God's Strange Providence

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Scripture: Habakkuk 1:1-11

Habakkuk 1:1–11 (ESV)
The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

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?
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.
4 So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted.
5 “Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe if told.
6 For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,
that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth,
to seize dwellings not their own.
7 They are dreaded and fearsome;
their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.
8 Their horses are swifter than leopards,
more fierce than the evening wolves;
their horsemen press proudly on.
Their horsemen come from afar;
they fly like an eagle swift to devour.
9 They all come for violence,
all their faces forward.
They gather captives like sand.
10 At kings they scoff,
and at rulers they laugh.
They laugh at every fortress,
for they pile up earth and take it.
11 Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god!”

Introduction

Well, Habakkuk, as I said, perhaps not one that you're very familiar with, and in fact, in the book itself, there's not much details given about Habakkuk, the man or in his role as prophet. Very little is said about Habakkuk. Other prophets have other things said about them and upfront you're given in the historical context and where they're from and those sorts of things, but not here in Habakkuk. And not that this is certainly untrue of other prophets, but here specifically in Habakkuk, it seems the the spotlight is of course not on Habakkuk himself anyway.

It's upon God. It is primarily a book about God. That you'll find at the heart and center of this book and certainly the Bible as we talk about often, the sovereignty of God. And the Bible is telling us something about who God is. He is the one who has created all things and has ordained all things and he subdues. He works his sovereign will. And Habakkuk would have to learn and God's people have to learn to live by faith as we'll see, Lord willing, in the weeks to come what that means, what that looks like.

And we learn right along with him that the sovereign Lord is Lord of all. He is in full control and he cares for his people. Habakkuk sees an oracle as it said. It perhaps, I think, carries the weight and the connotation of a burden like a donkey might carry a burden. It's that kind of idea behind it. It is certainly an utterance. He's given this vision from God and it's a burden of sorts. Usually, prophets speak from God to the people, and in essence, that is happening here in the whole book of Habakkuk. But what you find in Habakkuk is this series of what are often called complaints. It's Habakkuk questioning and asking questions of God. And it's a back and forth between Habakkuk and God. It's Habakkuk speaking to God even about the people as it were. And Habakkuk finds himself perplexed, often asking questions. And that's certainly where faith is often found, what true faith often looks like. Maybe more perplexed at God. And sometimes you find maybe the answers given are even more confusing, raise more problems and questions, I suppose. And what do we do when God's providence seems strange?

Well, Habakkuk shows us that sometimes what God is doing or seems not to be doing, though it makes no sense to us, we are to trust our God. He is doing something. He knows what he's doing. And Habakkuk is praying. And while God's providence seems strange, we trust that our God is sovereignly working even when we cannot see it or understand it. And certainly, in the context of three things that Habakkuk highlights with respect to God's sovereignty, he's his control over all his creatures and all their actions and every nation, the whole earth.

I Sin and God's Sovereignty | Habakkuk 1:1-4

And the first thing we see here is sin and God's sovereignty. Habakkuk is wrestling with that, wrestling with God in prayer, but wrestling with the issue itself in verses 1-4. As I said, it's a burden. But if you just glance through those verses 1-4, look at the the words that Habakkuk uses. Violence, iniquity, wrong, destruction, strife, contention, the laws paralyzed. He's putting forth the idea of immorality. Justice never goes forth. There's a lack of justice.

And Habakkuk sees evil clearly, calls it what it is. He sees sin, and there's corruption all around. And he's not pretending that everything is fine. He observes it. He sees it. And God is showing it to him for a reason. He's asking why. He's struggling with that whole idea of of sin, evil, and the sovereignty of God. And while it's true, we could pause and take time to think about sin in our own society and the great evils that go around, perversions of justice. It goes forth maybe sometimes but

perverted even as Habakkuk says and we could read the the headlines. We know that the news and things that happen in schools and homes and public squares and all of the immorality and wickedness. It's everywhere and Habakkuk is burdened by it.

But worse, it's found amongst God's covenant people. That's who he's talking about here. Yes, there are the righteous in the midst of that. But he's saying that the laws paralyze. It seems that justice never goes forth. There's destruction and violence amongst his own people. This was certainly during the reign of Jehoiakim. If you know your history of Israel and Judah especially. And Jehoiakim was set up by Egypt, a pro- Egyptian king if you will after they had taken over. And he was a wicked king, very selfish and unjust and evil.

Josiah's earlier reforms seemed to have been forgotten. Judah had turned away under Jehoiakim's reign and Habakkuk is deeply burdened by this sin that he sees. And that's what faith is like often. Seeing and recognizing the wickedness and evil and calling it what it is, taking that to the Lord. Should we not grieve over sin and strife and contention and destruction and violence in our streets? To be sure, in America, the land that we love, all around we see it. What about in our own midst? Do we grieve?

