

Habakkuk's Second Question About Evil

Habakkuk 1:12-2:1

Habakkuk 1:12-17: *"Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction. ¹³ You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he? ¹⁴ Why do You make men like fish of the sea, like creeping things that have no ruler over them? ¹⁵ They take up all of them with a hook; they catch them in their net, and gather them in their dragnet. Therefore they rejoice and are glad. ¹⁶ Therefore they sacrifice to their net, and burn incense to their dragnet; because by them their share is sumptuous and their food plentiful. ¹⁷ Shall they therefore empty their net, and continue to slay nations without pity?"*

Habakkuk 2:1: *"I will stand my watch and set myself on the rampart, and watch to see what He will say to me, and what I will answer when I am corrected."*

Background Notes

The prophet Habakkuk was certainly not the first person to wonder why God allows the wicked to prosper and why He allows evil to apparently go unjudged.

In Psalm 73, the psalmist Asaph had the same question:

"Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart.

² *But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.*

³ *For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

⁵ *They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men.*

⁶ *Therefore pride serves as their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.*

⁸ *They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; they speak loftily.*

⁹ *They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth.*

¹¹ *And they say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?"*

¹² *Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches.*

¹³ *Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence.*

¹⁴ *For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning."*

Do you ever have the same thoughts and feelings? Why do the wicked prosper? Why do they get away with cheating and violence? Why do I suffer when I've tried to do the right thing and keep my heart pure? Wicked people take

advantage of me and they get ahead, but I seem to get the short end of the stick every time! Why doesn't God do something about this? Why doesn't He step into the situation and put an end to all unrighteousness and evil? Asaph the psalmist had these questions, and Habakkuk the prophet had them as well.

There was a revival in the nation of Judah in 621BC, during the reign of King Josiah. (See 2 Kings 23 and 2 Chronicles 35-36.) This revival was widespread, and it even swept into the northern kingdom of Israel. But the revival was short-lived and the people soon returned to their evil ways. Habakkuk's prophecy was written about 15 years after this revival, and as he looked around he saw violence and moral corruption - the wicked prospering, and the righteous suffering. There was iniquity and evil all around him.

Habakkuk asked the Lord for an answer, and the Lord gave him an answer: *"Look among the nations and watch— be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days what you would not believe, though it were told you"* (v5).

The Lord was going to allow the evil and pagan Babylon Empire to conquer Judah. The Babylonian armies had already overthrown Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, in 612 BC. In 605 BC they would defeat Egypt at the Battle of Carchemish, and then move towards Jerusalem.

Habakkuk had a second question, and it was an obvious one: *"Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?"* (v13). In other words: "Lord, how can You do this? You're a righteous and holy God, so how can you let a pagan nation like Babylon conquer your people? The nation of Judah is bad - but certainly not as bad as Babylon!" In verses 14-17, he likened the Babylonians to pitiless fishermen who capture people by hook and by net, and then sacrifice to their dragnet as to a god.

So Habakkuk's second question was, "Lord, how can you let the cruel and pagan Babylonian Empire punish your own people?" God's second answer comes in chapter 2. But in the meantime, Habakkuk said he would patiently wait for God's answer (2:1).

Doctrinal Points

1. God's purity is not affected by the evil He allows.

It's obvious that God allows evil - or it wouldn't exist. That fact was obvious to Habakkuk, and it should be obvious to us as well. But doesn't the evil God allows somehow affect His purity and holiness? Isn't God to blame in some way? Habakkuk knew that this idea could not be correct: *"You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness."*

The rest of the Bible certainly teaches that God's purity and holiness is not affected by the evil that He allows. 1 John 1:5 says that *"God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all."* God's moral perfection is not in any way affected by the moral darkness that exists in this world.

Then how do we explain the origin of evil? And if there was a time when evil did not exist, then doesn't that make an all-powerful God somehow guilty, because He allowed evil to enter His perfect universe? No! The Bible's answer to this so-called "Achilles heel" of the Christian faith is what is known as the "Free Will Defense."

