

Questions for God

Text: Habakkuk 3:16–19

Good morning, Church Family!

Thank you to the Choir, Orchestra, and everyone in Mission Control for leading us in worship this morning. Any day at Hopewell is a good day at church.

Pastor Brandon is taking some time away today. Please pray for him and his family to be able to rest and relax while they are gone.

Also, please pray for our nation and for our leaders as they wrestle with the unrest in our world.

And now, if you'll turn with me in your copy of God's Word to the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. You'll find that book in the Minor Prophets. (They aren't called minor because they are unimportant. But rather because their messages are shorter than others.)

By the way, that doesn't mean that my message today will be shorter than usual.

Habakkuk is towards the end of the Old Testament. Just look for the Gospel of Matthew and turn backward a few dozen pages.

We will be looking at the whole book of Habakkuk this morning. But we will be reading momentarily from chapter 3, verses 16 through 19.

It's my goal, this morning, to connect with the series on the life of Joseph that Pastor Brandon has been leading us through. Last week, we left Joseph in prison, where he will be for the next two years of his life. Two years in prison is nothing to sneeze at. But Joseph has no idea that it will only be two years. He's probably thinking that he'll be in that prison forever!

We've seen Joseph's character. We know he's a good man. One of the best of men to be sure. But as Charles Spurgeon said, "The best of men are still men at their best."

I say that to say this: I imagine Joseph had some questions during his imprisonment, don't you? Questions like: "God, why me? What did I do wrong? Why am I here?" After all, Joseph is innocent – falsely accused. Framed! And yet he is the one in prison. He did right by his master, Potiphar. He did what was right in the eyes of God. He even did what was right for Potiphar's cheating wife! But here Joseph is, rotting in prison, probably thinking: "No good deed goes unpunished."

Can you imagine Joseph's prison prayers? "Hey God, what about those dreams you gave me as a teenager? You know, the ones where my family was bowing down to me? Why did you show me that, if this is my future?"

Now some people might say, “No! Joseph wouldn’t have questioned God. It’s wrong to question God.”

Really?!?! I mean, have you read the book of Job? Did God consume Job in fiery judgment for his audacity to ask questions? No! (Now, it is true, God didn’t give Job the answers he was looking for, but he didn’t turn him into a pile of ash for asking!) For that matter, in the end, God restored and blessed Job abundantly.

And what about David, the man after God’s own heart? We read in Psalm 10:1 where he asks, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” And again in Psalm 13:1 he asks, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”

And what about John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin. He’s the one that Jesus said there’s “No one greater born of women than John.” But while he was in Herod’s prison, he had some doubts. Luke 7:19 records how “calling two of his disciples to him, John sent them to the Lord, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” If you’re Jesus, that had to be pretty hurtful.

And we could go on and on and talk about Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Paul and Thomas, just to mention a few who had some serious questions for God.

Maybe you can relate. Maybe you came to church with some questions this morning. Well, I have good news! Our God is big enough to handle your questions! And He wants to hear them: honest, raw, and unfiltered.

I do think I should warn you. You might not get the answers you want. But you will get the answers you need.

Is that you, today? Do you have some questions for God? If so, then you are in good company. Because I want to introduce you to another of God’s most famous questioners: a prophet named Habakkuk.

Habakkuk had questions for God. He didn’t get the answers he wanted. And He didn’t like the answers he got! But in the end, he submitted to God’s sovereignty and worshipped anyway.

If you’ve found your place, please stand with me as we read from Habakkuk chapter three, verses sixteen through nineteen.

I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.

Would you pray with me?

Lord, there are some here this morning at a crossroad. Their circumstances are difficult. The pain is deep. Their Bible's tell them that "the righteous will live by faith." But it's tough to maintain faith when life is really hard.

There are others that are walking through life like a spring meadow. Life is good. All is well. They have no idea how anyone could struggle. But they are one phone call away, one text away, one conversation away from their life being thrown into a blender.

Help us to not live in fear or in frustration. Teach us to bring our honest, raw, unfiltered questions to you. And we'll trust you to be faithful and long-suffering with us.

Father, what we know not, teach us. What we have not, give us. What we are not, make us, for Jesus' sake we pray.

Amen.

Thank you. You may be seated.

So, who is this guy named Habakkuk? Well, he's a prophet of God in Judah. (It's important to remember that this is the period of history where the original kingdom of Israel has been divided. There's the ten tribes in the north, who go by the name of Israel. And there's the two tribes in the south, who go by the name of Judah.)

