

"How Long, O Lord?"

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Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0 : 00] Well, good morning friends. It's good to see you here. Glad you could join us on this sticky, hopefully the last one of the year. It's not right. It's the cry of the school child who is punished along with the rest of his class because one of his classmates has broken a rule and they don't get to go out for recess. It's not right, says the citizenry when they realize that their government has been taking tax dollars to pad their own accounts and fund their own vacations.

It's not right, the cry goes out, when a congregation hears that their pastor has used his position to take advantage of a woman in their congregation in an illicit affair.

It's not right, is the heart cry that comes out in so many different places in our life because we long for justice. What is justice? Well, the Cambridge Dictionary says that it's fairness in the way people are dealt with. The Bible talks about the justice in a number of ways.

If you were here in the spring, you remember we preach on the book of Micah, to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. That is, to do right towards others in the way that God would have us do it. Justice can have a positive sense of doing what is right and good often applied to treating people equally. Justice also can have a negative sense of responding to people who were not doing right, bringing restraint or even judgment on those who have violated that standard. In our society, the cry for justice has been a loud one in the last five years, and for good reason. Whether global inequality has caused great suffering, whether individuals have been badly mistreated and even killed at the hands of others, there's a lot of injustice in our world.

[2 : 27] Friends, I want to be very clear on this. I do not mean this from any political position. For if you think through the voices of the last five years, both progressives and conservatives have cried out for justice. Both Democrats and Republicans have said, that's not right.

And we will all disagree, probably humanly, on what we think are the things that most need to be dealt with. But at the core of it, we recognize there is a heart cry in our human soul for justice.

And how do we respond? Well, in this day and age, it seems we respond with outrage.

Outrage that is characterized by anger, often violence, whether it be in words or actions. But the Bible has a different way for us to go as we think about the heart cry for justice.

And that brings us to our passage and our new series today. We're starting a new series in the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk was a prophet in the late 6th century B.C.

[3 : 42] If you want to turn there in your pew Bibles, you can start going there because it's not easy to find. It's page 737. It's one of the minor prophets. And we're going to be looking for the next three weeks at what Habakkuk has to say to us this morning.

As you're turning there, let me give you a brief introduction to the book. And it's going to be very brief because we actually know very little about Habakkuk. Often prophets in the Old Testament have a father, a place where they were from, a historical context.

Next, we have almost none of that for Habakkuk. The only reference that we can pin down to give any kind of context is that in verse 6, the Chaldeans, which actually in the Bible is referring to the Babylonian Empire, is referred to.

And you'll see how that plays out as we get to it. But what we do know is that because that's the time marker that we have, Habakkuk most likely was speaking or receiving this oracle, as it's described in verse 1, during the latter half of the 7th century, so 650 to 600 B.C., something like that.

And it's likely that he was receiving this during the time of one of the bad kings of Israel. So maybe the reign of Manasseh before 640 B.C., or the reign of Jehoiakim after 609 B.C.

[5 : 14] And in case you're wondering what kinds of things he was encountering in the context and in the life of God's people at that time, here's a description of what Manasseh did as a king of Israel.

And he burned his son as an offering and used fortune-telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to answer. Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel. And then describing the reign of Jehoiakim, it says, And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done.

That is, he did the same thing Manasseh did. That's not right. Habakkuk speaks in the midst of these kings as a prophet.

Often the prophets in the Old Testament are speaking to God's people on God's behalf, speaking to them about who God is and what he's going to do. But interestingly, the book of Habakkuk is actually the prophet speaking to God about the people and interacting with God.

[6 : 33] And his cry is this, God, how can you, a just God, stand by when injustice happens under such evil kings?

Friends, we may not be asking the same question today about justice and injustice, but certainly in our world it's a question we ask as well. God, how can you just stand by?

And it raises a question for all of us. How could we imagine living in relationship to a just God in an unjust world?

If you're taking notes, that's our big picture. Living in relationship to a just God in an unjust world has three parts to it.

And this is what we'll look at. First, the first aspect is a cry of lament to a just God. The second one is a surprising reply of a just God.

[7 : 33] And the third one is the amazing hope from a just God. So that's what we'll be talking about this morning, how we live in relationship to God in an unjust world.

With that introduction, I'm going to invite you to pray with me. Let's ask God to help us as we look at his word this morning. Let's pray. Oh Lord, we do ask you, Lord, it is hot in here.

