

Wrestling with God's Strange Ways

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Habakkuk 1:1-11

I'd like to start our sermon today with a simple question: How do you expect God to deal with sin in the lives of his people? What do you expect Him to do when His people disobey? What do you expect Him to do when you disobey? Maybe you expect Him to do nothing, to overlook all your sin, like the poet Heinrich Heine, who on his deathbed, said "Of course, God will forgive. That's His job" Is that what you expect? Or maybe you expect God to do the opposite. Maybe you expect him to bring the hammer and punish you with terrible circumstances when you sin. Maybe you expect God to convict you, to speak to your heart and make you feel bad about your sin. How do you expect God to deal with sin in the lives of His people?

It's an important question for those who follow Jesus, because although we follow Jesus, we also struggle with sin. It's important for us to know how God might respond to that. Well today, we are going to look at a passage that gives us one answer to that question, a passage that gives us one very unexpected way, really a shocking way that God sometimes responds to sin in the lives of his people. Today we start a five week series on Habakkuk, a series on Habakkuk. Now when I say Habakkuk, I know what many of you are thinking. Half of you are thinking "Bless you" or "Gesundheit," and the other half of you are thinking "Wait, is that chewing Habakkuk or pipe Habakkuk?" It's a strange sounding word! It's funny. The dictate function on my computer every time I say "Habakkuk" types "her backpack." Habakkuk is not well known! But listen, Habakkuk is not tobacco, and it's not the sound I make when I sneeze. Habakkuk is actually a book in the Bible! Habakkuk is a minor prophet (meaning it's one of the smaller books of the prophets) near the back of your Old Testament. It's about three-quarters of the way through your Bible if you want to turn there.

Over the next five weeks, we are going to be studying this amazing little book of the Bible. Habakkuk is amazing! If you've never read Habakkuk, you might recognize a phrase or two from it. Habakkuk is the one who first said "The just shall live by faith." That little phrase is repeated three times in the New Testament: in Romans, in Galatians and in Hebrews. That little phrase is what started the entire Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther saw that phrase in Habakkuk and Romans, and it blew him away! Habakkuk also has a kind of famous quote where he says "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vine, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, yet I will rejoice in the lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior!" You can probably find that on a plaque somewhere at Hobby Lobby!

The point is although Habakkuk is not super well known, it has some very important concepts in it, some revolutionary concepts, like that the just shall live by faith, some important concepts. Habakkuk is going to start today with a very important question. That question we asked earlier: "How does God deal with sin in the lives of His people?" Actually, Habakkuk states it more like an accusation: "Why doesn't God deal with sin the way we think he should?" Habakkuk is going to start with that question, and God is going to give him one of the most

unexpected and shocking answers in the entire Bible. Today we're going to look at that and what we'll see is a:

- 1) Rebuke from Habakkuk,
- 2) Response from God, and
- 3) Riddle that we're left with.

The rebuke, response and riddle. Let's read Habakkuk 1:1-11. Habakkuk is writing from the land of Judah in the southern part of Israel during the reign of a king named Jehoiakim. He's writing during a time when the king and the people were disobeying God. This is what he says

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? 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. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

- Habakkuk 1:1-4

This is God's answer:

"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. 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. They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. 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. They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on guilty men, whose own might is their god!"

- Habakkuk 1:5-11

That is God's response to Habakkuk's question, and this is the word of God. The first thing we see in this passage is Habakkuk's rebuke, and Habakkuk's rebuke is this:

HABAKKUK'S REBUKE: GOD DOESN'T SEEM TO BE DEALING WITH SIN

Habakkuk wants to know "Why doesn't God do something about the sin I see around me?" Habakkuk is really upset by the sin he sees in the society around him, so he doesn't start his prophecy like other prophets, telling us about his lineage, or his hometown, or with a rebuke of Judah. He starts with a rebuke of God. Look at:

The oracle (which means the burdensome message the heaviness) *that Habakkuk the prophet saw.* And here's his complaint: *O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?*

- Habakkuk 1:1-2

Habakkuk makes his basic complaint. Now if we want to understand Habakkuk's message, we need to understand the historical background of his prophecy. Habakkuk ministered in the country of Judah (southern part of Israel). He ministered several centuries after King David's time, around 600 BC during the reign of a king named Jehoiakim. If you read the book of Kings, Judah had like this yoyo effect of good and evil kings. They went up and down (good king, bad king). Hezekiah was basically a good king. Manasseh, who followed him, was the most evil king Judah ever had. Josiah, who followed Manasseh, was really one of the best king Judah ever had. He got rid of all the idols and the high places. He listened to the prophets of the Lord and obeyed scripture and, under his reign, Judah prospered both physically and spiritually. He was a great king!