When Habakkuk writes this down for us, Israel, the northern kingdom, has already been destroyed by Assyria in 722 BC. But the Assyrian's military might has begun to wane. And now the kingdom of Babylon is rising to the top of world powers.

At this point in time, it's likely that king Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians have already taken the Assyrian capitol of Nineveh. And their power and influence are spreading out. They are conquering kingdom after kingdom.

In the midst of this upheaval on the Asian continent, we find Habakkuk serving the Lord during the reigns of Josiah and Jehoiakim, kings of Judah. And Habakkuk is unique from other prophets of the time (at least in what is recorded by him), in that he doesn't speak for God to the people. Rather, he speaks to God, complaining about the people.

And in his short book, he shares three questions he has for God that reflect ours.

First, Habakkuk wants to know: "Why does God permit evil?"

We know from the passage we read, in verse 16, that Habakkuk says that Judah is going to be invaded. But why? Why would God allow the Promised Land – the Homeland of the coming Messiah – to be invaded by a foreign army?

Well, it's because they deserve it! The people of Judah, following the lead of evil king Jehoiakim, have turned away from God to serving idols. And Habakkuk saw their wickedness and complained to God about it.

Turn a page or two back to Habakkuk chapter 1, verses 2 through 4. There we read:

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? 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. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

Habakkuk looks at society and he is filled with anger, with righteous indignation. And he asks God, "Why do you permit evil?" He looks at society and wants to cry out, "Violence! Violence is everywhere!" And that word translated violence here is a strong word that literally means, "This is wrong! This is cruelty and injustice." And he is asking God, "Why do you allow these things to continue without punishing the wicked?"

Can you relate? Sure you can! Habakkuk wants to know why he is made to look upon iniquity. I'd like to know why, in our nation, we are forced to have Pride Month every June, which is nothing more than a celebration of iniquity.

Habakkuk wants to know why there is destruction and violence everywhere. Me too! Why does God allow rioting and looting in our cities? Why doesn't he judge those people and put a stop to it?

Habakkuk says that the law is paralyzed in his day. I feel that too! Why are the unborn children of America still being murdered in their mother's womb? Is the law paralyzed in our day?

And Habakkuk complains that the wicked surround the righteous in his day. That describes us too! Godlessness is so pervasive in our culture that we are forced to deal with ludicrous questions, like "What is a woman?"

Help me out. Is it just Habakkuk? Or have you ever wanted to ask, "Lord, how long will you let this continue?" Yep! Me too!

But we should also consider this question. Is Habakkuk right in his complaint? I think the answer is "Yes." And "no."

The answer is “yes” in the sense that all the things that he complains about were happening. And yes, it did seem as if justice never goes forth. And when so-called “justice” did go forth, it was perverted.

But also, the answer is “no.” God was not idly looking at wrong. God was going to do something about it. His righteous character will not allow evil to go unpunished forever.

He tells us as much in Proverbs 11:21, which says, “Be assured, an evil person will not go unpunished, but the offspring of the righteous will be delivered.” And again, in Psalm 145:20 we read, “The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.”

But, to echo part of Habakkuk’s question: “O Lord, how long must we wait?” That’s an understandable question, but it’s also a tricky one. Consider for a moment what ‘destroying all evil in the world’ right now would mean. Are you a perfectly righteous person? No. Me neither. None of us are. In fact, we read in Romans 3:23 that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” And Romans 3:10 says that “None is righteous, no, not one.”

Now some might object here and say something like, “Well I know I’m not perfect. But I have a good heart!” With all due respect, Jeremiah 17:9 disagrees. There we are taught that “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

So, if all are sinful and there is none that are righteous, then, in order to destroy all evil in the world, God must destroy each and every one of us! Is that what we want?

Of course not! But, hey, something has to give! And it will! Someday. Soon.

Second Peter 3:9 and 10 says, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”

So, “Why does God permit evil,” you ask. He does so only temporarily. God is giving those who need to repent time to repent! But His patience will not delay His judgment indefinitely.

His judgment is coming. So don’t mistake God’s patience for indifference. God’s delay is due to his mercy, not apathy or absence.

And don’t take His mercy for granted. Do not delay! Respond to Him in faith and repentance, and surrender to Him today!

