

Why is God Doing This?

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Well, I don't know how many of you know your Scottish philosophers, but you do not need to know much philosophy at all for this problem to have troubled you. In the 1700s, there was a Scottish philosopher called David Hume. If you've been to Edinburgh, you might have passed this statue. He lived at the height of what's known as the Scottish Enlightenment.

It was a time of huge kind of social and technological change. But another thing that was changing was people's view of God. And David Hume famously put into words what I guess a lot of people struggled with at the time, and lots of people struggle with still today. The God of the Bible claims to be sovereign and benevolent, that is all-powerful and all-good. But if he is all-powerful and all-good, why is there evil and suffering? Here's what Hume wrote in 1779.

Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Why then is there evil? Why then is there evil?

He might have put the problem better than we could, but it hardly takes a philosopher, does it, to wonder, if God is God, why then is there evil and suffering in his world? It's helpful for us to step back and see that the problem we're faced with tonight in Scripture is nothing new. The problem of evil is an age-old problem for humanity. And it's the very same question that we find God's own prophet asking here. Just look at verse 13 there. He says to God, your eyes are too pure to look on evil.

You cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? Why God? Last time we heard God assure Habakkuk that he is indeed in charge of the world that he is indeed in charge of the world, even when the prophets struggle to see how. This time Habakkuk is asking, well, if you are in charge and you are good, you're too pure to look on evil. Why then does evil win the day and wrong go unpunished?

[2 : 47] A survey was done in Australia a few years ago by the Barna Group. They asked people, if you could ask God just one question, what would it be? And it won't surprise you to know that it was this question, why does God allow pain and suffering in his world? I imagine that David Hume might be surprised, maybe a bit disappointed that people want to ask God that question. I suppose he thought that the problem of evil disproved God's existence, but here's the thing that Hume didn't get.

Most people like Habakkuk know instinctively that God is the only one you can turn to with that problem. And here is why most people are like Habakkuk rather than Hume. We know that evil and suffering are only a problem if God is real. Evil is only a problem if God is there. A more recent atheist, Richard Dawkins, recognized that. He said, here's a famous quote, in a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, he says, some people are going to get hurt. Other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. What's the problem? He says, take God out of the equation, and you end up saying that pain is no longer a problem because evil is no longer a category. There is no good or bad, there is only chance. You may well suffer, says Dawkins, but not because something is wrong in the world, simply because that is how it goes. You see, evil, pain, suffering, this is not a problem unless there is a God. Do you know there are no atheists at the graveside? Do you know that? You cannot shed a tear in the face of death unless death is a problem.

And death is only a problem if there is a sovereign and benevolent God ruling over the universe. Our problem with pain and suffering, our sense that something must be wrong, it only makes sense if there is a all-powerful, all-good God. That is why our hearts cry out at wrongdoing. And so God is the only one it makes sense to ask, why? And so tonight, Habakkuk invites us to let that great problem, that weight upon our hearts, that cry within us, lead us to the one who holds the whole

world in his hands. And hear his voice speaking into the darkness of our world, of our lives. The structure of this bit is the same as last time. First Habakkuk's complaint, then God's response, beginning with the prophet's complaint, God, why are you doing this? Why are you doing this? We left Habakkuk last time reeling in horror at God's word. If you remember, even just look back in your Bible, Habakkuk complained that

God's own kingdom was full of wickedness and violence. He saw his law being ignored, the most vulnerable paying the price. And so he asked God, God, do you see what's going wrong? And what are you going to do about it? But he got way more than he bargained for by way of a response. God said, yes, he does know what is going on. And yes, he is doing something about it. And his answer to evil in his kingdom was to raise up a more evil kingdom, the Babylonian empire, to come and sort it out.

Now, if anything, God's solution sounded worse than the original problem. How can God solve evil with more evil? I don't know how many sermons you've heard in which the preacher has told you at the end to come with a complaint. Did God's answer satisfy you? He said, if you came back tonight, we would put the question back to God. I hope you have come with a complaint in you. Because Habakkuk was not satisfied, see the turmoil in his heart in verses 12 and 13. Lord, are you not from everlasting?

