

Habakkuk's First Question About the Problem of Evil

Habakkuk 1:1-11

Habakkuk 1:1-11: *"The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw. ² O Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" and You will not save. ³ Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. ⁴ Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds. ⁵ "Look among the nations and watch! Be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days that you would not believe, though it were told you. ⁶ For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs. ⁷ They are terrible and dreadful; their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves. ⁸ Their horses also are swifter than leopards, and fiercer than evening wolves. Their chargers charge ahead; their cavalry comes from afar; they fly as the eagle that hastens to eat. ⁹ "They all come for violence; their faces are set like the east wind. They gather captives like sand. ¹⁰ They scoff at kings, and they scorn princes. They deride every stronghold, for they heap up earthen mounds and seize it. ¹¹ Then his mind changes, and he transgresses; he commits offense, ascribing this power to his god."*

Background Notes

Very little is known about the prophet Habakkuk's place of origin or his call to the ministry, but we know quite a bit about his time period in Judah's history. Habakkuk was a "pre-exilic" prophet – that is, he prophesied *before the exile* of the Jewish people to Babylon. It appears that he prophesied a short time before Nebuchadnezzar's first attack on Jerusalem in 605BC, when Daniel and other noble youths were taken away as captives to Babylon. Habakkuk was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, and he probably heard Jeremiah preach in Jerusalem.

As he looked around him, Habakkuk's main concern was the unchecked and unjudged evil everywhere: *"Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. ⁴ Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds"* (v3-4).

The wicked were getting away with their iniquity and violence. There didn't seem to be any justice. Righteous people were suffering. How could God allow this? Why didn't God do something about it? Have you ever asked that question - how can a holy God let evil go unpunished? Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? When you read and study the book of Habakkuk, you'll get some answers to this question.

Habakkuk did the right thing with his questions - **he went directly to the Lord** and expressed his concern. The Lord answered Habakkuk's question by telling him that he **was** doing something about the wickedness. In fact, He was about to discipline Judah by bringing in the Babylonians (in some translations, the "Chaldeans"). *"For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation that marches through the breadth of the earth to possess dwelling places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful; their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves"* (v6-7).

God informed Habakkuk that the evil conditions in Judah would not go on much longer, because the Babylonians were coming, and God was about to use them to discipline and punish Judah. Soon thereafter the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem. The end of verse 10 refers to the earthen siege mounds and ramps that the Babylonians built to overcome the walls of Jerusalem and conquer the city. Archaeology has confirmed the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar – in fact, arrowheads have been found from the battle of 586BC.

But this revelation of punishment left Habakkuk even more confused and concerned. How could a holy God allow pagan Babylonians to discipline His own people? Judah was bad, yes – but the Babylonians were even worse! They were pagans! Habakkuk wanted some answers, but he couldn't understand exactly what God was saying in answer to his question, "How can a holy God allow the pagan Babylonians to discipline His own people?"

We'll look at that question in the second half of the chapter, but first we'll study a couple of doctrinal points from Habakkuk's first question and God's first answer.

Doctrinal Points

1. There is the legitimate question concerning evil.

The problem of evil is sometimes called the "Achilles heel" of the Christian faith. (In the Greek tale of Achilles, he was vulnerable to injury and death only if his heel was pierced). In the same way, the Christian faith appears to be vulnerable in the area of evil, because the question of evil does not have a simple answer.

"If God is all good and the Creator of everything, then where could evil come from?" And, "If God is all powerful, then why does this evil continue?" The answer to these questions is not as simple and easy as you may think. There is a legitimate question concerning evil.

Don't think you're a heretic if you have ever wondered how an all-good and all-powerful God can allow evil! Habakkuk had this same basic question, and he was a prophet of God! But what did Habakkuk do? He cried out to God for an answer: *"O Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" and You will not save.*

³ *Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble?"* (v2-3).

