

Is God Really in Charge?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I got ready to preach through this book, I read it through a number of times. It's very short, less than 10 minutes.

You can read it later on this evening or tomorrow to get a handle on it. But as I read it, there were two lines from two old hymns that kind of came to mind. One that we've sung already.

I don't think we sang this verse, actually, but we've sung the hymn, and another one that we'll finish with. And I kind of swithered over which line to use for the title of the series.

I decided it didn't matter because they both get to the heart of this book. Listen to these words from the hymn that we will sing at the end.

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace.

[1 : 0 0] Behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face. That's maybe a less familiar hymn to us.

Here's the one we know better. Those verses from those hymns could have been written by the prophet Habakkuk.

They very could easily have come at the end of this book because both those hymns were written by men who knew what it was to lose sight of God's face in the darkness of their circumstances and in the mystery of his ways.

They had been through times where who God is didn't seem to line up with what God was doing. And what God was doing was very painful. And perhaps you have been there.

Perhaps that's where you are now. Something has gone not the way you wanted. Something has gone wrong. And your heart says, I don't get it, God. Why are you doing this?

[2 : 2 5] Or why are you not doing that? Is this really who you are? Just look, if you would, at chapter 1, verse 13. See that question for the prophet.

He says to God, your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrongdoing. That's who God is, isn't it? But why then do you tolerate the treacherous?

Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? You see, something doesn't add up. If you are a good God, why don't you do something about the wrong in the world?

Is it that you can't? You're not in charge of the world? Is it that you won't because you're not as good as you say you are? These are very raw questions, aren't they?

To put to God, to find in our Bibles. Maybe you're wondering, is it ever right for a Christian to ask those questions? Can we talk about that in church? Well, I think God gives us permission to ask those questions by giving us this book.

[3 : 3 3] Verse 1 is really easy to skip over. But just look and think about what it's saying. A prophet receives from God, right, what he tells the people.

And this prophet is no different. He says this is the prophecy that he received. And so, this whole back and forth between the prophet and God is the prophecy that Habakkuk received from him.

Or literally, the burden that he saw. So, we could say that God gave him this burden so that he could give us this book.

It's a book that teaches us in lots of ways how to faithfully wrestle in our hearts with those questions from a place of pain. Habakkuk lived in a time where darkness veiled God's lovely face.

Where the smiling, radiant face of God, his love towards his children, was overshadowed by dark and stormy providences.

[4 : 38] You could almost say that the prophet was seeing double. He looked at God and he saw his works divorced from his character. But this book really is about God bringing those things back together for Habakkuk.

Correcting his vision so that he can look at God and see who he is and what he has done with one glance. The structure of the book tells that story.

It's a book, actually, where the headings in the NIV are more helpful than the chapter divisions. So, you can see at a glance, this book is a conversation, isn't it, between the prophet and God.

Habakkuk complains to God about what he sees. God replies to his complaint. Habakkuk then complains about God's reply. And God replies to that complaint.

Before Habakkuk finally, chapter 3, submits his heart to God and his ways. And he then prays a psalm or a song of praise and adoration to God.

[5 : 41] So, just even at a glance, you can see that this book is about a prophet on a journey from confusion to contrition, from pain to peace.

And God invites us then over these next three Sunday nights to go with him and to learn then how to see him rightly in times of darkness and trouble.

And that journey begins tonight with the question, is God really in charge? That's what's on Habakkuk's heart. Let's look at that complaint in verses 2 and 3.

How long, 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 wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me. There is strife and conflict abounds. So, you could picture, couldn't you, Habakkuk walking through the streets of a city and just watching the kind of moral fabric of the cosmos disintegrate before him, being torn to shreds.

[6 : 48] Just look at what he sees there, violence, injustice, wrongdoing, destruction, strife, conflict. This is a city tearing itself apart because it is a city at war with God.

Now, we don't know precisely when this book was written. We don't know much about Habakkuk at all, but because of the prophecy in verse 6 that we looked at, we read earlier to do with the Babylonians, it's thought to be pretty soon before the Babylonians were to invade God's kingdom.

That's what we heard about in our reading from 2 Chronicles. And we know from other books of the Bible that by that time in the history of God's kingdom, God's people were up to their necks in rebellion against him.

They had drawn up the battle lines, they had dug their trenches, and by this point there was no going back from that. And the results of that war against God was showing on the surface of society, violence, injustice, wrongdoing, or wickedness are in the streets.

This is daily life in the kingdom of God by this point in history. The cancer that had eaten away at the heart of the civilization had infected every organ and was breaking through the skin.

[8 : 11] It was staring Habakkuk in the face and he could not look away. Now some of you know that I'd actually planned originally to preach through this book last summer.