But Habakkuk ministered during the reign of one of Josiah's sons who was not so good. His name was Jehoiakim. He was a puppet of Egypt, and he did not listen to the prophets of the Lord. In fact, Jehoiakim was the only king of Judah to kill a prophet of Yahweh. A prophet named Uriah prophesied against Jehoiakim and against the sin that was going on in Judah. Jehoiakim chased him all the way to Egypt, dragged him back to Judah, chopped off his head and threw his body into a pauper's graveyard.

So this was the environment Habakkuk was in. This is why he's complaining to God. He sees rampant sin! He says he's prayed about it again and again, and God has done nothing, so he makes his general complaint in verses 1-2 and then he shows how bad it's gotten in verses 3-4. Let's look at what he says, and I want you to notice that there's a progression to the sin in his culture. It has developed in certain ways.

First sin is tolerated. It's just kind of there but nobody's doing anything about it. Look at:

Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?
- Habakkuk 1:3a

It's just there. He's seeing it. It's tolerated. But in the next stage, sin is nurtured. Look at:

Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.
- Habakkuk 1:3b

So Habakkuk kind of lists four things here: contention and strife and violence and destruction. I think the point is sin has not just been tolerated, it's been nurtured, and it's grown. It's grown to the point where we have not just contention, but also strife, and violence, and even destruction. Sin has gone from being tolerated to being nurtured.

Then in verse 4, we can see that sin isn't just tolerated and nurtured, it's actually protected in the courts and institutions of Judah. Habakkuk gives a shocking picture

So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

- Habakkuk 1:4

This is an image from the courtroom and in Judah. The Old Testament Law, the Mosaic Law, was also the civil law. It was the law of the land. So the courts were the place where right and wrong should have been recognized and where sin should have been stopped. But it's the opposite here. Habakkuk is saying the Law is paralyzed. It's powerless to help, so justice (just judgments) can't go out from the court. He says the wicked (lying witnesses) surround the righteous so that whatever comes out of court is twisted. It's perverse. It's against what's right and true. It's upside down in it's thinking. Quite a picture, isn't it?

He's saying "This is a travesty! Sin has gone from being tolerated to being nurtured to being protected," and he wants to know why God doesn't stop it. He's distressed by what he sees in his culture.

Let me ask you a question: Are you ever distressed by the sin you see around you, ever feel like it's gone from being tolerated to being nurtured to being protected? Now I want to tread carefully here. At Perry Creek Church, we try not to spend our time pointing fingers at everyone else. Our main concern is our own sin, right? But brothers and sisters, are you troubled by the sin in our culture? Do you see how we've gone from tolerating it, to nurturing it, to protecting it?

Let me give you two examples examples that Habakkuk is going to write about later in this book. The first one is just sexual immorality (debauchery). I don't think we realize how much we are swimming in immorality in our culture, but we are. Gilbert just came back from a trip to Malaysia. That's one of the things we're known for over there. They think of us as an immoral nation. When we lived in Zimbabwe, pornography was illegal there. There's no pornographic magazines. Kelley always says "If there's a billboard advertising soap in Zimbabwe, it will have a picture of a bar of soap!" You don't see immorality around you. So wow, was it ever an assault on my senses when we came back to the States! I could see it. Everywhere! I think our nation has gone from tolerating immorality of various kinds to nurturing it. We've seen all kinds of sexual misbehavior encouraged in our culture, and now it's protected. In corporate policy, in our educational system, in our courts, you can't say that anything is wrong. It feels like God's law his morality is paralyzed, doesn't it?

Let me give you another example that Habakkuk is going to write about: injustice, inequity, prejudice, racism. Our culture has been working on that one, and we still are. But just think with me about where we've been. When I was growing up, racism wasn't just tolerated, it was often nurtured, even amongst Christians, and it was protected in many civil institutions. I remember the first time I heard the term "institutional racism," I thought "That's ridiculous. That's not a thing!" But it is. It's real. See how sin went from being tolerated to being nurtured to being protected?

