

Complaint and Answer

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[0 : 0 0] So we're starting our summer series tonight and I'm going to do everything I can to say Habba Cook, but undoubtedly I will switch back and forth between the American style and the British style, but I want to be all things to all people, so I'm going to try to say Habba Cook as much as I can, but you will hear Habba Cook as well.

Let's read together from Habba Cook 1, 1-11. So if you would like to have a Bible, there's a stack of Bibles there, feel free at any time because we're going to, I'm going to try to treat this more like an inductive Bible study together where I'm leading us through that instead of just a monologue, so it'd be great to have a copy even if it's on a phone to be able to see the whole time.

So here we are, this is God's word, the oracle that Habba Cook the prophets saw. Oh 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.

Look among the nations and see, wonder and be astounded, for I am doing a work in your day, in your days that you would not believe if I told.

[1 : 3 8] For behold, I'm raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who marched through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own, they are dreaded and fearsome, their justice and dignity go forth from themselves, their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves, their horsemen press proudly on, their horsemen come from afar, they fly like an eagle, swift to devour, they all come for violence, all their faces forward, they gather captives like sand, at kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh, they laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it, then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men whose own might is their God, this is God's holy word.

So we'll try to work through this passage together, this is a really important book for any age and season of history, because we feel the same weight that Habakkuk felt here in this day.

So let me, I'm just gonna try to throw out some questions and see if I can just get one person to respond to these and we'll keep moving so we don't take too much time, but if somebody would just be willing to say, after you looked at those verse 11 verses, what do you feel like you could say about who this prophet is?

Anything? Ukrainian? Okay, yeah, so you're connecting it already to the contemporary, absolutely, yeah.

What about in his own time and context? No, but that's great, Brian, yeah, thank you. So this question is a dirty little trick, because you can't really say anything about him, can you?

[3 : 3 4] Actually this is the prophet that we know nothing about. So you read the text and you get nothing. Unlike most of the other prophets where we have a sense of who they were, who their father was, we don't get that with this person at all.

His name means in Hebrew, it's the word embrace. Maybe that means something, but it's hard to say. He's being embraced by God here in a way, but that doesn't really tell us a whole lot.

He's receiving an oracle that he sees, right? But the term oracle here very literally translated as the term burden.

So it could say something like the burden that Habakkuk the prophet saw, meaning the burden that he bore to God. Okay, so it's not necessarily exactly as if he's hearing a vision or seeing a vision or hearing something directly at the beginning from God.

He's coming to God with a burden and then hearing God's response. So that gives us a hint of the kind of things he's going to talk about. Where is he?

[4 : 47] The only thing that we can say about that is in chapter 2 verse 20. This is where a lot of commentators will go. People say when he says the Lord is in his holy temple, it seems like probably he's standing, Habakkuk may be standing where?

In the temple in Jerusalem. So it's very possible that Habakkuk is standing in the temple in Jerusalem, coming to worship and bringing his burden before the Lord.

So he's probably from Judah and then when is he? Now we can say a little bit more about when he is.

Just from your reading of the text, any ideas that might clue you in to when he's saying this. Yes, so well, God responds to him, doesn't he, and says, we're going to come to this in just a minute.

I'm going to send the Chaldeans to Jerusalem if he's in Jerusalem, which we think he is. Meaning the Chaldeans have yet to strike Jerusalem, the Babylonians.

[6 : 11] They're going to do that in 587 BC. They're going to come in and destroy Jerusalem, destroy the temple. We're going to see the last king of Jerusalem fall, of Judah fall.

So this is pre 587. But also we know at the same time that the Babylonians must be rising in power because the entire section from five to 11 is God's description of the power of Babylon that's coming forth.

And the Babylonians come to power in the seventh century, the 600 BC. The Assyrians had been the absolute dominant force for hundreds of years across the ancient Near East.

But in 612, 612 BC, the Babylonians Nebuchadnezzar is going to go to a place called Kharkhamesh in the north in Assyria and Defeat the Assyrians and destroy them.

Then he's going to come south in one another battle in 605. He's going to destroy Samaria, the northern kingdom of Israel around that time. And then he's going to keep marching south and south until he finally hits Jerusalem in 587.

