

And in the weeks that followed, newspapers and magazines were full of letters and articles asking, questioning, where was God?

In all of that, where was God? One reporter wrote, if God is God, he's not good. If God is good, then he's not God.

You can't have it both ways, especially with the Indian Ocean catastrophe. Now, for many people, it's not the exclusivity of Christianity, Christianity, like the claims that we looked at over the last three weeks in our mission months, that pose the biggest problem.

It's the presence of evil and suffering in this world. Some find unjust suffering a huge philosophical problem, calling into question the very existence of God.

[1 : 19] For others, as I've just prayed, right now, it's an intensely personal issue. Don't care so much about the abstract question of whether God exists or not.

For some, they just simply refuse to trust or believe in any God who allows history and life to continue to proceed as it has in the past, with all the carnage.

So, as James has said, we are continuing our series. If you were clued up, you would have seen it's still exactly the same series. Reasonable faith, unreasonable times.

But this, what we're doing now is we're moving into the little Old Testament book of Habakkuk to continue the series of reasonable faith in unreasonable times. Habakkuk is a book that deals directly with the issue of evil and suffering.

Habakkuk lived in a world very similar to the world that we live in, and he asked the sort of questions that we ask. Having said that, practically nothing is known about Habakkuk himself.

[2 : 35] All the information we have about this man is the very first verse of this prophecy, which says, the prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

There's no little bio outlining his education and his family, his hobbies, what he does on a day off, that sort of stuff. There's only one clue about his place in history, and it's in verse 6.

In verse 6, it appears that the Babylonians were about to pounce on Israel at any moment. That means that Habakkuk wrote sometime in the period between the rise of the Babylonian Empire in 625 BC and their attack on Jerusalem, which began in 592 BC.

Now, Babylon was the world superpower of Habakkuk's time, although they'd only held that position for about 80 years, but they were pretty arrogant regardless.

They were the schoolyard bullies that you kind of avoided and you didn't want to mess with at all. Now, the whole thrust of Habakkuk, the structure of it as little prophecy is really simple.

[4 : 04] It's straightforward and it's interesting and it's highly practical. So the general flow of Habakkuk goes kind of like this. First of all, Habakkuk complains to God about the evil and the injustice in his own nation, and he wants to know why God's not doing anything about it.

Secondly, God responds by saying, yes, I see it, and here's my plan to deal with it. Habakkuk, thirdly, responds with, hey God, that plan doesn't seem like a great plan.

God responds, yes, it is a good plan. And I'm God, you're not God, and I've got it all worked out.

Habakkuk closes out with this great prayer, which is basically saying, God, you're right, I'm not you, and I will trust you.

So the structure is easy to understand. The arguments and the application are much harder for our hearts and our minds to come to grips with.

[5 : 21] So we're going to take a closer look at the 17 verses, and there are four things I want us to see today. What Habakkuk saw, what Habakkuk did, what Habakkuk heard, and what it meant for

Habakkuk and us.

So firstly, what Habakkuk saw. I want to take a look first of all at verse 2. How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you violence, but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me. There is strife and conflict abounds. So Habakkuk here has got really two complaints to raise with God.

In verse 2, he says, how long, O Lord, must I call for help? Then, in verse 3, he tells us what he saw.

[6 : 26] Why do you make me look at injustice? That's his two complaints. So Habakkuk here, in his nation, is surrounded by violence, injustice, carnage, sin.

And in his frustration, he calls out to God and he asks God to intervene. And he gets nothing. That's his perspective. I get nothing from God. Habakkuk looks around in his nation. He sees the bad guys winning. He sees the wicked ruling. He sees corruption everywhere in amongst the people of God.

This is Israel he's speaking about. He sees military threats from the outside, from Babylon. And he also sees corruption amongst God's people on the inside.

These are evil times. And he's wondering why God's not doing anything about it. He says to God in verse 2, 3, and 4, why aren't you listening to me?

[7 : 37] He wants to know why God isn't doing anything. Why does God seem to tolerate? How can you tolerate this evil God? Why are you absent, God? God, why have you abandoned us?

He's tired of all the wrong, the destruction, the violence, the strife, the injustice, the corruption, and the conflict. He does not, in any sense, want to look positively about the world in which he lives. He doesn't want to venture down and think of positive thinking. A bit more education and we'll sort it all out. Let's just educate everyone. Let's educate everyone. In verse 4, he says, I can't even find justice amongst God's people.

Even the law of God is perverted and the righteous people suffer endless abuse. The prayers of the righteous, he says, go unheard. Maybe that's something that you've experienced.

Maybe you're experiencing now something that you know firsthand. Where you have prayed and prayed and asked God to intervene in the situation. But it just appears like silence.

