

How Long?

(Tears, Ashes, and Trumpets; Message 1)

(Lent, 2021)

Habakkuk 1:1-4

Scripture:

1 The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

*2 How long, Lord, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?*

*Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?*

*3 Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.*

*4 Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.*

Message

Nicholas Woltersdorff, a professor of philosophy and theology at Calvin and Yale Universities, says Christian worship, like the Old Testament Psalter, should include trumpets, tears and ashes.

This Lent we're going to be looking at the Book of Habakkuk; it's not very long - just three chapters, just three-four pages. Habakkuk is a book of tears (**lament**), ashes (**repentance**) and some trumpets (**praise**).

Today and for the next couple of weeks we'll be focusing on the tears; week four we'll focus on ashes, and the fifth Sunday we'll get to the trumpets. On Palm Sunday we'll focus in on the historical event of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

The book of Habakkuk is kind of hard to find; it's tucked into the Old Testament minor prophet section along with other Biblical books we seldom hear or read about . . . but we'll soon discover it is as **relevant** today as when Habakkuk first penned it.

THE MAN

So who is Habakkuk?

Some say Habakkuk derives his name from the Hebrew word “*habok*” meaning “to embrace.” We’ll see that quality in Habakkuk as he embraces God in an intensely honest and persistent conversation.

Others say his name means “Babylonian House Plant.” I wouldn’t have appreciated being called a “house plant;” I doubt Habakkuk did. But if Habakkuk is a “house plant” - he’s certainly not a pansy - as we’ll soon see. Maybe a coniferous Venus Fly Trap, but not a pansy.

Habakkuk is a prophet; but he’s not just your typical prophet. Prophets are **deeply committed** people; they need to be with the **abuse** they get -most from the people they are trying to help.

Many are ignored; others are verbally and physically abused; many were even killed. Their mandate is to hear a word from God and speak it boldly - with energy and passion.

They are often called to point out the nature and extent of people’s **sin** - sometimes a whole nations’ sin - and the impending impact and consequences (People never seem to take kindly to being told they are wrong, what they’re doing is wrong, and it will make things even worse).

They spoke to kings and common citizens...people loved to listen (most thought it was great entertainment) (Like the man carrying the “*Repent, The end is near sign*” confronting people in downtown Grand Rapids). They would nod their approval, but then walk away, ignore what they heard, and just continue doing what they were doing.

You can imagine how frustrating this would be if this was your calling and life’s work – people nodding their approval

In this book, however, Habakkuk actually seems to function more like a **priest** who goes to God on behalf of the people than like a prophet who speaks to the people on behalf of God. His brazen honesty with God may be a good model to follow. But his relentless trust in God, regardless of the circumstances, is something we should not miss or forget.

Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah - but neither of them wrote poetry that really caught on or excited the Israelites of their day - both were largely ignored! They must have made quite a pair - Jeremiah crying all the time; Habakkuk trying to console him: “Now don’t take it too hard, Jerry, God isn't listening anyway!”

Habakkuk is quoted in the New Testament; but his name is never mentioned outside of the book that bears his name.

Habakkuk lived in the latter half of the seventh century before Christ. He probably wrote the book about 600 BC - give or take twenty years. The southern kingdom of Judah was experiencing some desperate circumstances.

The Northern Kingdom had already been conquered by the nation of Assyria about a hundred years earlier in 722 B.C. Although the Southern Kingdom of Judah (and Benjamin) was yet unconquered, they weren't behaving like **people of God** should; fact is, they had trended away from God and stretched His patience.

Now a new world military power, **Babylon**, is looming larger and more ominous in the east; and Habakkuk realizes God may use them to judge His people.

Judah's future looking increasingly precarious and uncertain; fact is, things would get worse before they get better for God's people. Babylon would eventually cross Judah's borders, take over **Jerusalem**, burn it to the ground and destroy the **temple** until nothing was left.