A perfect God created beings - both angels and humans - with free wills. He didn't create puppets or robots; He created beings with free wills. In a moral universe, that is the only way to have a kingdom of love. Love can't exist unless a being is free to love or to not love. It can't be programmed like a robot, or it won't be love. Love must come from a free will. The Bible teaches that both angels and humans with free will chose to sin – to disobey God and rebel against God - and thus evil came into the universe.

But if God created free will and thus allowed evil to enter the universe, isn't God to blame (morally culpable) in some way? After all, He created these beings. No!

Here's an illustration. Imagine a married couple that is completely perfect. They decide to have a child, even though they know the child will not be perfect. The perfect parents raise their child in a perfect way. (Hypothetical, obviously, but follow the illustration!) But when the child becomes a teenager, he commits a crime. Are the perfect parents to blame? Are they morally culpable for the child's wrongdoing? Are they guilty in some way? No, they're not. I hope this illustration is helpful for our doctrinal point: the Bible teaches that God allows evil, but God's purity is not affected by the evil He allows.

2. God's providence is not affected by the evil He uses.

Habakkuk knew that God had made unconditional promises to His people, the Jewish people, and he knew that God would never go back on His word: "*Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die*" (v12).

On the basis of God's promises to His people, Habakkuk knew that there was no way Judah would be annihilated. They would not be wiped out – they would not die out. God's providence or plan for Israel was not affected by the evil He was allowing. The only logical possibility, Habakkuk thought, was that God was using the Babylonians as a tool to discipline and correct His people: "*O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction*" (v12).

The Lord was the Solid Rock and He did not change. His providence was as good in Habakkuk's day as it had always been in Israel's history. God was only using the evil of the Babylonians to accomplish His purposes - to discipline and correct His people. God's providence was not affected by the evil He was using.

What was true in Habakkuk's day is still true today. God's providence is not affected by the evil He uses. Think of the great evil of the Nazi Holocaust - and yet, out of that evil the modern nation of Israel was reborn, after almost 2000 years! God's providence is not affected by the evil He uses.

This is true in your life and my life, just as much as it was for the nation of Israel. Romans 8:28 says, “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*” This verse doesn’t say that all things are good. No! All things are **not** good! In fact some things are terrible, tragic and evil. But God can use even tragedy and the evil of mankind for His good providential purpose of conforming us to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

So bad things not only happen to bad people - bad things happen to God’s people as well. Listen to the words of Joseph, spoken to the brothers who had hated and betrayed him: “*You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good*” (Genesis 50:20).

Maybe something bad is happening to in your life right now. Remember - God is working, even through this tough time, for your eventual benefit. His ultimate goal is to make you more like Jesus Christ! Although it’s a hard concept to grasp right now, God’s providence is always for our good, and He is not affected by the evil He uses.

Practical Application

Let’s wait on our watchtowers!

Habakkuk’s conclusion to chapter 1 was that he would wait patiently for the Lord to explain. “*I will stand my watch and set myself on the rampart (or watchtower), and watch to see what He will say to me, and what I will answer when I am corrected (2:1).*”

In ancient times, watchtowers stood on the city walls or in the farm fields and vineyards to give a bird’s eye view of the surroundings, to watch for approaching danger. From the watchtower, you could see what was going on around you. You could get the big picture.

Habakkuk used the watchtower in a figurative way here: he was going to keep on watching and waiting for more of God’s answers to his questions about evil. Habakkuk was not a skeptic or critic or an evil man – he just wanted to get the big picture **from God**. He wanted to **get his answers from the Lord**, and he wanted to **see events from God’s viewpoint**. What a great attitude!

Are you willing to “wait on your watchtower” for the Lord’s answer? Maybe you’re going through some very tough struggles right now, and you really need answers. Maybe you don’t know why God is allowing difficult (or even evil) events in your life right now. You need insight. You need the big picture. When life gets tough, let’s not despair. Let’s be like Habakkuk, and “wait on our watchtowers” for the Lord’s answer.

God answered Habakkuk’s questions, as we’ll see. We don’t know how long he had to wait, but God answered Habakkuk and gave him the big picture. And God will give us the big picture too - if we’re willing to wait on Him.

Let’s wait on our watchtowers!