

A Prayer for Justice

Bible Background • HABAKKUK 1

Printed Text • HABAKKUK 1:1-4, 12-14 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 73:1-3, 21-28

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLAIN the justice of God in contrast to human injustice, ASPIRE to the establishment of justice and fairness for all, and CELEBRATE God as the source and model of justice.

In Focus

Michael could hear the clock ticking on the wall. He waited in silence for the phone to ring. His foot kept tapping, he knew it was his nerves. When he stopped tapping his foot, he began to tap the pen on the table. Why haven't they called already? He thought to himself.

For Michael, waiting any longer was too long. He just had an interview after months of getting no response from any of the companies he applied to. The bills were piling up, and he began to wake up at night wondering how he was going to care for his wife and kids. He wondered if God even cared about his family. There was nothing left for Michael to do. He felt like he could not go on any longer without an answer from God. Michael thought for a moment about their situation. He knew that God was in control of it all. He also knew that God deserved to be praised before he even got a job. So Michael sang softly at first, "Trust and obey for there's no other way..." He felt his spirit raising with the song of praise and started shouting "Hallelujah!" and "Thank You, Jesus" as an act of faith in God's care. While he was shouting and praising God, the phone rang.

Sometimes things look impossible or as if they will not work out. Trusting God is often difficult for people to do. What do you do to praise God for what He has done, is doing, and will do?

Keep in Mind

"But you are pure and cannot stand the sight of evil. Will you wink at their treachery? Should you be silent while the wicked swallow up people more righteous than they?" (Habakkuk 1:13, NLT).

Words You Should Know

- A. Burden** massa' (Heb.) — A load, or that which is lifted up and carried.
- B. Spoiling** shod (Heb.) — Destruction and oppression of the weak; the wealth that one might obtain through destruction or oppression.

Say It Correctly

- A. Habakkuk. **HAB**-uh-kuhk.
- B. Chaldean. kal-**DEE**-uhn.
- C. Jehoiakim. juh-**HOY**-ah-kim.
- D. Jehoiakin. juh-**HOY**-ah-khin.

KJV

Habakkuk 1:1 The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see.
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.
12 Art thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die. O Lord, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction.
13 Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?
14 And makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them?

NLT

Habakkuk 1:1 This is the message that the prophet Habakkuk received in a vision.
2 How long, O Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen! “Violence is everywhere!” I cry, but you do not come to save.
3 Must I forever see these evil deeds? Why must I watch all this misery? Wherever I look, I see destruction and violence. I am surrounded by people who love to argue and fight.
4 The law has become paralyzed, and there is no justice in the courts. The wicked far outnumber the righteous, so that justice has become perverted.
12 O Lord my God, my Holy One, you who are eternal—surely you do not plan to wipe us out? O Lord, our Rock, you have sent these Babylonians to correct us, to punish us for our many sins.
13 But you are pure and cannot stand the sight of evil. Will you wink at their treachery? Should you be silent while the wicked swallow up people more righteous than they?
14 Are we only fish to be caught and killed? Are we only sea creatures that have no leader?

The People, Places, and Times

Habakkuk. Information about Habakkuk is very limited. There are two references to him in the Bible that bears his name. He was a prophet of God who probably lived during some portion of the reigns of Josiah, Jehoiakim, and other kings that followed. This dating is derived from a reference in Habakkuk 1:6 to the impending arrival of the Chaldeans in 605 B.C. It is possible that Habakkuk witnessed the decline and fall of the Assyrian Empire and knew about the fall of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 BC. The sinful conditions in Judah he wrote about were also consistent with this time in history, which would make him a contemporary of the prophets Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Nahum. Habakkuk was commissioned to announce the Lord’s intention to punish Judah by the coming deportation into Babylon. The central theme of the book of Habakkuk is faith in the midst of problems and is beautifully expressed in 2:4, which says, “The just shall live by his faith.” The name Habakkuk may mean “one who embraces,” a fitting name for a man who struggled through the conflicts of life while continuing to “embrace” God.

Background

The powerful country of Babylonia exercised total control over large portions of the Middle East, including Israel. In 722 BC Assyria was responsible for the breakup of Israel’s Northern Kingdom. They invaded the land and carried many of its inhabitants into captivity. While Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was not attacked, it still lived in the shadow of the Assyrian Empire and was careful not to do anything that would invite its wrath.

In 612 BC, however, the Babylonians destroyed Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, which changed the balance of power in the ancient Near East. The era of Assyrian control came to an end while the Babylonians began to emerge as the world power. The Babylonians' conquering armies moved westward from Nineveh, eventually reaching Carchemish, along the Euphrates River at the modern Turkey/Syrian border. There they decisively defeated the Egyptians in 605 BC.