And we have launched our fall schedules. And some of us are busy. Some of us are distracted.

Many of us are weary from the beginning of our new schedule and coming off of our summers.

But Lord, we ask now that you would help us by your spirit. Lord, awaken our souls to receive your word. Help us to know our thirst and our need for your word.

Lord, I would pray for your help that I might speak your word as I ought. And that we together might sit under it today. That we might see you and know you in all of your greatness.

[8 : 38] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So, Habakkuk. Habakkuk. And we had a whole conversation.

Some people say Habakkuk. We say Habakkuk because that's what Kristen Getty and David, what's his Cochran say in the ESV audio Bible.

So, Habakkuk. That's where we're landing here. So, Habakkuk chapter 1, we're going to start by just looking at verses 1 through 4. The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Or cry to you violence and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity?

And why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me. Strife and contention arise. So that the law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth.

[9 : 42] For the wicked surround the righteous. So justice goes forth. Perverted. In its opening words, the prophet is crying out to God.

A cry of lament. A cry of complaint. How long? How long, God, will this injustice that you are making me see, that surrounds me, that infects, that fills your people, how long will this continue and you not act?

And it's not the people out there. It's not the people outside the people of God. It's not the nations.

There are other prophets who speak of that. Isaiah 12 through 25 is a great picture of all that the prophets have to say about the nations and what God has to say about them.

But this is about God's people. It says God's people are characterized by. And there's this pile on of words. There's violence.

There's iniquity. There's wrong. There's destruction. And violence again. Strife and contention. It says it is so bad that the law that was given by God to his people to constrain evil and to instruct the people on how to live rightly is paralyzed.

[11 : 01] It has no effect on the people anymore. It no longer has any hold to control or to guide the nation as a whole. And so because of that wickedness is surrounding and even the righteous ones

can't penetrate through the cloud of evil that has surrounded their people such that justice cannot go forth at all.

And Habakkuk says, God, you are the God of justice. If we are your people, then we need to be a just people to reflect you as a just God in the world.

And you're not doing that. We're not doing that. And you're letting it happen. God, how can this be? Habakkuk cries out this lament and this complaint to God. And friends, it's not just thousands of years ago that we have to wrestle with this.

Right? We ourselves here at Trinity are a part of the Southern Baptist Convention where we've seen leaders unjustly cover up and lack in their response to women who've been abused by pastors.

[12 : 30] The injustice does continue. We need to recognize that and not say, oh gosh, well that was so bad back then, but aren't we glad we're better now?

No. And we need to recognize that Habakkuk. Sorry, Habakkuk. There we go. Habakkuk is inhabiting a place of when I'm living among these people, this is an oppression to me.

This is an overwhelming pressure. This injustice is bringing upon me a hopelessness, a despair, a resignation. Perhaps some of you have felt that way, whether it be your circumstances now or in the past.

In the face of such injustice. What are we to do? Respond. Well, first, the text doesn't say this.

But as we've already mentioned, it is right and good at times for us to respond with our own action. That we are to do justice, as Micah says.

[13 : 45] That we are to be active in bringing God's justice into our world, into God's people, in the ways that we ought to. And so there's a right place for us to call for change and work for change.

But that's not the only way. We live in a society where activism seems to be the only role, the only way that we think we should address this. But Habakkuk actually gives us, I think, some other ways to do it, too.

Because Habakkuk seems to say, rather than, I'm going to fix the problem, he says, I'm going to turn to the one who is the ultimate fixer. I'm going to turn, in face of the injustice that I see, to the God of justice.

And I'm going to cry to him for help. And when we do that, we have a heart that is shaped not with anger, rage, outrage, violence towards others.

There is a righteous anger we can have towards injustice. But there is a, we all know, in our own hearts, as well as in our society, how easy it is for that anger to become one of vengeance.

[14 : 55] One of violence. One of retaliation. But Habakkuk can have its heart of lament, of brokenheartedness, of crying out humbly to the God of justice, how long, how long will you do it?

He doesn't cover it over and say, there's nothing bad here. He doesn't deny it and say, well, you know, God works all things for good, so cheer up and let's get on with it.

But he cries out in lament. How long, oh Lord, will you let this evil continue? Will you not act? And this is the first thing we learn, is that as Habakkuk faces injustice, the first thing he does is to go to God.

