

NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON- 21st January 2024 am

TITLE: "God's sovereignty over evil" TEXT: Habakkuk 1 verses 1-11

Series: Lament and Faith in the Sovereign God part 1

Scripture references from the ESV

Habakkuk 1:1-11 The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

Habakkuk's Complaint

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.

The LORD's Answer

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!"

**How can a good God, who is morally perfect and absolutely holy,
allow suffering and evil in the world that he governs?**

- Why doesn't God act to take out evil dictators, some of whom afflict God's own people?
- Why does God allow governments to continue to manipulate and lie?
- Why doesn't God deal with those who are greedy so that there can be an end to poverty?
- Why does God allow our children to remain unsaved when it breaks our heart?

- Why does God not deal with those in school or at work who make our life difficult?
- Why does God allow the church that bears his name to act in ways that go against his word?

When we pray and nothing changes, what does that say about prayer and what does it say about God?

Every week, we are called to Christlikeness as we hear God's word preached, and yet things are said and done that are not Christlike and sinful attitudes in our hearts remain unchanged.

How long should we go on preaching the word when nothing seems to change?

What does it say about the word of God?

What does it say about God when the means he's given us to change don't appear to work?

Habakkuk was a prophet called by God to speak to God's people, Israel, and these were the kind of questions that he too wrestled with. At that time, God's people were spiritually in a very low place with a wicked ruler, Jehoiakim (vv1-4 above). Under his rule, the nation had become a place of violence, and although the prophets had preached against this and called the nation to repentance, nothing had changed. Evil just increased.

Habakkuk cannot make sense of it and questions why God doesn't hear his prayers and do something. You are in good company if you struggle with:

- what seems like unanswered prayer
- why God's word appears to be ineffective in your life, and the lives of those you love
- why God does not end the suffering and evil in the world

Throughout the centuries, many godly people in the Bible have cried out to God:

'How long, O Lord? Why, O Lord?

Even Jesus Christ, our own Saviour cried out: "My God, my God, **WHY** have you forsaken me?"

If we take God and sin seriously, we will find ourselves struggling with the problem of a good God

and evil and suffering at some point in our lives.

Habakkuk will show us what we need to do and what we can expect to experience. He shows us that

Lament, and faith in a sovereign God, is the road to joy.

As we come to rightly use lament and to trust in God even when it doesn't make sense,

God will reveal himself to us as a God who is both sovereign and good.

Then, even though none of it makes sense and suffering and evil abound, we will say with Habakkuk:

Yet will I rejoice

Joy in the midst of the hard questions of life comes as we believe that God is both good and sovereign.

- We must therefore believe that God sovereignly rules over all evil as well as the good things

Habakkuk had been praying for God to intervene in Israel, and speaking God's word into their sin, no doubt hoping that God would work to bring his people to repentance and that they would enjoy God's favour again.

God had indeed heard his prayers but he would answer them in a completely different way (vv5-6).

Habakkuk would be astounded

as God sovereignly used evil to accomplish his purposes.

We may find ourselves, as Habakkuk did, with more questions than we had before, but we must begin with God.

- God's answer to those who wrestle with him in the prayer of lament is not to explain but to **reveal himself**.

God is under no obligation to explain himself to us. Rather, he means for us to see what he is like, so that we will trust him even when his ways don't make sense to us. The key verse in Habakkuk points to this.

"Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, (speaking of the Babylonians)

but the righteous shall live by his faith. (2:4)

This verse shows us what true righteousness is, and enables us to rejoice even when life sucks and God's ways don't make sense. It helps us navigate through this prophecy and is used three times in the New Testament.

- We can respond to God with pride – God cannot be like this because it doesn't make sense to me or
- We can respond to God with faith – it does not make sense to me but I will trust God.

The God we are called to trust is both sovereign and good.

We can see this from three things in Habakkuk.