[8 : 55] Just a buzzing noise in the background. That's what Habakkuk saw. So what did he do?

He did two things. Firstly, Habakkuk was bold and honest. In verse 3, he says, why do you tolerate wrong?

Now that's bold. He's, that's bold, it's honest. What he's doing here is in fact challenging God at this point.

But in verse 12, if you go down to verse 12, he does something that's even more remarkable in his challenge of God. Have a look at verse 12.

Lord, are you not from everlasting? In other words, God, aren't you the infinite God?

[9 : 59] Now, in the English language, when you look at that, that doesn't seem terribly confronting at all. Just seems like a, you know, straightforward question. In the original language, the Hebrew language, this is a bold confrontation of God.

This is, in fact, in the Hebrew language, a punishing statement. Habakkuk is saying something like this. I thought you were infinite. You're supposed to be the great God who is wise and who is from everlasting to everlasting.

He comes very close to saying, the God, you are none of those things. One Hebrew scholar says that the Hebrew word here that is used to translate, are you not, in verse 12, occurs 96 times in the Old Testament.

And amongst, sorry, almost every time that it's used, it's a vigorous human argument against God. And so nothing could have been more abrupt in Habakkuk's second prayer at the beginning of verse 12. God is not being approached here with any sense of courtesy and respect by Habakkuk.

[11 : 28] Which makes the second thing that Habakkuk does quite interesting. And we're going to see this a little bit more in the coming few weeks.

But we get a glimpse of it here. Right after that challenge of God in verse 12, he's challenging God. And yet, on the other hand, he never even hints that it's even an option for him to abandon God.

To walk away from God. To stop obeying God. To stop praying to God. To stop following God. Not even an option for Habakkuk. You see, Habakkuk's not blogging about God at this point. He's not putting articles in the Sydney Morning Herald about God at this point. He's praying to God. He comes to God with his anguish.

And as soon as he accuses God, in verse 12, he calls him, My God, my Holy One. He is wrestling with God in the safety of relationship with God.

[12:41] That's what he's doing. And hardly anyone treats God like this. You see, members of traditional religious communities, even traditional, you know, those who are traditional Christians, would say, oh, you don't talk to God like that.

You don't ask questions like that of God. You don't, you don't. See, they, they seem to, they see God as a king who must be appeased.

A God who you'd better not say anything negative to, or this God will just wipe you out. You've got to kind of, those who come from a works, good works mentality, that's how we have a relationship with God. We've got to do good things for him, for him to love us.

If your relationship is insecure with God, you'll never speak to God like this. More modern people have such, on the other hand, more modern people have such an enormous confidence in human reasoning and perception.

They just simply say, I can't see why God would allow evil and suffering in this world, and so I'm just not going to believe in him. So the traditional religious person says, no, no, you don't, you don't speak like that to God.

[13:59] On the other hand, the more modern person who has humanistic, very strong view of your perception of reason and will just go, well, I just don't believe in God. I've got a problem, philosophically, I just don't believe in him.

And Habakkuk's neither of those. He is emotionally and intellectually frank and honest with God, but he wouldn't even think of leaving.

My God, my Holy One. Habakkuk seems to be saying, if I can't figure out life with you, how on earth am I going to figure out life without you?

This is unconditionally faithful wrestling. So that's what Habakkuk saw, that's what he did.

And thirdly, let's see what he heard from God that made him so frank, so blunt, and speak to God without courtesy and respect in verse 12.

[15:12] God's first answer to Habakkuk's first complaint starts at verse 5. Look at the nations and watch and be utterly amazed, for I'm going to do something in your days that you would not believe even if you were told.

God says to Habakkuk, okay, I'll tell you, but you're not going to understand it. This is what's going to happen. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own.

And then you've got a lengthy explanation of what the Babylonians are like. So what's God's answer to Habakkuk's problem of injustice and evil in the people of God in Israel?

He says, I'm going to use the Babylonians to punish Israel for its evil and its injustice and its corruption. They are powerful. They are ruthless.

If they want something, they will plunder and kill in order to get it. They have no mercy, these people. And Habakkuk hears that and goes, what?

[16:27] What? God's answer to Habakkuk's complaint about the injustice and the violence is to bring more injustice and violence.

And this is how God is going to work his salvation into the world. In Habakkuk's time. This is how God is going to deal with the injustice and the violence and the sin and the evil and the carnage. And it makes no sense to Habakkuk at all. How can God use a wicked nation like Babylon to punish a nation that on the surface appears to be more righteous than Babylon?

It's like putting Adolf Hitler as the presiding judge of Joseph Stalin's trial. Makes no sense at all.