And as believers, we should live with urgency but not fear. We should, as we’ve often heard, “Live today like Jesus is returning tonight!” But what does that really look like in our everyday lives? It looks like having urgency about making peace with others. It looks like being intentional to forgive those who have wronged you. It looks like having urgency to share your

faith as if your opportunities are limited because they are. And it looks like being intentional in pursuing personal holiness, knowing that your Judge is coming soon.

By the way, if Habakkuk were preaching today, he'd say: "God's judgment doesn't always wait until Judgment Day." He'd say this because of what God said to Him in chapter one and verses five and following, where the Lord answers his question.

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. 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.

God was going to judge Judah and he was going to use the Babylonians, also known as the Chaldeans, to do it!

But this made no sense to Habakkuk. After all, Babylon was incredibly evil: much worse than Judah! In fact, God Himself goes on in chapter one to describe them in the harshest of terms.

But this description was kind in comparison to what they actually did. We know from 2 Kings 25:5-7, that after Babylon invaded Judah and scattered Judah's army, they captured king Zedekiah. They brought Zedekiah before Nebuchadnezzar. And before they gouged out his eyes, they made him watch as they murdered each of his children. Think about that! The last thing Zedekiah ever saw was his children being slaughtered like cattle.

And that bloodthirsty bunch is who the thrice-holy Creator God was going to use to judge His own people! It's mind-blowing!

When Habakkuk hears that, he asks a second question! He asks, "Why does God use the wicked to accomplish His will?"

He says in chapter one, verses 12 and 13:

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. You 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?

In other words, he says, "God, are you not the eternal, unchanging, Holy One of Israel? How can you use the Babylonians – who are more deserving of judgment than we are – to punish us?"

He almost accuses God of hypocrisy. He says, "You, who are of purer eyes than to see evil ... why do you idly look ... and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?" He describes Babylon in verse 14 through 17 as fishermen who are

catching all other nations like defenseless fish in a net. And then he asks, “Will you just let them keep on devouring people? Even us?”

And then, in chapter 2, verse 1, we see Habakkuk standing stoically as he waits for the Lord’s answer.

He doesn’t wait long. God gives His answer. Look at chapter 2, verses 6 through 20. There the Lord tells Habakkuk that “when Babylon has served its purpose, they too will be judged.” On the one hand, that’s good news. However, it doesn’t really answer Habakkuk’s question of why God would use the wicked Babylonians to judge Judah.

But here’s the thing. God is under no obligation to say anything to Habakkuk, much less defend His sovereign will. The answer to why God did it this way is known only to God. And therefore, it remains a mystery to us.

But just because we don’t know the reason why, that doesn’t mean there’s not a good reason. Life is filled with these kinds of mysteries.

For example, have you ever wondered why the bride stands on the Groom’s left side during the wedding? Any idea? It actually goes back to feudal times, when men captured or kidnapped a bride from a neighboring village. The groom would put the bride on his left side to keep his sword arm free in case he had to fight off the bride’s relatives or other suitors. (And you thought your wedding day was filled with drama!)

Here’s another one. Do you know why most pencils are hexagonal in shape, rather than round? It’s because it’s more efficient than making round pencils. The same amount of wood can make 9 hexagonal pencils, versus 8 pencils if they are round. The hexagonal shape leaves no waste, much like in a beehive. And the hexagonal shape keeps it from rolling off your desk.

I didn’t know that until this week. But my ignorance didn’t mean that there wasn’t a good reason. And God always has a good reason for why He does what He does.

Why did He use the most wicked nation to judge a lesser wicked nation? Well, He didn’t say. But what He did say is, “I will ALWAYS do what is right.” And therefore, we would do well to heed the advice of chapter 2, verse 20, which says, “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.” In other words, He is God. And we are not. So, we should just trust Him to do what is best.

But what if “what is best” doesn’t make things better for me? Actually, that’s our third question for God. **Why doesn’t God improve my circumstances?**

Now Habakkuk didn’t explicitly ask this question. But he assumes someone would. And so chapter 3 records his prayer concerning the judgment that is to come.

He begins in chapter 3, verse 2, by saying, “O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.”

You can see that he’s honest about his fear. He’s honest about his desires. He asks God to “in wrath remember mercy.”

And throughout his prayer he shows that he is resolved to 4 facts. He is resolved that God is good. God will judge evil. He is resolved that God is all-powerful. God can judge evil. He is resolved that God is sovereign. He can judge whoever, however, and whenever He deems best. And he is resolved that no matter the circumstances, God is worthy of his worship.

