

# Questioning God

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[ 0 : 00 ] We're going to start tonight with a question about questions.

Have any of you asked God or have thought about asking God questions like these?! Maybe you wanted to ask Him, why don't you hear me cry for help? Or why do you make me see so much violence?

Or why do I have to see so much sin? Or maybe even, why do you God seemingly ignore all of that sin? And these questions may sound like they apply to our society today, and they do, but if you've glanced ahead at tonight's text, you likely have noticed that those questions paraphrase questions that Habakkuk the prophet asked in verses 1 through 4 of chapter 1.

So let's go ahead and read those verses, and then we'll break those verses down into three sections. Starting with verse 1, it says, The first thing that says, The first thing we're going to see tonight is the prophecy's context.

So the prophecy's context is your first fill-in. And we see that context from verse 1. So here is verse 1 again.

[ 1 : 46 ] It simply says, The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. Let's talk a little bit about who Habakkuk was. The verse doesn't tell much about him except that he was a prophet.

And the lack of a thorough introduction means that we know a little about Habakkuk, but the brief introduction likely also means that Habakkuk's readers knew him well. Habakkuk felt that he needed no introduction.

He didn't really have to tell them who he was because they already knew. And we do the same thing today, because when we write letters or send emails today, we'll follow a similar pattern.

If Tom sends an email to James, he's likely going to skip a lengthy introduction about who he is because James already knows him. But if Tom sends an email to someone he's never met, he's going to spend some time explaining who he is.

And that way, the recipient is more likely to be interested in paying attention to what he has to say. The name Habakkuk is interesting. It means embrace, especially as a means of keeping warm when there is no other shelter.

[ 2 : 55 ] Some translations even refer to it as hug. And so as we go through the book, we'll see that Habakkuk's name fits because he clings to God when he sees no other alternative.

Think about what it must have been like for a prophet of God at that time. In the world, new powers were emerging, and nationally, the rulers were turning their backs on God, and the situation was very chaotic.

Here's how one commentator explained it. He said, Catastrophic events of the last decades of the 7th century B.C. and the first decades of the 6th century B.C.

left many people reeling and disillusioned. It was an agitated time, characterized by rapid political change, international turmoil, bloody military encounters, and a growing rebellion against the demands of the covenant by the great majority in Judah.

Prophetic activity was feverish, not only with the ministries of people like Jeremiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Huldah, and Ezekiel, but also with false prophets in abundance.

[ 4 : 04 ] Think about how much that description applies to our society today. Here are some of those key phrases again. He mentioned that many people were reeling and disillusioned, that it was an agitated time, that there was rapid political change, international turmoil, bloody military encounters, and growing rebellion against God's demands, and also there were false prophets in abundance.

But rehashing that quote again, I skipped over the good parts. The summary does have some good parts because it notes that God sent the people in Judah true prophets, including Jeremiah,

Nahum, Zephaniah, Huldah, Ezekiel, and also this prophecy from Habakkuk.

We have those same prophets from the Old Testament, but we have even more. We have the completed word of God in the combination of the Old and New Testaments. We need to notice at least one more thing from verse 1, and verse 1 describes Habakkuk's prophecy as an oracle.

The word translated oracle there literally means burden. Those of you with translations like the King James and New King James actually see it rendered as burden there.

And as we go through the prophecy, we'll see why the prophecy was such a burden to Habakkuk. So the oracle that was revealed to the prophet Habakkuk in a vision must be communicated to God's people in Judah.

[ 5 : 30 ] And God tells Habakkuk to write down what he is told. And he'll tell them that the Babylonians will destroy them. And you can see why that would be a heavy burden to deliver.

We have yet to talk about when the book was actually written, and we'll cover that when we get into verse 2, because verse 2 gives us some important clues about the timing. So that brings us to the second section of today's text.

In verses 2 and 3, we see the persistent complaining. So persistent complaining is what we see next. In verses 2 and 3, Habakkuk asks God four questions.

