

How Long, O Lord

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[0 : 00] If you've found Habakkuk, would you please stand with me?

As we honor the reading of God's Word together, I'll be reading verses 1-11. The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Or cry to you violence and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me.

Strife and contentions arise, so the law is paralyzed. And justice never goes forth, for the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted.

Look among the nations and see. Wander and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if I told you.

[1 : 04] For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own. They are dreaded and fearsome.

Their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves. Their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar.

They fly like an eagle, swift to devour. They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh.

They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men whose own might is their God.

May God add a blessing to the reading of his word. Would you please be seated? Now, I believe that a sign of good leadership is a leader who is not afraid to answer questions from those who follow them.

[2 : 01] A good leader is accessible. A good leader is transparent and willing to answer hard questions. Conversely, a bad leader is hard to get a hold of. A bad leader is someone who covers up or hides their true intentions and who avoids difficult questions or who phrases their answers carefully, making vague statements that they hope won't incriminate them later, and they don't really give an answer to the hard questions at all.

And so one thing I love about the Bible is God's availability and willingness to answer the questions that questions that perplex us.

And his accessibility to us when we're going through difficult times, and when we're left wondering why he either didn't intervene to stop something bad from happening to us in the first place, or why he hasn't interceded to this point to change our circumstances.

For example, in John chapter 14, Jesus informs his disciples that for a time he will depart from them, that his departure is coming soon, that he will leave them to go and die on the cross.

And that news was extremely hard news for those men to hear. Remember, they had dropped everything to follow him. Jesus was their leader. Jesus was their master.

[3 : 31] He was their Lord. They had trusted him completely. And now he said that he was leaving. You know, if someone you loved dearly told you that they were going to go away for a while, you'd want to know where they were going and for how long they would be absent from you, wouldn't you?

That's what Thomas asked in John chapter 14. Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way? Later, Philip had a question too. Before this point, Jesus had announced that one of them would betray him.

And that also brought a lot of confusion and perplexion and questions from the disciples that they asked of him. Later, Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, anguished to the point of sweating blood, knowing that he would soon endure the wrath of God for our sins on the cross as he atoned for them there.

Multiple times, if you remember, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Son of God, went to God the Father in agonizing prayer, not doubting the Father's will, not refusing to obey his will, but expressing his feelings about what awaited him and exploring the possibility of there being another way.

In that prayer, we see the full humanity of our Lord, the full weight of the burden of our sins that he would endure, and that God the Father is accessible to us and is someone whom we can bring all of our concerns before.

[5 : 12] Even, as is the case with Habakkuk, when we are surprised and we're challenged and we're experiencing hardship, we find ourselves facing a great deal of pain that we are in the midst of.

In the case of the disciples, they were shocked by Jesus' news about his imminent death. They were unable to comprehend how the loss of him was a good thing or even a necessary thing. And so certainly they must have wrestled with the questions about why it would be the Father's will that he die and why Jesus was willing to submit to that. As they watched Jesus die and as they saw him buried, they must have thought that hope is lost.

The enemy has won. And they went into hiding, not knowing what the future held. But we know in a few days, their questions would be answered.

And they would come to understand, as Habakkuk did centuries before, that God works in mysterious ways to accomplish his sovereign will.

[6 : 35] It's the main idea from this morning's text, that God works in mysterious ways to accomplish his sovereign will. You know, there's not much information about the prophet Habakkuk outside of the book that bears his name.

His simple introduction is Habakkuk the prophet. And that may imply that he didn't need an introduction because he was a well-known prophet during his day and during that time to those people.

Whatever his ministry responsibilities might have been, it becomes clear in the book that his role was to enlighten God's people concerning some very deep theological issues.

The people of Judah were about to face God's wrath, and they were about to face it from an unlikely source. And the questions, the perplexities that he had about that are answered by God in unexpected ways.

God's divine answer in this book, his answers in this book, are challenging. They are mind-stretching. They stretch our theology.

[7 : 46] They stretch the minds and the theology of the people back then as they do now. And you know, this is a short book, only three chapters, but it does not make for easy reading.

After all, what we learn again in this book is that God is an infinite being, that God has a knowledge that is limitless, and we who are finite beings do not always understand the ways that He works, though we can be sure that in the end, He works all things together for the good.

And we'll soon be reminded of that today as we look at these first 11 verses in the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk's prophecy deals with the justice of God in light of wickedness, the wickedness of His people and the surrounding nations as well.

Habakkuk ministered during the final days of the Assyrian Empire and the transition to a new world power, the Chaldeans or the Babylonians.

