

## **Why do the wicked prosper?**

### **Habakkuk 1:1-11**

**Covenant Waterfall, 22 August 2021**

Read

Pray

#### **Introduction**

Many of us were rattled by the violence and unrest in our community last month. It's left us with lots of questions. Will this happen again? Are we going to be safe? Is there a future for us in South Africa? How could so much wickedness and lawlessness just happen? Why haven't those who planned this been arrested?

On top of this – serious concerns with our government – their part in this, looting and corruption that has been going on for years with no consequences. Just seems that the wicked in our land prosper, to the detriment of everyone else.

The question is, where was God in all this? How could he have allowed all this? Isn't he a good God who just wants to bless us with a happy, health and wealthy life, who wants us to be living our "best life now"? How can it be that there is such wickedness and violence around us, and that these wicked people seem only to prosper through this all?

This morning we are beginning a new, four-part sermon series on the OT book of Habakkuk. How come? As we will see, Habakkuk wrestles with these very same issues that we are faced with. He cries out to God about all the violence, corruption and wickedness in his land, and asks him why the wicked seem to prosper. Where is God in all this? God answers Habakkuk, but not in the way he expects. Provides for us a theology of suffering – speaks powerfully into our own context. What we're going to see from the text this morning, is that God achieves his good purposes even in the midst of great wickedness and evil.

- Habakkuk the Prophet, v.1

- Habakkuk's Cry to the Lord, vv.2-4
- The Lord's answer, vv.5-11

### **A. Habakkuk the Prophet, v.1**

#### **"The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw."**

The opening verse introduces us to Habakkuk. Who was he? We only know Habakkuk from his prophecy. He's not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. He is introduced to us here as a prophet. What is a prophet? General perception that he is someone who predicts the future. Prophets, according to the Bible, are called and appointed uniquely by God, they are God's mouth-pieces – they speak the Word of God to his people. Habakkuk was one such prophet of the OT.

Into what context did Habakkuk prophesy? There are clues in the text that tell us. In verse 6 of chapter 1, we see that he prophesied just before the rise to power of the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans were also known as the Babylonians – empire in modern day Iraq, that grew rapidly all over the Middle East during the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. This means that we can date Habakkuk from between 625 – 605 BC. Around a similar time, prophets Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Nahum also prophesied.

To whom did Habakkuk prophesy? To the nation of Judah – southern kingdom. Remember, after King Solomon's death, the kingdom of Israel split in two – northern kingdom – called Israel (10 of the 12 tribes), southern kingdom – Judah (2 tribes – Judah and Benjamin) – capital in Jerusalem. One hundred years before Habakkuk was around, in 722 BC, the Assyrian Empire conquered northern kingdom of Israel and took them into exile – they were obliterated from history.

Judah survived. At the time of Habakkuk, the king of Judah was Jehoiakim, son of king Josiah. While his father Josiah had been a very good king, Jehoiakim was a disaster. 2 Kings 23:37 says that, **"he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD..."** He revived the evil practices of his grandfather, Manasseh – led Judah into idolatry – worshipping pagan gods and goddesses – Baal and Asherah, which involved sexual immorality. He placed idols in the Temple in Jerusalem, engaged in child sacrifices to the god Molech, practiced divination –

fortune telling and speaking to dead ancestors. He also oppressed the people of Judah through very high taxes, living in luxury while the people lived in poverty. Wicked, corrupt, despicable leadership, evil being committed all over the land. Darkness and gloom.

It was into this context that Habakkuk prophesied...

#### **B. Habakkuk's Cry to the Lord, vv.2-4**

**“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. <sup>4</sup> So the law is paralysed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.”**

Habakkuk starts his prophecy by crying out to the Lord, concerning all the wickedness, violence and lawlessness that he sees around him. He's crying for help. And it seems as if it's been an ongoing cry for help, as he feels that the Lord is not hearing his prayer. Verse 2 – **“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?”** Despite his many prayers, violence, corruption and wickedness just continues unabated. It's as if God is just sitting by, unconcerned. Verse 3 – **“why do you idly look at wrong?”** Why won't you intervene, God? Why are you just sitting by, letting all this evil happen as things only get worse? Why don't you help us?

Why is it that all this chaos is going on in Judah? Verse 4 says that, **“the law is paralysed”** (Hebrew = numb). Law – Hebrew = Torah. It's a direct reference to the Law of Moses – this covenant that God had made with his chosen people, Israel, just before they entered the Promised Land. What was the nature of this law? Summed up in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20) – how Israel was to conduct themselves in the Promised Land, what God's will for them was.

This law was given to them in them in the context of a covenant – a promise. God had graciously saved them from slavery in Egypt and given them a Promised Land. Their responsibility now was to obey the terms of the covenant – the law. If they obeyed, God

promised to bless them, give them long life, make them fruitful. But if they disobeyed the law, God promised to judge them and curse them (Deu 28).

Now in Judah at the time of Habakkuk, that same law is numb, paralysed – inactive. Very few people are bothering to obey it. Most people are outright disobeying it. The wicked outnumber the righteous, v.4 – they **“surround the righteous”**. Because of this, the text tells us that **“justice goes forth perverted.”** Because most people are living in disobedience to the law, living lawlessly – doing evil – there is no justice in the land. Evil is running rampant and not being punished. Corrupt rulers are looting the land, and there is no consequence. The wicked are prospering and the innocent are being oppressed. Basically, God’s chosen people have broken the covenant – they are not living like God’s people.