And we get the sense that Habakkuk has asked these questions many, many times. And we see those questions in verse 2 and the first half of verse 3. So here are verse 2 and that first half of verse 3 again.

Habakkuk says, So before we look at Habakkuk's questions, here's another question for you to think about.

[ 6 : 44 ] Is it okay to ask God questions? And we'll talk through that in just a second here.

Habakkuk and other verses in Scripture do show us that the answer is yes, but there's a caveat there, and that is if we ask those questions with the proper motives.

Listen to how R.C. Sproul described the issue of questioning God. He said, This type of questioning is usually disingenuous, coming from people who have already decided that there is no acceptable answer.

Such questioning is also arrogant, making the response of faith contingent upon whether or not the questioner finds the answer satisfactory. But then he goes on and says, On the other hand, it is possible to ask questions of the Lord in a manner that is not sinful.

The psalmist and Habakkuk exemplify this manner of questioning the Lord. But he also adds, Still, let us be careful when asking questions of God, for we can easily fall into questioning Him sinfully. Then he says, They ask their question, How long, O Lord, in faith? They know His righteous judgment is coming because they trust His holy character, but they are curious as to why His wrath is, from their viewpoint at least, delayed.

[ 8 : 13 ] So the Bible has examples that show the incorrect way and the correct way to ask God question. And we're going to take just a minute here to look at two examples, and both of them are in Luke 1.

You probably already know where I'm going with these examples. But we'll look at these two examples and see the difference. Both situations involve how people receive God's word as delivered by the angel Gabriel.

And the first is when Gabriel told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a son in their old age.

We know that son became John the Baptist. And so as we look at some verses in Luke 1, remember that Zechariah was doing his priestly duty in the temple when Gabriel appeared to him.

The first verses we're going to look at in Luke 1 are verses 11 through 13. And in those verses it says, Skip down now to verses 18 through 20 to see Zechariah's response and what happens next.

Picking up with verse 18, it says, And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.

[ 9 : 41 ] And the angel said to him, I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.

You see there that Gabriel clearly states the reason why Zechariah was temporarily made deaf and mute. Look at verse 20 again. Gabriel said, You will be silent and unable to speak, because you did not believe my words.

Now let's look at the encounter with Gabriel and Mary. And that starts in verse 26 of Luke 1. There Gabriel foretells the birth of Jesus, and we're going to pick up the conversation between Gabriel and Mary in verse 30.

And we'll read through verse 38. And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

[11:00] And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth, in her old age, has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.

For nothing will be impossible with God. And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.

So do you see the difference with Mary's attitude compared to Zacharias? Mary wanted to know how she could have the baby, but when Gabriel told her, her response was, I am God's servant, let it happen.

That's essentially the way you can paraphrase that. So she showed faith in God's word. When Zacharias questioned Gabriel, he essentially said in verse 18, Prove it.

[12:04] And so there's a big difference there. And you see the difference that questioning God in faith makes. As we get into tonight's text in Habakkuk, we'll see additional evidence that Habakkuk clearly expected God to act.

The first two questions that Habakkuk asked in tonight's text are, How long questions? The third and fourth questions he asked are, Why questions? So look at the first question.

He says, How long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? We can tell from looking at that sentence that the question must have been bothering Habakkuk for a while.

The question is a legitimate question, but it's also a complaint. But if you look at the question, you can tell that the question itself is proving that Habakkuk expects God to answer.

The hope that the Lord will eventually respond makes the prophet keep on asking. The prophet just wants to know how much longer he has to cry for help before, in his mind, the Lord is going to stop ignoring him.

[13:10] And here's how one commentator describes the first question. He said, The tension of unanswered prayer sets the tone for the entire book. Habakkuk here faces the dilemma that has confronted faithful people in every age, the dilemma of seemingly unanswered prayer for the healing of society.

The prophet is one with all those persons who fervently pray for peace in our world and who only experience war, who pray for God's good to come on earth and who only find human evil.