[7 : 21] My God, my Holy One, you will never die. Lord, you have appointed them to execute judgment. You, my rock, have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? There's the problem. He sees who God is, everlasting, pure, holy. He understands what God has said. But if God is good, why is he getting his hands dirty in the evil of this world? It would be much simpler and more satisfying, wouldn't it, to hear God say in the words of the Iron Lady, we don't negotiate with terrorists. Wouldn't we rather God had said that? You'd be long for that kind of moral clarity, cutting through the messiness of our world. If God can do anything, why is he doing this? In this seemingly complicated and seemingly compromising way? It's a question I'm sure most, if not all of us, have asked at some point. If we are not in fact asking it now, God, why are you doing this? Why are you doing it this way? Why is that?

We live in a world of deeply complex problems that don't often have easy solutions on the world stage in our own lives, so much so that when we see suffering and pain in the news or feel it in our own hearts, we might be tempted to feel that there is no plan or purpose or order to any of it. And perhaps we feel that it's only people kind of out there who can say that. Surely that's not a very Christian thing to say that we feel. But that is what the world began to feel like to Habakkuk.

That is what it seemed like to God's prophet. Look, at the end of chapter one, he says, you have made people like fish in the sea, like the sea creatures that have no ruler.

Now, you know, don't you, what I'm going to say about the sea? What am I going to tell you about the sea? What is the sea in the Hebrew imagination? The sea is a world of disorder. It is a realm that resists and pushes back against God's good rule, his order over his creation. And so it's as if he's saying the disorder of the sea has washed over the land so that now all humanity has become as chaotic, as unruly as the sea creatures. See what he's saying? In this world that Habakkuk is looking at, there is no rule of law. There is only the rule of the strong over the weak. There is no such thing as right or wrong. There is only power and violence. In this watery world, the power of Babylon is like a trawler, churning through the waves. The wicked pulls all of them up with hooks and catches them in his net. The strength of evil is unstoppable as a net being pulled through the ocean, catching everything in its path. In fact, so successful is this power that they worship the net itself, Luke.

[10 : 39] They sacrifice to it, burn incense to it. It's a strange thing to picture, isn't it, worshiping a net, but it illustrates the stupidity of what they're actually doing. Because look, their net is a symbol of what in verse 11? What is their God? What do they serve? What do they worship? Their own strength is their God. They worship their own power. They worship themselves. In this underwater world where there is no right and wrong, the strongest have put themselves in place of God. In proclaiming that God is dead, they haven't stopped worshiping, have they? They've simply started worshiping themselves in his place.

And you don't need me tonight to stand here, do you? And map this onto our world. This is our underwater world, isn't it? Look at the world, a world that has cast off God and his word and has been thrown into chaos and violence and self-worship. But now look at the first three words in verse

14. Here's the complaint, okay? You have made.

You have made. Don't you know, God, you're presiding over this anarchy. The world has come undone on your watch. Where is good and evil? Where is justice? Who is going to come and put these wrongs right? Who's ever going to throw the book at the wicked? Aren't you going to do that? Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy? Is this simply how it is, God, from now on?

Studies have shown over the last several decades a steady rise in the level of anxiety in our general population. So much so, increasingly couples are deciding not to have children for fear of what the next 10 or 20 years might hold for the next generation.

And with this vision of the world and seeing what we see of the world, is it any wonder people are ruled by fear? It's a very real question for us as Christians living in the world. Is this now simply the world that we live in? Is this the world the way it is? Well, if you feel that way, if you think that way, if you are tempted to go down that road, know, friends, that God's prophet Habakkuk got there long before you did. Here's Habakkuk's watery vision in modern English. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. Some of you will recognize those as the words of Richard Dawkins again. But friends, this passage tells us that God knows that that is sometimes how the world feels to us. That God knows that our pain in this world is a real problem.

