

Habakkuk 1:1-4 The Burden of Habakkuk

The hardest thing for me this week as I prepared was how to organize this book into sermons. As we discussed last week, this prophecy of Habakkuk is really one long prayer to God (which happens to be revealed as prophecy). It is one man, the prophet of God, pouring out his heart as he wrestles with the very same things we wrestle with in this world, the very same questions. And as his prayers continue, God answers. And though God's answers are often surprising, as he listens, his faith is strengthened; his knowledge of God and his plans are broadened, and all God's people profit from this revealed wisdom. With this in mind, we need this Book! We get to see through the eyes of Habakkuk; and we see through the eyes of God. I could preach this book in one sermon. But, there are so many truths we would miss. So, I don't know how the divisions will go, and even if they will be the best. But, we will benefit greatly from the truths and applications of this book.

So today, I would like to begin with what I see as the first part of Habakkuk's prayer to God from vv. 1-4. I will call it Habakkuk's burden. And we will find that we have the very same burdens. In verse 1, the ESV translation says, "**The ORACLE that Habakkuk the prophet saw.**" Simply speaking, the meaning is that God has given Habakkuk these words by revelation. However, this word in the Hebrew is often translated as "burden," which is where I get my title. After all, God does tell Habakkuk he will judge Judah with utter destruction through the ungodly Chaldeans (Babylonians). And this is a great burden to the prophet. But, as we will see, Habakkuk bears other burdens as well. I have 2 for today, which also apply to us: 1) God's people are burdened by sin and its effect this world; and 2) God's people are burdened with the unknown of God's answers.

1. God's people are burdened by sin and its effect on this world. Notice Habakkuk's prayer as he recognizes the sins that surrounded him. V. 2: "**O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, 'Violence!'**" Then in v. 3: "**Why do you make me SEE iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong. Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.**" And then in v. 4: "**So the law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.**" These verses are full of specific sins. And these descriptions are not just bad decisions or innocent mistakes; they are sins. Before moving to the specifics, we must ask, "*What is sin?*" Our catechism says, "*Any naughtiness against any of God's commands.*" What makes something sinful is essentially that which is contrary to God, that which violates his holy standard. Why do you think Habakkuk cries out to God? Because he knows FIRST, all sin is against GOD.

Quick Application: This is a difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. Christians know their sin is ultimately against God. The non-Christian, if they believe in sin, see it as a mistake or something committed against someone else. This is why true repentance begins with sin against GOD himself, and then moves to sin against our neighbor.

Brothers and sisters, sinful man's greatest burden is always sin against God. Since the fall of Adam and the imputation of that sin to us we are "by nature" sinners. Now, as Christians, we know that Christ took this burden upon his back, as this great burden was lifted from us. And we

are not condemned any longer. However, when we sin, what do we do? We repent? And repentance always begins with this: “*God, I have sinned against you.*” And we pray as Jesus tells us: “***forgive my sins as I forgive those who have sinned against me***” (Matt. 6). As Christians we know what it is to be forgiven. And because of this, we are also burdened with the sins of others, which brings us to back to my point.

Habakkuk was burdened with the sins of his people. Remember, Habakkuk prophesied in the 7th century B.C. The Northern Kingdom was defeated by Assyria in 722 B.C. They were carried away to captivity. And now, the Chaldeans are coming into power, as they assume control even over the Assyrians. And Judah, the Southern Kingdom will soon follow the same path in 587 B.C. And after the last good King, Josiah, died, followed by 4 bad kings, Habakkuk was right in the middle of this decline. And as he looked around, what did he see? He saw violence, injustice, wrongdoing, oppression, strife, and conflict. As a man of faith, he knew that Israel’s moral state was merely the result of disobedience to the law of God. And this was his great burden.

And he says to God in v. 3: “Why do you make me see iniquity?” This was the Spirit of God saying to him, “*Look around you. See the sins of my people.*” I must say this is always the burden of the prophets of the OT. And it is the same for God’s people today.