During this transition in world politics, King Jehoiakim was on the throne of Judah. He was a worldly man and an oppressive ruler who, among his many faults, rejected the message of Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 22:13–17). Jehoiakim's reign was characterized by religious idolatry. He was the son of Josiah, a good king and one who had turned the people back to God away from idolatry. This made the situation especially tragic. Under Jehoiakim's rule, the people of Judah were in a downward spiral moving further and further away from God and the truth. Habakkuk, a prophet of God, concluded that divine intervention was necessary if the people were to be saved from destruction. When the intervention did not happen, Habakkuk questioned God's failure to act.

At-A-Glance

1. Habakkuk's First Question (Habakkuk 1:1–4)
2. Habakkuk's Second Question (vv. 12–14)

In Depth

1. Habakkuk's First Question (Habakkuk 1:1–4)

When Habakkuk looks around his country, he sees a few encouraging situations. Everywhere he turns in Judah, he sees violence and bloodshed. The wicked always seems to have the upper hand over the righteous. The legal system is corrupt. Jehoiakim, Judah's king, is an unspiritual man, more concerned with the trappings of power than in providing leadership for God's people. The prophet Jeremiah has the occasion to denounce Jehoiakim's leadership (see Jeremiah 22:13–19). By comparison, Jehoiakim's father, Josiah, had been a good king who had initiated many religious reforms that encouraged the Jews to live up to their covenant promises. Unfortunately, Jehoiakim does not follow in his father's moral footsteps.

It is in this context of social chaos that Habakkuk exclaims, "O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou will not hear!" (v. 1) Habakkuk expects God to intervene directly in this crisis, to judge and punish the wrongdoers and save the righteous. His prayer of complaint has been voiced not once, but many times. Habakkuk is distressed because it seemed as though God is "asleep at the wheel." Sin and injustice seem to increase the more the prophet cries (v. 2). God allows Habakkuk to see violence, iniquity, plundering, strife, contention, and a crooked, worthless government that is powerless to stop such rebellion in the land. The wicked are so entrenched in their wickedness that they make fun of those who are perplexed about the problem. To Habakkuk, it seems as though no one cares about God's standard of righteousness, including God Himself!

How do you respond when you see or hear about injustice?

2. Habakkuk's Second Question (vv.12–14)

The Lord responds to Habakkuk's first question in verses 5–11 as to what He would do about all of the violence and wickedness in the land. He would not continue to have mercy on the injustice in Judah. God has heard Habakkuk and the cries of the righteous; He would punish the injustice. God would use the Babylonians, who already have a reputation for their ruthless destruction and conquest, to conquer and punish Judah for their sin.

Habakkuk responds with this second question: if God is going to use Babylon to punish Judah, will He punish them for their wickedness as well? How can God use wicked people to punish His own people's unrighteousness? Judah is bad but not as bad as Babylon. God should spare some of the Judeans in order for the covenant to be renewed, Habakkuk argues. Furthermore, Habakkuk is concerned the Babylonians will think it is their own strength that has allowed them to conquer Judah rather than the power of God that has allowed it. Habakkuk is upset with the state of His own people and the injustice in the land, but he is offended that the most unjust people he could think of would be used to punish the injustice.

This is Habakkuk's attempt to circle back on his own first complaint. He wants God to intervene and give justice, but does not like God's plan to use people who are ignorant of God to do it. Habakkuk is caught in a comparison between what he sees as the little sins of Judah and the big sins of Babylon. Clearly, God's sense of justice is different from Habakkuk's. In fact, God is simply keeping His word in the Law to punish Israel by raising up enemies to defeat them so they will repent (Leviticus 26:14–17, 33, 40–41). God will judge any injustice, and God can use whom He chooses to correct it. God has already said that Babylon is guilty as well, and God will handle the injustice of Babylon as well.

How is God's justice sometimes different than our sense of justice?

Search the Scriptures

1. Identify the specific injustices and evil that distressed Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1:2–4).
2. Why was Habakkuk troubled by God's lack of intervention in the life of Judah?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What are some of the conditions in our society that you wish God would intervene and change? Is there anything you can do now to help make changes?
2. How should we respond when an injustice is punished in a way that we didn't expect? Are all injustices equal?