[7 : 17] So if you were to pull open a newspaper in the day that he's writing, it's going to say Babylon is the great power rising in the east to quote Gandalf about Mordor.

There's a great power rising literally in the northeast and it's Babylon and they're coming. Okay. All right. Lastly, as just by way of, well a couple of things more about way of introduction.

What about this question? See if I can get anybody to bite on this. But in the most general simple sense, this is not a gotcha question at all. What is a prophet?

What are prophets do? Anything that comes to mind from? Intermediary between God and the people. Right. Intermediary between God and the people. Yeah.

Yeah. Keep this way. Bring it up. Right. Absolutely. So they're intermediary. A lot of times the prophets are carrying messages from God as well to the people.

[8 : 14] Right? So Isaiah, for example, famously does this Ezekiel very famously gets these visions from God telling me exactly how to perform in front of the people.

Right? If you just, just the first 11 verses, you don't even have to read the whole book. What do you notice about this? This is called a prophet. This is one of the prophets.

But you've got something very different happening here. You don't have him in any sense bringing a word from God to the people or really from the people of God.

But his role here is completely one of speaking directly to God in lament. Okay. So it's not prophecy in any traditional sense of the word.

Like you would normally expect prophecy to be. It's a, actually, a man lamenting before the Lord with a carrying of burden. And the reason it's a prophet is simply because God does respond.

[9 : 14] God opens his mouth and speaks in the temple space to Habakkuk. Okay. So it's very different than the rest of the prophets in that way.

So that's something to be on the lookout for. All right. Let's look together then for just a second at verses two to four.

He says, Oh, Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear section two to four versus two to four? What is Habakkuk lamenting?

What is he lamenting? What is he crying out about? What is he upset about to God? By the end of July, people are going to be talking if it takes that long, but that's okay.

Even if it does take that long. What is it? Just anything. What is he crying out about? God's not listening. Yes. Exactly. God's not listening.

[10 : 08] Okay. God's not listening to what exactly? Yes. Yes. What are you doing about? Why are you not doing something about the situation?

Right. So he's crying out to God and saying, God, you're not doing anything about the situation that is very clear and obvious to me.

And that assumes a couple of things. One of the things that that assumes is he has been asking for something already. So when he says, Oh, Lord, verse two, how long shall I cry for help?

We assume that he has been crying for help for a long time. He's been asking God for a season to do something. But how long now he's, so it's likely that Habakkuk has come.

This is me creating perhaps a fiction around Habakkuk. But this is how you might be that he's come to Jerusalem on pilgrimage, perhaps three times a year.

[11 : 15] Every faithful Israelite would come to Jerusalem for a pilgrimage. And perhaps he's been praying farther out wherever he might live.

Lord, when please come and intervene. And now he's in the temple. He's finally come to the temple. And now he's bowing before God in the temple itself and saying, I've been praying and I've been praying and you haven't done anything.

What exactly is the thing? That's the question. What is it that he's asking for God to do something about what do you, what can you gather from the clues here in verses two to four?

We don't get specifics, but just in general, what, what has happened? What might be happening?

You can even just read the words back like destruction. There's one violence. What else? Corruption.

[12 : 19] Yes. Yes. Right. Verse four, the law is paralyzed, he says. Torah, Genesis, Deuteronomy, the law code of Israel that all kings are supposed to follow is paralyzed.

It's not working. Right. In other words, he's injured. He's likely in Jerusalem. He's likely in the temple. And it likely means that the king and the officials of the land have become completely corrupted.

And so violence is dominating. Justice, Mishpat here, the Hebrew term that he uses is not being had.

Those who are righteous and obedient are being crushed. Those who are wicked are being glorified. The king is evil. The king is corrupt.

Now if we're right about where he is and if we're right that he's actually complaining about Judah and the evil of a corrupted king, then it's very likely that we can say probably of more exactly when this is because Israel had gone through a season, Judah, of great renewal under King Josiah.

[13 : 44] King Josiah had ruled for 30 years in the 600s, the mid-600s. And unfortunately King Josiah was shockingly killed in battle.