This was a period of political instability. Habakkuk was from the kingdom of Judah, and it was about to be swallowed up by the advancing nation of Babylon.

[9 : 05] And Habakkuk is troubled by all of this. He is disturbed by the deplorable depths of sin that his own people have engaged in. He expresses his frustration with the corruption that has taken place in his society, and he appeals to God to do something about it.

But Habakkuk's cries for help are met with an answer that he did not expect. But they are answers, though they would confuse him in the beginning, they are answers that would reveal more to him and more to us about the mysterious ways God works to accomplish a greater good.

So to understand this book, you first have to understand the tension that exists within Habakkuk. Things are not the way that they should be.

God's people are in a state of moral and spiritual decay. The world around is in upheaval, and he wonders, God, where are you?

Why aren't you setting right what is wrong? Do you care? Are you listening to my prayers? Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

[10 : 22] Why is this happening to us? Why is this happening to me? I'm sure that you've felt that way before. I'm sure you've felt that tension as Habakkuk did.

You might even feel that way right now. Perplexed and disheartened by the normalizing of sin in our society and how it's being celebrated.

Worried about the political state of affairs in our nation and around the world. Longing for a return to the good old days.

Or wishing there was some kind of fast forward button that you could press to speed forward through all of these hard times and get to a point in place where they are over.

Either way, either looking back with longing or ahead to what you hope will be better times, the desire is the same. To escape the present.

[11 : 19] But this is our day. And this is our time. And we must be reminded, as Habakkuk was over 2,000 years ago, that God works still in mysterious ways to accomplish his sovereign will.

He is faithful. And we must trust him even when things don't seem to make sense. And our situation seems desperate. Habakkuk opens his book in verse 1 by saying, the oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

In the Bible, an oracle refers to the words of God. Words often expressed by him to an intermediary, which is Habakkuk in this case, who then shares his words with his people.

This book is a series of oracular dialogues, a conversation between Habakkuk and God, which is meant for the people to hear.

And so today we'll look at the first section of this dialogue between Habakkuk and God, and through it we'll learn a couple of things. The first thing we learn is this.

[12 : 29] Habakkuk had serious questions for God. Habakkuk had serious questions for God. Habakkuk's serious questions come in the form of laments. A lament expresses deep regret, grief, or sorrow.

It is a common expression found in the pages of Scripture. In fact, there is a book in the Bible called Lamentations. And the Bible records several reasons why people lament.

We lament when we grieve over the loss of someone dear to us. Remember when Lazarus died in John chapter 11, we hear the lamentations of his sisters.

And Jesus was so touched by their grief that he wept too. We lament in our prayers when our hearts are broken. Many of the Psalms are songs of lament, expressing a range of emotions when the authors were going through sorrowful times.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, as already been mentioned, Jesus lamented in prayer about the cup of wrath that he was about to drink on the cross. We lament when we feel helpless.

[13 : 45] King Jehoshaphat demonstrated this kind of lamentation when mighty armies arose and encircled Israel and he didn't know what to do. In 2 Chronicles 20, 12, we hear his lament.

Oh, our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.

The Bible instructs us also to lament over sin. This kind of lamentation is associated with repentance in 2 Corinthians 7, 10.

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. And so Habakkuk is lamenting here.

And his lament begins with two words. Oh, Lord. I'm sure that you have opened up your prayers with those two words before.

[14 : 50] Prayers offered up as a result of being overcome with sorrow, physically unable to stand as you melt into the floor by just the weight, the crushing weight of the sorrow that you are experiencing with tears.

And in between sobs, you cry out, Oh, Lord. Oh, God. The doctor reads the test results, and they are good.

And you pray, Oh, God. A loved one has died tragically. And you pray, Oh, Lord.

You're laid off from work, and your savings are minuscule. Your sins have found you out. And what you thought you could hide, God has disclosed.

A tornado has leveled your home, destroying everything that you own. Your baby gets sick and dies. You turn on the news, and you see another school shooting, another war, another riot in the

streets, another injustice, another scandal, another reminder that this world is cursed by sin, and things aren't the way that they should be, and you cry out to God and lament, Oh, Lord.

[16:26] Oh, God. Why? Give me an answer. Help me understand. How can I go on?

Why does it have to be this way? Can you feel Habakkuk's sorrow? Habakkuk continues in verse 1 with his lament, Oh, Lord, how long shall I cry for help?

See, Habakkuk has been praying for a long time. He's been in this state of mind for a while. He's been in the valley of despair long enough, and he's had it.

