

Why Does God Do Nothing?

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew 4, my name is Steve Jeffrey. I'm the senior minister here at St. Paul's.

And as we've been told, we are already moving into a new season and we're looking at the book of Habakkuk. So if you've got a Bible there with you, it'd be great if you could open up Habakkuk chapter one, or you can go to the St. Paul's app and open that up and you'll find an outline for my message, but also the Bible passages there in front of you. As we have said, we, and as you're fully aware, we are in a, one of those strange and odd seasons. Last Thursday, as I was finalising this message, there were 3.2 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections around the world, of which the death toll at that point was 227,000 people. Now, while today this is not the worst pandemic or in fact catastrophe that this world has experienced, we know that we are not at the end of this just yet. We are living through a unique and what many have called an era defining period.

Many of our old certainties are now gone and whatever our view of the world or the, or whatever our beliefs are, they are being challenged. So, so whether you are a Christian or not, this coronavirus pandemic is perplexing and unsettling for everyone and we're reaching for answers. How do we begin to think through and cope with this season that we are in? And while restrictions might be easing, the pandemic is long from over. In the past, in times of national disaster like this, and especially in the Western world, people have flocked into churches to pray in, in moments like this. And such occurrences are fairly rare nowadays. Nowadays, fewer and fewer people in our society have any God dimension in their lives whatsoever. Since churches all over the world are being closed in order to limit the spread of this virus, you have to wonder where is God if it's impacting even the so-called people of God? That is, is he there at all? Is he accessible? Is he self-quarantined? Where or from whom can we get any solace or hope in a season like this? Now, for many people, the presence of evil, the presence of suffering in this world is one of the biggest issues for them when it comes to the existence of God. Some find the unjust suffering and especially the unjust suffering of innocent people is a philosophical problem that they just can't intellectually get over. For others, it's, it's, it's not so much an intellectual problem, it's an intensely personal issue for them.

They don't care so much about the abstract question of whether God exists or not. They just refuse to trust and believe in any God who allows history and life to proceed as it has for centuries. Now, this little Old Testament book of Habakkuk that we're beginning into today really deals directly with this issue of suffering and evil because Habakkuk, even centuries ago, lived in a world very similar to the world in which we live and he asked the sort of questions that we ask. So if you've got the St. Paul's app there, you'll notice I've got an outline. It'd be great if you could just launch into that and take some notes as we're going along. Let me just give us some background information with this little book. It might help us understand a little bit. The very first verse introduces us to the man Habakkuk. It just says the prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received. There's no little bio there outlining his education, his family, his interests. There's not really much known about him at all, but there is a little bit of a clue about his place in history when you look down into verse 6. And in verse 6, it appears that the Babylonians were about to pounce on Israel at any moment. So what that means is that Habakkuk was written sometime around the period between the rise of the Babylonian empire in 625 BC and their attack on Jerusalem in Israel, which began in 592 BC. Now Babylon was the world's superpower in its day, although they only held that position for about 80 years. They were the, if you like, the schoolyard bully who you really did not want to mess with. They weren't particularly nice people. Habakkuk is written with Babylonians ready to pounce. And it's a straightforward, it's an interesting, and it's a practical book. And the structure of it is really easy. The argument, the application is kind of easy to grasp, and yet at the same time, difficult for our minds and our hearts to come to grips with. So have a look at it with me.

Again, get the St. Paul's app open. And my first point, I want to go through four things this morning, and let's first of all see what Habakkuk saw. As we kick off, there is something interesting to note about Habakkuk. He's a prophet of God. We're told that in verse 1. And as a prophet, his job is to be a messenger of God to God's people. And yet, this is the one prophet who says nothing to God's people at all.

[6 : 45] Not a single word. This book is Habakkuk the prophet speaking to God about what God has revealed to him.

Wrestling with God. And Habakkuk's got two complaints to raise with God. In verse 2, he says, How long, O Lord, must I call for help? And then down in verse 3, he tells us what he saw.

Why do you make me look at injustice? So Habakkuk is surrounded by violence and injustice and carnage and sin.

And in his frustration, he cries out for help. And he asks God to intervene. And it seems like he gets nothing from God. Habakkuk looks around and he sees the bad guys winning.