And he was a great young king that had brought the land of Judah back under the law and cast the idols out of the temple and all sorts of things like that.

And then immediately the next king, well there's a short one in between, but the main king that comes to the throne is King Jehoiakim. One of Josiah's sons and he becomes king in 608.

And remember Babylon had defeated Assyria in 612 and then more fully in 605. Jehoiakim became king in 608 in Judah.

So it's likely that we're sometime between 608 and 597. And Jehoiakim has completely corrupted Israel. He's put idols back into the temple.

[14 : 43] He's put idols, statues all across the land. He's not following the law in any sense. He punishes the righteous, wicked and evil go rampant in the streets.

There's violence everywhere. Completely broken society. So that's very likely exactly what Habakkuk is seeing. Now if you were to try to phrase his complaint in brief to God, I think it would be something like this.

God what are you going to do about evil in Judah and why have you not done anything yet? Lord, what are you going to do about this broken society that's all around us and the corruption and why haven't you stopped it yet?

And that means that Habakkuk expects actually holiness and law abiding from the people of God on the one hand and that he's been hearing what one theologian calls the maddening silence of God for a long time in his life as he's prayed about this.

Okay, now if you flip over just for a second to chapter 3 verse 1, you're going to see it circle around to the beginning again and at the very end Habakkuk is going to sing a song before God and say verse 2, Oh Lord, I've heard the report of you and your work.

[16 : 21] Oh Lord, do I fear? And the rest of it is a praise to God. So Habakkuk is going to come around to see in God's point but he's not there in chapter 1 at all.

He's not there at all in chapter 1. Okay, now this brings up some universal and timeless questions. This book does and this complaint.

Every single person, especially for Christians, can look out at the world and say the world as I find it and the world that I've been promised are not exactly the same thing.

I see the world as it is and I know the world that I read about in the prophets, the hope and they don't square, they don't match up.

And so this is a prayer that any person from any age of history, of course, can pray over and over and over again. Why and how long will you continue to let the corruption carry forth?

[17 : 38] Why and how long will you continue to let what looks like evil reign in the land? It's a prayer that all of us have felt to some degree and in some way and people feel it in different ways at different times, in different spaces, in different places that they live especially.

How can God sit back and allow injustice to reign, especially within Judah, His covenant people? Another Gandalf quote, I'm reading the two towers right now so I've got a lot of these.

Gandalf says at one point to one of the hobbits, many live that deserve death and some die that deserve life.

Exactly the complaint, many live that deserve to die and many die that deserve to live and that's exactly what Habakkuk sees here and he's asking about.

Now there's a second issue as well. We're going to come back and say something about and ask what do we say to these things in a moment. But let's get the second issue on the table very quickly and then we can wrap up.

[18 : 50] In verse 5 to 11, God responds and he says, I am doing something. So Habakkuk's complaint is you are not doing anything and God says, no I am.

Why do you think the Babylonians are moving from north to south? The Babylonians are coming for Judah and Jerusalem and 587 BC is about to come and the Babylonians are going to come in and absolutely destroy the city, tear down the temple, dethrone the last king of Israel and carry off multitudes of captives to Babylon in the midst of killing many.

So that's coming. They are the rising power of the east. Now we don't have time to work through every single section of this but God is telling us in poetic form here exactly of the power of Babylon.

But note what does God also say about them morally? How does God speak about the Babylonians morally here in terms of their ethic?

What kind of a people they are? So verse 6 happens a few times. Verse 6 would be one space.

[20 : 12] It says that they are what? Bitter and hasty nation who march through the breath of the ark to seize dwellings that are not their own.

So he labels them as thieves and criminals, evildoers and says, and they are what I am doing, they are what I am sending to crush the corruption of Judah.

Alright? So level one, Habakkuk's complaint. I've been praying and praying and praying and corruption reigns in the land and you're doing nothing.

God says I am doing something. Level two complaint would be what?

It's worse still. Okay, well if that's what you're doing then how can that be justice? So you're going to take evil and use it to crush evil and so evil reigns because evil plus evil equals evil, right?

[21 : 22] And so the question is thrown back a level, is thrown back a stack if you will. So we could put it like this. The first question, how can God sit back while people living righteous lives or suffering under the corruption of evil, right?

