

Why?

(Series: Tears, Ashes, and Trumpets; Message 2)

(Lent, 2021)

Habakkuk 1:5-17

Scripture: Habakkuk 1:5-17

The Lord's Answer

*"Look at the nations and watch—
and be utterly amazed.*

*For I am going to do something in your days
that you would not believe,
even if you were told.*

*⁶ I am raising up the Babylonians,
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwellings not their own.*

*⁷ They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.*

*⁸ Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.*

*Their cavalry gallops headlong;
their horsemen come from afar.
They fly like an eagle swooping to devour;*

⁹ they all come intent on violence.

*Their hordes advance like a desert wind
and gather prisoners like sand.*

*¹⁰ They mock kings
and scoff at rulers.*

*They laugh at all fortified cities;
by building earthen ramps they capture them.*

*¹¹ Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty people, whose own strength is their god."*

Habakkuk's Second Complaint

¹² Lord, are you not from everlasting?

My God, my Holy One, you will never die.

You, Lord, have appointed them to execute judgment;

you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish.
13 *Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?
Why are you silent while the wicked
swallow up those more righteous than themselves?*
14 *You have made people like the fish in the sea,
like the sea creatures that have no ruler.*
15 *The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks,
he catches them in his net,
he gathers them up in his dragnet;
and so he rejoices and is glad.*
16 *Therefore he sacrifices to his net
and burns incense to his dragnet,
for by his net he lives in luxury
and enjoys the choicest food.*
17 *Is he to keep on emptying his net,
destroying nations without mercy?*

Message:

Marshall Shelley was a senior editor at Christianity Today; he and his wife Susan have asked the “Why” question many times. He writes:

This was not a gentle year for the Shelley’s. It was one in which we experienced God’s grace amid some painful circumstances. First the difficulties: Our daughter Many, age one, was hospitalized nine times this year—seizures, surgery to have a feeding tube implanted in her stomach, surgery for acute glaucoma. She remains completely dependent, unable to respond to us in any way, although we do think she knows when she is being held.

In August, due to a still unknown cause, Mandy went into a coma and almost died. Susan stayed all night at the hospital holding Mandy and praying. At 7 a.m., her vital signs normalized. The next day we brought her home. One of the nurses said later that she saw angels hovering over Mandy’s bed.

In November, our son Toby was born four pounds, eight ounces, nineteen inches long with severe birth defects—heart malformation, cleft lip, missing portions of the brain, spina bifida. He had a condition called trisomy thirteen.

We got to hold him, and we saw him breathe a few times. But we never heard his voice or saw his eyes. We still grieve for not getting to know him.

After paying tribute to Toby with a service of remembrance and thanksgiving, we loaded his tiny casket into our van and drove to Kansas where we buried his body in the family cemetery. We knew (in our heart) that Toby was already in

heaven enjoying eternal life free from his birth defect. But we are left to wonder...

What is God up to? Why create a child who would live for two minutes?

“We still have no idea what ‘caused’ Toby or Mandy’s condition; but we are convinced they were created for a purpose...” but what is it?

Why all the suffering and grief, physical and economic pain, and loss of life associated with this worldwide COVID19 pandemic? Why the continued oppression from racism, bigotry, hatred, nationalism, and ethnic purity? Why do the “good” die young, good people suffer, and evil seem to win?

The prophet Habakkuk knows God is **holy**, and **righteous** and good... Habakkuk knows God’s eyes are too **pure** to look upon evil; so WHY is God silent while the wicked seem to swallow up the righteous? Habakkuk knows God takes no pleasure in the **death** of anyone; so WHY is a son born still or given only two minutes of life?

Habakkuk knows God doesn't want anyone to **perish**, but everyone to come to repentance (cf. 2 Peter 3:9); so WHY does a daughter (or son) continue to reject God? Habakkuk knows God hates **divorce**, so WHY does God tolerate a spouse’s derision and infidelity toward the other?

Habakkuk’s questions are our questions; we don’t understand: why doesn’t **God** act more like **God**?!

THE CONCERN

Job (24:12; RSV) says, *“The souls of the wounded **cry for help**; yet God pays no attention to their prayers.”* (WHAT?!) On the surface, that has to be one of the most terrible statements in the Bible; yet, truth be told, that is often just how it feels.