What's truly distressing, the thing that really bothers Habakkuk, is that it's not just out there. It's in here. It's among God's people, and it's in our hearts. What the world embraces, we tolerate and even nurture. I was thinking this week about some of the racist things I heard from the pulpit when I was growing up. It's shameful! I often wonder where else do we have big sin in our midst that we don't even see?

That's what is distressing Habakkuk. He sees the tolerance, nurturing, and protection of sin, and he asks God one big question: Why don't you stop this? Why are you allowing your people to do this? Why don't you stop it.

So 1) Habakkuk's rebuke is that God doesn't seem to be dealing with sin. Now how is God going to respond to that accusation? Well, let me say it's a little more complicated than we might think, because God's response is this:

GOD'S RESPONSE: HE SENDS SINFUL PEOPLE TO DEAL WITH SIN

Let me show you what I mean. In verses 5-6a, God tells Habakkuk that he is going to do something really shocking. Look at what he says there:

“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. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation.

- Habakkuk 1:5-6a

The Hebrew there is really interesting. In the first part of the verse, Habakkuk just piles up four Hebrew words that mean to gaze in wonder. He literally says “Look! Observe! Amaze yourselves! And be amazed!” In other words, this is going to shock you! And what's shocking about it in Hebrew is not just what God is going to do, it's also the way the news is delivered. If you look at the way this is laid out in your Bible, you can probably see that this isn't just prose, it's poetry. It's laid out in verses. It has meter to it. In Hebrew, you used certain meters to convey certain kinds of information. The meter in these verses (the sort of tune) doesn't fit the message!

Hebrew scholars tell us that the meter of these verses is 3+3 which is what you could normally use to convey an oracle (a prophecy) of blessing. When a Hebrew speaker would hear the tune that Habakkuk is using, they would expect to hear good news, a lighter, more encouraging message! But that's not the kind of message this is! It's an oracle of judgment of doom! So the tune doesn't fit the message. To put it into context, that like me singing a tune, like “Happy Birthday” but singing different words: “God's going to judge you. Your whole nation too. He'll smash and destroy you. That's what he will do!”

The point is everything about this is shocking. God tells them to be shocked. He uses a shocking tune, and the message itself is what's most shocking. God says He is sending a people called the Chaldeans or what we would call the Babylonians.

The Babylonians were a new super-power at this time. One reason this is shocking is that Israel's region the Ancient Near East traditionally had only two superpowers. Israel had other local enemies, like the Philistines and Amalekites. But in terms of superpowers that went through the region and enslaved whole nations, there were really only two biggies. There was Egypt to the West, who was always messing around in the region. And there were the Assyrians to the East, who were the real bad-boys of the Ancient Near East. The Assyrians had captured the Northern Kingdom of Israel 120 years earlier, and they were not someone you played games with. They were greatly feared. So these two nations had dominated the region for centuries, but now God says he is raising up the Babylonians, and God goes on to describe them. God gives this massive description of the Babylonians in verses 7-11. He uses more than twenty adjectives to describe them. We won't go into great detail here, but let's just read through the description that God gives of these guys. First, he talks about how terrifying they are. Look at:

who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.

- Habakkuk 1:6b-7

God says "These are seriously bad boys and they are a law unto themselves." Then God goes on to do something interesting. He compares the speed of their cavalry to different kinds of animals. Look at:

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.

- Habakkuk 1:8

To the ancient Israelites, a cavalry like that would have been terrifying. The Israelites didn't have a lot of horses. They didn't use them much in warfare, so this kind of speed in warfare would be unheard of. God says they can come out of nowhere like a leopard. They are hungry, like wolves who are on the hunt, and they can attack from great distance like an eagle.