But then the second level, based on God's answer, how can God be just and in control of the world and yet let Babylonians have a free hand to terrorize and dominate his own people?

How can he use such a nation as his instrument to punish his own people? That's how John L. Mackay, the old OT professor across the street put it in his commentary.

So God says here I'm using the wickedness in the world for my purposes of justice. Habakkuk is going to come next week and say is that justice?

Okay, let's wrap up by asking very briefly what can we say to these things? How do we respond to this difficult issue and these questions that come up very clearly here?

[22 : 34] All right, let me say three things. One, let me, this is preliminary before the one.

No, we're not going to fully answer the problem tonight, okay? If you can fully answer it at all. But let's say a few things. Now, note the difference here in what Habakkuk does in the modern problem of evil as it's often expressed.

Okay, so people today really struggle with believing in God and believing in Christianity in particular and oftentimes one of the central reasons is the problem of evil.

The problem of evil is probably the greatest argument against faith in any deity and it's the most common thing to see in the public square.

The modern problem of evil essentially says this. If God exists, then he's not punishing evildoers or delivering victims in a just way.

[23 : 38] And that means that either God is just but not powerful enough to stop injustice or God is powerful but he's not just so he doesn't.

Okay? So that's the modern problem of evil. I just want to say that Habakkuk is not coming to God to present to God the problem of evil.

That's not at all what's happening here. Instead, what he's doing is he's appealing to God to ask why.

In other words, Habakkuk is stepping into the holy place of God, the temple, in faith and saying how long ago Lord and why oh Lord, Lord help my unbelief.

He's not saying the problem of evil is forcing me to question your character. Those are very different things. On the one hand, he's doing what we're all called to do, which is why this book is in the Bible.

[24 : 43] And that's the Christian's duty is to be a person of faith seeking understanding. And he's doing that before the Lord. I have faith.

I don't have understanding. And so I'm appealing to you. I'm lamenting before you. That's very different from the modern problem of evil, which begins apart from faith and without faith and questions the possibility of God by questioning the character of God.

Those are very different tasks. So I just want to point that out. He's bewildered at God, but he believes in God deeply. All right.

Secondly, of three, just to address each question very briefly. Question one, which is our second point here. How can God sit back while people living righteous lives are suffering and people living evil lives are flourishing?

So the problem of evil in the world that we see all around us, why is God not putting it into it today? That's Habakkuk's question. It's our question. That's the same question that we're struggling with.

[25 : 54] The Bible comes, I think, and tries to say over and over and over again and to drill into the human mind and heart something that is very difficult for us to receive.

And that is that ever since Genesis chapter three, justice has always been stayed, not delivered.

In other words, ever since the beginning of human history and our sin, God has always been patient to never give us what we deserve.

That's exactly the fundamental ground that we've got to stand on to be able to wrestle with a question like this. When we say, Lord, why is it that the evil seems to be increasing and getting worse all the time, but you have the power to fix it and you're not?

Habakkuk shows us that's a prayer you can pray. How long, oh Lord? But the ground that you're walking on has got to have this.

[27 : 02] God has never given us what we deserved. And that's the assumption that carries forth from the beginning to the end of Scripture that none of us have ever actually received justice.

So when Habakkuk says, well, why aren't you doing justice? He doesn't want to hear what God could say. Which is, do you want justice?

Do you have a good want justice? And the answer when you wrestle with that can only be no. I don't want what I deserve. And we've never gotten it. If you've drawn a breath, you've never gotten what you deserved.

Sin deserves death. And the ground that we walk on, in other words, to live, to even be able to say, look at the corruption is actually mercy. That we're all, every single person in the world is walking on the ground of mercy to even live life at all.

And so that's the assumption that we have to keep. That's the biblical motif that comes up over and over again is that even in the judgments of the Old Testament, there is mercy.

[28 : 07] The ground that people walk on is mercy before justice. Okay. All right. Now these are half answers, by the way.

We're leaving it. We'll try to flesh these out over the course of July. Thirdly and finally, and we'll finish. That issue is then God comes back and says, well, I'm sending Babylon, right?

