

The Strange Ways of God (Habakkuk 1:5-11)

Readings: 2 Kings 23:36-24:7; Romans 8:28-31

Do you believe in the sovereignty of God?

I mean...do you really believe it!

We can often give mental ascent to the idea...but do we believe it in our hearts.

It is a big question... because how you view God affects how you live.

Things do not just happen.

Events are not just accidental, because there is a definite plan of history.

God, who sees the beginning from the end, has a purpose in it all.

Everything is under his hand.

I think that Habakkuk believed in the sovereignty of God...

but he was questioning what it really meant.

Last week, we started a walk through Habakkuk's prayer journal.

Verses 1 to 4 outlined the prophet's first question:

'Lord, why? Why won't you answer our prayers and bring justice to our nation?'

Habakkuk complains to God that all he sees is evil wherever he looks.

Pain and suffering are everywhere.

Wicked men go unpunished.

And he wonders where is God in the midst of this.

We saw that Habakkuk's problem is a very real, very current human problem.

We wondered, with him, how there can be evil in the world of an all-powerful and loving God.

We saw that you don't have to be Christian to struggle with this...

that some unbelievers take this as evidence against God's existence.

And we were reminded that, while evil is a hard thing for even Christians to understand and reconcile with our God, the Bible gives us the ultimate answer to the problem of evil.

That answer is a person...Jesus Christ.

The death and resurrection of Jesus gives us hope

and reminds us that the problem of evil is only temporary.

God's goodness and grace are forever.

So today we continue our study.

Habakkuk has boldly called on God to act.

And our God is not deaf. He responds...

But he gives a totally unexpected answer.

Verses 5 to 11 give us God's first reply.

[READ verses!]

God answers prayer!

This whole passage is, in a way, good news.

God didn't ignore Habakkuk.

He heard the prophet's prayers.

He listened.

He took note...

He acknowledged the problem, and promises to act.

God sees evil, and He acts.

And for us, there's a reminder, and an encouragement.

Your prayers are never wasted.

God hears us when we call!

God answers prayer!

But there's another lesson about prayer here.

God always hears and answers prayer.

But sometimes He does so in mysterious ways.

And in ways we can hardly make any sense of.

A totally unexpected response

The response from God starts with, 'be utterly amazed', literally 'be amazed, amazed'.

This is repeated word in the Hebrew is done to highlight the force of the argument...

They will be numb with astonishment, dumbfounded by events.

Try to put yourselves in the shoes of the people who heard this.

God's not just addressing Habakkuk here...

the Hebrew pronouns here are plural, and so when it says "you," it means "you all."

God tells them He's raising up the Babylonians.

As we read in 2 Kings we know what happened.

The Babylonians would eventually destroy Jerusalem, tear down the Temple, and carry off most of the Hebrew people into exile far, far away.

That is what God is promising here.

It is absolutely terrifying.

Who are these Babylonians?

They were a warlike people, very skilled in battle, from what is now Iraq.

Up until just a few years before Habakkuk, the world superpower had been the dreaded Assyrians, who ruled most of the known world from the city of Nineveh.

Nineveh was such a strong and powerful city that it seemed unlikely that it would ever fall...but it did.

The Babylonian army surrounded the city, and finding no way in, they dammed up the river that flowed through the city.

The riverbed became the gate into the city...

The Babylonians walked right in and destroyed it.

The mighty Assyrians, who had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel...gone.

But in its place rose an even greater threat...the Babylonians.

Look at how God describes them...“that ruthless and impetuous people’.

Angry and thoughtless.

They shoot first and ask questions later.

“who sweep across the whole earth”, leaving a trail of destruction.

They take people from their homes and families, scattering them abroad, and give the homes to their own people instead.

“a feared and dreaded people”

No one could stop them.

And distance was no protection.

Although Babylon was months of travel from Israel, their horses are “swifter than leopards,” and their armies “fly like a vulture swooping to devour”.

Judah is like a small mouse or rabbit, helpless as the bird of prey swoops to snatch it.

There is no hiding.

There is no escape.

And they “come bent on violence.”

They enjoy war.

Violence is fun for them.

Unlike Habakkuk, who looked to God for justice, the Babylonians look to themselves.

They are their own highest authority.

They decide for themselves what is right and wrong, with no reference to God.

And they don’t love or trust God...they love and honour their own strength.

They are self-sufficient...they are full of themselves.

Habakkuk had been crying out because he saw evil everywhere in his land.

And God heard – He’s going to act.

But in His own way.

God will punish the wickedness of the Hebrews by using the wicked Babylonians as His instrument.

This is not what Habakkuk anticipated...this was unexpected.
Instead of fixing the problems of the Jewish nation, God has had enough.
He's going to destroy it.

When we pray about the state of the western world...with its irreverence to God and its immorality, and when we pray about our own struggles we advise God to handle our case with gentle kindness.

We hope for a 'soft landing', for a 'happy ending'.

This is not always preferable to our God.

Maybe God will answer in a way that stuns us.

Evil and God's plan

Why are the Babylonians coming?

God takes the credit.

God is responsible.

"I am raising up the Babylonians," he tells the Jews.

He's going to make use of evil people and their evil actions.

And at first glance, our passage seems to make our problem worse.
Here God is, and He's taking responsibility for something bad that's going to happen.
Babylonians are coming to pillage and slaughter – and God's allowing that.

Elsewhere in the Bible, we see the same picture.

Jesus meets a blind man, and says that he was born this way so that the glory of God might be shown.

Satan questions the motivation for Job's faith, and so God allows all Job's children and all his possessions to be destroyed as a test.