Applications:

Do we/you have the same burden? For yourself, do your own sins bother you? Or do you just brush them off, and move on without much thought? Husbands, when you sin against your wife in anger or lack of self-control, what goes on in your heart? Are you quick to repent and ask for forgiveness? Parents, when you do the very thing you teach your kids not to do, how do you feel? Are you quick to go to God and then to your kids in humility, asking forgiveness? What about all the sin you commit over and over again? Do you have a plank in your eye as you view all the sins of those around you? Listen to the words of King David from Ps. 51:1-4 as a good example for us. He says: “**Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.**”

Now, what about the general sins of our culture? Around us we see great immorality, greed, deception, hatred, injustice, hypocrisy, oppression, etc. From many of our political leaders to the culture at large, I feel we are seeing “moral madness.” It seems with every new law, there is something contrary to what God’s Word teaches. I must repeat what I said last week. The taking of innocent life through abortion and the approval of such in the world and the spending of tax dollars through spreading this ideology is sin. And it should be a burden. And concerning the changes in our thinking on gender, I am greatly burdened. No, I do not believe in discrimination . . . against any person, to discriminate is to sin. But, we are not discriminating when we remind the world that “God made them male and female.” When the large corporations get favors and breaks and the small one-shop owner has to close his/her doors without favors and breaks, I often question, “*where is the justice?*” When we see the violence, particularly in some of our bigger cities these days, and all the wrongs done, our burden is great.

But even deeper, do we have this same burden as we see the sins of the church? I know this gets a bit tricky, especially with all those who name the name of Christ in this country. And there are lots of those who attend Christian churches that would disagree with these applications. But, are we burdened for the sins of those who name Christ? I am reminded of the words of Paul to Timothy: “**But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.** Avoid such people. **For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.**” Let’s move on.

2. God’s people are burdened with the unknown of God’s answers.

While the prophet knows God is sovereign, his daily experience seems to say otherwise. Based upon what he knows about God, he is struggling to interpret or “fit” the realities of Judah’s sin into God’s plan for Israel. Our common Christian phrase “*God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life*” does not square with this oracle. And for us, Habakkuk’s experience becomes ours; it is the believer’s battle with deep questions of life, what I am calling the “unknown” of God’s answers. In our text, we have two questions.

i. How Long? Look again at v. 2: “**O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you Violence? And you will not save?**” This question implies that Habakkuk had long been crying out to God for an answer. “*How long God will you allow us to continue like this? How long will you tolerate our sins?*” No matter what we think of this passage, Habakkuk is asking for God to judge his people. And, as any good prophet, I certainly believe his first choice for Israel is repentance. But, since it has been so long without repentance, he is asking God to judge. He wants God’s judgment because he wants God’s people to be obedient to him; he wants them to live righteously; he wants them to receive the blessings of living under the Covenant of God. Remember, brothers and sisters, these are the times BEFORE the coming of the Messiah. Israel was God’s special chosen people among all the world. God had not shown himself to the other nations. Concerning Israel, the Apostle Paul reminds us in Rom. 9:4: “**They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.**”

Now, we see God’s answer beginning in vv. 5-6 (which we will deal with next week). It will be the Chaldeans, the Babylonians. But, as far as I can tell, God does not give the specific timeline. He doesn’t say on such a date in 597, or 587, Babylon will destroy Judah. We see this kind of prayer often in Scripture, with much the same kind of answer. In Ps. 13:1-2: David says, “**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?**” And in v. 3 of the same Psalm, David is concerned with his own life, saying, “**Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death . . .**” But, again, God does not appear to give the specifics or the details of how or when he will answer. What about Job? I am sure he often cries out: “**How**

long?” to both his critics and to God. In Job 19:7 we have almost the same words we see in Habakkuk: **“Behold, I cry out, ‘violence!’ But I am not answered; I call for help, but there is no justice.”**