And he cries out to God. And this then leads us to God's response to this cry. Starting in verse 5, let's go ahead and read the next section of the text.

God responds. The voice changes. You can hear it pretty quickly. Look among the nations and see, wonder and be astounded.

[16 : 13] For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation who marched through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own.

They are dreaded and fearsome. Their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves.

Their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle, swift to devour. They all come for violence, all their faces forward.

They gather captives like sand. At kings, they scoff. And at rulers, they laugh. They laugh at every fortress. For they pile up earth and take it.

Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men whose own might is their God. And they say, God, how long will you let this happen?

[17 : 32] God says, I hear you. I understand. I see. I am not blind. I am not unable to act.

And he says, I will come and bring justice. That is, I will come and I will judge. But surprisingly, he says, and I will use the Chaldeans to do it.

And this is what the Chaldeans will be like. This is what this passage, this section is all about. Right?

In verse 6, they come quickly to swallow up cities and civilizations. In verse 7, they come dreaded and fearsome, driven by their proud self-confidence.

Right? Look at verse 7. That's what it means by saying their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. They're not serving a just God. They're making it up for their own self-benefit.

[18 : 36] Verse 8, they come swift, fierce, pressing like eagles, swift to devour. Verse 9, they are driven by a lust for violence. They scorn all other authorities.

Verse 10, they laugh at kings, scoff at fortresses like bullies on a playground. They say, my dad is bigger than your dad. What do you got? And then they come at you.

Verse 11, they come and they scour like the desert wind, leaving nothing behind. And they go on self-exalting in their power.

Like a pack of wolves converging on a deer. A swarm of hornets streaming out of their nest. Like a group of sharks in a feeding frenzy. This is how God says he's going to bring judgment upon his people.

It's going to be terrible beyond what you can imagine. And in fact, if you turn to 2 Chronicles 36, you will see that this is exactly what happened.

[19 : 45] When Babylon came and finally conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem, they slaughtered young and old, men and women, even in the temple.

They pillaged everything of value, destroyed the rest, systematically burned the city, tore down the temple, and broke down the walls. Everyone who was not killed was taken off in slavery, except the poorest of the poor who were left to watch the abandoned flocks and vineyards.

It was a total war. And it was terrible. Now we balk at this, don't we?

Really? And I will just say, next week, Pastor Nick's going to come back because Habakkuk's second complaint is, you're going to use them to judge our people?

And that's what Pastor Nick's going to preach on next week. So, I'm just going to put that question aside. But we balk at this picture of God as a God who will bring this kind of judgment.

[20 : 53] It just offends our modern sensibility. Because this picture is worse than we can imagine. Why would this be true?

Friends, it's because true justice requires a response that is appropriate, that is commensurate to the wrong that has been committed.

And this is where we really struggle, isn't it? Because we can think of a few people that we think, yeah, torn apart by wolves, yes, that's my plan. And we would choose different people for that.

But we probably can think of a few that we would say, yes, they probably deserve to be torn apart by wolves. Some of you are far too civilized to even think that. But there are some of us who might think, okay, okay, yeah, there are some people who are so bad that they would deserve that.

But not most people. But friends, when we stop and we think about the world we live in, and we think about the evils that are out there, we think of unjust wars.

[22 : 08] We think of murder and rape. We think of torture, trafficking, and abuse. And we long, don't we, for those wrongs to be righted, for those who perpetrate those things to have a day of judgment.

And if we're honest, sanitized rehabilitation for people who do those things often isn't enough. Habakkuk sees the sin in the people of God, and he cries out for God to act.

For God to stop the judgment. For God to bring a judgment upon it. For Habakkuk, it was too terrible to look on.

And so God responds, I will not tolerate injustice forever. What a good thing this is when we see how bad evil is.

God promises to bring this justice. And this judgment. But it leaves us, friends, if we think about ourselves honestly in a terrible place.

[23 : 23] Because if we recognize that this is true, that God is a just God, and that he is not uncaring, but that he is watching, and he is looking, and that he will not tolerate injustice forever, but that he will bring judgment.

Where does that leave us? We go to the New Testament, and we realize the Apostle Paul writes this in Romans chapter 3.

No one is righteous. No one is righteous. No, not one. No one understands. No one seeks God. All have turned aside. Together they have become worthless. No one does good. Not even one. Friends, we all really want to be semi-Pelagians.