The Babylonians would take every able-bodied man, woman and child, and transport them thousands of miles away from their homeland into captivity and force them into **slavery**. Sin has devastating consequences.

Life in Habakkuk's world was going from bad to worse as the tension increased. There was no justice, no shalom, no peace, no wholeness, no community, no dependence on God among God's people!

God's law was being ignored; sin was infecting everything; people continued to laugh at Jeremiah and Habakkuk's warning.

THE MANUSCRIPT

Habakkuk is kind of a strange book. And a quick read of it will likely leave you confused. You have to dig in a bit, reflect a bit, to understand Habakkuk's message. It is introduced as a prophecy or oracle (**1:1**); but, interestingly, the book contains **no word** from God to Israel. This prophecy is more of a conversation between the prophet and God.

Since it is a conversation with God, that would define it more as a "**prayer**" than an actual **prophecy** . . . It is less a prayer of petition and intercession and more a prayer of lament.

Lament is a heartfelt and often prolonged prayer of regret, **sadness**, and **grief** verbalized in **crying out** to God, **mourning**, and weeping, other expressions of pain and forgottenness.

The book of Habakkuk describes those dark uncertain times when God seemed absent. It is a prayer for understanding when answers seem completely evasive.

- It is the fervent prayer of those who pray for peace, and only to experience war
- It is the earnest prayer of those who pray for healing standing at a loved one's bedside, only to find themselves standing by their loved one's grave
- It is the passionate prayer of those who pray for a spouse's love to be renewed, only to experience more betrayal, apathy and abuse
- It is the grieving prayer of a faithful businessman who's worked hard all his life only to have his partner gamble the business away
- It is the desperate prayer of two wedded un-parents who long to have their arms filled with a child they can love and embrace only to see the years quickly passing by
- It is the impassioned prayer of a student who longs for acceptance and community while being picked on, ostracized and cyber-bullied.
- It is the heartfelt prayer of a parent praying for their prodigal son or daughter year after year, only to see their child walk farther from the faith

Habakkuk's prayer is our prayer; he, like all of us, longs for timely answers from God. **More than anything else, he wants God's assurance that God is still God and he will work things out; that it will be alright.**

THE MOANING (I.E., THE LAMENT) (1:2-4)

In these opening verses, Habakkuk accuses God of doing nothing to help the righteous and of totally ignoring the plight of the helpless (1:2-4)

"God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell, "Help! Murder! Police!" before you will come to my rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day? How long, O Lord, must I call for help?! (cf. The Message)

The conversation begins with Habakkuk's complaint - isn't it God's responsibility and duty to help the helpless? Isn't it like in his job description? Isn't it like in his character?

Israel often complained about its troubles - about the injustices of life - to God; they had their share and they had been complaining since Egypt! They not only wrote letters to the editor, fired off a nasty emails and tweets, complained to their neighbors and fellow church members, they went to worship and "lamented/complained" in the **sanctuary** in the **presence** of God himself!

They did this because deep down they firmly believed God was **good** and just, that he **cared** for them, and intended to **help** them. And this simply made no sense!

The reality is, Habakkuk notes, is that the law was paralyzed; it was no longer acknowledged as relevant; they had literally grown numb to it. God's instruction was given to guide people to love one another and to prevent exploitation and manipulation. But God's people were ignoring the law; justice was perverted, evil was running rampant; and as a result, their prayers were not being heard.

Habakkuk expresses his anger toward God.

First, Habakkuk looks and sees the horror of the evil and debauchery that is going on all around him in the **world**. He sees godless Babylon sweeping in Israel's direction and knows they are "taking prisoners."

But Habakkuk is most concerned about the evil and debauchery - the continual injustice and wickedness - going on among **God's own people** - people who profess to know and honor God.