Do we grieve and hate sin as we see it, as God makes us see it? Is it burdensome to us? Our savior would weep over Jerusalem, seeing the sin and the wickedness there. The Lord Jesus would weep over it. I wonder if it makes us weep and grieve over the sin not only that we see out there and in society and in our church, but even in ourselves. Notice Habakkuk asks the question, why do you make me see iniquity?

Why do I have to look at it even? Why am I being shown that? Have you ever wondered that question? Why do I have to struggle with sin? Why do I have to see it? Why do I have to observe it and know it and see it all around me and within me? Well, certainly, as you'll find throughout the book of Habakkuk, certainly it is to teach lessons. It it ought to humble people. It ought to humble us when we see sin all around.

Not to simply say, "Look at all those wicked people." That's not exactly what Habakkuk is doing. It certainly should remind us, “Lord, what would I be apart from your grace?” We aren't better people necessarily in that kind of way. As we think about ourselves, we ought to recognize our own sinfulness, our own wickedness. Habakkuk is not saying otherwise. He's not just saying look out there, but the iniquity he's made to see all around him and certainly inside him. John Bradford famously put it when he saw criminals being led to their execution. He would say, "There goes John Bradford, but for the grace of God."

You ask that question, why? Why am I made to see iniquity and see sin? It certainly would drive us to that way of thinking of humility, what we would be without the grace of God. It ought to drive us to Christ, drive us to the cross, to see sin and all of its vileness and as our catechism says, its odiousness, its ugliness and vileness and to learn to grieve and hate it, but with an apprehension of God's mercy to us in Christ Jesus. It ought to show us more clearly not only the disease, the sickness as Jesus would say, but the need for the physician, the one who can heal, one who came to save sinners.

And so, it shows us that no doubt, we often find ourselves praying like Habakkuk, asking questions, maybe even wanting to grow as we see our own sin and recognize it. Yes, out there and amongst us, but recognizing the log in our own eye, as Jesus would say, and we pray, we pray about it and pray against it and look to the Lord and perhaps we find like John Newton, we might ask, but he might grow us in ways we didn't expect.

As he would pray that hymn that he wrote, I asked the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace, might more of his salvation know and seek more earnestly his face. And the Lord did answer that prayer and taught him to trust. But as he said, it was in such a way as almost drove me to despair. The Lord has his way of doing that. We want him to subdue our sins and give us rest as John Newton would pray. But he he made me feel the hidden evils of my heart.

Let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part. He seemed to aggravate my woe and cross all my designs that I schemed. And why? To humble my heart, to lay me low. And John Newton is asking, wrestling, why? Why have you made me see this? Why have you made me experience that? Well, he concludes, "These inward trials I employ from self and pride to set thee free and break thy schemes of earthly joy that thou mayest find thy all in me." That's where God is driving Habakkuk as he makes him see sin, his own iniquity, not only all around him, but inside. This is the way where the Lord would drive us. But Habakkuk perhaps shows us a deeper problem, if you will. He is not merely asking why. Why is there evil?

We might ask that question. People ask that kind of question all the time. We recognize it. We wonder why it's there. But it's more so why isn't God doing something about it? Have you heard that question? Maybe you've wrestled with that question. Some people often refer to the problem of evil. And in some sense I suppose, yes it is a problem in that way as we experience it, but Habakkuk is teaching us, the Lord is teaching Habakkuk and us that ultimately there is no problem from God's standpoint. And so, you ask those questions and a deeper issue is brought to the surface. Why isn't God doing something about it?

II Silence and God's Sovereignty | Habakkuk 1:2-4

Which is what we find secondly in this text verses 2 through 4. There's silence it seems like on God's part.

And Habakkuk struggles with that, wrestles with that. Why is God being silent over it? I see it. I see it plain as day in my own life and in society and all the wickedness and evil and sin all around and inside. But why isn't God doing something about it? Maybe you ask the same question, think the same thoughts. You see, he's crying out to the Lord. How? How long, oh Lord? Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Why do you idly look at wrong?

There are some things behind that prayer that Habakkuk is praying. Because he knows God. He knows God hears his people and God is holy and God hates sin and God is just and all of those things. But that's precisely why God's apparent inactivity is so perplexing to him. We ask those questions, don't we? In the midst of some great trial, some great suffering, some calamity in our own lives personally. And as we look in society, we wonder why. Why has this horrible thing happened again?

Why does society seem to be crumbling around us? And yet Habakkuk is more bewildered, isn't he, by the the silence that seems to be there. Not only that it's happening, but God seems to not be doing anything about it. You know, questioning God isn't necessarily wrong. The the Bible is full of people asking questions of God. It’s full of anguish and despair, even struggling and troubled by certain things. Psalms are full of questions in the Bible. How long, oh Lord, the martyrs cry out to to wait? You know, God is big enough to handle all our questions, all our anguish, all our despair and trouble. He can handle it. We ask those kinds of questions and God seems to be silent.

