

O Lord, How Long?

Habakkuk 1:1-5

Any time that a speaker stands before you, you really want to know why you should listen. I'm guessing that this comes to your mind each time you hear a political speech or an educational lecture. But there is a little different dynamic for God's people hearing God's Word. A wise speaker will help his hearers, understand the "so what" (relevance) of God's message. But the Scriptures show us that for God's people, it is enough that it is God's Word. That is, even if they don't immediately recognize the practical value of what is preached or taught, they still pay attention. This matter of "getting attention," is interesting. If you take a course in public speaking, you will undoubtedly study what has been called "the motivated sequence." This sequence is designed to help people pay attention to your speech in order to persuade them. And is it any surprise that in standard public speaking theory, the first step is called "the Attention Step?" If you wanted to deliver a speech, how would you go about getting people to pay attention to your message? Let's try to put this in more dramatic terms. How would you go about beginning a message with the greatest possible urgency? I'm not speaking of mere urgency, but of the greatest possible urgency. How would you do that?

As preachers, we are conscious of the fact that we often begin messages with urgent questions or statements. Why is this? Is it merely because that is "good public speaking theory?" No. There is a much better reason for that dramatic urgency. God's Word wisely addresses questions that are foundational to life and reality. And as you well know, God's answers run "cross grain" to much of this earthly life. Heaven answers the hostility of sinful mankind in the most dramatic

possible terms. This is not sensational or idle talk. Men's eternal destinies are at stake. There is the great danger of "the second death" in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). There is the greatest need for men to "repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," as Jesus preached (Matt. 3:15).

So, let's return to that question. How would you deliver a message with the greatest possible urgency? Which words would you use? Which questions would you try to address? In the Book of Habakkuk, we have a superb example of how to go about this. And this is not just because it is "good speaking theory" or "best practices." No, the questions raised here were piercing, poignant and profound. And God's answer in this book runs much deeper than man's deepest questions! The editors of the MacArthur Study Bible put it this way: *"The queries of the prophet [Habakkuk] represent some of the most fundamental questions in all of life, with the answers providing crucial foundation stones on which to build a proper understanding of God character and His sovereign ways in history . . . [New Testament] references ascribe unusual importance theologically to Habakkuk."*

And yet, we must begin this study of Habakkuk with a riddle of sorts. "When is the writing of a prophet not a prophecy?" Prophecy can be designed as "foretelling" the truth (predicting) or it can be "telling forth" the truth (preaching). This book is neither, so what is it?

The Name "Habakkuk"

The name "Habakkuk" means "one who embraces." This book will appeal for you and me to employ greater faith – embracing God more fully. When you consider the wickedness around

us and its dangerous impact, you can see why we need to “**take hold of God**” (Isaiah 64:6-7). Habakkuk addressed the darkness in his culture and its impact on believers.

The Burden

This is “the burden” of Habakkuk. It is weighty; it is hard to carry. If you will look at the very last phrase in Habakkuk 3, you discover that it was given to “**To the chief singer on my stringed instruments.**” This is the kind of note that you would expect to find in the Psalms. Like many of the Psalms, this book includes both a “heavy burden” and a song to be sung to teach God’s people.

“How Long” and “Why”?

Habakkuk wastes no time with flowery introductions, but “cuts to the chase,” addressing the most important, fundamental questions on his heart. ²**O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save!** ³**Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention.** ⁴**Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.**

- How long will you have to ask the Lord to correct this situation and it will seem as if He will not hear you? As you can see, in verse 2, Habakkuk was especially burdened about the violence in his society. Does the violence in your society bother you? Even our games and sports have become violent. If you are not vexed – deeply troubled – by this violence, then you will have a hard time understanding the importance of Habakkuk.
 - Why hasn’t the Lord humbled the arrogant politicians of our day?

- How long will the Lord put up with murderous regimes – in Africa and the Middle East – where Christians are slaughtered like cattle?
- When you have prayed so fervently, why doesn’t the Lord turn around a marriage that it in trouble?
- How long will you have to endure the painful rebellion of a young man or woman?
- Why won’t the Lord bring an end to some old deviant’s long war against God?
- We are almost continually bombarded with news of more violence. Just the other day, the Orlando shooter killed or wounded more than one hundred human beings. The murderers in San Bernardino killed 14 people last December and injured 22 more. It’s hard to remember a local news broadcast that did not include news of a murder.
- Why does the Lord allow this iniquity, violence, grief, violence, strife and contention to occur right in front of your face?
 - All sorts of abominations are now “out of the closet.” Yes, these existed in past centuries and decades. But now it is as if all the restraints have been removed.
- What ever happened to our system of justice? The prophet Habakkuk posed that question and it still rings true today. Let’s read verse 4 again, and as we read it, ask yourself, “Is this a commentary on our own country?” ⁴**Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass**

about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.

