
Unanswered Prayer and the Problem of Evil in Habakkuk

DAVE BAST

You have probably had one of those, “It’s a small world,” experiences; like bumping into an acquaintance from back home when you are traveling in a distant land. Well, I have a similar feeling of recognition when I come to the book of Habakkuk. Here we are, among the twelve minor prophets of the Old Testament; it is sort of a strange place, really. There are a lot of books here that are not read very often, written by people with odd sounding names; and they are talking about problems and issues in a civilization that has been dead for twenty-five hundred years; and then, just as we are tempted to leave, we turn a corner and bump into somebody we know. We recognize this man, Habakkuk. He is asking the very same questions we ask: God, are You listening to me? God, why don’t You answer me? God, why did You do that? Why don’t You fix this? Does any of that sound familiar? Well, let’s spend some time with Habakkuk and see if he finds any answers to his questions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we are beginning today, Scott, a series of programs, actually, on a little book in the Old Testament, the prophecy of Habakkuk – just three chapters long - but a book that is amazingly contemporary in the issues and questions that it raises.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is tempting to skip over Obadiah, Haggai, Nahum; who thinks much about these books; and Habakkuk is a relatively short book – three chapters only – and so maybe we don’t go to it very often, but I think, as we will see in this series, not only does Habakkuk have some surprisingly familiar passages, which we will see more in the next program, even more vitally, he asks all the right questions, because he lived at a time of great foment and ferment in the ancient Near East. We think he lived... He lived in the southern kingdom, so you know, the kingdom split after Solomon died. There was a northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah, and Habakkuk lived near the end of the seventh century BC, at a time when the northern kingdom had already experienced a lot of loss, if not destruction, from Assyria; and the southern kingdom thought that was a preview of coming attractions: Here come the Assyrians; except then the Babylonians arose and got rid of the Assyrians; and so Habakkuk is prophesying during a time with a little bit of a lull, where the people are relaxing a little bit. The Assyrians are not coming our way. The Babylonians just wiped them out. So, Habakkuk kind of turns more inward.

DAVE BAST

Yes, Habakkuk is a remarkable prophet at a remarkable time. Incidentally, a little bit about the name, Habakkuk. We have chosen to say Ha-BAK-kuk – some people say HAB-a-kkuk – a prophet who was probably contemporary with Jeremiah – much better known – but prophesying just about at the end; as you pointed out, the history of the people of Israel kind of came to a series of stops, and the bigger kingdom, the northern kingdom, was completely wiped out by the Assyrians in, I think it was the year 722 BC; so

Habakkuk is after that, toward the end of this era when Judah was still functioning, but was going to be threatened by a new enemy rising on the world stage.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But in the meantime, and as we will see in this very program, God is going to give Habakkuk a preview of what really will be their coming attractions, and it is not going to be very pretty with the Babylonians; but for the moment, Habakkuk looks internally to Judah. So, we know Israel is gone; the judgments of God are real; but Habakkuk looks at his own people and he does not like what he sees. So, let's listen in to the very opening verses of what is often called Habakkuk's complaint to God, and here is how it goes starting Habakkuk 1:2:

How long, Lord, must I call for help but You do not listen, or cry out to You, "Violence!" but You do not save? ³Why do You make me look at injustice? Why do You tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me. There is strife and conflict abounds. ⁴Therefore, the law is paralyzed and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous so that justice is perverted.

That is Habakkuk's opening salvo.