But in the end, the Bible is a theology book. It teaches about God. And we discover God's ways are not our ways. God's ways are surprising. God's ways are often hard to work out.

[17:41] To our finite grasp of reality, God's ways will often seem wrong to us. You see, most of us, I think, certainly those who have a traditional view of religion and those of us who have no religion at all, we would tend to be more comfortable with a God who's a bit more like Oprah and Dr. Phil, who gives out advice when we need advice.

Or like the fairy who waves a wand and fixes them when we need things fixed. We're much more comfortable with Bruce Almighty than God Almighty. Now, to be fair here, God told Habakkuk he wasn't going to understand it.

God says to Habakkuk and us, don't you dare judge me. Don't you dare judge me on your timetable and your calendars. Habakkuk knows that God promised salvation to the world through his people in the Old Testament.

But his people are just as corrupt as everyone else. And he wants to know that God's doing something about it. He wants to know God is doing something about it. His plan for salvation. And God says, yes, I am. I haven't forgotten it. He's going to raise up the Babylonians. They're going to come in. They're going to conquer his people. They're going to take them away into exile. And Habakkuk says, what?

[19:10] You call that an answer to my prayer? Now, Habakkuk could not see what we can see. We got the benefit of history, the hindsight of history.

Habakkuk could not see what we can see. If Israel had never been taken off into exile, then they would never have eventually spread throughout, over the centuries, to spread throughout the entire Roman Empire.

Babylonians were beaten by the Persians, the Persians were beaten by the Greeks, the Greeks were beaten by the Romans. And each one of them, God has used each empire to build roads and to spread and to spread his people throughout the world.

And wherever they spread, wherever God's people spread, they built synagogues for the Jews and they built synagogues for the God-fearers.

And the God-fearers were pagan Gentiles who got interested in the God of the Bible and joined one of these God-fearing synagogues. And every town that they went to, they built these synagogues.

[20:22] And when Christianity in the first century started to spread, the most receptive people in the entire world to God's message of salvation through Jesus Christ were the Gentile God-fearers in those synagogues.

They embraced it. And what God did through them was the message of salvation went to the world. And the great irony that as the message of the gospel, the salvation of Jesus Christ, spread throughout the world in the first couple of centuries, it made the world in its time a less violent place. The influence of Christianity changed nations and cultures in such a way that things like human sacrifice, infanticide, slavery, gladiated competitions were stamped out because of Christianity. The violence of the Romans, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, led to Christianity, which all made the world less violent.

Habakkuk couldn't have seen that. He couldn't have seen that God was going to work it out in his timing, not Habakkuk's timing. You see, it's no different for us. When the communists took over China, they had all the Western missionaries removed out of China.

[21:53] And the ethnocentricity of us white people assumes that nobody can work without us. We just assume that.

And so when the Western missionaries were removed, we thought, oh my goodness, the church in the Western world assumed that 100 years of Christian mission work, it was all over for the gospel in China.

And at the time, there were questions why God was abandoning China. We just assumed, remove the Western missionaries, God's abandoning China. A whole lot of racism there.

We now know that because the Western missionaries were removed, that the Chinese made the Christian faith indigenous and is now the fastest growing Christian movement in the world.

Couldn't have seen that when it happened. Just assume God abandoned them. We do not have God's perspective. We do not have God's timing.

[23:05] And yet we sit here and we say, God, we don't get it. I want to know now. But we can't. That's what Habakkuk does in his time.

Tell me what you're going to do, God. And God tells Habakkuk, you're not going to understand the plan if I told you. Habakkuk says, tell me, tell me, tell me.

God says, okay, here it is. Habakkuk says, I don't get it. I don't understand it. You do know why a three-year-old is always screaming.

You understand why a three-year-old is always screaming. It's because they don't get it. They don't understand. You know, they want something to eat. And so they grab something to eat.

And you take it off them because it's poison. Or it's got too much sugar. It's because it's the pet guinea pig. One or the other. And they scream because they don't understand. And you sit them down and you explain it to them, the basis of nutrition and cruelty to animals, if they happen to have the guinea pig.

[24 : 14] And they might, for a moment, understand the guinea pig thing. They might get that. But they don't understand the poison thing and they don't understand the sugar thing. And you sit them down and you explain to them and you say, honey, you've just got to trust me.

And then they go on screaming again because they don't understand. The distance between the capability of the mind of God and the timing of God and the mind and the timing of a human being is infinite.

It's vast. It's much greater than between a parent and a three-year-old. We expect to understand everything that God does. And to say God has to make sense to me makes no sense at all.

Get that? To say that God has to make sense to me makes no sense at all. Because God has to be limited to the size of my mind.