It wasn't wrong for Habakkuk to ask God for an answer, and his questions didn't mean he had a bad attitude. He wasn't a skeptic, because there is a ***legitimate question concerning evil.***

One of the courses I teach at Emmaus Bible College is "Christian Evidences." Christian Evidences is a branch of apologetics, the defense of the Christian faith. Every year the same question comes up, even before we get to a formal presentation of the answer: "How can an all-good and all-powerful God allow evil?" That is a legitimate question.

2. God uses evil to punish evil.

The answer to the question of how a good God and an all-powerful God can allow evil and violence is multi-faceted. There's more than one reason why God allows evil and violence to go on at the present time. One of those reasons is given right here in these verses: God uses evil to punish evil.

This truth is taught in God's answer to Habakkuk. The Lord told Habakkuk that He was going to punish the people of Judah for their evil ways, but He was going to do it by using the evil ways of the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians wrongly took over land that did not belong to them (v6). The Babylonians were a law unto themselves (v7). The Babylonians used violence and did not respect authority (v9-10). The Babylonians were a guilty pagan people (v11). Some translations of verse 11 vary, but the main point of the passage is obvious: God was going to use the evil of the Babylonians to punish the evil of the nation of Judah. So God uses evil to punish evil.

This truth is certainly taught throughout the rest of the Bible. For example, look at the book of Judges. God constantly used the evil of the surrounding pagan nations to punish the evil of Israel. And in 70AD, God used the pagan Roman Empire to punish the evil of the Jewish nation for its rejection of their Messiah, Jesus Christ. So God can use evil to punish evil - whether it's the evil of a nation, or the evil of an individual person.

However, the use of evil to punish evil in no way infringes on God's holiness! Galatians 6:7 says, "*Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.*" If an individual sows evil, God will allow that individual to reap evil. But the fact that God allows evil to punish evil does not take away from God's holy character. In fact, Psalm 76:10 says that God makes the wrath of man to praise Him. When all is said and done, the evil of man actually brings praise to God. It's a difficult concept to grasp, but it's what the Bible teaches.

Has God ever used the evil of another person to discipline you? Maybe some unfair treatment or other evil deed has been perpetrated upon you. Maybe a seemingly unfair tragedy has entered your life. What was the result? Hopefully you looked at your life to see if God was disciplining you for sin in your life. And hopefully you stopped your sin, learned your

lesson, and ended up thanking and praising God for His intervention! God uses evil to punish evil.

Practical Application

It's not wrong to question God - *in the right way!*

Is it wrong to question God? Yes - and No! Yes, it's wrong to question God in the *wrong* way, with the wrong attitude. But no, it's not wrong to question God in the *right way!* What's the difference?

What's the wrong way to question God? It's wrong to question God's ways in our lives with a resentful or selfish attitude – accusing God that what He's doing in our lives is wrong, or that He's unjust and unfair, or that He should be doing the “right thing” for us.

But it's not wrong to question God in the right way. The right way is to go to Him with a humble attitude, telling Him what we can't understand, and that we need His help with answers to our hard questions. We're not resentfully questioning what God is doing in our lives, and we're not telling God that what He's doing is wrong. It's not wrong to humbly seek answers to your questions!

The question of how an all-good and all-powerful God can allow evil was a hard question for Habakkuk, and it is for us as well. Habakkuk went to God with the right attitude. He simply asked God for some answers - and God gave Him answers. Habakkuk did **not** approach God as an accuser, or a skeptic, or as a critic, or as a doubter. No, he came with the right attitude and his simple questions.

Do you have any hard questions that need some answers - maybe even this question about why God allows evil? Or perhaps you have a tough doctrinal question - or maybe you wonder about the way God is allowing certain difficult circumstances to come into your life. Don't question God's character; that would be wrong. And don't resentfully or angrily question God's ways in your life. Just go to God, simply and trustingly, as children go to parents for answers to good and legitimate questions.

It's not wrong to bring hard questions to God for answers – humbly asking for His help in understanding. There *are* answers to the hard questions and God will answer you in His own time and way.

It's not wrong to question God in the right way.