Liberating Lesson

The dismal picture that Habakkuk paints of his society sounds all too familiar to us today. Many believers are deeply troubled by what they see in the world, their country, and in their own neighborhoods. Murders and violence are headline news in most major cities. Truth sometimes seems in short supply, and lies and half-truths are accepted as truth. We now have alternative facts and fake news as everyday vocabulary. There are people being silenced and killed in their countries for speaking out. There is corruption making the rich super-rich while in the same nation the poor starve. Believing that God is on the side of justice and righteousness, many Christians wonder, as did Habakkuk, why doesn't God do something about the situation right now? Habakkuk was a prophet of God, and yet he questioned God. God is not afraid of our questions. We can always ask God for His response in prayer. When God answers Habakkuk, God's plan is different from what Habakkuk expected. But God will restore justice and allow Habakkuk to participate in sharing His plan and helping it come to pass. God likewise is inviting us to intercede in prayer and advocacy about injustice in our communities and our world. Our responsibility is to listen and respond to God's direction to play our part in seeking justice for all.

Application for Activation

Take the opportunity this week to learn about injustice in your community or the world. Research the issue using the Internet, local library, or other resources including those who might be most impacted near you. Then cry out! Gather together with others or a prayer partner to pray about the issue. Share some of the information you learned on social media or in your congregation to bring attention to the issue. Donate your time or money to a charity that seeks to right the injustice. Most of all, trust that God hears your cries and will answer them in His timing.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 12-14

Habakkuk's name means "embracer or wrestler," which might give us some insight into the character of this man of God. Habakkuk willingly embraces the burden he is given and then relentlessly wrestles with God in prayer for Him to act in accordance with His covenant promise and judge the sin of His people (Deuteronomy 28:15; Leviticus 26:15–21). How needful we are today for more modern-day Habakkuks. One does not need to be a prophet to wrestle in prayer with God for our nation and our leaders who have strayed from acting according to godly principles (Micah 6:8), and instead are doing what seems "right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Habakkuk's prophecy is articulated as a prayer for justice, a dialogue between Habakkuk and Yahweh, because of God's people's gross sin. The prophet's prayer in Habakkuk 1 is a petition that is stated in the form of two sets of questions in his plea for justice. In his first set of questions (1:2–4), Habakkuk asks the Lord why He continues to tolerate sin among the people of Judah. Yahweh's first response, that He is raising up the wicked Babylonians to punish Judah, does not satisfy the prophet (1:5–11). Therefore, Habakkuk asks a second set of questions where he rephrases, intensifies, and expands his original question (1:12–17). God gives His detailed response in Habakkuk that justice delayed is not justice denied, that God is sovereign and is working His purposes according to His wisdom. Habakkuk then concludes his short book with a prayer of praise for justice that is imminent, though it may not yet be evident (3:1–19). Interestingly, this poetic prayer of praise is actually sung by Habakkuk himself (v. 1). Although little is known historically about this prophet, the fact that he sings his poetic prayer indicates that he may have also been an official temple musician (1 Chronicles 25:1). Additionally, at the end of the song, Habakkuk gives instructions to the choir director that the prayer should be accompanied by string instruments (3:19).

1 The burden that Habakkuk the prophet did see.

This little known minor prophet characterizes his entire prophecy as a "burden" (Heb. *massa'*, mas-SAW), which means a load, or that which is lifted up and carried. Habakkuk wants the reader to know that he is carrying a load that is personally and emotionally heavy. He is totally involved. He is not above God's people, but an integral part of the people. That is why the sinful condition of the nation is so disturbing to Habakkuk, prompting him to wonder why God seems unconcerned. In fact, Habakkuk is in a position very similar to Jeremiah, who also prophesied during that same time to the same Israelites that stubbornly refused to repent. Jeremiah got so discouraged, he tried to quit, but simply could not do it (Jeremiah 20:9). Like Habakkuk, Jeremiah had to carry his burden and obey the call of God for his life, even though the rebellious nation did not respond to his message. When we choose to follow Christ, we too have a burden, a cross that we must carry in

order to do God's will (Matthew 16:24). Although the "cross" may be different for each person, everyone must be willing to carry it. Salvation is free, but there is a cost to following Christ.

This prophecy, this burden, is something the prophet "did see," indicating that God gave him this prophecy through a vision. God often uses this method of revelation for His prophets such as Amos (1:1), Isaiah (1:1), and Obadiah (1:1). Not surprisingly, one term used for prophet is chozeh (Heb. kho-ZEH), or seer.

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.