DAVE BAST

Right; there are two basic questions here. The first one is a question I will bet we have all asked, and it is the question of unanswered prayer: Lord, how long must I call for help and You don't listen? Have you ever pleaded with God for something? You have asked Him; you have poured out your heart; and it just seemed like the heavens were brass; your words were bouncing up and rebounding right on your head, and nobody was listening.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Whistling in the dark, as some people criticize prayer; it is just as useless as whistling in the dark; and of course, we believers, we typically say: Oh, no, no, no. Prayer is not whistling in the dark. Prayer is my real conversation with God and God listens; but, as you said, Dave, there are times, if we are honest, that we join Habakkuk and say: You know, God, I have been praying about such and such for quite a long time, and You seem deaf to me. Of course, Habakkuk here is an heir of many of the psalms of lament in the book of Psalms, which frequently have the same problem: I pray and You are not listening. I keep calling and You are not picking up the phone, God. What gives? There are few painful things that believers can experience that are more painful than the idea that maybe God is not listening.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely. I don't know if you have ever thought like an atheist, but I know I have. There are hard questions for believers; hard questions of faith; and it seems like with every increasing advance in the world, believing in God becomes more difficult, you know; frankly, there are intellectual questions. There is the whole march of science that seems to have taken more and more away from the realm of faith when it comes to explaining the details of how the world works. In the world of the Bible, people did believe that God's hand was very direct. You know, the thunder was His voice, and all that. Now, no, thunder is caused by electrical discharges in storm clouds – that sort of thing; but with all those intellectual problems, I think the deepest problem for us as believers is the more personal and existential and relational problem of thinking that God really does not care.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I remember one of my teachers in seminary saying that in the ancient Near East and in ancient Israel intellectual atheism like we have today, or the atheism that says there is no God in existence anywhere – that was not as common as the atheism – the practical atheism that says there is no god here. The fool says in his heart, "There is no God," but what he means there in Psalm 14 is: There is no God *here*.

DAVE BAST

Yes, watching me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is not local.

DAVE BAST

He is not paying attention.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that, you know, was just as painful because if God is not with you – if God does not see you – then that is an extremely... that is a moment of great crisis for a person of faith; and that certainly is part of what Habakkuk is saying here: I have been crying out to You about our situation; why do You seem to be deaf to my cries?

DAVE BAST

Well, that situation is what we want to look at next because that raises Habakkuk's second question: God, why do You permit this to go on? Why do You allow this wrongdoing? And we will look at that in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and this, our first program of five on the prophecy of Habakkuk, often called one of the minor prophets – not minor in terms of importance, but because their books were shorter than the more major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and Habakkuk's book is very short – three chapters – and we are in Chapter 1 today; and Dave, we were just looking at Habakkuk's initial complaint to God from Chapter 1, which was: God, You are not listening to me; I am crying out to You and You are deaf to my cries. That is a great crisis for any believer to have the feeling God is not listening; although Habakkuk, like the psalms of lament, lodges his protest about God's not listening to him to God. So we say: Dear God, You are not listening; so we are still praying to God, which is what people of faith do; we keep at it.

DAVE BAST

Right; but now here comes his second question aimed at God: Why do You make me look at injustice? Why do You tolerate wrongdoing? God, why are You doing the things that You are doing? Or more importantly, why don't You stop what is going on in Your world if You are really God, if You are really in charge?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Don't just stand there, do something, God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right, exactly; and now, let's go back to the background a little bit because I think that is really important in understanding this; and if you are somewhat familiar with the history of the Old Testament, we have already located Habakkuk in the late 7th Century; that means to put it the other way around, around 610 – 620 BC – something like that – maybe 630 BC; and this was this period, as we have said, when the Assyrian power was suddenly done away with that had threatened Israel for so long; meanwhile, there is a new power on the horizon, but there is sort of a lull in between before the Babylonians are going to get around to paying attention to little Judah. It is also, in terms of Old Testament history, the time toward the end of the reign of Manasseh, who was the worst king in the history, probably of either kingdom, and ruled the longest period of time, over 50 years; so there is pagan sacrifice, child sacrifice going on even in the Temple in Jerusalem; just unbelievably terrible things; the preying upon the poor and the helpless. Things had just about hit rock bottom, as bad as they were in the society of the people of God, who at the same time, as we know from Jeremiah, are going on and on: Well, we've got the Temple – we've got religion. Everything is cool with us because as long as we keep that Temple here, God is not going to do anything to us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They treated God like a good luck charm; that as long as He was our talisman – as long as we had God in our hip pocket, it did not matter how bad we were at cheating people in our business; it does not matter if we trample on the poor; it does not matter if we ignore all the laws in Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy – all the Laws that God gave Israel to make them distinct among the nations. No, now Israel looked just like all the other nations; except they just kind of put the sticker of Yahweh – they put a smiley-faced god over the top of their evil and said: We are safe.

So, Habakkuk is a prophet who looks at this and knows it is wrong. He knows how Israel should live, and he cannot figure out why God is not doing something; and isn't that the perennial question, as we said at the opening, of the ages? How can God allow the holocaust? How can God allow fetal alcohol syndrome? How can God allow cancer? Right now, ISIS in the Middle East decapitating Christians and burning down churches – why doesn't God do something?