We say – in the name of the Gospel – God is **good**; God is just; God is **love**; God cares for you; God will help you if you turn to him. So people do. They pray; they petition; they plead; they beg

And still . . . some **die** in pain from disease; some are left widowed and orphaned; some lose everything by storm or accident; some lose their work and can’t find more; some succumb to the power of evil and are crushed under it. Why?

My niece, Amy, 38, mother of three young children, is dying of cancer. Why? Mark Jansen, a lifelong follower of Jesus, is battling brain cancer. Why?

There must be something more. What are we **missing**? Are we without **hope**? Should we just **give up**?

If we are to offer any hope or help to those crushed with the tragedies of life, we must **cry out with those victims...** If we don’t want to appear as mockingly

cheerful, optimistic Pollyanna's, we need to join Job and Jeremiah and Habakkuk and cry out, "How Long?" "Why?"

If we don't want to simply offer glib answers to the suffering and pain of life, we need to take God – his mercy and justice – seriously and ask, How Long? Why?

And if this impacts our life as much as we say it does, shouldn't it also impact our worship? Is there a place in our public worship for the psalms and questions of **lament**? Is there a place for Habakkuk's lamentation?

Most Christian worship tends to be triumphant – all upbeat, just the good news. Even our confession of sin seldom involves lament because we know an assurance of pardon immediately follows (its already printed in the order or worship!)

When a pandemic ravishes, should we not acknowledge it in our worship? When racism is called out on our streets, should we not acknowledge it? When a family grieves a loved one, what does our worship say to those who know nothing of triumph, only loss? Did they mess up? Was their faith insufficient? Is worship only for the good times? Does faith have anything to do with real life?

Some would suggest the Gospel has eliminated the need for lament; that is, there is no need to lay our failures in life before God and ask, "How Long?" "Why?"

It is true, the cross has *already* solved the dilemma of suffering and pain... But it has *not yet* eliminated the impact of the pain, oppression, or injustice we often experience daily. But now, in the middle of the *already, not yet*, it is not enough to simply say to someone who is struggling, "Jesus is the answer," or "Smile. God loves you."

We also need to **sit** next to them, **cry** with them, and **plead** with God a bit.

THE COMPLAINTS

We encountered the first complaint (last week) in 1:2: "How long, Lord, must I call (shout, beg, cry, lament) for help but you do not listen?"

In **1:5-11**, Habakkuk claims God answered his question - sort of. In one sense it sounds like a politician's answer; that is, his answer doesn't really seem to address the actual question asked; but to have a direct conversation with God is rather extraordinary. Truth is, God is answering the bigger question; and that question is, "Who is in charge? Who calls the shots? Who sets the timetable? Who says, When?"

And here is God's answer:

1:5 – "Look at the nations and **watch** – and be utterly amazed."

1:6 – "For I am going to do something in your days..."

1:7 – "I am raising up the Babylonians..."

Translated: “*I am in charge; I am sovereign; I raise up and remove kings; i.e., no person, group or nation functions without my permission.*” Truth is, to deny this would effectively solve Habakkuk’s dilemma – i.e., God isn’t responsible for the suffering that is about to happen: He can’t stop it! But God is omnipotent! So we’re left to deal with evil and suffering

Translated: “*I am not ignoring your complaint, Habakkuk; I’m promising to help **fix the problem**; but it will involve being taken captive by the dreadful Babylonians*” (So you’re hearing me, God; but you’re not really listening...)

The Babylonians were well known for their merciless warfare. When God says they are “*ruthless and impetuous, swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves, focused like an eagle . . .*” you know you’re in trouble.

Jeremiah writes they devoured everything in their path (**Jer. 5:15-17**); even walled cities provided no relief (**Habakkuk 1:10**)

But, “*don’t forget,*” God reminds Habakkuk, “*even the most powerful nations on earth are merely **instruments** in God’s mighty hand.*”

We encounter Habakkuk’s second complaint in our text this morning: “You have appointed these merciless people to execute judgment on your people! Why?”

God just answered Habakkuk’s first complaint, but he isn’t **satisfied** with the answer:

--“*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil, so WHY do you tolerate their treacherousness?*” (**cf. 1:13**)

--“*You can’t tolerate wrongdoing, so WHY are you silent while the wicked prey on the righteous?*” (**cf. 1:13**)

Habakkuk understands Judah must be held accountable for their sins, but he doesn’t **understand** how a just (righteous) God can “appoint” and “assist” an contemptuous enemy to inflict pain and **punishment** on his own people (**cf. 1:6**).