But he is also one with every soul who has prayed for healing beside a sickbed only to be confronted with death, with every spouse who has prayed for love to come into a home and then only found hatred and anger, and with every anxious person who has prayed for serenity, but has then been further disturbed and agitated.

Habakkuk's problem came about because of what he knew about the Lord rather than because of what he did not know. So think about that quote for a second. Habakkuk's problem came about because of what he knew about the Lord rather than what he did not know.

We'll see evidence later on in Habakkuk that Habakkuk clearly knew how God described himself to Moses. Listen to how God described himself to Moses in Exodus 34, verses 6 and 7.

[14:32] It says there, The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiven iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.

So look at the first question in verse 2 again of Habakkuk 1. Habakkuk says, Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Habakkuk is trying to reconcile what he knows about God

with what he is experiencing at that point in his own life.

In the Old Testament, hearing, like most mental functions, implied more than simple hearing. It meant to hear and to respond. God had heard Habakkuk's cry, but he hadn't responded to the prophet's questioning complaint.

Habakkuk knows God has heard him, and his first questioning complaint can be summarized as, How long must I wait for you to do something? And like we said before, the very sense of the question implies that Habakkuk expected that God would answer at some point in the future.

Let's look at the second question now. That question is, How long shall I cry to you violence and you will not save? We can't see it here from the ESV translation that I'm using tonight, but here Habakkuk used a different but similar verb meaning to cry.

[16:09] The second verb means to cry out in distress or horror. So the prophet called out to God about the violence in the land because the wicked oppressed the righteous and God seemed not to care about that.

Violence there is a word that relates to the continual oppression of the wicked and the brutality and the assaults of those who deliberately injure or murder their neighbors.

And it can also describe in a more general sense transgressions of the moral law and it can mean ethical wrong as well. It occurs six times in Habakkuk, which is more than in any other Old Testament book except for Psalms and Proverbs.

And it's specifically mentioned as the sin that brought about the flood in Genesis 6, 11 through 13.

The Lord, though, to Habakkuk remains unmoved, or at least it appears he's unmoved by the prophets' prayers and protestations because Habakkuk says, you do not save.

And God neither restrains the evil nor destroys the wicked. God often delays his servants and causes them to cry out, when will the Holy One notice and take action?

[17:24] So let's pause here and reemphasize something we discussed earlier. Prayers questioning God are appropriate as long as they're offered in a context of trust.

Habakkuk's complaints come from a spirit of obedient submission and love. It's because of a zeal for God's glory that he implores God to reveal himself through acts of justice and judgment.

He's not charging God here with wrongdoing and he's not uttering prayers of impatience. On the contrary, he's pleading with God to save the righteous and punish the wicked. So he is asking God how long he wants to bear with the wickedness of the people and that's really the main reason behind his remarks.

Habakkuk knows God's character as God revealed it to Moses and so Habakkuk knows that similar misbehavior brought about the flood in Noah's day and those things make Habakkuk wonder when God is going to act again.

But Habakkuk does still have his faith that God will act. Habakkuk's complaints here also give us some clues about the time when Habakkuk was complaining.

[18:32] Because God later revealed to Habakkuk the coming power of Babylon and its control of Judah, the latest possible date would have to be the battle of Karshemesh of approximately 605 B.C.

After that battle every discerning person would know that the balance of power had shifted in the Near East. Babylon and not Egypt or Assyria would dictate the future of states like Judah.

And the earliest possible date for Habakkuk's outcry appears to have been the death of Josiah in 609 B.C. You'll remember that before his untimely death Josiah led the nation to a time of reform. He removed the places of idolatrous worship and he concentrated worship in Jerusalem and that apparently satisfied the teaching of the book of Deuteronomy. And in the appraisal of the writer of the king's material Josiah reigned as a good king because of his attempts at reformation.

