

The Rise and Fall of Wickedness

Habakkuk 1:12-2:20

We've been studying the book of Habakkuk and talking about how when we are going through bad circumstances for an extended period of time it can feel like God doesn't see or doesn't care. But we saw last week that he does. He knows exactly going on and he's always at work, doing things beyond our ability to see. And that gives us comfort and reassurance.

But just because he's working doesn't mean that things are going to get better. Sometimes bad circumstances don't go away and things go from bad to worse. So even though we know God is working it can be overwhelming because it can feel like darkness and evil is having a hay day and God seems to just let it happen. It can feel like he's never going to step in and just let it go on forever. It can feel like the darkness is never going to lift. Bad people seem to get away with it and wickedness seems to grow stronger and stronger.

You probably remember the massive tsunami that hit coastlands all along the Indian Ocean in 2004. A huge underwater earthquake that measured 9.3 on the Richter scale created a series of gigantic waves that reached 100 feet tall in some places. To give you an idea of how big that is, someone created this image (picture). That tsunami was an unstoppable force that swept entire communities into the ocean. About 230,000 people lost their lives in 14 different countries.

Sometimes the wickedness around us feels like it's turning into a growing tidal wave (picture). It feels like it's just going to keep growing and growing and will just swallow up everything in its path. And when it feels like that, it can also feel like there isn't any hope. Bad things are just going to keep getting worse and worse.

I think that's how Habakkuk felt about what was happening to him. God showed him that he heard his prayers and he was doing things beyond his ability to see. But what he was doing was raising up the Chaldean army – the Assyrians and then the Babylonians to bring judgment upon Judah. So things weren't going to get better. They were going to go from bad to worse and now Habakkuk had to wrestle with some new questions: "How could you let this happen? Is this going to go on forever? Is evil going to eventually consume the whole world?" Every

Christian has to grapple with questions related to God and evil and that's what the passage does this morning.

Read Habakkuk 1:12-2:1.

¹² Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. ¹³ You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he? ¹⁴ You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. ¹⁵ He brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad. ¹⁶ Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich. ¹⁷ Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever? ¹ I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

So after hearing about the Babylonian army in the preceding verses, Habakkuk begins this section by remembering God's covenant with Judah. He remembers God's promises to them as he writes: "We shall not die." He knows that the covenant God made with them was an everlasting covenant and he will not totally destroy the people of Judah forever, and he recognizes God would raise up the Babylonians to bring judgment and reproof.

But in verse 13 you can see this is all very troubling to him. If God is pure and holy and set apart from evil and wrong, how can he allow the wicked Babylonians to trample the nations? They are even more evil than the nations they're destroying. How can a righteous God have anything to do with them? Isn't he supposed to stand against them?

He finishes with a metaphor in verses 14-17 to express his troubled confusion. The metaphor is that of a fisherman dragging up net after net full of fish from the sea to bring them to market. He is grossly overfishing, and nothing can avoid his nets. He catches everything he goes after. He is exhilarated with his success and worships his nets because of all the riches and prosperity they have brought him, and he continues without restraint.

That fisherman is the wicked Babylonian king and his hooks, net, and dragnet are his unstoppable army. He mercilessly devours nation after nation. Everyone in his path is destroyed and he is exhilarated by his success. He worships the might of his army for by it he has amassed great wealth and prosperity. And he shows no signs of stopping. Habakkuk completes the metaphor with his troubled question: Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?

Habakkuk saw the Babylonians like a growing tidal wave in the distance and was deeply troubled by what God was doing: “How can you raise up such a wicked nation to bring about your judgment? How can you punish evil by using worse evil?” And he wonders, “Will it ever come to an end?” He sees the escalating chaos and misery of the world and wonders if the darkness of the Babylonians will go on forever. If you see a tidal wave is coming and there’s no way of escaping, I would imagine you would be overcome by fear and dismay. What can you do against such an unstoppable force? And if God is actually somehow behind it, what hope do you have?

This is the same confusion I think most Christians have as they try to understand the existence and growing strength of evil in the world. How God can be so powerful yet allow evil to exist? Even more than that, how can God let it grow and prosper?

So Habakkuk is in desperation before the Lord and waits to see how the Lord will answer.

Habakkuk 2:2-5

²And the Lord answered me: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. ³For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. ⁴“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. ⁵“Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples.”