[14:01] God's Word does not say that the problem is only in our heads. He knows it hurts. He knows it is wrong. He knows it is complicated. He shows us that himself in his Word. It's no surprise to him. He recognizes the struggle in our hearts. He acknowledges the question, why, God, do you let this stuff happen? Why do you do it this way? God got there long before we did. And so do we, like Habakkuk, do we bring our dissatisfaction to him? Where do we take those feelings of helplessness that the world has spun out of control? What do you do with that? Does it keep you awake at night?

Do you lament it with those in your home? Do you bring it to the God of the universe? Notice that with that sense of the world falling apart around him, Habakkuk still calls God, my God, my Holy One, my Rock. He is still talking to you, God, about it.

And at the start of chapter 2, with all of that ringing in his ears, we find him watching and waiting for what God will say. I will stand at my watch and station myself on the rampart. I will look to see what he will say to me and what answer I am to give to this complaint. Friends, when darkness veils his lovely face, that is the only thing that it makes sense to do. Knowing God does not make us immune from pain in this world. But knowing God gives us a place to go with that pain. We know in our guts that there is such a thing as right and wrong. And so we turn to the creator and king of the universe and we watch and wait for his reply. I wonder tonight, are you watching to see what he will say? Are the eyes of your heart straining to see God through the darkness of this world? Let's see, secondly, then, what God replies. Habakkuk has asked, why are you doing this? God replies, you can trust me with the world. You can trust me. Now, lots of you take notes during sermons. I know for some people, at least, note-taking does at least two things. Obviously, it helps you remember what has been said. You get it down on paper. But it can also help us to listen well to what is being said. I know for me, if there's something I definitely cannot forget, I need to get it written down. It needs to be recorded in the calendar. Well, God is about to say something that he does not want us to miss. Write down the revelation, he says, verse 2. Make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. So if he's saying, okay, stop what you're doing, pick up a pen, and listen closely. Write this down. In fact, write it down so someone else can run with it and take it to where it needs to get to. This is, in fact, how a gospel would go out in the ancient world. Good news.

Something would happen. It would be given to messengers who would run to the towns, the cities, and villages around to share the good news there. That is what verse 2 is describing. This is a message God does not want us to miss. Listen closely, he says. We need to listen because, verse 3, what is being revealed isn't ready yet. You need to listen closely because it's not here for you to see or to touch. What God is sending out is the publicity, not the event, because what he is revealing waits for an appointed time. It speaks of the end, Luke, and it won't be proved false.

[18:05] Now, when Jesus was here, he spoke about the end. And when he did, people often wanted to know, didn't they, desperately as we do, when will this stuff happen? When will it be, Lord?

Well, Jesus famously said this, about that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not the Son, but only the Father. Therefore, he said, keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

Keep watch because you do not know. It's not time yet, but it's coming. So watch. You might want to ask, well, how long? Even give us a time frame. Is it short, medium, or long term?

And Jesus says later in Revelation, I am coming soon. But we know, we heard from Peter last time, didn't we, that God's soon isn't necessarily the same as our soon. He stands in a different relationship to time than us. With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day. And all of that helps, I think, with the paradox of the Christian life. But the paradox of verse 13, he says, it lingers, but it will not delay. It's soon, but we're still waiting. At that tension, that paradox, soon, but waiting, that is a tension that the Bible is not embarrassed by.

It leans into that tension, and it says to us, therefore, wait. You do not know, so watch, so wait. And the point of the Revelation is, as you have guessed, in Paul's words in Acts 17, that God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice. That is the end. That's what he does not want us to miss. And in the confusion, the grayness, the messiness of this world, he wants us to trust him with the weight of the world. He wants us to trust him with the end of the world. He has written this down so that we would not lose faith in God in our suffering, but wait and watch for the end that God has promised, and not get lost or sidetracked by the dark story that this world is telling. And I will come back to that trust, that faith at the end, once we've seen more of the Revelation, because that's our take-home point, really, tonight, that the righteous shall live by faith. But in verse 5, we find a chilling description of Babylon that helps us kind of root ourselves back into Habakkuk's world. That's where we want to be, isn't it? Look, he is as greedy as the grave. Like death, he's never satisfied. He gathers to himself all the nations, takes captive all the peoples. Okay, again, this is Habakkuk's world. They are like death, he says, greedy for human life.