So we know then that the book must have originated between 609 and 605 B.C. probably earlier rather than later during that time period. Jeremiah also knew Jehoiakim who came to the throne in 609 B.C.

[19:48] as a ruthless and merciless ruler. He cut up the scroll Jeremiah prepared and threatened the lives of Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch. And the background of Jehoiakim's reign supports the anguish of Habakkuk.

Of all of Judah's evil kings only Jehoiakim is said to have killed a prophet. Manasseh had shed much innocent blood but only Jehoiakim had a prophet killed and that is the only one that's specifically named in the Old Testament at least.

So it's no wonder that Habakkuk cried violence and wondered when God would act on behalf of his people. The third and fourth questions come in the first half of verse 3.

Look at the portion of that verse again. He says, Why do you make me see iniquity and why do you idly look at wrong? The prophet here addresses six problems of corruption in Judah in matched pairs.

And we see the first pair in these questions. Iniquity and wrong are two sides of the same coin. The sin and injustice of the perpetrator and the wrong suffered are two parts of the same human problem.

[ 21 : 00 ] So why doesn't God intervene in this life denying dynamic? You notice that Habakkuk says, Why do you idly look? And it has the sense there that God is just standing by and watching it happen.

And the question, Why do you make me see iniquity? Implies that God's inactivity had allowed wicked people to dominate Judah. Such wickedness had come upon the whole land, including the prophet himself.

When you think about it, the prophet is boldly blaming God for the problems in his situation because he says, Why do you make me see? And that means not to just look at the troubles of other people, but to experience trouble himself.

So the sentence really could be phrased, Why do you make me meet with such trouble? And why do you make me receive trouble like this? Or even, Why do you bring such trouble upon me?

So we need to get the sense here of how distraught Habakkuk really is. The fourth question is Habakkuk's boldest so far. That's where he says, Why do you idly look at wrong?

[ 22 : 08 ] And we've already touched on how idly looked has the sense of God standing by and watching. Habakkuk is implying that the Lord is watching without taking any action to put things right.

And this last complaint and the other three give you a sense of why we've grouped Habakkuk's questions under the persistent complaining heading. So we've looked at the prophetic context and the persistent complaining.

The last thing we'll look at tonight will be the perverted conditions. The perverted conditions. And the term perverted comes straight from the text.

Listen to the end of verse 3 and all of verse 4 again. Habakkuk writes, Destruction and violence are before me. Strife and contention arise.

So the law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous so justice goes forth perverted. When we look at the first part of verse 3 we discussed how Habakkuk groups things in three pairs in this verse and we see the last two pairs in this section.

[ 23 : 14 ] We'll do a general overview and then we'll dig a little deeper. The next pair that he talks about are destruction and violence. We know that destruction and violence wreak havoc on communities infrastructures and relationships.

And the last pair of problems are strife and conflict and these are legal terms in Hebrew. Habakkuk says they abound indicating that there are many lawsuits and legal quarrels in Judah's courts.

We wouldn't know anything about a society that has a lot of lawsuits today would we? Anyway, Habakkuk is saying that Judean society is in chaos the law is numbed and justice does not go out. Instead, the wicked surround the righteous and justice is perverted. So you get a sense of why the prophet complained when he saw such a sorry state of comparison and with the breakdown of the social order the nation lacked the necessities to really stay in existence for long because when law is paralyzed and justice is perverted the righteous become the pawns of the wicked.

Some interpreters have identified the wicked with Babylon but most modern scholars see the wicked as the inhabitants of Judah themselves probably during the reign of Jehoakim.

[ 24 : 38 ] So there's nothing in this passage that points to a foreign nation. What he's really saying most likely is that my own people are doing this to themselves. So let's talk a little bit more about each of the conditions we see.

Destruction which could also be translated plundering describes the open robbery and oppression of the poor by those in authority whose job it really is to defend the weak and the hopeless.