So God begins by assuring Habakkuk that the things he is about to show him are guaranteed to happen. There would be a time of waiting, but they would come to pass. He then confirms that the Babylonian king is very wicked. His soul is puffed

up with pride. But Habakkuk should not lose heart. Notice the little phrase that sticks out in verse 4: “but the righteous shall live by his faith.” God calls him to live by faith. Even in the face of a tyrannical warlord, there is hope. And then he begins to show him why.

He says the arrogance of the Babylonian king will turn against him, it’s like wine that will consume him because he can’t stop drinking – he never has enough. He’s never satisfied in his conquests and must have more and more. His greed is like the grave (or Sheol), like death, always claiming more and more victims. He never has enough, so he continues to wage war against the nations. And at first you would think this is really bad – it looks like his evil is just getting worse and worse – growing like a tidal wave. But God shows Habakkuk that’s not going to happen. His wickedness will come crashing in on itself.

Habakkuk 2:6-11

⁶ Shall not all these take up their taunt against him, with scoffing and riddles for him, and say,

“Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own— for how long?— and loads himself with pledges!” ⁷ Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. ⁸ Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them. ⁹ “Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm! ¹⁰ You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. ¹¹ For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond.

So because of his greed and the fact that he fought against so many nations, the survivors of those nations will eventually outnumber and overpower the Babylonian king. So his unrestrained greed and wickedness will not result in world conquest. In fact, it’s the very thing that will bring about his demise. His own lust for more will be his downfall. He will be destroyed by his own wickedness and his empire will come crashing down on his head. What looked like an unstoppable tidal wave to Habakkuk would actually come crashing down on itself.

I think this is an example of what happens with wickedness time and time again. There is no tidal wave of wickedness that will go on forever because wickedness

ends up destroying itself. It grows in strength for a while, but then it brings about its own destruction. You see that here and I think you also see it in what Paul writes in Romans 1.

In Romans 1:18 he writes: *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”* So God’s wrath against those who are unrighteous is being revealed – and what does it look like? Paul describes the progression of God’s wrath in the following verses. Verse 21 says: *“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”* So the first stage of God’s wrath against the unrighteous is that their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts are darkened. We usually look at that as if evil is just getting stronger, but Paul tells us this growing darkness is actually part of God’s judgment. He’s allowing them to be further entrenched in sin.

The next stage is in verse 24: *“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.”* So here, as an act of further judgment, God gives them over more fully to their fleshly cravings and perversity. Again, we just see the growing darkness, but the growing darkness is actually part of God’s wrath. And as they continue to descend into darkness, verse 26 says: *“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.”* Again God is giving them over more and more to their own wickedness and its consequences. And finally, in verse 28 it says: *“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”* And verse 32: *“Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”*

Wickedness always comes crashing in on itself. And this doesn’t happen by accident, it happens because God is behind it and that’s what we see in the next few verses.

Habakkuk 2:12-14

¹² *“Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity!*

¹³ *Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire, and*

nations weary themselves for nothing? ¹⁴ For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

I used to think that verse 13 said “It is not from the Lord,” as if it let God off the hook when it came to the evil actions of the Babylonian king. But it does exactly the opposite. It actually says, “Is it not from the Lord...” which puts God as sovereign and in control of what was happening. Verse 13 describes the rise to power of the Babylonian king and how his conquests are like the work people put in to make a fire – all that work to make a fire, but as quickly as it flares up, it dies back down again. The Babylonian army wearied itself to conquer nations and in the end it would result in nothing for them. Why? Because God is in control. He raised up that army to bring judgment on the wicked nations, but when their purpose was complete they too would be conquered and come to nothing. Evil and darkness will not be allowed to go on forever. God is in control and he will prevail. For as it says in verse 14: *“The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”*

The chapter ends with further pronouncements of judgment against the Babylonian king for his wickedness and makes it clear that God is the one who would bring that judgment.

God made it clear to Habakkuk that there would be times when bad things would happen, and there would even be times when things would go from bad to worse. But darkness and evil would not be allowed to go on forever because God is in control. There are times when he will allow evil and darkness to rise up to carry out purposes that are beyond our ability to see, but at some point that wickedness comes to a collision with God, and God always wins.

So I believe his call for each of us goes back to that little phrase in chapter 2 verse 4: “the righteous shall live by faith.” God is in control. He sees you, he knows exactly what’s going on in your life, he knows exactly the problems that you are facing. Those problems are not beyond the realm of his control. Darkness and evil will not prevail. God is in control and his glory will cover the earth.