By the way, this was absolutely historically true. If you look at this map, this is Israel this is Egypt to the West and this is Assyria to the North East. In 605 BC, just a few years after Habakkuk's prophecy, the Babylonians went from Chaldea up to Carchemish in Syria to fight the Egyptians. Now, the Assyrians were concerned about the rise of the Babylonians, so they joined in. Egypt and Assyria took on Babylon together. Nebuchadnezzar, who was the commander of the Babylonian army and the son of the Babylonian king, not only defeated both of them, he also chased the Egyptian army 150 miles and routed them again. Then when he heard that his father had died, he immediately rode all the way back to Babylon to become King. So Habakkuk's prophecy here is spot on. These guys are terrifying. They are incredibly fast, and they are ferocious to the point that they are like animals. They can't be reasoned with. Then God goes on to finish his description:

They all come for violence, all their faces forward (in other words, they've got their eyes on the prize). *They gather captives like sand.* (The people they conquer are nothing to them. And note their arrogance) *At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on.*

- Habakkuk 1:9-11

God is saying "These are bad boys. There is no title, no personality, no fortress that impresses them. If you have a wall, they'll just build a siege ramp and take your city, and then they will move on to the next place: Lather, rinse, repeat." Notice how he sums it up in the last line: "Guilty men, whose own might is their god!"

So that's the description God gives of the Babylonians. That is his response to Habakkuk's complaint that he's doing nothing. God is saying "Oh, I'm doing something alright. I'm sending the Babylonians, and the implication is I'm sending them to you. They're going to invade you." And notice that God describes them as sinners, right? He doesn't say "I'm sending some guys to straighten you out. They might be a little rough, but they have good hearts, and they're doing my will."

That's not what he says at all. He says they are violent. They destroy cities. They are constantly fighting and engaging in strife and conflict. They are unjust. They are a law unto themselves, and they are idolatrous They worship their strength. These are sinful people.

So 1) Habakkuk's rebuke is that God doesn't seem to be dealing with sin, and 2) But God's response is that God will send sinful people to deal with sin. Now, that rebuke and God's response leaves us with something of a riddle There's a question that this all raises. God said it would raise a question, right? God says:

I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe, even if told.

- Habakkuk 1:5

It's unbelievable! So what is it that is so unbelievable about God's response here? What is the riddle? What is it that doesn't make sense? Is it the fact that it's the Babylonians that are invading and not the Egyptians or Assyrians? That is surprising, but that's not what God emphasizes in the description. Is it their ferocity? Their ferocity also is shocking, but the Assyrians had that as well. That's not what makes this so unbelievable. That's not the riddle. The riddle is this:

THE REMAINING RIDDLE: HOW CAN GOD USE SIN TO DEAL WITH SIN?

That's what's so unbelievable here: That God would use sin, bigger sin, worse sin, more sin to deal with the sins of his people. If you keep reading, Habakkuk goes on to protest this. He basically says: "OK God, I get it. We have sin. In fact, I've been whining quite a bit about it. Sorry if I over-spoke. But our sin is like down here! A little bit of violence, little bit of disorder, little bit of idolatry. But these guys are so much worse! We have a little bit of violence. They overthrow

entire societies! We have a little disorder in the court. These guys don't even have a court! They are a law unto themselves! We have a little bit of idolatry. We burn a little incense to the wrong God. These guys worship themselves. Their God is their own strength! And I'm not making this up! You're the one who pointed this all out!"

Habakkuk is saying "This doesn't make any sense." That's the riddle. How can God use sin to deal with sin? It's funny I was talking to Davis Sutton this week, and he was saying the flow of thought in Habakkuk is like:

- Habakkuk: "Hey God, why don't you do something about the sin and violence around here?"
- God: "I am I'm sending more sin and more violence."
- Habakkuk: "OK let's have a worship service" (because he does say that later in the book)

There are lots of ways that we expect God to deal with sin in our lives. We might expect Him to deal with it by warning us with Scripture or by convicting us with his Spirit or chastening us with difficulty or by having other Christians confront us, but we don't expect God use more sin to deal with sin.

It's unexpected. If we read the Bible, we can see that sometimes that's exactly how God deals with sin. Think about it: God judges sin with more sin. Those of you who were with us when we went through Romans remember Roman 1. There was this "cycle of God's wrath," where man suppresses the truth, and God responds by hiding the truth. Four times it says "God gave them over to a deeper level of sin." Sometimes God deals with your sin by handing you over to more sin! The wages of sin becomes more sin. At first, this doesn't make sense. We expect God to be against sin, so we think he won't use sin.