We really want to believe that the human heart is really going to be good if we can just give it a chance. And the Bible tells us it's not true. The Bible tells us that this is true of us.

[24 : 33] That our hearts will continually turn towards wickedness and evil. And it may be a very sanitized, polite version of it with pride and arrogance and scorn and lack of mercy.

Or it may be a more brutish kind of violent, angry evil. Sometimes we're both. But friends, the human heart, as Paul goes on to say in Romans 3.23, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

If this is true of us, and if the Bible says there is justice that is coming onto the whole world for all people, oh friends, we are not in a good place.

And listen, I know how many of you have read Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. Because it's classic American literature. It's in the Norton's Anthology of American Literature.

So everyone reads it in high school. And I don't know what it was like in your high school, but in my high school, when we read that, it was, do you see how these Puritans have a terrible view of God?

[25 : 44] God is a vengeful God. God is a God just waiting for us to mess up so that he can punish us and knock us down. And stuff us in the mud. God is waiting to curse us.

God is a capricious God who is looking for these opportunities to bring judgment. And because we've been raised in that kind of world and with that kind of influence, we think God can't be that terrifying.

But the Bible says that he is. And the judgment that God brought upon Judah through Babylon in the 6th century BC is just a foretaste of the judgment that he will bring upon all people, upon me and you for our sin if we stand before him.

And this leaves us in a terrible place.

Because we know that there should be justice. But then it gets pointed at us. But the God of the Bible is not only just, but he is also gracious.

[27 : 05] And in that we find our third point, our amazing hope in a just God. Let me go back to Romans again.

Romans 3, 23. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time so that he might be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Friends, as we process the reality of injustice in the world, we have to go to the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ. Because God looked at this world and if he were just a just world, if he were just a just God, if you were only a just God, let me say it that way, if you were merely a just God, he would simply have wiped us out and we'd be done.

But he's not just that. And so he, in his love, foreknew the sin that we would commit. He planned before the creation of the earth.

[28 : 33] If you were in Sunday school today, I know you dealt with this. Before the foundations of the world, God knew the sin that would come upon the world and God knew the judgment that it would deserve.

And he saw that there would be a need for him to intervene so that he would not destroy his creation. And so in his great mercy, he sent his son, Jesus Christ.

And Jesus Christ, the only human who walked the earth without sin, therefore deserving no judgment because he lived in perfect justice, he lived a perfect life for us so that he could go to the cross and die in our place.

He, the just, died for us, the unjust. God, who in his justice must punish sin, poured out his wrath and anger, not on us, but on Jesus.

And when you look at the gospel stories, you realize that even the creation knew how amazing this was, that the God of justice would take on injustice for us.

[29 : 45] The sky went dark and the earth shook because of the injustice of Jesus' death for us. And yet because he did that for us, he is now able to give to us who by faith are joined with Christ. Not judgment, but mercy. This is the grace of God. This is the good news of the gospel. So how do we face injustice in our world? We cry out to God to bring justice because we know it's good and right.

We look and know that God will respond and that God will not let injustice go on forever. But in the midst of it, we walk in the gospel of grace.

We know that he is the perfect judge, not us. He is the ultimate inflictor, adjudicator, enactor of righteousness.

[31 : 03] We are not. And yes, we can work for righteousness, but let us do so standing in a place of grace, the grace of God, because apart from him, we would be under that same judgment, but because of what he has done.

We stand in relationship and with great joy to a just God who in his mercy has saved us. Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus, we come to you this morning. We've already done it once, but in light of this text, we want to do it.

We confess our sin to you. I have sinned. Lord, we have sinned. We've not done what we ought to have done.

We've done what we have not, ought not to have done in your sight. Oh Lord, have mercy on us.

Lord, even as we long for a just world, Lord, we long for you to be a just and merciful God.

[32 : 31] We long to know you as a just and merciful God. Lord, I pray this morning that you would restore our hope for those who are facing injustice, for those who are feeling the despair, discouragement.

Lord, strengthen them because you have heard their cry and you will not let injustice win forever.

Lord, for those of us who feel the weight of our sin and who know, Lord, the judgment that we deserve, I pray that you might bring the comfort of grace that you might turn our hearts to believe in you and trust in Jesus' death for us and so be saved.

And Lord, we all want to stand before you and tremble, but for your grace, Lord, we would be under your judgment as we stand before you as a holy God.

Lord, help us to come to you in humble worship. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.