Habakkuk's first set of questions come in rapid succession like waves crashing on the seashore during a violent storm. He prays with an intensity combined with a deep sense of frustration. This is not the first or second time Habakkuk had prayed to the Lord about this burden he is carrying, but he feels that his incessant cries to God seem to fall on deaf ears. He received no response. To understand the reason for his urgent plea, some historical context is imperative. Habakkuk's desperate prayer comes at a time when hope for justice and righteousness in Judah has been raised and dashed again and again. Josiah, a godly king, had returned the nation to righteous living after the rediscovery of the Book of the Law in 622 BC (2 Kings 22–23). Unfortunately, Josiah was killed in battle in 609 BC, and kingship went to his corrupt son, Jehoiakim who ruled from 609–598 BC (2 Kings 23:35–37). Habakkuk's prophetic prayer comes during Jehoiakim's ruthless reign, characterized by greed, dishonesty, the murder of the innocent, and oppression of the poor (Jeremiah 22:13–19).

The violence and corruption rampant under Jehoiakim's rule is the main historical context for Habakkuk's complaint. The prophet's cry against violence is a legal plea for God to act.

After all, God's covenant promise to hear the cry of his people means that He would also act in accordance with His Word (Exodus 2:23–25, 22:23). If the people obey His Law, the Mosaic Covenant, they would be abundantly blessed (Deuteronomy 28:1–14). Conversely, if they turn away from His Law, they would be cursed (Deuteronomy 28:15–68). Indeed, the purpose of the curses is not simply for punishment, but also to get them to repent so that a gracious God could restore them (Leviticus 26:14–44). The same is true for us today. Under the new covenant, there is a blessing for obeying God's Word, and believers are disciplined when they disobey (Hebrews 12:5–11). Discipline is for the exact same reason as the curses—to encourage repentance for the purpose of restoration. Habakkuk further complains that by not acting, God is forcing him to "behold" (nabat, naw-BAT), that is "to stand by and watch" such atrocities (1:3, 13). Habakkuk cannot do anything about evil but always has it in front of him. There is nowhere he can look and not see it. Habakkuk knows if he can see all this iniquity, surely God can too, and it must grieve God to see it (cf. v. 13). Habakkuk's prayer continues as he enumerates the six obvious problems in Judah that are being tolerated and not addressed by God (1:3). These problems are addressed as matched pairs that are flip sides of the same coin. They are: (1) iniquity and grievance, (2) spoiling and violence, and (3) strife and contention. The first couplet is iniquity and grievance. In Hebrew, iniquity is the word 'aven (aw-VEN) meaning wickedness like idolatry, and the grievance is the word 'amal (aw-MAUL), which is wrongful suffering, toil, or trouble. In pairing these together in his cry for justice, Habakkuk emphasizes that the wickedness of the perpetrator causes the wrongful suffering of the victim.

Spoiling and violence are paired next. Spoiling is the word shod (SHODE) and refers to destruction and oppression of the weak or the wealth that can be obtained through those. Such destruction leads to violence (khamas, khaw-MOSS), which wreaks havoc on the community and infrastructure as well as relationships. The third pair of problems mentioned are strife (rib, REEB) and contention (madon, maw- DON). "Strife" is a legal term, and contention is often paired with it (Proverbs 15:18; Jeremiah 15:10), indicative of the numerous lawsuits and legal quarrels in Judah's courts as a result of the violence and destruction. We have all been in a situation like Habakkuk, praying about a situation and getting no answer, as if the prayers hit the ceiling and bounced back to earth. Jesus tells us the appropriate response during such times: "Men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1). That's what Habakkuk does. He is constant in prayer like the persistent widow with the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–7). The widow got an answer, Habakkuk eventually got an answer, and you too will get an answer if you do not faint (Galatians 6:9).

4 Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.

The word judgment is the key to Habakkuk's complaint. Mentioned twice in verse 4, it is the Hebrew word mishpat (meesh-POT), literally justice. Justice speaks of the verdict, favorable or unfavorable, that is pronounced judicially, and includes the crime committed and the associated penalty that is required so that the society can function properly. In other words, justice brings about the order ordained by God for His covenant people (Isaiah 42:1–4, Jeremiah 5:1–9). However, society is out of order. The six problems (v. 3) have so negatively impacted the society that there is no justice: (1) the law is so slack that justice never prevails, and (2) the wicked hem in the righteous so that justice is perverted.

The law is slacked (Heb. pug, POOG), or lies still so that the courts no longer work, and laws are not enforced. Consequently, wrongdoers go unpunished and are never corrected. If that were not bad enough, the wicked hem in those who are trying to do right so that they are totally frustrated. Those with the responsibility to uphold the law accept bribes and rule in favor of wrongdoers, thereby perverting justice. The result is chaos, a society full of crime, violence, corruption, legal trials that are a farce, and the defeat of the righteous.