[21 : 13] Like a grave, they are never full. And here they come, sweeping across the world, coming for ye. And yet, here's an amazing thing, look, verse 6. The nations will mock them because of what God is revealing. It's a bit like, as I thought about it, one of those kind of timeless FA Cup matches, where some kind of League Two side turns up to Old Trafford or Anfield, and against the run of play, scores in the first half, and goes on to win a kind of surprising victory. And the fans cannot help rubbing it in, can they? Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying, woe to him. This is totally against the run of play, isn't it? Babylon is on a winning streak. They are conquering the world, and yet their enemies will say, woe to him. Just glance down the paragraphs and see five woes. Do you see that? Why woes? Why curses? Well, we don't need to spend long in these woes to see the point. The wicked will get their comeuppance. Just for example, see verse 6 and 7.

Woe to him who piles up stolen goods, who makes himself wealthy by extortion. How long must this go on? Will not your creditors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble?

Then you will become their prey. Because you have plundered many nations. Look, the peoples who are left will plunder you. You have shed human blood. You've destroyed lands, cities, and everyone in them.

Their victories, he's saying, are funded by debt and by theft. And they think they'll never have to repay what they've borrowed, what they've stolen. But the nations will come knocking, he says. You have plundered them, while they will plunder you. It's an example in history, the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires of what Jesus was saying when he said that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. You have lived with violence, you will die by violence. And so there's a sense, isn't there, here, that in God's moral universe, evil cannot win because evil has a way of consuming itself, destroying itself. It's Burr Habakkuk's underwater imagery. There will always be a bigger fish.

[23 : 41] And so in pursuing what is wrong, has not the Lord Almighty determined that the people's labor is only fuel for the fire and that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing? Is this not a comforting promise for us to rest in that people can wear themselves out on evil schemes and wicked plans, but at the end simply burn out and their work be thrown away? That is what the Lord Almighty has decided, says Habakkuk, that evil will be like a sparkler on bonfire night, that it will burn bright and hot for a short time. It will be impressive and dangerous for a few seconds, but then it will burn itself out and be thrown on the bonfire. They have raised glass after glass to their own glory and victory. But now, verse 16, the cup from the Lord's right hand is coming round to you and disgrace will cover your glory. In Scripture, that cup is the cup of God's wrath. What's this all getting

out, these five woes? Well, Christians in past generations spoke about a day of reckoning. A day of reckoning.

That is what God does not want us to miss, that whoever is winning today and whoever wins tomorrow, his justice will win in the end. That whoever's glory and reputation is spreading throughout the world or shown on our screens, it will be his glory and his reputation that will fill the world forever.

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Again, what a comforting truth that is to rest in, that that is the end of the story.

It's a big truth of the Bible, isn't it? That God works everything for his own glory. But when something goes wrong and when something terrible has happened, it's trite, it's unhelpful to say in the face of that pain, well, it's for God's glory. Maybe you wonder if that is a helpful truth, but I hope that Habakkuk is showing us that even if life isn't always that simple now, even if we can't always see God's glory in our suffering. And even if we might never know in this life quite how our circumstances have led to that day, I hope that we can see that when God is working for his glory on the canvas of world history, it frees us to trust him with the things that we cannot understand. It frees us to fear him rather than to fear the human powers that rage around us. It frees us to live by faith in his word rather than by what we see on our screens, in our streets, in the world around us. Remember the vision of the world underwater, the chaos that it represented. Well, now just read verse 14 again.

How far will his glory stretch? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. We rejoice in this at Christmas time, don't we? What is that line that we sing? Joy to the world, for his kingdom will come far as the curse is found. As far as the curse is found, that is how far God's kingdom and glory will stretch on the day of his judgment. His kingdom will stretch over the raging waters. His glory will fill the churning seas, and he will put right every wrong. These five woes promise that that is how the story ends. And that promise leaves us with two lessons here and now. One is in verse 20, and one is in verse 4. Just glance down at verse 20 first. Habakkuk has complained. God has replied. Habakkuk's complained again, and now God has spoken one more time. So what do we say next to God? What is our reply? Well, hear this. The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before him. Now we see God, God, the sovereign God, the benevolent God, seated on his throne over the world.