DAVE BAST

Yes; or as I put it once: Why doesn't God act more like God? I mean, what do we say about God? God is great – God is good. You learned it as a child in your Sunday school prayer, and we hang onto both those things. We believe that God is all powerful; He is the sovereign; He is the ruler of all; He is also pure grace and love and goodness. So, what would you do if you were God? If you had all the power in the universe – if you could simply snap your fingers and make something change... in fact, all you had to do was will something and it took place – all you had to do was say the word – so why do these things go on? Why this horrible suffering? Why do children get sick and die? That is the problem of evil. That is how theologically it has been expressed. That is what Habakkuk is wrestling with.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, the question of what is often called *theodicy*, which is the big theological word for reconciling God's ways to a broken world and wrestling with the age-old question that if God is all powerful, then He can do something, and if He is all good, He would, and so when He doesn't, why not? And let's just admit that we are not going to come up with any definitive answer on this program because no one ever has come up... I guess it would be a landmark program if we actually solved this, Dave, but we won't because it is a mystery; but, to go to your series of questions, I think that you start to realize... So, put the question: If you were God what would you do? If you could snap your fingers and cure cancer and blink your eyes twice and make all babies healthy and end all famine, you start to realize there is no end to the things that God would have to do, and at what point, then, does the world then stop being a world of freedom and of love, as God seems to want it to be, ideally, and become just hyper controlled, where every single thing that happens is a direct result of God's intervention? You know, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week on every continent in every country and county and household God would have to hyper-control everything to head off every single bad choice anybody could ever possibly make that would have more repercussions. He would have to stop every person from taking one too many drinks of wine and then beating up his wife, who then would miscarry a baby or...

DAVE BAST

Or getting behind the wheel of a car, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, where does it end? Now, that does not fully solve the problem either; but it indicates that the only way for God to do everything that we would like Him to do would mean He would have to do everything; and all of a sudden the nature of reality would be quite different from what I think even God wants it to be, which is a world where there is some freedom; but also, therefore, there is the possibility of true love.

DAVE BAST

I think of something Dorothy Sayers said a couple of generations ago now, the wonderful Christian writer and novelist: When we throw back at God, "Why didn't you stop that evil from happening?" God would have

to reply, “Well, if I stopped all evil, I would have to stop you; I would have to begin with you.” Why didn’t He wipe us out, first and foremost?

So, yes, there is something to that, and we want to dig more deeply into this, but the interesting thing is that God does respond to Habakkuk’s questions here in Chapter 1, and we are going to take up that response in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are continuing in this first program of a series on the prophet Habakkuk, in Chapter 1. Dave, we just saw that Habakkuk asked God: Why don’t You do something about the evil in our land? Why do You tolerate injustice? And God has an answer, and it is quite surprising.

DAVE BAST

Yes, here it is. This is what the Lord says in response to Habakkuk’s complaint and questions; so God speaks:

⁵Look 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. ⁶I am raising up the Babylonians; that ruthless and impetuous people who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own. ⁷They are a feared and dreaded people. They are a law to themselves; guilty people whose own strength is their god.

So, God says: Okay, yes, I agree. Things in Judah have gotten very bad. There is terrible injustice and wickedness. Here is what I am going to do about it: I am going to send the Babylonians and they are going to come and destroy you!

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Habakkuk says: Whaaat are you talking about, God? They are worse than we are! The Babylonians don’t even know You. How in the world, O God, can the Babylonians – that ruthless, evil people who... how can they be Your instrument? How could You use them? Why would You tolerate... he goes on in verses 12 and 13:

Lord, aren’t You 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? ¹³Your 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?