Habakkuk saw the defenseless being mistreated and oppressed and he couldn't do anything about it. He knows God's people are wicked, but his focus is on God's apparent **indifference** to their wickedness. So one wonders, "Does God really care?" The sin of Judah was going unpunished and the suffering of the innocent was going unprevented. Habakkuk is doing a slow burn.

Do you burn at injustice? Millions of unborn children are being aborted; the rampant sex trafficking here in Kent county; children down the street who go to sleep on the floor hungry; the racial tension and injustices in our community; men are beating their girl friends, wives and children; students who bully fellow students in our schools and online; road rage fatalities; Christians are being persecuted/killed for their faith. Does that bother you? Do you burn inside?

One of the evidences that we are becoming a Biblical people is that we, like the prophets, **begin to burn** as we see evil taking its toll in our world. Biblical people burn when they see injustice and evil having its way. Biblical people hate sin in their lives, in others lives and in the world.

There is no "coolness" in the life of a prophet; a prophet "burns!" There can be no "coolness" in the life of a Jesus follower.

Second, Habakkuk is frustrated that God seems to be **ignoring him**. God, **where** are you in all of this? Why do you treat us this way?

We've complained to you about the wrongs and injustices in this world and begged you to do something and you haven't even answered? You haven't

helped! Honestly, God, you don't seem to care! God do you hear me?! **How long** will you ignore our pleadings?

Tell me you haven't ever had those feelings? Many of us can speak to this from personal experience. I can.

You've been trying to have a child with no success while the birth rate among unwed teenagers is at an all time high! How long?!

Your mother-in-law gets early onset Alzheimer's and your mother dies from Cushing's disease. Both are relatively young! How Long!?

Your son gets hit by an inattentive driver, is thrown forty feet in the air, spends eighteen months in rehabilitation and the driver doesn't even get a ticket! How long?!

You're let go from a position you've worked in faithfully for decades without any foreknowledge or conversation or reason. How Long?

Those are some of my stories. **What** is the problem, Lord? Have I not done all the right things! I read the Bible and pray! I go to church regularly; I'm a faithful spouse; I tithe; I've never skipped church to play a round of golf or go to the beach. Now I beg you, God, for relief, for an answer; but all I get is silence. Lord, **why** are you letting these things happen to me? (Tell me you haven't been there).

Lord, how are we to live by faith when your presence seems to be missing in our unstable world. Lord, we desperately need your rule. Habakkuk's language suggests he has been pleading with God to intervene and put an end to these injustices for a very **long time**. "How long" are the first two words out of his mouth; "how long" is the refrain of Habakkuk's lament - and probably many of ours.

THE MESSAGE

When instability creeps into our world, it must become natural for us to turn to God with our questions. And to ask them...honestly and boldly. God has broad forgiving shoulders; he invites us to cry out to him. And then, we wait for his answers...

God's sees the big picture, the whole picture - we see only fractions. Justice and fairness are best measured in the long run. The uncertainty about the future, Habakkuk will learn, provides us the opportunity to learn to **live by faith** instead of by sight - which is part of God's plan for our lives.

Rather than focused on ourselves and our agenda, lament invites us to focus on making God's name great. Rather than trusting our own strength we need to **increase our trust** in God while we wait for him. Lament is an invitation to

push through our feelings of instability and uncertainty and affirm the goodness of God by faith.

This morning, we are invited to come to His Table - burning about the injustice in God's world. In coming, we acknowledge, we are its promoters, **participants** and its **victims**. We come to his table hurting, empty, frustrated, and with all kinds of **questions**; but we come. God welcomes us, and reminds us, it's okay.

This Table is a visual and vivid reminder that **God is here** – he stepped into the middle of the world's injustice and experienced its full impact:

*He was despised and rejected by men
A man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering...
He was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities
The punishment that brought us peace was upon him
And by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:3-5)*

Even if we may not be able to hear his answer to one of our specific questions, he has given us the only answer we really need – **himself**. **Jesus too cried out to the Father, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” And God said, “Because I so love the world . . .”**

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