The word possibly also refers to a more general devastation and such destruction is carried on before the astonished and sorrowful gaze of Habakkuk. destruction emphasizes the physical havoc that results from a ferocious assault while violence the same word that we talked about in verse 2

focuses on the action itself.

Society around Habakkuk was tearing itself apart. Rather than living in harmony by following the standards of God's revealed will people were acting on the basis of their own ideas of what should prevail.

Not only that but there are angry disputes which Habakkuk calls strife among men who abuse the law and there are also endless quarrels and contentions.

[ 25 : 54 ] We see that in the ESV as conflict and those are caused by wrongdoing. Everyone is arguing and doing whatever they please. So let's move into verse 4 now and talk about what Habakkuk means when he says that the law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth.

The law could refer to any form of authority of teaching but it almost invariably refers to God's law by which he reveals his will and directs the life of man.

The law can refer to a number of specific ideas such as the Ten Commandments the law of Moses or other specific sets of law material but the most natural meaning here is the instruction of God without reference to specific passages of scripture.

In the Old Testament justice and righteousness go together. Righteousness meant that a person met the demands of a relationship. Righteousness toward God meant meeting the demands of that relationship with God where righteousness toward a fellow human being meant that it carried the righteousness into the legal sphere to meet the demand.

So justice carried that righteousness into the legal sphere as well and the prophets demanded righteousness in the gate where justice was dispensed. Habakkuk says that God's instructions had been violated.

[ 27 : 16 ] He complained to God that he dwelt in the midst of a people without moral restraints or abiding values. That also sounds fairly familiar with what we're facing today. He complained that he dwelt among people without moral restraint or abiding values.

And Habakkuk described God's law as paralyzed and the original Hebrew word could also mean numbed or ineffective. So the law is meant to be the soul and the heart of political religious and domestic life but the corruption of Israel's civil and religious leaders and the profanity and wickedness of the common man paralyzed the law.

Through misuse and neglect it became numbed and powerless so it was a dead letter that lacked authority and credibility. Habakkuk's describing a situation where justice never prevails.

It's withheld and suppressed by the enforcers of the law who neither protect the innocent nor condemn the guilty. He's saying that evil men rule as they see fit and the government disowns its responsibilities to maintain order in a fair and upright manner.

Virtue stands unrewarded and vice is never punished. So let's look at the last phrase of tonight's text now. He says at the end of verse 4, for the wicked surround the righteous so justice goes forth perverted.

[ 28 : 47 ] The few who actually dare to uphold the law who he describes as the righteous are shut in and outnumbered by violent men, the ones he calls the wicked.

The word surround has a stronger meaning than his first appearance from the text. It carries the connotation of surrounding to oppressed, to threaten, or to bribe.

So, you know, those of you in the room here surround Ted and James and Yolanda and Elsa at the table, but they're not being threatened to be oppressed or bribe.

That's a different type of surround that we have. So, does Habakkuk's description of Judah sound here like a description of another nation today?

So, when the tribunal of justice stands firm, the national character is never fatally affected by acts of evil. But when the tribunal sides with the oppressor, all hope of reformation from within is lost and judgment has to come from outside.

[ 29 : 52 ] So, as we come to the end of tonight's text, Habakkuk's prayers had not been answered, but he kept on coming to God because he knew that the answer to what was happening in his day could only come from God.

Similarly, today, many aspects of the existence of evil in the universe have not been made clear to us. We don't yet fully understand how God is working, and even the saints in glory are presented as asking how long it will be until God acts in judgment.

Listen to Revelation 6, verses 9 and 10. These verses show the saints in glory asking God a similar how long question. Here are 6, 9, and 10 of Revelation.

It says, When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?

We don't know how long God is going to wait to set things right, but faith doesn't let go of the fact that God is in control and that he will intervene. We have every reason to present to him our questions, but we need to wait for him to act whenever he sovereignly believes the time is right.

[ 31 : 19 ] to ask questions of God in faith means asking him with willingness to be content with his answer, even if it appears he's giving us no answer at all. To ask questions of the Lord in a faithless manner is to demand an answer or to find uncertain answers unacceptable.