And originally what kind of inspired me to preach it was the news that we heard about the invasion of Ukraine. And I, like many of us, I assume, my heart sank at that news.

What do you do? What are we to make of that? My heart broke for the people of that land and the people involved in the fighting over that land. I wanted to ask God, why did you let that happen?

Why did you let that happen? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction, violence, strife, conflict are in the headlines.

They are on our screens. They are before our faces. Are you not looking, God? Now war is an awful, awful thing. But coming back to it, I wonder whether what Habakkuk wants us to see isn't much closer to home than that.

[9 : 22] Because this was evil that was being done not by a foreign nation at some other part of the world. It was evil being done by his own leaders in his own society on his doorstep.

So what would Habakkuk have seen if he were to walk through the streets of the cities of Scotland today? What would he see? A place where the lives of the most vulnerable, those at the very beginning and the very end of life, the unborn and the terminally ill are counted cheap and put at risk in the name of human rights.

A place where confused children with big questions are quicker to be operated on rather than counseled.

A place where women in prison are not kept safe from predatory men. Would Habakkuk not see a society at war with God and the most vulnerable in society paying the price?

Would he not cry out violence? This Hebrew word is one that we know, Hamas. Hamas. It's easy to get worked up, isn't it, about Hamas in other parts of the world.

[10 : 41] But is there not Hamas in our land? In our halls of power? In our hospitals? Does the wrongdoing we see in our own society, wrong that is celebrated in the media and fought for by our politicians, does it not make us wonder what God is doing?

Does he not watch the news? Is he unaware? Where? How can we see it's wrong and God doesn't seem to? You look, Habakkuk asked God that in verse 3.

Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? And the word tolerate there is literally look idly. So Habakkuk's complaint at heart is, do you see what I see?

Can you see what I see? Why do you have me staring at wrong day and night when you only seem to cast an eye over it now and then? See, it's only when we feel the heaviness and weight and pain of the problem that these questions really start to bite, don't they?

Real questions. Because this is not really a question, actually. It's a complaint. As the heading in our Bible suggests, Habakkuk is bringing a problem to God that he says is God's problem.

[11 : 57] He's laying it at God's feet. You, why do I cry out but you don't listen? Why do I bring problems but you don't fix them? He feels perhaps like the boss has gone home early and switched off his phone and left him with a bombshell to clear up in the office.

Can't you see what I'm dealing with? Now, is it okay for Habakkuk to complain like that to God? Well, I have a friend who says that questions like this come from one of two different places.

They can be armchair questions or wheelchair questions. That is, they can be intellectual questions that people ask from a place of comfort.

But they can also be emotional questions that people ask from a place of pain. And which is Habakkuk in here? Well, he's not the philosopher, is he? He's trying to think of reasons not to trust God.

He is the broken prophet crying out to a God who he knows is there. And friends, God knows the difference. He sees our hearts. And he knows when we're proudly pointing the finger at him and when we are painfully lifting a finger towards him.

[13 : 15] We can ask the same hard, hard questions in our prayers, either to proudly interrogate God or because we are desperate to hear his voice. Now, it needs to be said that pointing the finger at God is always wrong.

It is always wrong to accuse God of wrongdoing, but it is never wrong to seek his face so desperately that you would say things to him in prayer that you wouldn't otherwise say, or you might not say to somebody else.

We could do that to God. When we come to God in humble desperation like that, listen, there is nothing that we can say to him that would make him push us away or drop us from his sight.

God has got big hands. God has got thick skin. You can ask him your hard questions and he can take it. The important thing is that we are asking God our hard questions.

Habakkuk had real doubts, but he's wanting to hear God's answers. It shows beneath his painful questions that his faith is still in the right place. And so, friends, God gives us permission to speak to him like this.

[14 : 32] You don't be afraid when you're confused about what's going on to humbly complain to the ruler of all things. Because think of it like this. When we bring the weight of the world to God, we are recognizing his sovereignty.

Aren't we? Habakkuk is asking whether God is really still in charge, but in a way, his questions betray the answer. Because if he didn't believe that God was in charge, he wouldn't be asking him.

Now, that doesn't make Habakkuk's problem any less real. Just look at verse 4. Therefore, he says, as a result of the injustice, violence, wrongdoing, the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous, so justice is perverted. It's an incredible image, isn't it? What a dilemma. Remember, God's word isn't striding forth. It's not even limping forth through this city.

The law of God's word is paralyzed. Can't move. And remember, Habakkuk is the prophet of God's word. He is the lawyer, so to speak, of God's law.

[15 : 40] So what does he say? He's saying to God, I can't work in these conditions. God, how can you be in charge if your word is silent? It's a real dilemma, isn't it?