No one pays attention to priestly or prophetic instruction. In fact, it was so bad that the very priests ignored the Law (Jeremiah 2:8), and false prophets preached their own opinions or soothing words that the people wanted to hear (Jeremiah 23:16–20). During the reign of Jehoiakim, Judah abandoned the righteous order intended by God for their society, in spite of the fact that only twelve years prior they had renewed their covenant with the Lord and undergone sweeping religious reform in the time of King Josiah.

Given all of this, Habakkuk could not understand why Yahweh tolerated such wickedness. Yes, the society was out of order, but the reason there was no justice was that God did not dispense divine justice (mishpat) on a rebellious people. However, it is important to remember that God has promised to judge sin, and He will. It is not a question of whether He will judge, but when. So the prophet's question about how long will God wait before He judges His people is appropriate. Therefore, we too can take heart knowing that God sees the injustices that occur in our nation today. We can pray with confidence for God to intervene, knowing that He will do so in due season.

12 Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die. O LORD, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction. 13 Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?

God reassures His prophet that He has the situation well in hand and is going to handle it in a way Habakkuk would not believe (1:5). His plan is to raise up the cruel Chaldeans (Babylonians) and make them a world power that will conquer many lands, including Judah and Jerusalem (1:6–7). On one hand, Habakkuk accepts and repeats, in his own words, what has been stipulated: God has chosen Babylonia to be their judgment (1:12). Habakkuk recognizes the sovereignty of God by addressing Him as “O LORD” and “O mighty God” in the same sentence. He acknowledges that God has ordained the Babylonians to punish Judah and dispense justice (mishpat) sometime in the future.

This plan, however, still leaves a big question in Habakkuk's mind. How does God's plan square with God's character? How can the everlasting, holy God continue to “behold,” to stand back and watch evil with His pure eyes? How can God continue to tolerate evil, not only by Judah but also by the Babylonians, who are even more wicked than the Israelites (1:13). To allow the Babylonians to invade Judah and take the Israelites as captives to Babylon is more than the prophet could comprehend.

However, Habakkuk should not have been confused because God's plan of action is not at all mysterious or even new. As a matter of fact, it is already spelled out in the Law, in the Mosaic Covenant that God used as the means of governing His people Israel. If they did not listen to and obey God's commandments, He would punish them, especially by allowing their enemies to conquer them. God told Israel He would "scatter you among the heathen" (Leviticus 26:33). What is happening is exactly what God said would happen.

God uses whomever He chooses as His instrument of justice. In this case, God told Israel that defeat by their enemies would be one of the curses for disobedience and lawlessness. So why is Habakkuk surprised? Perhaps in his overwhelming distress, Habakkuk is not concentrating on God's Word, and what God had already said about the situation he is praying about.

This is a lesson for us as well. God will always act in concert with His written Word. Therefore, when we pray about a matter, we can have confidence, for "if we ask anything according to His will He hears us" (1 John 5:14). His will is clearly expressed in His Word. In fact, the only reason Habakkuk could say, "We shall not die" (1:12) is because of God's covenant promise: "when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them" (Leviticus 26:44). His Word is His covenant, His unfailing promise to us. Therefore, it is critical to know God's Word, and then to pray in accordance with that Word.

14 And makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them?

In the next few verses, Habakkuk uses a fishing metaphor to explain his questions and objections more fully (1:14–17). The Israelites are like the fish in the sea, and the Babylonians are the fishermen. Habakkuk offers several objections about their hideous activities: (1) the wicked fishermen catch the more righteous in their nets, (2) strings them up on their hooks, (3) rejoices and celebrates over their success, (4) sacrifices to their false gods while living in luxury, enjoying the choicest food. It seems as if the wicked Gentiles are flourishing, and God is tolerating it. However, again and again in Scripture, God assures His people that evildoers will be punished (Psalms 37:1–2). The success of wicked people is only temporary. As we observe and pray for our society and our nation today in light of all the evil in it (mass murders, racism, voter suppression, etc.), we do well to remember these words of admonition and take hope in the God who will ultimately judge all evildoers. He uses Babylon to judge Judah, and then He uses the Medio-Persians to judge Babylon. Truth and justice will ultimately prevail.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Job's Cry For Justice Frustrated
(Job 19:1-7)

TUESDAY

The Rock's Work Is Justice
(Deuteronomy 32:1-4)

WEDNESDAY

God's People Ravaged For Sin
(Jeremiah 5:14-19)

THURSDAY

Chaldeans To Ravage The Nations
(Habakkuk 1:5-11)

FRIDAY

The Destructive Character Of The Enemy
(Habakkuk 1:15-17)

SATURDAY

Assyrians Punished For Arrogance
(Isaiah 10:12-14)

SUNDAY

Why, Lord, Does Injustice Prevail?
(Habakkuk 1:1-4, 12-14)