- Recent Supreme Court decisions try to destroy the meaning of what it means to be a human being and re-define institutions such as marriage and family.
- The concept of law is being voided. The wicked surround the righteous. Sin is gathering a head of steam to take us into deeper darkness.

O Lord . . .

Remember the riddle posed earlier in the message? When is the writing of a prophet not a prophecy? This book is not about a message preached to God's people. Its emphasis is not on foretelling the future. So what is it? The first two words of verse 2 give you the answer: "O Lord." The Book of Habakkuk is a dialog with God – heartfelt prayers and God's responses to those prayers. But like the Book of Job, Habakkuk touches the most sensitive places of the heart.

- Habakkuk was invoking the truth of Deuteronomy 28: 15-29 where God promised to punish wickedness. The prophet wanted to know why God seems to stand idly by.

Alerts and Alarms

⁵ Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvelously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you.

Earlier in the message, we asked you a question. How would you go about beginning a message with the greatest possible urgency? What words of alarm would you use? How would you alert your hearers to the urgency of your message?

In verse 5, God began to respond to Habakkuk's prayer. He did so with four terms of alarm. Habakkuk's prayer was the prayer of one individual, but it expressed the heart cry of God's faithful people. His prayer was singular, but God's responses were plural. Each of the following alarms was sounded in the plural – as a command to the faithful remnant who were still trying to honor God. Each one of the following verbs communicates urgency. Brought together in one verse, they communicate the greatest possible urgency.

- LOOK ("Behold")
- SEE ("Regard")
- BE ASTONISHED ("Wonder")
- WONDER ("Marvel")

Why was this alarm sounded? What was it that God wanted to alert His people to? **"for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you."** Remember that we have learned that Habakkuk's prayer addressed fundamental human problems. These are serious questions that run very deep. Part of the alarm is that God's answers run even deeper. The message of this book is so astonishing that those who hear it will have a hard time believing it. Habakkuk will demonstrate this in his own response as the message of the book continues. How will you respond to God's commands for urgent attention? Think about the alarms you hear around you.

- Next Monday morning, July 4, you will probably hear the mournful wail of the tornado sirens. Though it is a holiday, it is also the normal day of the month to test the sirens in our county. These alarms get your attention. And on this Independence Day, they will seem to mourn our dwindling independence in this country.
- Sometime this summer, you will probably hear a TV or radio broadcast interrupted by a deep, grating buzzing sound. This sound will signify danger predicted by the

national weather service. It will indicate a line of severe thunderstorms or even tornadoes approaching. This sound will warn you to take cover.

- Perhaps you have been in a hospital room when a medical alarm was sounded. A nurse came rushing to the room where you were. Or perhaps you saw several nurses and doctors rushing down a hallway toward another patient. An alarm went out, and people responded.

The message of this book is so astonishing that those who hear it will have a hard time believing it. So before we close the message, let's see how this warning ought to be used today. Please turn with me to Acts chapter 13. Here we will learn how the Apostle Paul used the Book of Habakkuk. Look in verses 40-41: **⁴⁰ Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets; ⁴¹ Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you.**

Beginning in verse 14, we have a portion of the sermon Paul delivered in the synagogue in Antioch. After a brief review of the history of God's dealings with the Hebrews, Paul arrived at the central theme of His message: "**²³ Of this man's seed hath God according to his promise raised unto Israel a Savior, Jesus: ²⁴ When John had first preached before his coming the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵ And as John fulfilled his course, he said, Whom think ye that I am? I am not *he*. But, behold, there cometh one after me, whose shoes of his feet I am not worthy to loose.**"

ⁱ John MacArthur, et.al., The MacArthur Study Bible, Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997, pp. 1316-1317.

Habakkuk's message about violence and its victims is a foundational question. But notice what Paul preached at Antioch in verse 28: **²⁸ And though they found no cause of death in him, yet desired they Pilate that he should be slain.**

They found no reason, no cause to put Jesus to death. Two of the greatest justice systems in history could not come up with any evidence to answer the question: "What evil has He done?"ⁱⁱ But we know from the preaching of the apostles that Jesus was put to death for your sins and my sins. But God raised up Jesus again in the resurrection. By His finished work, He is the Author of our salvation. So Paul warned those in Antioch with the words of Habakkuk 1:5: **"Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets; . . ."** God Himself, in the Person of Jesus Christ, was the victim of violence. When He was upon earth, He undoubtedly prayed to His Father using the words of Habakkuk 1:1-4. But part of the astonishing wonder is that way back in the Book of Habakkuk, God was setting the stage for the coming of His Son. Even the coming Babylonian invasion and the destruction of Jerusalem would pave the way for the Messiah.

This is astonishing! So as you turn back to Habakkuk 1, think about those four alerts and how they relate to the Gospel. And today, if Habakkuk 1:1-4 really does express your deepest, heartfelt concerns, then wake up to the alarms of verse 5. Read this Book of Habakkuk carefully, knowing that it really does address your relevant concerns today.

Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio

ⁱⁱ Audio message: "What Evil Has He Done?"
<http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=35141925410>