So he rattles off a series of questions, questions that he's probably taken to God before many times. In verses 1 through the beginning of verse 3, Habakkuk is asking, Why do you make me see iniquity and why do you idly look at wrong? Habakkuk desired to see revival take place in his land and he's frustrated that God hasn't brought that revival yet. He's angry about the injustices taking place amongst his people and he pleads with God to do something about it and he suggests that since God hasn't done anything about it yet, he must not be paying attention. His calls are not getting through. God seems to have shut off his phone and set up his email with an automatic reply that he's out of town. Habakkuk wonders if God has forgotten him and his people. And so he pleads for relief. He pleads for rescue, for revival, but it hasn't come.

His plea is reminiscent of King David's in Psalm 13 verses 1 and 2. How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

[18:35] David there was surrounded by enemies. There was no way out but for God to deliver him. His agony was real and so is Habakkuk's. And he continues with his lament in verse 3.

Destruction and violence are before me. Strife and contention arise. Habakkuk was disturbed by how people in his society were sinning against God's commands with impunity. It's like every direction he turned, he was confronted with the reminders of how evil was prevailing in his land. And don't you see the same in ours?

Our news channels are full of bad news. Terrorist attacks, wars, sex trafficking, mass murder, discrimination, political unrest, homelessness, spiritual deception, moral insanity, and social disintegration. You know, when I watch the news, it seems as if the world is spinning out of control. Destruction, violence, strife, contention are ever before us as well. And I don't know about you, but it's really hard for me to even watch the news these days. For one, they aren't as trustworthy as a source as they might have used to be. Whatever corporation owns them is going to spin the facts to suit their agenda. But worse for me, as a father, I'm constantly find myself either hitting the mute button or changing the channel when my kids are in the room because of the graphic images and the graphic language that they use now. I'm trying to preserve the innocence of my children from a world that is seeking every day to take it away from them. And why are their reports becoming so much more graphic? And here's what I think, because that's what people want to watch. They are entertained by violence. They are amused by the current state of society, and they enjoy having their emotions stirred up.

And so I ask you, does that characterize you? Are you, are we as Christians amused by the things that are going on in our society? Or are we like Habakkuk deeply grieved and gravely concerned over the consequences of sin on humanity? You know, if Christians do not weep over the lostness of society, then what hope is there for society? If we aren't the ones interceding to the one true and living God in prayer for them, then who will? No one else will. In Matthew 5, 13 through 16, Jesus said to us, to you, the church, you are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world, a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Do our hearts break like Habakkuk's? Are we being the salt and the light of the earth that we've been called to be? Habakkuk continues in verse 4, so the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted. I wondered about sharing this illustration. It's kind of strange, but when I think of being paralyzed, I think of when your body parts fall asleep, you know?

So I am a tummy sleeper, and sometimes an arm will get trapped underneath my body. In one case, somehow I had wound up asleep with both of my arms underneath me, and I woke up to my alarm clock going off, but I was paralyzed to do anything about it, just kind of waiting until the blood

started flowing through my arms so I could turn off that annoying alarm. But sure enough, I was a wake that morning. I remember that. And so Habakkuk is saying, you know, that's what's going on here.

[23 : 22] The people who should be doing right, the people who should be upholding justice, they're asleep at the wheel. In his case, it's the priests. It's the ones who should know God's Word best, and they're the ones who are so sinful that they themselves are paralyzed to do anything about it. In fact, they were the source of many of the injustices that were taking place. When those who are supposed to suppress corruption are corrupt themselves, it just adds to the depravity. And Habakkuk is sick to his stomach about it. The Word of God has stopped circulating through his priests and his people, and as a result, they are all paralyzed. So what can we learn here from Habakkuk's serious questions that he asked of God? First, it is better to lament in prayer to God than to lament alone.

As I mentioned before, we are finite beings. We have limits. Sometimes the journey gets too hard for us to travel, and we reach the end of our strength. You know, I love God's words to Elijah when Elijah was on the run from Ahab and Jezebel for confronting them and the people in their sin. And he came to a point where he had reached his limits, and he prayed to God that he would die. It was enough.

But God sent an angel to nourish his weary body, heart, and soul. In 1 Kings 19, 7, Elijah hears this news. And the angel of the Lord came again and said a second time and touched him and said, Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you. But he'll continue on with God's help.

Sometimes we need to admit when we've reached our breaking point, and instead of putting on a fake face and acting as if we're okay, what we need to do is to cry out to God in prayer.

Because if you lament alone, you will shut yourself off from God and others. This church must be a place where you can come and be real with what's going on in your life, and allow others to administer to you, to lament with you, and remind you of the hope that you still have and always will have in Jesus Christ. Lament in prayer. Do not lament alone.

