

HARD QUESTIONS, HARDER ANSWERS

Habakkuk 1:1-6, 12-13, 2:1-4

What should we do when our theological understanding of God and His ways does not correspond with our experienced reality? Based on what I have read about Mark Twain, he had trouble believing in God. I'm not sure if he was an atheist or not. He used to make comments that he could not believe in a God that let the innocent suffer and evil people prosper. We read or hear about people who commit fraud and wind up being rich. We learn of people who get conned out of their life savings and are left destitute. There are people who commit murder and never get caught. Innocent kids get AIDS from blood transfusions. When we hear about things such as this, we tend to wonder about fairness and justice. We have trouble understanding what we see going on around us and making sense of it. The world is certainly not being operated the way we would do it if we were in charge. Believe me, this kind of thinking has been about for thousands of years. People in every age or generation have had trouble fitting life into a "fairness formula." The "fairness formula" is something like this: If you do wrong you should fail and/or be punished and if you do right you should succeed and/or be rewarded.

Habakkuk lived in Judah before the fall of that nation to the Babylonian empire. He saw injustice happening in his world of Judah and Jerusalem and had trouble making sense of it. He brought his concerns to God and let Him know that what was going on was NOT what he thought was right and fair. In other words, Habakkuk complained to God. God listened to the complaint and provided answers. We can learn from these answers as we see and react to injustice and unfairness in our world.

What About Evil? 1:1-4

¹The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw. ²How long, O LORD, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save. ³Why do You make me see iniquity, And cause *me* to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises. ⁴Therefore the law is ignored And justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore justice comes out perverted. Habakkuk 1:1-4 (NASB95)

What Habakkuk saw was not encouraging: violence, iniquity, strife, contention, slackness in enforcing the law, and no justice. The king of Judah in Habakkuk's time was Jehoiakim. He was ambitious, cruel and corrupt.

Did you ever notice how society tends to follow its leadership? The general public in Jerusalem was such that the strong took advantage of the weak and the rich took advantage of the poor. In Jeremiah 9, he saw the same thing going on. He wanted to just find a place in the middle of nowhere to go live. In verses three through six of that chapter, God described how He saw was going on:

³"Their tongues shoot out lies like a bow shoots arrows— A mighty army of liars, the sworn enemies of truth. They advance from one evil to the next, ignorant of me." GOD's Decree. ⁴"Be wary of even longtime neighbors. Don't even trust your grandmother! Brother schemes against brother, like old cheating Jacob. Friend against friend spreads malicious gossip. ⁵Neighbors gyp neighbors, never telling the truth. They've trained their tongues to tell lies, and now they can't tell the truth. ⁶They pile wrong upon wrong, stack lie upon lie, and refuse to know me." GOD's Decree. Jeremiah 9:3-6 (The Message)

Habakkuk's complaint to God was that he had told God about this condition before and nothing had been done. Habakkuk knew that God was a just God and that He would surely punish the guilty and deliver the oppressed; therefore, God must not have heard! He was distressed that this sort of thing went on and that he had to continue to observe it. I wonder what Habakkuk would think if he saw what was happening in our world today?

What about things that are happening in our own nation? We started out as a nation that endorsed Judeo-Christian principles. In years past, people would have demanded truth and integrity from those in leadership. Many times things contrary to truth went on and they were hidden. If people found out about wrong behavior, they would get very indignant and demand that something be done. Nowadays, a lot of improper behavior is blatantly flaunted in public. What do we do? We either ignore it or we wring our hands and say, "Ain't it awful!"

Rather than condoning sin, or asking that it be ignored, Habakkuk called for punishment as required by God's own covenant. The evil of our own godless culture needs to be confronted. God's people today, as in Habakkuk's time, are too tolerant of things among themselves which are explicitly contrary to God's will as revealed in Scripture and creation.

If we started making a list of things happening in our society today that are either contrary to the revealed character of God or go even further to being an abomination to God, then we would have a very long list.

An observation in the New Bible Commentary is helpful in describing what is going on today. "While seeking to restore the sinner, too often we condone the sin, or at least seek to reduce the severity of its negative consequences. A lack of confrontation, rather than restoring the wrongdoer, tacitly gives permission to continue in the sin (1 Cor. 5). A child of God is called to withstand public wrongdoing, whether corporate, social or political, but the confrontation is hollow if evil is unchecked within the believing community. There is even now a need for prophets who do not espouse 'safe sin', but insist rather that sin be eradicated." (D. A. Carson)

In response to Habakkuk's request that God do something about the sin and injustice of what was happening in Judah and Jerusalem, God already had something underway to take care of that problem.

I Am in Control – 1:5-6

⁵ "Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because *I am* doing something in your days— You would not believe if you were told. ⁶ "For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, That fierce and impetuous people Who march throughout the earth To seize dwelling places which are not theirs. Habakkuk 1:5-6 (NASB95)

God answered Habakkuk's complaint by telling him what was going to happen. God told Habakkuk that what was going to be done would be unbelievable. I'm not sure what Habakkuk wanted God to do in this matter. Perhaps he thought that somehow, those who lived life in an evil pattern, oppressing others, would just "see the light" and stop doing what they were doing. Wouldn't that be wonderful! But, realistically, does this happen very often?