Brothers and sisters, this is often our cry, which becomes our burden. And often they are cries about such an issue as “judgment.” We cry out, *“How long God, will you not judge this country?”* *“How long, God, will you wait to judge the earth?”* We often cry out like David, *“How long God, will the ungodly prosper and the godly be persecuted?”* Many will say *“How long God, will you not save my rebellious child; Or, my brother or sister or mother or father?”* Our burdens of prayer go on and on. You may say, *“How long God, will you let me, or one of my family members suffer with this disease?”* Or, *“How long God, will I be out of work?”* We even pray the most mundane of prayers, like *“How long God, must I wear a mask into the doctor’s office or into Target?”* (though I hope this one comes out much later than these other prayers.)

Application: Sometimes God answers with a timetable. For example, Paul prayed three times for God to heal him, but God said, **“My grace is sufficient”** (2 Cor. 12:9). And as far as we know, Paul lived with that physical ailment for his lifetime. But, usually, especially with the big questions, God does not give us the specifics on the timetable. (Now, hold on for a moment for some specific applications as we move on to Habakkuk’s next question.)

ii. Why? Habakkuk’s 2nd question is “Why?” Look at v. 3: **“Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?”** This question is not so much a logistical question as *“How long,”* but a question of motive. *“God, why do you choose to do things as you do?”* I imagine Habakkuk was thinking, *“God, it’s easy! Can’t you see how long and how deep is our immorality. Can’t you just cause a revival, do a miracle, or maybe just send a little bit of judgment upon us that we might see and turn from our sins and follow you again?”* But, as time goes on and God does not answer, the question becomes more complicated. And the reason it becomes more complicated is because Habakkuk knows God is righteous, holy, and good. And He knows God is powerful and can do great things if He so desires. So, why does He not desire to make things right? Why, God, do you let these things continue as long as you have? And this is a great burden for Habakkuk.

What about us? Do we have “Why” questions? Now, I think our “whys” could easily replace the “how longs” of our questions above. Because when we say, “how long,” what we are really asking is “why.” We really want to know the motives of God concerning “Why” he does not answer as we think he should. And this can be a great burden. Let me end this morning with some applications.

Application: The righteous will live by faith. God’s ways are not our ways. And, God does not usually answer as we desire, at least in the specifics. But he does answer the heart cry of faith. Look at Hab. 2:4: **“The righteous shall live by his faith.”** This is always the best answer from God! This is what separates the world from the church. And as long as we have FAITH, we overcome the world! And we are safe and secure! And we are able to commune with God, and this through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came to SECURE your faith.

forever and to unite you with Him, who is united with God the Father, and this through God the Holy Spirit!

Application: It is so important with what attitude we consider the “how longs” and “whys,” especially the “whys.” We must always realize, “*We are not God!*” Our questions and our prayers come from faith, faith in the living God to do what He sees is right.

Application: God hears your prayers. Even if he doesn’t answer the “how long” or the specific “why,” HE ANSWERS! So, continue to be honest and pour your heart to God, who will answer.

Application: As long as sin is in this world, God’s people will always yearn with our burden to see it finished. Look at v. 14 with God’s promise: “**for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.**” This is what we want. And if you do not have such a burden, maybe you are not a Christian; maybe you do not have the Spirit of God living within you. But if you do, know that this particular burden will not be removed from your heart until the earth is filled with the glory of God.

Application: Habakkuk’s prayer has been going on for a long time. God has not answered. The context is Judah’s long-standing sin against God. Sometimes God will keep us praying on a particular issue for a long time, or for some things, even for life. But, this is for our good!

In the end we must remember the examples of our Lord Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, “*Lord, let this cup pass from me.*” But, in the end, he trusted the will of God as he says, “*Nevertheless, thy will be done.*” And, on the cross he also says, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” Well, I believe Jesus knew both the “how long” and the “why.” Yet, he still cried out “Why.” And what followed was the judgment of God. And this judgment is the cause of our peace. God knows what He is doing!