This is a terrible threat of divine judgement against a disobedient people; but even those who are righteous will suffer (along with the disobedient). Even so, Habakkuk sees a contradiction between the God he “knows” (has trusted his whole life) and what he is currently experiencing in the world around him.

In **1:12**, Habakkuk recalls and reflects on God’s true character; he addresses God with his covenant promise-keeping name – Yahweh – to remind God of his promise to love his people... so this doesn’t seem loving.

He reminds God, he is the “Rock” – a refuge, a protector of his people; but this doesn’t feel like you’re protecting us.

So WHY? This doesn’t make sense...

God’s answer doesn’t come until chapter 2. It comes in God’s time.

THE COMPLICATION

Habakkuk continues his lament in 1:14-17. Habakkuk uses a metaphor in these four verses of **fish**...

He pictures Israel as fish in the sea— **vulnerable**, abandoned, and **helpless**. He pictures the Babylonians (the enemy) as an **insatiable** fisherman who can never get enough fish (**1:17**) who “worships” the fishing gear that brings him success:

1:15 – “*He pulls them up with hooks...*” (one at a time)

1:15 – “*He catches them in his net...*” (in small multiples)

1:15 – “*He gathers them in his dragnet...*” (a large net grabbing everything in its path)

The fisherman uses each piece strategically to render the fish helpless – like the Babylonians use their sophisticated military equipment on their enemies.

It is about to be turned in Judah’s direction; Israel will, like the fish, be helpless to its destruction; and God seems to be promoting it. Why?

Can you imagine a more desperate, helpless feeling – that God is orchestrating your suffering against you?

Habakkuk ministers in a time when God’s people were about to personally experience the fate of fish:

--Babylon will ransack Jerusalem, destroy the temple and burn everything to the ground

--They will force every able-bodied man, woman and child into slavery hundreds of miles from their home . . . for seventy years (i.e., the rest of their life)

--It will be physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually excruciating

Habakkuk just wants to know **Why?** Most of us have asked that question: You are suddenly fired from your job; a long term-relationship explodes; your spouse dies of cancer; COVID19 leaves you alone with young children; your investments sour, you’re not able to get pregnant, you lose your house in a fire or tornado

Tell me you haven’t had moments where you **begged** God for help, for relief, for a miracle – and it hasn’t come. You love God; you’ve done all the right things.

Why?

Prophets are a bit more far-sighted than that... They ask, “**How Long?**” They ask, “**Why?**” They ask, “**When?**” And sometimes they get so frustrated they get angry at God!

Truth is the evidence that we are becoming the **people** of God is that we begin to get so **burned** (angry) about evil in our world we cry out to God. Truth is anyone

who says he loves God cannot look at a world seemingly **dominated** by evil and feel good about what they see.

Do we watch people use their influence, power and wealth to leverage their agenda at the expense of others dignity and personhood? Do we stand by and watch the injustice of terminating an unwanted pregnancy, sexual harassment in the workplace, racial inequity in our communities; fellow believers maimed and murdered in our world just for following Jesus?

It may seem that the way of faith would be to wait quietly and patiently for God's redemption. But Scripture reminds us it is not unbelief but a **strong faith** that pushes one to ask impatiently of God: How Long? Why?

Prophets and biblical people always burn when evil appears to be having its way; they hate sin; they hate to see people suffer. They cry out to God. We need more prophets.

THE CONCLUSION

Why? The reason these things happen is so God's purpose can be fulfilled... God's ultimate purpose is to **bring** us into his family; to **build** his kingdom; and he is even willing to use suffering to do it...

Marshall Shelly adds, *"Since the Bible says, the last shall be first, we won't be surprised to find when we get to heaven that Toby and Mandy played key roles that we can't begin to imagine right now. Susan and I have often said that all of our professional and church contributions may wind up in eternity looking pretty insignificant. In God's Kingdom we may discover our greatest contribution to God's Kingdom was simply giving birth to Toby and Mandy."*

That is **Biblical thinking**; and it comes from Habakkuk and the prophets. It provides **strength** for today and **hope** for tomorrow

Even when life seems terribly confusing, impossibly difficult, and devoid of purpose; the prophets remind us God is still on the throne and in charge!

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