[26 : 00] Second, Habakkuk appealed for God's intervention from a society that was headed towards destruction. I'm sure you are upset with what is transpiring in our society, but how often have you prayed for them?

How much time have you logged on your knees in prayer for those who are lost? Praying for our leaders. Praying for others who have gone astray.

Are you praying for revival? How much time have you spent praying that God would turn this nation back around?

How much have you prayed that God would use you to bring them to church where they would hear the good news and be saved? God doesn't have an ego that is intolerant of our questions.

Like Habakkuk, the answer might not come right away, but it will come. However, it might not be the answer that you expect.

[27 : 08] And so next we see that God had a strange answer for Habakkuk. Habakkuk. The Lord answers Habakkuk's serious questions. He receives his complaints and his concerns and in doing so proves that he does care.

Habakkuk was or had been persistent. But it's not as if God has been putting off his answer because he's annoyed with Habakkuk. It's not like that person who maybe calls you and you send them right to your voicemail because you just don't have time in the moment to speak with them or maybe it's something else.

That's not the case here. God's timing is perfect. And everything that God does happens for a reason. Sometimes we may perceive that as a delayed response when really it's just him preparing us.

Him helping us understand how desperately we need him. Him humbling us and helping us to gain a proper perspective of who he is and who we are.

And you know, God doesn't play mind games with us in this way. God, I remember when I was very early on starting to date my wife in college, I told her that I would call her the next day.

[28 : 33] But I didn't call her. And that was intentional. Because I thought I was being smart. You know, I didn't want to seem desperate and I wanted her to want me more.

And so I did call her the next day and I picked her up and one of the first things she said to me is, why didn't you call me yesterday? And you know, I came up with some excuse. I can't even

remember.

I probably just muttered something on my tongue. And she said, don't do that anymore. And I haven't. I haven't.

God doesn't play games with us like that. Okay? He's not playing games with us. He doesn't need to do that. He gives an answer in his timing.

And he gave an answer to Habakkuk in verse 5. And the Lord answers him with three imperatives. Look, see, and be astounded. God's response to the concerns and complaints will be surprising to the prophet Habakkuk.

[29 : 37] If Habakkuk thought that he and his people were going to be given relief from their distress right away, he was wrong. Verses 5 and 6 again.

God says to him, Look among the nations and see. Wander and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to sieve dwellings not their own. God says, I've put up with the sins of my people for a very, very, very long time. And my patience has worn out.

At this point, there will be no revival. There will be judgment. And it will come from the Chaldeans, the Babylonians.

They would be the switch that God would use to discipline his children. In verses 7 through 11, God describes the Babylonians as dreaded and fearsome.

[30 : 44] Their armies advance at breakneck speed. Their cavalry moves at the speed of a leopard who is overcoming its prey. They are like a pack of hungry wolves with the scent of blood in the air.

And they move with the swiftness and grace of an eagle in verse 8. Verse 9, he says, they are merciless. Verse 10, he says, and they mock any power that thinks that they can stand a chance against them.

They are like a tornado in verse 11 that sweeps through the land, unleashing complete and total devastation in its wake on the inhabitants of that land. And so I think that at this point, Habakkuk hears that answer and his jaw must have been on the floor.

Not only is rescue not coming, the opposite is going to happen. God is going to use evil to punish evil.

God is going to use evil to punish evil. And now we are perplexed. We hear that and maybe we think that God needs a cognitive examination.

[31 : 55] How can that be? That can't be right. But as we go along in this book, we'll hear Habakkuk say that very thing. God, this doesn't make sense.

We have the benefit of being on the other side of the cross from Habakkuk.

When I was in seminary, I wrote a lot of papers. I'm still writing a lot of papers for my doctorate. But there's one of those papers that, I mean, I've forgotten most of them.

There's one that I remember well. I was assigned Galatians 4, 4 through 5. I want to read that passage to you. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.

And so my task, my assignment was to explain why it was the fullness of time when Christ came. And so that meant going back into the Old Testament, Old Testament history, and tracing all the things that God had done to prepare the world for the arrival of His Son, that the gospel would be spread far and wide.

[33 : 16] And so in doing that study, you learned about how the Assyrians and then the Babylonians took control over Israel and Judah and how they transported them from their homeland to these foreign nations.

And there, the Jews set up places, synagogues, where they read Scripture, where they worshiped the one true and living God. Later on, Alexander the Great came through, and he conquered much of the known world, and he established the Greek language as a common language that everyone or most people spoke.