But he does. Think of the story of David and Bathsheba from last week. David sins by raping Bathsheba. Then he tries to cover it up. How? With more sin! He murders Uriah! Then his son Amnon rapes his half sister, Tamar, and David doesn't confront him. Why? Because of what he's done. He's a rapist. So it grows. There's more sin. Then David's other son, Absalom, finds out about what Amnon did to Tamar and he murders Amnon. Does David deal with it? No, because he's also a murderer. Do you see how sin grew into more and more and more sin?

This is what happens. The wages of sin is sometimes more sin. It grows. God judges sin with more sin. Can I tell you something today? This is what's happening in our culture. The reason we see sin tolerated and nurtured and even protected is that we allowed it in the first place. The wages of sin have become more sin. Understand that when you look around you and see sin tolerated, nurtured and protected. When you see that, that's not the crime. It's the punishment. That should cause us to have compassion toward the people we see. God has judged sin with more sin.

Let me ask you a question: Has God done that in your life? Are there sins you tolerate, and nurture, and protect? Are there sins you don't even see any more? Have you lost your sensitivity, your fear of that sin? Be careful. The fact that you feel better about your sin may not a sign that you've grown up or that you're psychologically healthier. It may be a sign of God's

judgment. It doesn't mean you're safer. It means you're in more danger. It's important that we understand this, so that we can recognize God's work in our lives. Sometimes God judges sin with more sin.

But here's what's really important for us to know: Judgment is not all there is to Habakkuk's message. There's a completely different point he's going to make. Not only does God use sin to judge sin, God uses sin to destroy sin.

God never uses sin just to do more evil. That's not his way. He ultimately uses sin to do good. I think that's what that little tune is really all about. Remember we said the words of the Oracle are judgment and doom, but the tune of the Oracle is happy. It's a tune of blessing. We said that doesn't seem to fit, but it does, because God is going to use even the invasion and overthrow of Judah to call his people back to Himself, to be reconciled to Him. He's going to call them back into the land. They are going to follow Him more closely, and then God is going to send the Messiah, His own son, to deal with sin once for all. He's going to use sin, the sin of the Babylonians to destroy sin!

Habakkuk knows this. The other prophets had already written that it would come to pass, and that's why he says "The just shall live by faith!" He knows righteousness is coming. That's why he says "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vine though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food yet, I will rejoice in the lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior!" That's why he goes from wrestling to waiting to worshipping. He knows God is going to use the Babylonians to judge Israel's sin, but he knows more. He knows that salvation is ultimately coming! It's funny. The Apostle Paul quotes verse 5, where it says "I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told" in Acts 13, when he is speaking to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch. Only there, Paul is not talking about the Babylonians. He uses that verse to talk about the death and resurrection of Jesus. He's talking about the gospel, because the gospel is the greatest example ever of God using sin to destroy sin. Think about it. The greatest crime ever committed by humanity was the crucifixion of Jesus. He was completely innocent. He only spoke what was true. He only did what was right. He only felt love for his fellow man. He was the Son of God who became one of us eternally so that he could save us. But he was arrested without cause, and the very people who were supposed to protect God's way, the chief priests of Israel, sentenced him to death. It was a great crime. It was the ultimate example of what Habakkuk says:

For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted
- Habakkuk 1:4

It was the greatest crime, the biggest sin, the world has ever seen. That's exactly how God saved us from our sin. He used sin to destroy sin. This is God's strange way, and He uses it in our lives. He uses sin for good, because forgiveness is only for sinners. We can't receive God's salvation until we know that we can't save ourselves. Even as a Christian, sometimes it takes a little more sin, more awareness of our sin, to get us to really turn to Christ.

I've had times in my life where I sinned, and then I repented, and I actually drew very close to God because of my sin! One time I was journaling when that had happened and I wrote "Is it possible that God can draw me close to Him, when I'm being really sinful?" It was like the Holy Spirit said to me "There's no other way to draw you close. You're a sinful guy. So yes, I can use even your sin to draw you to me." I realized that God loves me so much that He uses even my sin to destroy my sin. It is God's strange and merciful way.

So how does God deal with sin in the lives of his people? He may warn us through scripture. He may convict us by his Spirit. He may chasten us through circumstances, and He may, from time to time, use more sin to judge our sin. But even when He does that, His mercy shines through. Because He doesn't just use sin to judge sin, He uses sin to destroy sin in our lives by the gospel as we turn to Him for grace.