

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Problem of Evil: Trusting God When it's the Worst”

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Habakkuk 1:1-11 and James 1:21-27 (NIV)

July 7, 2024

Today we kick off our Habakkuk series. Today’s sermon tackles **the problem of evil**. Seeing God at work can be a challenge, especially when there are injustices and hard times. Our next few sermons wrestle with: pain, loss, and hardships, even as we know from Scripture God is Almighty, reigning over everything!

The problem of evil is raised in several Biblical books, such as Job, but Habakkuk concisely explores this theme. The prophet Habakkuk is relatable. He voices some of the theological frustrations we have- maybe the ones we don’t voice. He questions God, then resolves, in the meantime, to wait patiently for God’s judgement against his antagonists.

Thematically, he compares God’s ways, over our limited understanding. He sometimes blatantly states that God seems to be unjust. He questions **how long** will God let evil triumph?

Listen to these brutally honest yet faith-filled words in Hab. 1:1-11. First the troubles then what God says and does...

The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received. ² How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save?

³ *Why do you make me look at injustice?*

Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me;

there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴ *Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.*

The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted. ⁵ “Look at the nations and watch— and be utterly amazed.

For I am going to do something in your days

that you would not believe, even if you were told.

⁶ *I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless & impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own.*

⁷ *They are a feared and dreaded people;*

they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor.

⁸ *Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk.*

Their cavalry gallops headlong; their horsemen come from afar.

They fly like an eagle swooping to devour;

⁹ *they all come intent on violence.*

Their hordes advance like a desert wind & gather prisoners like sand.

¹⁰ *They mock kings and scoff at rulers.*

They laugh at all fortified cities; by building earthen ramps they capture them.

¹¹ *Then they sweep past like the wind and go on— guilty people, whose own strength is their god.”*

Prayer: Help us, O God, to hear, retain and act upon your Word, for your will, not our own. Amen

Obviously, there's no shortage of Evil. It's done to individuals, groups, and nations. All ages. All races. Evils of: oppression, neglect, abuse, and war. Despite our nation being *unified* in celebrations this week (4th), we remember our checkered, contentious past. For example, Gettysburg when we literally let *evil get the best of us*. Americans harming Americans. Over 50,000 casualties in 3 days, during this week back in 1863.

Even the very news of EVIL acts can be so difficult to hear, especially when it feels close. Mass shootings happen in nearly every US state nowadays. It's even happened rather close to East TN. Remember the awful news of the gunman who fired at so many innocent college students in Charlottesville, VA (in 2022)?

Or the Nashville shooting at the Presbyterian elementary school (in 2023)? Or right up Kingston Pike, at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist that fateful day when Sunday worshipers had to unfortunately follow the active shooter protocol: Run, Hide, Fight? Some fled in panic to 2nd Presbyterian- killings interrupting worship!

People of faith all over the world struggle when others do all kinds of brutalities. So many tragedies during our lifetime alone, and we hear painful echoes of our: parents, grandparents, and great grandparents: "How long, O Lord, must we endure such evil?"

In the prophet's time, Habakkuk also saw such evil and turned to God. He protests about wrongdoings, even accused God for not doing anything about it. The message of Habakkuk, as a whole, reassures us, though. God IS at work, does do something about it, does suffer with victims.

Let me be very clear: when evil emerges, our sovereign God redeems his own, eventually revealing that the corrupt destroyer will itself be destroyed.

In the end, Habakkuk learns to: 1) rest in God's will, and 2) await as the ultimate Judge determines what's fair and just (NIV Study Bible Intro. P. 1386).

Remember THIS: Though there is evil, we, too, are invited to *trust* God's sovereign plan in the meantime, even when we don't understand how it will work out.

You may ask, but *how will it work out* when Presbyterians believe in "total depravity"? That means that our sin is utterly pervasive. Yes, but we don't believe that humans are totally evil. We're sinful, but we're "not so perverse, corrupt, or dangerous, that there can be no order in society, or no good purposes served." Of course, when we try, we can make individual and group decisions for good and positive ends (Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers, p. 40).

Though we're capable of good, we still suffer from evil.

It's logical to have at it with God. To take up injustices with the Lord. Haven't you done so? I have! At times, demanding an explanation concerning the course of history! Job did! (See the last 5 chapters!) Habakkuk did, too! The Psalmist addresses the fate of evildoers this way: Psalm 7 says, "whoever is pregnant with evil conceives trouble and gives birth to disillusionment; the trouble they cause coils on them; their violence comes down on their own head.

Habakkuk exhibits a wonderful and strong faith that dares God to be God. He cried out, and we can cry out, "How long, O Lord?" Fair question to ask. Pleading with God doesn't mean doubt or lack of faith. It's asking the Creator to *take notice*.

After Habakkuk complains, God compassionately replies. God shows piety and is sympathetic. God doesn't belittle and isn't hard of hearing. God is always watching out for us. His "eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me."

God commands to **look** at the answer; not hear, but look. Maybe in today's world, God's equivalent response would come as a series of pictures texted. Words couldn't convey it, only images. God invited the prophet to notice how he sovereignly rules. God shows he has everything under control. God proves his power is limitless, displaying that a foreign country, unknowingly, figures into God's larger plan.

Habakkuk, criticizes God, then God replies, "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe... I am raising up the [terrible] Babylonians, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own." Even though we don't see the long-range plan of how a terrible nation could be used for any good, God can make it be the case. In Habakkuk 2:8, God assures the prophet by plainly saying that "those who plunder many nations will themselves be plundered." (Archeological Study Bible, p. 1504).

Our true theological challenge with the problem of evil is living "*in the meantime*"- in the time between: God's promises and God's fulfillment of those promises... in the season of *waiting*.

We know the world isn't what it's supposed to be. We know we are not what we're supposed to be either. "We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

In faith we trust and give thanks to our Savior who makes all things well. We keep watching and waiting **in the meantime**. We get urges of the Holy Spirit to be difference-makers. Even as we're doing so, we sometimes question, "How long, O Lord?"

Evil did not dissolve or end when Jesus came. Most certainly, Jesus proved, on the CROSS, God overcame: sin, death, and evil, but evil remains for a while longer. Jesus taught his disciples to *love instead of hate*, to overcome the temptation to retaliate, rather turn the other cheek.

Peter, who Jesus said he'd build his Church upon, teaches in 1 Peter 3, "Do not repay *evil with evil* or *insult with insult*. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing, for the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." We're obviously not following Jesus or Peter's advice completely. God is probably crying out, "How long?" How long before we obey?

Frederick Buechner, somberly, notes that Christianity "ultimately offers no theological solution [to the problem of evil]. It merely points to the cross and says that, practically speaking, there is no evil so dark and so obscene, but that God can turn it to good" (Beyond Words, p. 104).

While we watch and wait "in this time in between," let's trust God has begun his reign but not yet completed it. Trust the Holy Spirit to work through us. Trust, as we're fed for the journey at the Communion Table, we get a glimpse of God's kingdom today, but will be able to see clearly in God's perfect timing.

Because we know this Prince of Peace, we KNOW, at least, 3 takeaways. We know, with God's help: 1) we wait patiently and trustingly in Almighty God to guide us through love, and 2) we may struggle but we believe our sovereign God will be judge of justice and not allow evil to go unpunished, and 3) we participate as a beacon of hope as God's good light still shines in the darkness.

Friends, do you want to be known for your evils, or for being a light?