And you ought to know this limitation of your minds. That makes God know God. That statement makes no philosophical sense at all. When we say we don't believe in God because of suffering and evil, in fact makes us worse than a three-year-old.

[25 : 39] At least, at least a three-year-old will trust their parent even if they don't understand.

If we don't trust God with what he says, even when we don't understand it, the Bible says we will die. We will die.

So that's what Habakkuk saw. It's what he did. It's what he heard. And finally, what it meant for him and what it means for us. What does it mean when God says, I'm going to do something here and you're not going to understand it?

What does it mean for Habakkuk in that moment? What does it mean for God to bring salvation out of judgment, justice out of violence and injustice?

Centuries later, the Apostle Paul, during the time of the Roman Empire, is on his first missionary journey. And he's in Acts chapter 13.

[26 : 48] We read he arrives in this town and he does what he normally does. He heads to the synagogue of the God-fearers. And his sermon is, when he preaches, his sermon is a brief history of the Old Testament and how God has been working out his plans and purposes and how all of God's plans and purposes point to the person of the Lord Jesus.

And especially his death and resurrection. And then Paul adds this. He says, Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him, everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. So his point there is, if we believe in Jesus and put our trust in Jesus, we are justified.

We're made right with God. He says, there's no more fear of God pouring his justice out on me because he's poured it all out on the Lord Jesus. All of our injustices against God and against people are forgiven.

And then, the very next thing he does is he quotes from Habakkuk 1, verse 5. And he says, What Paul does here in this moment in his sermon is he looks at Habakkuk 1, verse 5, when God says he's going to bring salvation out of injustice and violence.

[28 : 29] And Paul says, when God said that to Habakkuk, what Habakkuk couldn't see, but what I'm telling you now is that he was talking about Jesus.

He was looking forward centuries as to how God is going to do this, and it's going to be about Jesus. The thing that God said to Habakkuk, the principle that God brings salvation through violence and through injustice, finds its ultimate expression in the Lord Jesus.

When God came into this world, went to the cross, he took the judgment that we deserve, he experienced absolute injustice. He suffered, he died. Why?

Because he is holy. You see, Habakkuk could not understand, God, I exist in a world of carnage and violence and injustice.

How can you tolerate that? How can you put up with that? If you're a holy God, how can you put up with it? And on the cross, it is finally explained how God can put up with it.

[29 : 42] Because God is holy and justice and just, our sin has to be paid for. Because he is both holy and just, our sin has to be paid for.

He can't just go, oh, look, I'll just forget about it. A price has to be paid. He experienced his own justice on the cross. That's how it happens. God pours his own justice and violence on himself. He paid for penalty. He's the ultimate fulfillment and example of bringing salvation out of justice and violence, light out of darkness, redemption out of suffering, evil and difficulty.

And at the time, the cross made no sense to anyone. It made no sense to anyone. In fact, the Apostle Paul said that.

The cross is foolishness to Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews. There's no one else left. Foolishness to Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews.

[30 : 49] No one could understand what God was, that he was a good God and that he could bring justice through that way. It didn't make any sense at all. It was, however, the ultimate good.

And because of it, we can look at our lives now and our evil times that we exist in and we don't understand what God is doing, but know that he is and he will bring salvation through it.

On the cross, we have the ultimate Habakkuk. Habakkuk is wrestling with God and yet he trusts God. And Jesus has done that for us as well.

He's fulfilled the Habakkuk bit for us. Jesus is the ultimate Habakkuk in the Garden of Eden on the night he is rested. And he's asking his father, if there's any other way that we can do this, come up with another plan.

He's wrestling with God's plan of salvation, but he submits to it regardless. Unconditional, faithful wrestling. And he did it for you and for me.

[32 : 03] He's not just God coming in the world to deal with the issue of injustice, but he's the Habakkuk wrestling with injustice. Jesus was abandoned on the cross so that we might never be abandoned by God.

even when we might feel it, God never abandons us in Jesus. God is always working. He's always doing things.

And because Jesus stuck at it during the evil times, and when those evil times especially came upon him, when the evil times come upon us, we can still say, I know God is working.

I know God loves me. I know the God hasn't abandoned me. So I will be faithful and patient.

If that's a moment for you right now where you're really struggling with something, in the next 24 hours, in the next 24 hours, give yourself one day only, go away from here and read Habakkuk chapter 3.

[33 : 23] Read Habakkuk chapter 3 and especially the last bit and ask God for Habakkuk's prayer to be your prayer right now. There is a reason for everything God is doing.

We may not know and in fact most of the time we do not know what it is, but it will result in redemption and it will result in salvation for everyone who trusts him through it.

Amen.