This is a society that needs to hear God's voice, but God's voice can't get through. Again, would Habakkuk see that problem in Scottish cities and towns and villages today?

Would he not only see it in Scottish cities, but Scottish churches today? Places where the Bible is not believed, or worse, churches in which believing the Bible is condemned.

Think of this. It was this time last year that the National Church put its support behind a bill in Holyrood that would make it a criminal offense to speak the truth in love from God's word about human sexuality.

Can you get your head around this? We live in a country where the church is calling for the silencing of God's word. Could we not say with Habakkuk, if that were all to pass, your law is paralyzed?

[16 : 55] Your word cannot go forth? How can God be in charge if he can't speak? How can God be in charge if people, if his own people, no less, can silence his word?

How can God be in charge if this violence and injustice can all go on unchallenged and unchecked? God, do you see what I see? Are you looking?

That's Habakkuk's complaint. But now let's hear God's response to Habakkuk's complaint in our second point. What a relief. That's not the question we end on.

God replies, you don't know what I know. Verses one to four are full of Habakkuk telling God what he can see. Well, God begins in verse five, Luke, by telling Habakkuk to look again.

Do you see that? Look at the nations and watch to looking words and be utterly amazed. See, when we come to God with these hard questions and with our problems, I wonder, are we prepared to have him tell us to look again?

[17 : 59] Lord, can you see what we're up against? Look again, he says. Are you prepared to hear that answer? I ask because that is how the change in Habakkuk's outlook happens in this book.

He doesn't just talk past God. He actually listens to what God replies. He looks where God tells him to look for answers. So what does God say here?

Can he deal with this problem? Can he deal with our problems, with the wrongs that we see today? And if so, how can he? Well, God is quite open, isn't he?

And he's unapologetic about the fact that what he's doing isn't anything that Habakkuk could have ever imagined in a million years. Look, he says, for I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe even if you were told.

I could tell you what I'm about to do, he says, but you wouldn't get it. And here it is, verse six. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own.

[19 : 06] So here's God's reply. God says to Habakkuk that he is going to deal with the evil in the land. He is going to sweep away the wickedness, but he's going to do it by raising up an even greater evil in the Babylonian empire.

Just feel the weight of that answer. Your jaws should have dropped. What? Be astounded, says God.

Be utterly amazed at this. It's hard for us maybe to kind of get our heads around what this situation is, but a few years ago, me and a friend visited a few cities in Europe.

One of the places we went was Budapest. And I didn't know this before we went, but during the Second World War, Hungary was ruled by its own fascist dictatorship called the Arrow Cross Party up until the place was liberated by the Soviet Union.

And so Hungary came under a communist dictatorship. And there's a museum in Budapest called the House of Terror because the same building was used as the headquarters of both regimes.

[20 : 20] And one of the great tragedies of the history of countries like that is that the use of that building didn't change. So the basement was still a torture chamber and the filing cabinets were still full of evil plans.

In fact, in one room, there was a kind of turntable with the uniforms of both regimes mounted on it, spinning round and round to symbolize the sense in which all that changed in Hungary were the uniforms of the people who were committing the acts of terror.

In this country, what I learned in history anyway was that the Second World War ended with peace, but in so many places in the world, it ended with just more terror.

And so if you were to put yourself in Hungary in the year 1945, you prayed to God. There are many Christians in Hungary no doubt they would have prayed to God to take away the evil in their land, to sweep away this wicked government.

And then you hear on the radio, you read in the news that God is answering your prayers. He is going to deliver you from the hands of this regime. The government will fall, but God is going to do it by bringing in an even bigger regime, a world superpower to pick up where the old regime left off.

[21 : 46] How would you feel to see the tanks of the Red Army rolling into your city, into your town? How would you feel? Bewildered? Confused?

That is God's answer to Habakkuk. You don't think I see the wrong in the land. I do, he says, and I am raising up the Babylonians to come and deal with it.

You thought verses 2 to 4 sounded bad. How about verses 6 to 11? They are a feared and dreaded people, verse 7. They are a law to themselves and promote their own honor.

They are, we would say, the apex predators in the food chain. Look at verse 8. They are on the hunt. Horses swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves. At dusk, they fly like an eagle swooping to devour.

Or another picture. They are a desert wind, verse 9, and you are the sand. These are pictures of just unstoppable power and force and speed and ferocity.

[22 : 47] God is foretelling what we heard in our reading from 2 Chronicles earlier. And it would have put everyone who heard it into a cold sweat.

God is saying that the wickedness you see is a molehill compared to this mountain that is coming. So is God in charge? Well, yes.