Then the Romans came, and they created all of these roads and these highways that connected all of these cities and all of these places. And so by the time Jesus came, lived sinlessly, died sacrificially, and rose victoriously, and commissioned His disciples, go and spread the gospel, go and make disciples.

Well, guess what? The world was primed for it. And that's what happened. The gospel went. The gospel spread. The good news was heard in a common language that many people could speak and understand.

And we can trace the beginnings of that, well, all the way back to Genesis, but, you know, we can see it here in Habakkuk, that though this was happening, it was going to happen for a reason that would accomplish a greater, greater good.

[34 : 42] So here's the main point of application for this morning's sermon. When things don't seem to make sense, trust God anyway.

When things don't seem to make sense, trust God anyway. Now, the ultimate example of this is the cross of Jesus Christ.

The cross reminds us that when things don't seem to make sense, trust God anyway. Returning to the series of questions the disciples had asked of Jesus, how could the death of God's only Son accomplish anything good for anyone?

That was before the cross. That was before the resurrection. Now in Acts chapter 2, Jesus has risen. Jesus has ascended. Jesus has commissioned them to go and share the good news of Jesus Christ.

And here we see, again, how God can use an evil thing to accomplish a greater good. In Acts chapter 2, verse 23 and verses 36 through 37, Peter is preaching.

[35 : 57] This is the day of Pentecost. The church is about to be born. This Jesus, he tells to the Jews who have gathered, delivered up, listen, according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

And he continues, Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and they said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, brothers, what shall we do?

God's will was to use evil men to crucify his sinless sons for the sins that we have committed.

That through his death, we are forgiven of our sins. And that as a result of his resurrection, we too will live forever in him by faith.

And so we look at the cross and we understand that God's ways are mysterious. Sometimes in the moment, they don't seem to make sense. And we will wrestle in those moments with God.

[37 : 11] We will grapple in those moments. We will lament. But ultimately, the cross reminds us that God is sovereign. God is in control.

And a day is coming. A day is coming when we will be with him in heaven. And it will all make sense. Revelation 21 verse 4.

This is a good one to memorize. Highlight in your Bible and read a lot. Speaking of Jesus and us being with him in heaven. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

And death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. For the former things have passed away. It's all over.

That is the end. He is moving you towards brother. That is the end that he is moving you towards sister. Habakkuk didn't know it at the time.

[38 : 13] But God will continue to hear his questions. And God will continue to give him answers. And in the end, when we get to the end of Habakkuk's prophecy, the end of his book, he understands.

And I love these words. These are other great words to highlight, memorize. Habakkuk 3, 17 through 19. Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines.

The produce of the olive fail, and the fields yield no fruit. The flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls. He's saying, even if everything that can go bad goes bad.

Verse 18, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. And I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God the Lord is my strength.

He makes my feet like the deers. He makes me tread on my high places. I don't know if you resonate with Habakkuk today.

[39 : 20] I'm sure many of us, if not all of us do. Take heart, friend. God is sovereign. God is in control. God is faithful. God knows you.

He sees you. He hears you. He loves you. And he's going to work all things together in the end for the good. Three application questions for you to look at today, discuss in your community groups tonight.

Number one, what was Habakkuk's emotional state when he asked God how long? Have you ever asked God how long? What was the issue for you?

Question two, have you ever been frustrated with God's timing? Read 2 Peter 3, 9. How are God's timing and his patience related?

And then finally, have you ever received an answer from God that you did not like? Read Romans 8, 28.

[40 : 24] What hope does this verse give us when we face difficult circumstances in life? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we read the questions that Habakkuk asked you long ago.

And I'm sure for many of us, if not all of us, Lord, we can look around and see the same things that Habakkuk saw back then. A society that is immoral and corrupt.

But everywhere we turn to, Lord, we see the depravity of sin, the ruin that it has left in the wake of so many people's lives. And God, we wonder why.

And Lord, we can grow impatient with our questions and with our frustrations. And sometimes, Father, that takes our eyes off of what we know to be true, that the end has already been written.

And that there is hope for us no matter what we are going through in this life. And so, Lord, I pray that your word today would be an encouragement to us.

[41 : 32] That, God, we would know that you are a God whom we can ask our difficult questions of. That, Lord, this is a place where we can ask those questions as well. And that, Father, we know that an answer will be coming, though it may not be what we expect.

That you are a God who has proven over and over and over again that you are faithful. And we can trust you. And so, Lord, may we live our lives faithfully trusting you.

That you would be glorified in us. Because we know, God, that you do work all things together for the good. And all we have to do is look at the cross to be reminded of that wonderful and glorious truth.

Father, we ask and we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.