So, now Habakkuk is saying: Okay, we are not any moral glamour prize here in Judah, but we are better than them. So, here is one of the most surprising things anybody must ever have heard in the history of the Bible. Lord, can’t you fix Your broken people? And God says: Sure, I will. I will use the Babylonians to do it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is an amazing thing. You know, the Old Testament is so profound in so many ways, and one of the most interesting things that emerge from the Prophets is that God is sort of an equal opportunity offender. He will offend everybody’s sense of propriety and rightness. He will use wicked and evil things to accomplish His purpose in working ultimately salvation. I mean, that is the final story of the Bible that we cling to and believe – that ultimately in the end it is going to lead to salvation; not just for Israel, but for all the nations; for the whole world; but in the meantime... and I guess the supreme example of that in the New Testament is the cross, where Peter says: You meant it for evil, but it was done in the plan and purpose of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and if anybody thinks – and some of us, we do, all of us, I think, Dave, at one time or another, we can think somewhat simplistically about how God works and what God will do and how He will answer our prayers. We sometimes try to make very neat one-to-one correlations between what is happening in the world and what God is doing, and we think that we kind of have God cased; well, anybody who thinks that needs to read, indeed, these parts of the Old Testament, where God uses very surprising methods that nobody would have ever guessed to work out His larger plan. In fact, as we know, the Babylonians will come and they will deport Israel for a seventy-year or so captivity; but eventually they are going to be released; but before that happens, the Babylonians will get conquered by the Persians, and the leader of Persia at the time will be a man named Cyrus; and there is even this remarkable passage in the Bible where God says: Cyrus is My Messiah...

DAVE BAST

My anointed one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

My anointed one, and he will release you; so, now I am going to use this pagan guy named Cyrus to send you back to Israel...

DAVE BAST

Who also does not know Me, incidentally.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not at all! And He will send Nehemiah back to rebuild the walls, and Ezra and so forth. So God uses these surprising ways. Now, to loop back to the previous segment, Dave, where we were wrestling with the problem of evil: Why doesn't God do things about cancer and head off every war and stop every bank robber before they go into the bank? Why doesn't God do things? And we do not have any good answers. We know that we have to trust God to have a greater wisdom than we do, and here, right in Habakkuk, here is a great test of trust. Can you trust Me, Habakkuk, that I know what I am doing, even though I am doing this utterly surprising thing of punishing My people through a people even worse than you; but in the long run, this is all going to lead to where I want it to go. It is going to lead to the cross of Jesus Christ, we ultimately believe, now, as Christians. So, to think that we have God cased – to think that there are easy answers to this, or that we could always know just what God is up to, this sort of give the lie to that simplistic thinking. It says: You have no idea what God is working through right now, which might be an utterly surprising method, to get His accomplishments done.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, I think one of the easy answers that people sometimes give, and it has sort of been increasingly popular in our day because there is a recoil on the part of many against the idea of God ever possibly being connected with nasty things or permitting these terrible things to happen. We fall all over ourselves to try to protect God's reputation, as though that were our job; and so, a lot of people have suggested: Well, God cannot help it. God suffers with us. I call it the weak God theory. He is doing the best He can, as one writer said. I have come to believe that we have to feel sympathy for God. He cannot manage this...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Like the Woody Allen line in the movie – the Woody Allen movie; he said: Oh, great. Now God is an underachiever. That is all we need.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; well, just listen to how Habakkuk describes Him here. He is the Holy One. He is my rock, Habakkuk says. He is of too pure eyes to behold iniquity. He is from of old. He is from everlasting. So, Habakkuk says all the things that we believe about God. God is great and God is good. Habakkuk affirms all

that. He refuses to give up the truth about God simply because his experience is really tough and he cannot figure out what God is possibly doing; so, I mean, in this he is a model for us, really. I think in this he shows us the way of faith, which is to hold onto both things: God, I don't understand You; I can't You figure out, but I still believe in You.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we want to save this for the end of our series, of course, but Habakkuk 3 – the book of Habakkuk – the prophecy of Habakkuk will end on one of the most lyric notes of scripture; and it will be exactly that. Even when I cannot figure out what You are up to, God, or why; even though I cannot see with my eyes or hear with my ears every single day, the whys and the wherefores of the universe, yet I am going to trust You because You are the Holy One. You are wiser than I am. You are more powerful than I can even fathom or imagine; so I am going to trust You. It is sort of where Job ends up at the end of the book of Job. God never really answers Job's questions, but Job just sort of gets this whirlwind tour of creation and says: Okay, I trust You.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the greatest thing here in Habakkuk 1, I think, is that Habakkuk asks all those questions *to* God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

To God.

DAVE BAST

Not *about* God; and it is all a prayer, and at the end he is still praying, and he is still hanging on and trusting; and you know, I think if we can do the same, ultimately we will end up all right.

So, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation today. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit us at groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into on Groundwork.

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