He sees the wicked ruling. Now this is Israel he's speaking about. This is historically to God's special people. And he sees military threats from the outside. He sees corruption on the inside.

[8 : 01] These are evil times. And he's wondering why God is silent. Why God's not doing anything about this.

He says to God in verse 2, 3 and 4, Why aren't you listening to me? He wants to know why God seems to tolerate the evil.

Why, God, are you absent? Why have you abandoned us? In verse 4, he says he can't even find justice amongst God's special people.

He says even the law of God is perverted and the righteous people suffer endless abuse. That is, the prayers of the righteous are going unheard.

Maybe that's, you're sitting here this morning and that's an experience that you know yourself. Where you have prayed and prayed and prayed and you've asked God to intervene in a situation.

[9 : 15] And yet something, nothing appears to ever happen. So what do you do about that? What did Habakkuk do?

That's what he saw. Now what did he do? He did two things. Firstly, he was bold and he was honest. In verse 3, he says, Why do you tolerate wrong?

Now that's pretty bold. That's pretty honest. He's actually, in actual fact, he's challenging God at that moment. But if you cast your eyes down to verse 12, he does something that's even more remarkable.

Have a look at it. Lord, are you not from everlasting? In other words, aren't you the infinite God? The God who's always been.

Aren't you the infinite God? Now that doesn't seem too remarkable or too confronting when you read it in the English language. And yet in the original language that Habakkuk was written in, the Hebrew language, that is a punishing statement.

[10 : 24] Habakkuk is saying something like this. I thought you were infinite. You're supposed to be the God who's wise and everlasting.

And he's coming so close to saying to God, you're none of those things.

One Hebrew scholar says of the Hebrew word that is translated in verse 12, Are you not?

It occurs 96 times in the Old Testament. And almost every single time, it is in vigorous human argument.

Nothing could have been more abrupt in Habakkuk's second prayer than the beginning of verse 12. God is not being approached here with any sense of courtesy and respect.

[11 : 31] Which makes the second thing that Habakkuk did quite interesting. Now we'll see more of this in the coming weeks, but let me just give us a bit of a glimpse into it here.

On the one hand, Habakkuk is challenging God. But on the other hand, he never even hints that it's an option for him to walk away from God.

To stop obeying God. To stop praying to God. To stop following God. Not even an option. Because Habakkuk is actually praying here.

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's wrestling safely with God. Hardly anyone treats God like this.

[12 : 40] Hardly anyone does this. Members of your traditional religious communities would say, Oh, you know, you don't speak to God like that. You don't accuse God.

You don't challenge God. You don't have doubt. You don't question. You don't have doubts. You see, they see God as a king. As a harsh ruler that needs to be appeased.

A God you'd better not say anything negative to. Or this God may well bring his big stick out and he'll wipe you out. More modern people have such an enormous confidence.

This is us on the other hand. Have such an enormous confidence in our human reason and perception. And we say, I can't see why God would allow all of this suffering or evil. So frankly, I'm just not going to believe him.

And Habakkuk does neither of those things. He is emotionally and intellectually frank and honest with God. But he doesn't even think about leaving.

[13 : 46] 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 unconditional faithful wrestling with God.

So thirdly, God speaks. And what does Habakkuk hear from God? That made him so frank, so blunt, to speak to God without courtesy and respect in verse 12.

Habakkuk's first answer to, sorry, God's first answer to Habakkuk's first complaint starts in verse 5. Have a look at it. Look at the nations and watch and be utterly amazed for I am going to do something in your day that you would not believe even if you were told.

So God says to Habakkuk, okay, I'm going to tell you, but you're not going to believe it. You're not going to understand it. This is what I'm going to do. Verse 6. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own.

God is going to use the Babylonians to punish Israel for their evil and their injustices. They are powerful.

[15 : 22] They are ruthless. If they want something, they will plunder, they will kill in order to get it. And Habakkuk is horrified.

God's answer to Habakkuk's complaint about the injustice and the violence is to bring more injustice and violence.

This is how God is going to work out his plan of salvation for his people and for the world. This is how God is going to deal with the injustice and the violence, the sin, the evil and the carnage.