Taking a step back from this – haven’t we all cried out to God like Habakkuk did? Haven’t we poured out our frustrations about our circumstances – dismayed at the evil and injustice around us, lawlessness in our land, corrupt leaders who face no consequences for their actions. And when nothing changes – only seem to get worse – think that God is not answering our prayers?

### **C. The Lord’s answer, vv.5-11**

God then answers Habakkuk, but gives him an answer that he is not expecting, or wanting to hear (vv.5-6):

**“Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. <sup>6</sup> For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own.”**

What we see firstly in God’s answer to Habakkuk, is that contrary to Habakkuk’s perception that God is doing nothing in the face of all the wickedness in Judah – actually God is most certainly at work. Verse 5 says that he is doing a work that is going to astound and surprise everything – it’s going to be unbelievable what he will do.

Secondly, God tells Habakkuk what this work entails. In verse 6, he says that he is raising up the Chaldeans - the Babylonians – a cruel, pagan, “bitter and hasty nation” who will invade

Judah – seize the homes of the people – expropriate their property without compensation – they are coming to steal your land.

God then describes this brutal nation, vv.7-9:

**“They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.  
8 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.”**

They are a terrifying people who strike fear into all. They have a powerful war-machine, which flattens everything in their path – like eagles swift to devour (v.8). Verse 9 tells us that they are also “violent”. They exact their violence as they gather captives like the sand (v.9), as they scoff at rulers (v.10), and they sweep through territories, slaughtering and defeating people (v.11). It’s interesting that the Hebrew word for violence used here in v.9 – “hamas” is the same that is used earlier in verse 3, to describe the violence in Judah.

So how then is God going to answer Habakkuk’s prayer? How is God going to deal with the corruption and violence in Judah? Certainly not in the way Habakkuk expects. He is going to punish them with the violence of the Babylonians. These pagan, brutal Babylonians, God himself is raising up.

Remember, God is not disinterested or uninvolved in the affairs of this world. He’s sovereign, indeed, as the WCF 3 – he ordains all things that come to pass. Daniel 2:21 says that, **“[God] changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings...”** Kings and presidents don’t come to power randomly – God raises them up. And as quickly as he raises them up, he also brings about their downfall. God is sovereign over all world events – as he is sovereign here – raising up the Babylonians whom he will use as an instrument to discipline his people Judah.

Because of the wickedness and evil in Judah that we’ve already heard Habakkuk complaining about, because Judah has broken the covenant God made with them, because they’ve disobeyed the law; they must now endure the curse of the law. Deuteronomy 28:25, 36 say – **“The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them. And you shall be a horror to all**

**the kingdoms of the earth... The Lord will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone."**

Those curses of the law – promised all the way back in Deuteronomy, are now going to come to pass, because God's people have repeatedly disobeyed God. Now, by using the Babylonians, he will bring calamity and violence upon Judah – land will be invaded and he will cause them to be exiled to Babylon.

God is going to punish his people because of their disobedience. But he's also going to continue to work out his perfect plan for them as well. Hebrews 12:6 says, **"For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."** Habakkuk was probably expecting God to answer him by promising him that he would bring peace and harmony to Judah, give them their best life now. But what we see is that God's love is going to be expressed through discipline. And that discipline is going to happen through an evil empire, who will unleash violence upon them and take them into exile.

## **Conclusion**

Is this not shocking? That God's answer to Habakkuk's cry to intervene in Judah, to bring peace, end violence and injustice – was precisely to do the opposite – allow more violence through the Babylonians?

Could this mean that for us, God's answer to our prayers, his very purposes, could actually – in the short term – be to allow even more destruction and violence? Can't tell the future – pray and hope for peace. But there is still a strong possibility that things will get worse. What then? Isn't God good? How is it possible that he should permit evil in our lives and bring about tough times and challenges? How can we trust a God who acts like this? Doesn't this just leave us with no hope?

No! The reality is that nowhere in the Bible does God promise us a trouble-free life of peace and quiet. Actually, if there is one thing that he *does* promise it is trials. Consider James 1:2-3: **"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup>for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."** God, in his providence, brings trials,

chaos into our lives in order to work out his perfect will in our lives – to grow our faith in Christ – that’s why we are to count them all joy.

It is precisely through these evil things that God sovereignly works out his purposes for his people. This is epitomised through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus’ crucifixion was the greatest evil, violence and injustice ever committed by hands of lawless men. While Jesus was on the cross, people mocked him, asked him where his God was, why didn’t he come and save him? It appeared at that moment that evil had triumphed, that death had won the day.

Yet this was not so. Though the crucifixion was carried out by the hands of lawless men, it was predestined by God himself. Through this act of despicable evil, he achieved his perfect will. Death and evil didn’t prevail, as God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day, forgiving the sins of his people and redeeming us to himself for all eternity. The greatest evil was turned into the greatest good by God.

This too is God’s promise for those of us in Christ. Ultimately evil won’t triumph. Proof of that is in the resurrection. We may certainly endure troubles now. But it’s often these troubles and uncertainties that show up our great need for God, reality that we can’t do this alone – hopeless. Only hope we have is in Jesus Christ. Trust in him – forgiveness of your sins, trust him – he will be with you through the storms of life, and trust in him, who seals you with his Spirit and promises to raise you from the dead to life eternal. Only then will there be no more violence, corruption, tears, no more death, mourning, crying nor pain. There God will dwell with us and we his people forever.

Amen.