He certainly is. But not in the way that we thought he was. God, when we prayed for evil to be dealt with, that's not quite what we meant.

We wanted evil to be overcome with good, not more evil. If you have questions about that, which I hope you do and you should, come back next week and hear Habakkuk's complaint and what God will say to him about it.

But for now, let's just sit in this tension and with this dilemma and think, what does God's reply here at this point tell us?

[23 : 51] Well, it teaches us, doesn't it, that God is not any less in charge simply because he's not doing what we want or in the way that we would want him to do it.

You have said before from the pulpit, it's worth saying again that we need to get out of the way of thinking that says that answered prayer are only the prayers that God answers in the ways that we want.

God answers our prayers in ways that we don't want to. It doesn't mean he hasn't answered. It doesn't mean he's not listening. You, was Habakkuk's prayer answered? Well, it was, just not in the way that he wanted or at the time that he had planned.

Habakkuk says, can't you do something about it, God? God says, I am doing something about it. Just look at the tense in that first line in verse 6. I will raise up the Babylonians.

Is that what he says? What does he say? No, I am raising up the Babylonians presently. Presently, now. The Babylonians were not yet at the height of their power, but God was already at work when Habakkuk prayed to raise them up so that at the right time they would act as the sword of his judgment against his people.

[25 : 10] And with that news ringing in our ears, I think our passage puts two kind of probing questions or challenges to us just to help us come to terms or grapple or wrestle with that truth that God sometimes does things, often does things in ways that we would not have him do.

So the first question or challenge is, do we doubt that God is in charge simply because he's not doing things in the way that we hoped he would?

How often do we ignore or overlook God's work in our world or our country or our church or our lives simply because it's not what we wanted for him to do and we assume that therefore he is not at work or harder still because he is doing what we wanted him not to do and we prayed for him not to do or not to happen and we think God must not be at work.

How quick are we to think that God isn't in control simply because he's not working in our lives specifically in the ways that we prayed for him to do? Friends, Habakkuk is a book that reminds us big time, big time, that God's ways are not our ways.

His thoughts are not our thoughts as the heavens are higher than the earth, he says, so much higher are my ways than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. The second question or challenge that this bit of Habakkuk puts to us is this, do we doubt that God is really in charge simply because he's not doing things on our time scale?

[26 : 55] You, Habakkuk wanted to know, didn't he, much, much sooner what God had planned. He called for help but he didn't hear a reply. He said violence but God did not save.

Did that mean that God wasn't at work? Well, no, because God was at work. He was raising up the Babylonians. God would answer, he would work but in his own time and we long, don't we?

Don't we long for evil to be put away? Don't we long for the wrong in our lives, in our society, in our world to be finished? Don't we long for that?

In our calendar, that day cannot come soon enough, can it? But what is keeping God so long? Peter gives us the answer in 2 Peter chapter 3.

He says this, do you not forget this one thing, dear friends. Hear that, dear friends. He says, with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day.

[27 : 59] The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance.

What's keeping him? Well, his time is not like our time. Is he not coming? Of course he is, but he is going to come in his time, not ours.

Why would we doubt that he has not got our world under control simply because he's not working to our deadline? Is that what we think? How often do we try and work out what God is doing by looking at what's happening down here at ground level when God's throne is in heaven?

How often do we try and work out what God is doing by looking at what's happening here and now today or this week or this year when to him a thousand years are like a day and a day are like a thousand years?

You think that I can't see, says God. You think that I'm not at work. Well, look again. Brothers and sisters, look again.

[29 : 13] Is it possible that God is doing things in our lives or in our church, our country, or our world that we would not understand if he told us?

Well, it's not only a possibility, is it? It's a certainty that he is. It's certain that God is doing things that we cannot get our heads around. And those things might be painful for us as they were for people back then, but it changes everything, doesn't it, to know that it comes from his hands and that his hands are nail-pierced hands.

Brothers and sisters, the one who is seated on the throne has scars on his body. The one who is crowned with a crown of glory today once wore a crown of thorns.

Can we trust him to rule our lives, to be in charge of our world? We can trust him because he has the wounds to prove it.

[30 : 32] But so often in our lives, friends, why God works the way that he does or why he keeps the time that he does is his secret. We might not ever get to find out in this life, but I'll tell you one day, he says, I'll tell you one day.

You do all things well. Until that day, where can we look in a world so full of wrong to see that God is in charge? We can look at the cradle where in his time, in his way, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those under the law.

And we can look to the throne from which in his time and in his way, Christ will return to set right all the wrongs that have ever taken place in this world.

In a world so wrong, we look to Jesus and we see the one who is in charge ruling over his world for our good and for our salvation.