What do you think are the chances that the American society is going to turn around and suddenly become God-fearing and moral? What are the chances that child abuse is going to decrease, that illegal drugs are going to disappear, that prostitution is going to cease, that traditional family values are going to return?

If all it took was that the truth be proclaimed to those who are immoral, then we should have the purest society of any time. Men such as Billy Graham, Charles Stanley, Chuck Swindoll, and many others are on radio and television proclaiming truth as clearly as it has been proclaimed and yet many change only for the worse.

What would we suggest that God do to change our nation? Are we looking for some quick fix, easy solution just as Habakkuk was? However, God could see that only something very radical would cause such people to change in Judah's case and, I fear, that the same will be true for our nation.

The thing that Habakkuk would not be able to believe was that God was going to use a heathen nation to bring judgment on the Jews. Many of the prophets of that day, made it clear

that the rise of the Babylonian Empire was God's way of bringing judgment on the people of Judah. The Babylonians were also used by God to bring judgment on the Assyrians that God had used to bring judgment on the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Verses 7-11 give further descriptions of the Babylonians and how terrible they were. Listen to Habakkuk's reaction.

But God, Why? – 1:12-13, 2:1

¹² Are You not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge; And You, O Rock, have established them to correct. ¹³ *Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You can not look on wickedness with favor.* Why do You look with favor On those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up Those more righteous than they?

¹ I will stand on my guard post And station myself on the rampart; And I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, And how I may reply when I am reproved. Habakkuk 1:12-13, 2:1 (NASB95)

Habakkuk was aware of the covenant relationship that the Jews had with the Eternal and All-powerful God of Creation. His concern was not about the eventual survival of the nation, since they were God's covenant people. His statement that "We will not die" is not saying that everyone would be physically safe when trouble came, but was more related to the survival of the nation. The purpose of what God was going to let happen at the hand of Chaldeans was chastisement or correction.

This was not the solution that Habakkuk wanted. This solution that God came up with seemed to be unfair from Habakkuk's point of view. In fact, he had another complaint to lodge with God. The theological problem facing Habakkuk is how a holy God, one who is *pure* in all things and completely separate from sin, can *tolerate wrong* and treachery as practiced by the Babylonians chosen to be instruments of his punishment. How could God use the unrighteous to correct those that were more righteous than themselves? In other words, even though there were sin and evil in Judah, it was nothing like that of the Babylonians. At least the people of Judah claimed to believe in and worship God and the Babylonians were a pagan nation that worshiped idols. This is the dilemma that we face when we try to evaluate our righteousness by the wrong standard. If we can only see "relative righteousness," then we can always find someone worse than we are. The problem with that approach is that it is not the standard that God uses.

We can understand the perplexity of Habakkuk in trying to comprehend God's methods. Habakkuk did not see the depth and seriousness of the basic problem in the society of Judah, but God did. It was as if Habakkuk wanted to treat a heart attack with an antacid, whereas, God saw that they needed a transplant.

In the continuing verses in chapter one, Habakkuk claimed that God did not value humanity any more that people value fish and fish bait. The argument that he put forth by was that the pagans who were successful in conquering other nations (and especially if they conquer Judah) would give credit to their instruments of war. They would think that they could defeat their enemies because they had better horses or better chariots or better strategy. (That would be the equivalent of the fisherman praising his hooks and nets for his success as a fisherman.)

Habakkuk laid out his complaint before the Lord and then waited for a reply as he anticipated that God would eventually provide an answer to the additional questions about how God was going to deal with the condition of his own nation.

Trust Me – 2:2-4

² Then the LORD answered me and said, "Record the vision And inscribe *it* on tablets, That the one who reads it may run. ³ "For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay. ⁴ "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within

him; But the righteous will live by his faith. Habakkuk 2:2-4 (NASB95)

Habakkuk expected to be rebuked by God for this second complaint. He was saying, in effect, I'll just wait until God's answer comes. God's answer came in the form of a message that was to be shared with all the people of the nation. Habakkuk was told to write it down so that runners could take to various parts of the country and let everyone know. It was also intended that the message would be preserved so that when it finally came to pass that people would know that what was happening was according to God's word.

We need to be diligent in taking the revelation that God has already given us and sharing it with other people. We should also be alert to be able to interpret what is happening in our day and time and put these happenings in the context of what God has said would be happening.

For example, in 2 Timothy 3:3, the word of God that came to us from Paul says that in the last days "people would be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self control, brutal, not lovers of good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof." How could there be any more evidence that we are in the last days?

The revelation that God was giving to Habakkuk was set to happen at a specific time. Judgment would not be instantaneous but it would surely come. Habakkuk was told to wait until God acted because it would happen in God's timetable – He would not miss. His appointments.

With regard to the very real concern that Habakkuk had about how God would deal with the wickedness of the Chaldeans, God was aware of and would take care of the situation. God realized that the nation of Babylon and in particular their king was proud, boastful and unjust. In some of the following verses God pointed out that eventually the king would meet his downfall in the form of alcoholism.

God also answered Habakkuk's concern about the righteous. "The righteous (the justified) would live by and because of their faithfulness." This great truth was quoted in three places in the New Testament (Rom 1:17, Gal 3:11, and Heb 10:38). It is a foundational truth regarding man's relationship to God. Without faith (faithfulness) it is impossible to please Him, but all things are possible to him who has faith in God.