1. **God is sovereign.** He created everything and everything is under his ultimate control, including all the nations, as God shows Habakkuk (v6). The Chaldeans were an insignificant group, yet they defeated both Assyria and Egypt, eventually making Babylon their capital city, hence being known as the Babylonians. They only achieved what they achieved because God was sovereignly giving them the power to do it.

It was astounding that God was raising them up to deal with the evil of his own people, and Habakkuk grasps this point. **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. (1:12).** They did not establish themselves. God established them. He raised them to become instruments in his hand to judge and reprove his own people.

2. **The Chaldeans are evil (vv6-11).** They stole what wasn't theirs to take, had no regard for international justice and did what they saw was right in their own eyes. They had no fear of kings, and city walls could not stop them.

God himself described them thus: **Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!" (v11).** In Chapter 2, God pronounces his woes against them and we discover that they are thieves, murderers, drunkards, and immoral. They used their captives as slaves, and worshipped a pantheon of gods of their own imagination. History books confirm that all this is true of the Chaldeans.

- God has raised up an unspeakably evil nation to bring judgement against his own people – does that mean God is evil?

Habakkuk did not think so. Even though he could not understand what God was doing, he still believed that:

3. God is holy. ¹²Are 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. ¹³You 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? (1:12-13)

Habakkuk might not understand how a holy God can use an evil nation to accomplish his purposes, but he will not charge God with being unholy. He is able to affirm that

God is sovereign over that evil nation and also holy.

This will raise questions (to be looked at in the next weeks), but we need to hold these two truths in tension, because

We do not believe things because they are logical.

Rather, we believe something because God has said it.

God has clearly told us that he has raised up the Chaldeans, that they are an evil nation and he is still a

holy God and unstained by their sin.

The place where we can begin to make sense of this is in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

a) The cross shows us God can handle evil and remain holy. How is this possible?

Sinful human beings can handle radioactive uranium and produce useful energy without being contaminated by it so it should not surprise us

that an infinitely pure and good God can handle evil and not be contaminated by it.

The cross shows us that he is able to do this. In fact, if he could not do so, then none of us could be saved from our sin and evil. Paul tells us: **For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** (2 Cor 5:21). In some way, Christ bore our sin in his body, and made atonement for it, without being contaminated by our sin. He remained the sinless Son of God, so that we might have the debt of our sin cancelled and be reconciled to God.

b) The cross shows us God can use evil to accomplish good. When Peter preached to the Jews who had cried out for Jesus to be crucified, he said to them: **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)**

Peter does not excuse the evil they did – these men were guilty before God – but he also acknowledges God’s sovereignty. The men were acting with evil intent but at the same time, behind the scenes, God was also sovereignly acting according to his pre-determined plan.

- The intention of evil men was to get rid of Jesus
- The intention of God (from before the world began) was to save humanity.

In the cross, we see both the sovereignty of God and the goodness of God. God was working his purposes out through the evil choices men were making. His plan of salvation came about because God is good.

- God is good in that he is holy
- God is good in that he works out these things for our eternal good

We probably now have more questions than answers, but we have entered Habakkuk’s world, and the good news is that, despite all his questions, he ends up rejoicing in God. God’s wider answer to our questions, in itself a question, is this (2:4):

**“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, (speaking of the Babylonians)
but the righteous shall live by his faith. (2:4)**

- Will we respond to God with pride, setting ourselves above God? We do this when we say I don’t understand so I won’t believe it
- or
- Will we humble ourselves and respond to God with faith? We do this when we say it does not make sense to me but I will trust this God who is sovereign over both evil and good.

Does it matter? Yes – for two reasons:

- 1) The glory of God is at stake
- 2) For our assurance. If we can rest our souls in the assurance that God is sovereign over both evil and good, then we can have the assurance that the evil is not out of

control. Whatever is happening to us and around us is accomplishing God's good purposes for our lives. We can say with the Apostle Paul:

**And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good,
for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28)**