And Habakkuk goes, what? Are you serious? It makes no sense. How can you use a wicked nation like Babylon to punish a more righteous nation like Israel?

Wow. It's like Hitler being the presiding judge at the trial of Joseph Stalin. Makes no sense at all. What are you doing, God?

[16 : 39] In the end, the Bible is a theology book that teaches us about God and the way things actually are. And we discover God's ways are not our ways.

God's ways are surprising. God's ways are often hard for us to work out because we do not have the mind of God. You see, to our finite grasp of reality, they seem wrong.

Most people in our society would be a lot more comfortable with a God who's much more like Oprah or Dr. Fenn who dispenses advice or prefer a God more like a fairy who waves his wand and fixes things the way that we want them to be fixed.

Now, to be fair, on God here, he did say to Habakkuk, if I told you, you're not going to understand it. God says to Habakkuk, and it was, however, don't you dare judge me by your calendars and your time frames.

Habakkuk knows that God's promised salvation to the world through his people in the Old Testament. Habakkuk knows that.

[17 : 58] But his people are just as corrupt, just as wrong and as evil as everyone else. He wants God to do something about his plan of salvation and God says, I am.

I'm going to wrap up the Babylonians to come on in to conquer my people, to take them away into exile. And Habakkuk says, that can't be the plan.

See, Habakkuk can't see what God can see. And Habakkuk can't even see what we can see with the perspective of history from Habakkuk's time.

You see, if Israel had never been taken into exile, then they would never have eventually spread throughout the whole Roman Empire centuries later.

Wherever they spread, they built synagogues for Jews and synagogues for God-fearers these God-fearers were pagan Gentiles who got interested in the God of the Bible.

[19 : 16] And when Christianity began to spread through those synagogues and beyond those synagogues in the first century, the most receptive people in the entire world to God's message of salvation through Christ were the Gentiles in those God-fearing synagogues.

They embraced it and through them the message of salvation went global. And the great irony of all this spread of the Christian faith in the early centuries was that it, in fact, made the world a less violent place.

the influence of Christianity changed nations, changed cultural practices in such a way things like human sacrifice, infant suicide, slavery, gladiator competitions were stamped out right across the Roman Empire.

The violence of the Babylonians, the Persians, the Romans, the Greeks led to a Christianity which has made all nations less violent.

And Habakkuk did not see, could not have known that perspective on history in the same way that we can't see what God is doing right now.

[20 : 42] For instance, even more recent than Habakkuk, when the communists took over China, they expelled all of the Western missionaries.

And the church in the Western world assumed that after 100 years of Christian mission work in China, the gospel in China was over.

At the time, there was questions, what is God doing? What is he doing abandoning China? But we now know with the perspective of history that because the Western missionaries were kicked out of China, the Chinese made their Christian faith indigenous and now is one of the fastest growing Christian movements in the world.

We don't have God's perspective on history or his time to bring out his plans. So often we sit back with our finite view of history and life and we go, I don't get it.

I don't understand what you're doing and so frankly, I'm not going to believe in you. If you've got children, you will understand this.

[22 : 07] Maybe you don't understand it, but you've worked out why a three-year-old is always screaming as they tend to all the time. It's because they don't understand what you're doing.

That's why. They don't understand what you're doing. They want something to eat and so they go and grab something to eat and you take it off them because it's poison or because it's a container of sugar or it's because it's the pet guinea pig and they scream because they don't understand why you've taken it from them and you can sit them down and you can explain it to them, the basis of nutrition, the danger of poison or the cruelty to animals, to the guinea pig and they might get the guinea pig thing but they're not going to understand the poison and the sugar thing and you say to them, you have to trust me on this and they go on screaming.

The distance between the capability of the mind of God and the mind of a human being is infinite. It's vast.

It's much greater than the capacity of a mind of an adult and a three-year-old to grasp reality. We expect to understand everything God does.

To say that God has to make sense to me in everything he does in fact makes no sense at all that statement. When we say we don't believe in God because of suffering and evil makes us worse than a three-year-old.