[28 : 29] We have heard his voice. Now what can we say? Be still, he says. Be still and know that I am God. Friends, I hope this book is helping us to learn how to bring our problems to God freely, how to complain to God about our world, about our lives, to wrestle with him in faith. But once he has spoken, once he has shown us who he is, once he has shown us what he is doing, then there is a time for silent reverence. Then there is a time for quiet trust. We all stand equal before the God of heaven and earth, and he has said he will judge all wrong. That should lift our hearts tonight, but it should also bring us low, because we know that we are not without wrong in us. Perhaps you've heard of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a man who survived eight years in a Soviet gulag in a prison camp. He later devoted his life to trying to warn of the evil of communism. And if anyone was ever qualified to point the finger at the evil in the world out there, it would be this guy. But instead, he wrote this famously. He said, the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts. The line separating good and evil passes through every human heart. Perhaps it won't surprise you to know that he was a Christian.

And before God, even this man can only stand in silence and say, not woe to them, but woe is me. I am undone. Friends, have you come to God and come undone over the evil in your own hearts? Have you stood silently before God and acknowledged your part in the global rebellion against him? Friends, before we point the finger at the evil out there, let us point the finger at the evil in here. Hear his judgment. Repent of your sin. A great day of reckoning is coming. Let all the earth be silent before him. All the earth. But take heart and trust him with that. That's verse 4. But the righteous person will live by his faith. I think faithfulness is not a great translation of this word. It's a famous verse. It's actually repeated three times in the New Testament. And every single time, do you know what it is saying? That those who are counted righteous by God live by trusting in him, depending upon him. Faithfulness, we think of doing things for God, don't we? Living rightly before him. Well, faith is simple trust, isn't it? Faith is a dependence upon God, a casting our lives upon him. And that is what Habakkuk is saying here. God is calling us to keep trusting in what our eyes can't

see.

[31 : 55] True faith is not a prayer that we prayed once, but an enduring trust in God. If we have been counted righteous in his sight, cleared of our wrong before him, then he says our lifestyle from now on is a trusting dependence on God. A day will come when evil will be no more. The Christ who died in place of sinners will come again to judge all wickedness, all evil, all unrepentant sin. The glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. And if you are hiding in Christ tonight, then you are safe in the eye of the hurricane. Do you trust him to do what he says he will do?

That is how the righteous live. Trust him to hold you there. Trust him with the world. Trust him with the story. Trust him with the end. And wait faithfully for that final day when he will judge the earth in righteousness. I'm going to ask us to take a minute before I lead us in prayer to be silent before God and bring our hearts to him and ask us in the silence to ask him in the silence to help us to trust in what he has told us tonight. And then in a moment, I'll lead us in prayer together. Let's pray.

Amen. The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before him.

Our Father, we have heard your voice. Lord, you have cut through the doubt of our hearts. You have cut through the darkness of our world. You have shed light.

Father, we pray that you would enable us to trust what you have revealed. Our Father, in the face of all that we see, all the wrong that we see all around us, all the pain that we feel in our own lives, Father, we pray, help us to trust in your justice. Help us to trust in your righteousness. That is trust in the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[34 : 50] Our Father, we come before you humbly, not proudly. Oh Lord, not pointing the finger at you, not pointing the finger at others, but coming before you as sinners saved by grace. Father, we come before you with the evil in our own hearts. Our Father, we know had not Christ died upon the cross to take your wrath, to satisfy your justice, that we would be liable on that day. Father, how we praise you, that you are the God who is both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Oh Father, let that trust not be for one day, but let it be for a lifetime. Lord, let us trust, let us rely upon him. Father, give us faith, we ask, to endure this world. For all this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.