Nowhere is his resolve more clearly seen than in verses 17 through 18 of chapter 3 where he concludes his prayer this way.

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

Do you see what Habakkuk is saying here? He’s saying that no matter what happens to me or around me, I will rejoice in the Lord. He knows what’s coming. He knows that God has ordained the Babylonians as His instrument of judgment on Judah. And so he proclaims that when the Babylonians invade, he will rejoice in the Lord, the God of my salvation. And when they burn the crops, I will rejoice in the Lord. And when the economy collapses, and the cupboards are empty, I will rejoice in the Lord, the God of my salvation.

And we must ask: why in the world would you ever do that? If God doesn’t make your circumstances better, why rejoice in Him? Because no matter what my circumstances are, they are better than my sin deserves. And because no matter if my circumstances improve or get worse, my God is still worthy of all my praise!

That kind of perspective can make a tremendous difference in our outlook on hard times. And what a difference it made in Habakkuk! He had been honest with God about his feelings, about his confusion, and about his frustration.

He trusted God to care about his questions. And because of God’s answers, Habakkuk’s perspective changed from asking “Oh Lord, how long” to saying in verse 16, “I will quietly wait” for God’s will to be done.

May I ask you to please write these next four statements down? Number one, “True faith is not circumstantial.” In other words, we would do well to examine whether our faith is tied to our blessings or in God Himself. Ask yourself, will you still love Him and worship Him if the job falls through? If the relationship ends? If healing doesn’t come?

Number two, **"Rejoicing is a choice, not a feeling."** Habakkuk says in verse 18, "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord." Don't miss that first word: "yet." It's a word of contrast. In this context it is saying that we must choose joy based on who God is, not how we feel about what's going on around us.

Listen! Choosing to rejoice during trials is a powerful weapon in spiritual warfare. The enemy cannot stand to hear you praise God. Shut him up by shouting him down!

Number three, **"God's aim is to change us, not our circumstances."** That's not to say that he won't ever improve our circumstances, but it does mean that merely improving our circumstances isn't His number one goal. Think about it. Habakkuk's external situation didn't change, but his heart did! Same thing with Joseph. For the next 2 years, Joseph's situation won't change; but God will use those painful circumstance to change and grow him.

Number four, **"Worship transforms worry."** Notice how Habakkuk's complaining at the beginning of this little book turns into celebration by its end. He's still facing the same future: the same anxieties, the same looming grief, and the same fears. But intentional worship and meditation on God's Word – rather than on his problems – gives him the right lens through which to view his circumstances.

So as we think on these things, can I ask, "Do you have some questions for God?" If so, it's time to be honest with God about your questions. He can handle it.

Maybe what you need is a new perspective on your circumstances. Perhaps you're tired of complaining, and you are ready to just quietly wait for the Lord's will to be done. By the way, to wait quietly for the Lord's will to be done does not mean that we give in to fatalism and just wait for the end. No, not at all! To wait quietly before the Lord is to be able to rest peacefully in the midst of your circumstances – no matter how peaceless they may be – and to know that the situation is in the ever-capable hands of God.

But you should also know that this kind of rest is only found in a personal relationship with God, through His Son, Jesus Christ. For in Christ, our wickedness has been judged. It was laid on Him when God's wrath was poured out at the Cross. In Christ, we have been given victory over sin, sickness, death, and the grave through a future resurrection. And one Day, this same Jesus will split the sky, physically return, judge all wickedness, and usher in a sinless Eternity.

I'm going to ask Pastor Greg to come and lead us in a time of response.

As he's coming, let me ask, "Are you resting peacefully in a relationship with Christ today?"

If not, you can be, by confessing your sin. Say the same thing about your sin that God has said in His Word. Believe in who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for you. And surrender control of your life to Him. If that's what you want to do, then meet me right down here and allow me to introduce you to Jesus.

If you make that choice, or have made that choice, then you should go public with that decision by being baptized. If you know that you need to be baptized, then you should also come down here and let us help you move forward with that desire.

Maybe you want to make this church your church home. If so, you come too! Let us help you begin the membership process today.

Maybe you just have some questions you need to ask God in prayer. Come on. But remember, you may not get the answers you want. You might not like the answers you get. But if you trust God in spite of your questions – in Him – you'll find the answer to every question that really matters.

Would you stand together as we sing and as we do business with God. I'll be waiting right here. You come as God leads you.