[23 : 48] At least they put their trust even if they don't understand in their parents. If we don't trust God with what he says even when we don't understand it the consequences we die.

So have a look at what this meant for Habakkuk. This revelation meant for Habakkuk and also for us. That's what he saw it's what he did it's what he heard finally what it meant for him and what it means for us.

What does it mean when God says I'm doing something here that you will not understand? What does it mean for God to bring about salvation out of judgment justice out of violence and injustice?

Centuries later from Habakkuk the Apostle Paul one of the early adopters of Christianity and certainly one of its major opponents in the first century if not the major proponents in the first century was on his first missionary journey in Acts chapter 13 if you've got a Bible in front of you flick into Acts chapter 13 and we arrive we see here that the Apostle Paul arrives at town into a town and he does what he normally does he goes into the synagogue and his sermon on this particular day is a brief history of the Old Testament and how all through history God has been pointing people to the person of Jesus Christ how all of history is heading in that direction and especially the death and the resurrection of Jesus and then he adds this in verse 38 of Acts chapter 13 this is the implications of what he's just said 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 what he's saying there is if because of everything I've just said if you put your trust in Jesus Christ you have faith in Jesus you are justified that is you are declared right before the God of the universe despite any of your evil and injustices and violences and wrongdoing from the past that is there is no fear in the future that the righteous God is going to pour out his justice on you as he does here on his own people Israel through the Babylonians all of our injustices against God and people are forgiven and then what the apostle Paul does in

[26 : 53] Acts 13 is he quotes from Habakkuk chapter 1 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 Paul's saying God's doing it again he's doing something that you cannot grasp Paul looks at Habakkuk chapter 1 verse 5 when God says he's going to bring salvation out of injustice and violence and says God was talking about Jesus in that moment the thing that God said to Habakkuk the principle that God brings salvation through violence and injustice finds its ultimate expression in the person of Jesus

Christ when God came into this world and went to the cross he took the judgment that we deserve for our crimes against God he experienced absolute injustice he experienced the absolute injustice he suffered he died at the hands of the unrighteous why because he is righteous because he is holy Habakkuk couldn't understand why God put up with all the injustices and all if you're a holy God why do you put up with all the injustice and violence and wrong and on the cross it's finally explained centuries later it's finally explained because

God is holy and just our sin had to be paid for he doesn't just forget it in the same way we don't just forget it he experienced his own justice on the cross he paid our penalty he is the ultimate fulfillment and example of bringing salvation out of injustice justice and violence light out of darkness redemption out of suffering evil and difficulty and the cross made no sense to anyone as it often makes no sense to anyone today no one could understand what God was what good he could bring out of the cross it didn't make sense and yet it was the ultimate good and because of it because of the cross of

Jesus Christ we can look at our life we can look at evil times we can look at coronaviruses and we don't understand what God is doing and we don't understand what God is doing but we can know that he's bringing salvation out of it on the cross we also have the ultimate Habakkuk Habakkuk in this book is wrestling with God and yet he is faithful Jesus is the ultimate Habakkuk in the garden of Gethsemane on the night that he is arrested just before his execution and he pleads with God in the garden of Gethsemane if there's any other way take this cup from me if there's any other way to bring salvation out of the injustice and the violence please take it from me and find another way he wrestled with

God's plan of salvation and yet he submitted to it regardless even at great personal cost he unconditionally faithfully wrestled with his father for your sake and for my sake for the sake of the whole world Jesus was abandoned on the cross so that we might never be abandoned by God even when we might feel like we are being abandoned by God his promise to us in Jesus is that he never abandons us God is always working he is always doing things even if we can't see it even if we don't understand it because Jesus stuck at it on the cross when the evil times came upon him for you and for me when the evil times come for us when the days of darkness come for us we can still say because of

[32 : 24] Jesus we can still say I know God is working I know God loves me I know that God has not abandoned me and so I will trust him I will be faithful and I will be patient and I will live by faith there is a reason for everything that God is doing we may not know what it is but because of Jesus it will result in redemption and salvation if we put our trust in him and live by faith in him but there'll be more of that next week as Jane comes and opens up the early parts of chapter two for us bless you a tomb a wherein another kun a piece at a high and and to a good and