But Habakkuk knows God. He knows who he is and he's pouring out his heart in that regard. There's even a bit of hope, you might say, in this kind of praying. How long shall I cry for help? There's a continuation of his crying. He's continuing to pray. He's recognizing, he's calling out for

God to do something, though he's going to be corrected in a moment. But there's the sense in which his very praying is a sign of his hope in the Lord, his trusting the Lord, casting his cares upon the Lord. You find our Savior even with his dying breath, even in the prayer, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It's a calling upon the Lord as a prayer of hope and faith. Habakkuk is doing that even when his heart is broken over the suffering and all the sin and what's to come.

He's still praying, knowing that he needs, as we do, as James would say to us - that we need God's perspective. We need wisdom from above and the Lord gives it. The Lord is going to give the answer. It might not be the answer that we always want, that Habakkuk necessarily wanted, but he will give it. And it's a reminder that we should pray, take it to the Lord in prayer. We have a throne of grace open to us by the Lord Jesus Christ, by his precious blood and we can come with confidence as Habakkuk is doing - calling upon the Lord, pouring it out. And we know God's character because of Christ even when we cannot understand his providence. You know God doesn't seem to always follow our script, does he?

Perhaps sometimes we have a plan, and we express that plan through prayer, even that we have those thoughts. I clearly see the problem Lord, and this is what you should do about it. This is how you should fix it. And I think I have understood it pretty well and you should take my advice. Follow my plan. Follow my script. And Habakkuk seems to expect God to deal with Judah's wickedness. He wants God to intervene and do something, but according to his own timetable and in his own way. Perhaps he's got ideas about how that should look, how that should go. And God answers in perhaps a very unexpected way. And it seems to create even another problem in Habakkuk's mind

III Suffering and God's Strange Providence | Habakkuk 1:5-11

You see thirdly, not only is Habakkuk struggling with sin, with suffering with silence, I mean with the sin of God's people and with God's seeming silence but also the suffering with what's about to come in verses 5-11.

That's what we see. Notice what God says to him in response. Habakkuk, I am doing something. I want you to look and see and wonder and be astounded. It is something that perhaps Habakkuk would never have planned and never have thought of. It's a shocking sort of answer. And he wants Habakkuk to marvel at it in some sense, not with glee necessarily at what's coming, but to marvel at God, at his ways that are not our ways. He's going to raise up the Chaldeans or the the Babylonians, a bitter, hasty, brutal nation as he describes them. You can read that in verses 5- 11. The way he's describing them, they are unstoppable force.

They're going to come through and they're going to build siege mounds and they are going to take over everything in front of them and not stop. And you think that there's wickedness going on amongst God's people. He's saying these people are, if you can say it in this way, worse. I'm going to use something very wicked and it's astounding. It's baffling. It's strange providence and Habakkuk needs to wrestle with it. And he's wanting him to take stock in what the Lord's doing.

It is both marvelous and mysterious. I might not understand it all, but it is the Lord who is working. He says twice, I want you to look out, Habakkuk, and he says, I am, not I will, but I am doing a work in your days. verse 5. In verse six, I am raising up the Chaldeans. I am doing something very much so. Now, we should be clear, certainly the sovereignty of God does not excuse man's wickedness. He's describing a wicked people. And God is not wicked. He's not evil. There's no darkness in him. But he uses these wicked people as his own instrument.

God's wanting Habakkuk, he's wanting us, to wrestle with that notion that God is sovereign over all his creatures and all their actions. And he is one who even uses evil for good. He uses the wicked. Is not the cross God's example, greatest example, of that strange providence we might say as what Peter said.

In fact, this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. [Acts 2:23] The Lord was doing his work there. He had planned it. It was strange in people's eyes and yet as Psalm 118 says is marvelous. The way in which the Lord works, He used the wicked to bring about his sovereign plan of redemption, of salvation.

Conclusion

That's why we ought not despair when we see evil all around and wickedness and sin. The Lord is in control of it. The Lord sent his Son, a man of sorrows, Isaiah would say, and acquainted with grief, the Lord would lay on Him the iniquity of us all. The one bearing our sins in his body on the tree. The cross certainly shows that God does deal with sin and evil. You think about even the way in which the Father, as we sing sometimes or say, the Father turns His face away, there's silence at the cross. The Lord was dealing with sin and evil and wickedness and would call sinners to trust, to look to Christ and trust Him. You know, the Apostle Paul would quote Habakkuk 1:5 as he's explaining the whole history of Israel, explaining to them the promises, of even Habakkuk, culminating in the Lord Jesus Christ, his life and death and resurrection and the Lord doing something that might seem strange, yet it is glorious, marvelous.

And Paul would quote Habakkuk 1 verse 5 as a way to call people to repentance and faith and not to figure everything out, but to see God's ways, to see and to look at the cross and to say, “there's my savior. May I repent and believe and cast all my cares upon him who forgives sin.” That's what Paul says, that he was the one through whom the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed. Believe on him, that the Lord can be trusted even when things look bleak and dark and there's sin all around. He would have us to look our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, and in whose sovereign providence we rest and trust. May the Lord help us to do so.