

Minor Prophets' Major Gripes, VIII

Habakkuk on Necessary Evil

August 3, 2003

DOUBTING HABAKKUK

We've gone through: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah and Nahum. Today is Habakkuk (huh-BAK-kuk).

- Habakkuk has been called the doubting Thomas of the OT.
- He's the only Minor Prophet whose gripe is against God.

After the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.) Habakkuk's nation (Judah) came under attack from the cruel and ruthless Babylonians. Habakkuk couldn't understand God's inactivity.

How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. - Habakkuk 1:2-3 NIV

Habakkuk wasn't afraid to tell God how he felt; and God wasn't offended by his honesty. And God gave Habakkuk an answer.

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. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. - Habakkuk 1:5-6 NIV

And the Lord did just that:

1. The Babylonians rose to incredible power.
2. They conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem.
3. Egypt, a world power, was crushed almost overnight.

But let's sum up Habakkuk's and God's conversation thus far:

1. Habakkuk asks: "If You're good and holy, how can You tolerate injustice, violence, and wrong stuff?"
2. God answers: "You ain't seen nothin' yet! Things are about to get much worse. What do ya think of that?"

Now things get interesting; Habakkuk basically says, "Huh?!"

O LORD, are you not from everlasting? ... O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? – Habakkuk 1:12-13 NIV

Habakkuk was having a real problem with an all-powerful, all-loving God permitting and even working through evil. There are only four conclusions a prophet can come to:

1. Maybe He's not all-powerful and can't put an end to evil.
2. Maybe He's not all-loving and doesn't care enough to put an end to evil - or worse, He has a dark side, and enjoys it.
3. Maybe He doesn't exist and we have no hope against evil.
4. Maybe somehow, pain, suffering and evil are a strategic part of an all-powerful, all-loving creator's plan.

In chapter two, the Lord gives Habakkuk a revelation of the punishment that awaits the Babylonians. But he premises it with two lessons for Habakkuk – and every believer.

For the revelation awaits an **appointed time**; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay. See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright – but the righteous will live by his faith ... - Habakkuk 2:3-4 NIV

APPOINTED TIME

- The first lesson has to do with appointed time.

God's timing always seems to be off a bit. He doesn't come to my rescue as quickly as I'd like; and evil people never seem to get punished swiftly and fairly.

- To be honest, the Lord seems to take His sweet time.
- God doesn't operate on our timetable ... literally!

We operate within a system of space and time. A 45-year-old who commits murder may only have 30 years left in him; to let him enjoy even a couple years may seem like injustice. God isn't confined to a timetable. He operates in a system of eternity. No one is ever out of His grasp ... ever; forever and ever. Therefore:

- God doesn't regard the passing of time as a motive for action

God reassures Habakkuk that justice will certainly come and will not delay, according to what best benefits His plans for humanity; but He has a 10,000 year perspective.

IT'S ONLY BY FAITH

The problem isn't with God and His ways, but with our limited understanding of the complexity of His ways.

However, there is a key to understanding the permission of evil, and it lies in the second lesson God gave to Habakkuk:

See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright — but the righteous will live by his faith
... - Habakkuk 2:4 NIV

The reason an all-loving, all-powerful creator would permit evil is right here: He doesn't desire forced love from His creation.

If you want to be unrighteous – you can be. By creating rational creatures with free will, God opened the door for evil to exist.

Q: Does that mean that a good God created evil?

A: No. he created a perfect world with children made in His image. It was their free choice to do as they pleased.

- God created the fact of freedom; we perform the act of freedom

If you have a rebellious teenager, you can choose to love them, confront them, set boundaries with them, and wait for them.

- But you wouldn't consider a frontal lobotomy for them!
- Well, you might *consider* it ... you just wouldn't do it.

It'd be a much quicker fix. But the draw back is loosing their ability to choose to love you and to experience your love.

It's precisely because God loves us so much, and desires us to *freely* love Him back that evil is allowed to exist.

- Evil cannot be destroyed without destroying freedom

Maybe that's why Hell has to be eternal ... perhaps it has to forever be possible to choose to leave His presence in order for our ongoing expressions of love and trust to have real value.

If this is so, then evil has a precious purpose that can never be *destroyed*. However, it can be *defeated*.

- And it will be defeated for those who choose to love and trust in the Lord; in other words, “those who live by faith.”

But, just because it isn't defeated according to our timetable doesn't mean it won't ever be. I truly believe that on the day we see Him face to face we will fully comprehend that creating creatures with the ability to love and be loved in return was worth all the necessary evil.

A COUPLE MORE THOUGHTS

And there are two things we can't know until that day:

1. How much evil He held back for our benefit
2. How much good resulted from the evil He allowed

Here's a great C.S. Lewis quote (from *A Grief Observed*):

What do people mean when they say, 'I am not afraid of God because I know He is good'? Have they never been to a dentist?

Pain and suffering serve to get our attention, and to remind us of the realities of this fallen world and just how much we need to rely on our Great Physician.

Habakkuk wanted to understand everything. But God asked him to trust that which he couldn't make sense out of. Chapter three (the final chapter) is filled with Habakkuk's praise.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. – Habakkuk 3:17-18 NIV

Like Habakkuk, we cannot see all that God is doing, and we don't know all that the Lord is going to do.

- But we are assured that He is all-powerful and all-loving.