So as we wrestle with God in prayer, let's be careful that we always come before him in faith, trusting his goodness and being willing to be content with whatever he gives us.

So here are some more questions for you. One is, does God have anything to say when society appears to be disintegrating? Does God have anything to say when society appears to be disintegrating?

Another question is, is there a message from God for a wicked age? And these are the same questions that Habakkuk asks. He's really asking, where is God and why is he not doing something yet?

And we know that the righteous in every age ask similar questions. One of the helpful lessons that we're going to learn from Habakkuk is that God does know what is happening.

[ 32 : 28 ] He's not oblivious to wickedness in high places. In his time and in his way, he's going to bring judgment on those who oppress the weak, just like he said he would. Despite what we've seen tonight and what we'll see for the next several verses, Habakkuk's prophecy is more than just gloom and doom.

And I want to give you a preview of what's to come as we get further into the book. Perhaps the verse from Habakkuk that's most often quoted is, the righteous shall live by his faith.

And that comes from the end of Habakkuk 2, verse 4. chapter 3. The real center of the book expresses God's ultimate purpose in the world that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

That comes from verse 14 of chapter 2. But the ultimate expression of Habakkuk's faith concludes the book. So listen to verses 17 through 19 of chapter 3.

So joy in the God of my salvation.

[ 33 : 45 ] God, the Lord, is my strength. He makes my feet like the deers. He makes me tread on my high places. So considering the verses we've studied tonight, you may be having a hard time believing that the writer of the verses we just read is the same person who wrote those first four verses we looked at tonight.

So before we leave tonight, let's consider what we can learn from those verses. First, when we have questions, we should take those questions directly to God.

When we have questions, we should take those questions directly to God. Habakkuk clearly was upset with God when he wrote down the words we looked at tonight. But rather than complain to others, he complained to God.

The second thing we can learn is that God has his own timetable. God has his own timetable. When we question God in faith, we also need to be content to wait on God to answer whenever he knows the time is right.

God has to be prepared. The last thing we can learn tonight is in difficult times, we should find reassurance in what we already know about God.

[ 35 : 01 ] So in difficult times, we should find reassurance in what we already know about God. Habakkuk knew how God described himself and Habakkuk knew that God had avenged similar wickedness in the past.

That provided Habakkuk with faith that God eventually would act to set things right. We'll end tonight by taking a page from Pastor Mike's book. Here are some application questions for us to consider as we go through the week.

So the first question is, in what sorts of situations do people of God ask why and how long? In what sorts of situations do the people of God ask why and how long?

And you see some cross-references there to several examples of those questions. The second thing to ponder is, has the coming of Christ relieved the tension expressed in such questions? So, has the coming of Christ relieved the tension expressed in such questions? The next question may be the easiest to think about, but I encourage you to look at the verses listed there and go a little deeper.

[ 36 : 11 ] That question is, should we expect to understand all that God is doing? Anybody willing to say yes to that question? Just making sure on that one.

So, should we expect to understand all that God is doing? And a very timely question for today is the last question. How do rulers affect the standards that prevail in a nation?

So, how do rulers affect the standards that prevail in a nation? A few minutes ago, we looked at a preview of how Habakkuk's attitude will change as we go through the book.

The transformation of Habakkuk's attitude is going to take a while, but we will see Habakkuk change from complaining to rejoicing. We've already seen the answer for how to make such a change ourselves, and the answer is as simple and sometimes as difficult as the last words of Habakkuk 2.4.

that is where Habakkuk wrote, the righteous shall live by his faith. Let's close in prayer. Father, we thank you for the reminder from Habakkuk that although we sometimes wonder whether you are paying attention and whether you are going to set things right, you are paying attention, you are true to your character, and you will resolve everything just as you said you would in your own time.

[ 37 : 38 ] Give us the faith and the patience to wait on you as we go through difficult times. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.