Our mysterious God

We Christians have a tendency to try to distance God from evil and suffering.

But look at Jesus' ministry, or read the Book of Job, or glance over the Ten Plagues of Egypt... all these stories tell us something: the Bible doesn't distance God from these things.

There are two lessons we can draw from this.

First, God's ways are mysterious.

We simply don't understand what he's doing much of the time.

A young person gets cancer.

A Christian pastor and his wife are shot to death in Pakistan.

A job is lost and a family must leave their home.

The sins of God's people are punished by the sins of a nation that doesn't know God at all.

Why does God let these things happen?

He is God.

We are not.

“The secret things belong to the Lord,” Deuteronomy tells us.

God told Isaiah, *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

If we had all the answers we wanted, we'd be God,...
and we wouldn't have any problems.

And if we really knew everything God was doing, He wouldn't be God.
He'd be like us, small, simple and limited.

Yes, He's mysterious.
Sometimes He's just impossible to understand.

But that's because He's God.
And because He's so much more than we could ever grasp or imagine...
This is hope for us!

Nothing that we can do can confuse or thwart or defeat Him.

It's because he's so far above and beyond us that we can pray to Him in the first place...
and hope for help and encouragement.

Because He's mysterious, we know he's not a little god that needs our help and service and protection.

He's a big God.
Yes, a mysterious God.
But He's OUR mysterious God...
and what is not mysterious is that He loves us and works everything for our good.

And that is no small or abstract promise.

We have a God who knows what it is to suffer...
Who is personally acquainted with our struggles.
Who doesn't ask us to go through anything that He has not already suffered Himself.

Remember...this is the same God who decided to become a human being,
and instead of asserting His rights let himself be mocked and spat upon.
Instead of taking the privileges of a king, He let himself be insulted and abused.
Rather than conquer his enemies with legions of angels,

He let Himself be nailed to a wooden cross and left to die
while His enemies laughed at Him.

What kind of sense does that make?

No one ever suffered so much...and yet no one ever deserved it less.
The only person in history who did not deserve pain and suffering, suffered the most.

Why would He choose to do things that way?

But He did.

And even more...after Jesus Christ was abused and tortured and killed by wicked men...

He was raised from the dead.

Death wasn't the end, and it isn't the end.

And now everyone who believes in Him has the hope, the certain hope,
of an everlasting life without any pain or suffering at all.

We have the certain hope that every evil, every act of abuse, every thoughtless word and every violent deed will be dealt with, and set right, by God.

Everything will be all right in the end.

God is in control

Second, God is fully in control...of everything...including evil.

Here is one of the hardest and most controversial truths of the Bible, right here in this passage.

God is raising up the Babylonians to punish Judah, in full knowledge of the Babylonians' evil ways.

God is taking, not avoiding, responsibility here for raising up a people that He Himself says, right here, will commit evil acts!

How does that work?

How can a holy God do such a thing?

There are a lot of people out there who see good and evil as two equal and opposite forces...fighting for all eternity.

Yin and yang, light and dark ever fighting, neither ever winning.

The cosmic struggle.

Evil is seen as something that cannot ever be truly defeated.

Well, that's not the way it is.

Evil is indeed God's enemy, but it is not His equal.

It is not a fair fight.

Satan thinks he is opposing God, but in reality Satan, and evil, are turned against themselves and wind up accomplishing God's purpose.

The Bible is very clear that evil never defeats God, and that God is always in control.

There's another place in the Bible where God's plan required that something evil happen, that an atrocity take place; that the innocent be tortured and killed by the wicked, that justice be perverted.

One other place where, like in our passage, human sin and evil was used to punish human sin and evil.

That place was the Cross.

God sent His only Son to be whipped and beaten and nailed to a Cross, to die, an innocent victim of wicked men.

And God accepted that death as payment for sin for anyone who believes in Jesus Christ for salvation.

Human evil was used to punish human evil in Christ.

And this was not an accident...God planned this.

"This Jesus was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge, and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."(Acts 2:23)

Yes, sin is God's enemy.

Pain, evil, wickedness, suffering – they are all ultimately the work of Satan.

He is like a rabid dog that seeks to infect and destroy anyone it can sink its teeth into.

And yet he is a dog on a leash...God's leash.

And there is the hope.

Evil is real.

It hurts.

We hurt one another.

We see, and do, terrible things in this world, and they are done to us.

And God lets it happen... but He does so according to His plan.

He does so, the Bible tells us, for His glory.

The glory of God...I can't understand what possible glory there might be in some of the awful things we see in the news or in our own lives every day.

Some of you here today are probably suffering at home, or in the workplace, or at school, or in the depths of your own heart.

And if you were to ask me, "Why?"

What reason could God have in this?

How does this give God glory?"

I really couldn't give you any hard or specific answers.
I don't really know why.

But I do know this: God knows why. God has a reason.

There is no senseless or purposeless evil in this world...
for everything happens according to God's purpose and plan.
And that plan is good.

Conclusion

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

That purpose is to grow us, to make us more and more like His Son Jesus Christ, who is perfect.

More like Christ, who loves nothing more than to give glory to the Father.

Our good and our growth and our joy sometimes require pain.

And compared to God, we're just too little to understand why that is.
But God loves us!

He intends our good, and the God who controls all things and who is never, ever defeated will certainly, definitely, accomplish our good!

God works great things today.

His channels of mercy and grace flow as freely and as fresh today as ever.

He continues to gather the elect from the four corners of the earth.

Do not think that God is not active and acting today, for he continues 'doing work in your days that you would not believe if told'.

We need to look to God, because God is in control, God is sovereign, God is powerful!