Is God just to use Chaldea, Babylon, who is itself an unjust evil power for his purposes of justice?

We've got to keep in mind what we just said, right? And a couple other truths. God never does evil. God never does evil.

God in his grace actually restrains evil throughout history. We call that God's common grace. And so another way to read Habakkuk's complaint or to read the context and the situation is to say something like this, to see something like this.

[29 : 16] God has been showing mercy to Judah for many, many, many years. Judah has broken the covenant over and over and over again for hundreds of years, all the way from when Abraham and Moses walked the planet to this time hundreds of years later, Judah has been given mercy after mercy.

And so the same thing prevails, that Judah has never gotten what it deserved. And so when Habakkuk complains, it's both true what he says.

God, you could wipe this off the face of, you could stop corruption. And then God, it's also true that God can say, I've been patient with all of you and especially Judah for century after century after century.

You, I've revealed myself in physical form to you and you keep putting up Asherah polls in the temple and worshiping and bowing before them.

He's been patient and he's been patient and he's been patient. And at the same time, we come to this and the last thing I'll say is that the book isn't really here, however, to treat these things exactly at an intellectual level.

[30 : 46] So we could work through these issues with, I could pull out a whiteboard, might do that one week and put a philosophy, if you will, of why it can make sense that God can be just and these things happen at the same time.

Now we can make that work using some of the assumptions I've just talked about and other things, other biblical ideas. But what this book actually is doing, I think, is trying to step into our shoes, God and His mercy and giving this to us in His kindness because suffering is a lived reality.

The pain of wickedness and evil and corruption all around us in micro ways and macro ways, the ways of daily interaction and the ways of government evils.

This is a lived reality for every human being and for some of us a lot more than others. And I think that this book is trying to help us see that God's own servant here is wrestling with a deep existential problem.

How can I survive this pain? I think it's the question underneath the question. How can I be patient and survive in the midst of this pain? So I just want to mention this, Christianity has to face the problem of evil to some degree, yes.

[32 : 12] It's a problem. But I also want to say that Christianity alone has the power not only to face the problem of evil intellectually, but to give human beings hope existentially in a way that I don't think any other philosophy or religion in history can.

You might put it like this, okay, you say, well, this problem is a huge problem for belief in God. Well, let's explore for 30 seconds the philosophy of the secular West.

The philosophy of the secular West is that we are nothing but matter in motion. We are beings who started out as single cell molecules that underwent the evolutionary process, not made by a creator.

We need death. We need decay for our development. What we call evil and suffering is a construct. Actually it's the path to advancement. The strong must eat the weak.

The survival of the fittest is a necessary path to future generations of evolved beings. And yet, what do you say to Hitler?

[33 : 26] You see Christianity has much less of a problem with evil. The secular West has the problem of evil to face. And that's that they don't know how to call evil evil at all. You see you need faith in God to be able to even say this is bad.

This is evil. This is corrupt. And not only that, the intellectual problem that the secular West faces, but more than that the existential problem. Because the secular West can say we're just matter in motion and I can say well then how can you call anything bad on the one hand.

But on the other hand I say well then what do you say to the person on their deathbed? You see the secular West can't deal with the intellectual problems or the heart problems. There's no hope in that.

And you have to if you're honest do what Foucault and Deri Dye and Sartre and the French philosophers of the 20th century said. They said that life is meaningless and all there is is to live and to die.

That's the only thing the secular West narrative actually offers unless it borrows hope from Christianity. It borrows a moral framework from Christianity.

[34 : 30] And that's exactly what modern people do. And so I think the problem here of the suffering of lived reality and pain is much greater apart from Christianity than it is within Christianity.

And I'll close with a quote. Tim Keller has a wonderful book on this called Walking with God and Pain and Suffering. I can't recommend it enough. Especially as we work through this book this summer. It's a great read.

And at the end of every chapter he finishes with a little story about someone in his own ministry that was in deep suffering and pain. And I just want to read you a quote from a woman called Mary.

And this is what she says after and I won't tell you all that happened to her but horrific life. She says this I've come to believe that life will not always be as it is now.

I find even more comfort in being able to stop focusing on all the heartache and focus instead on the one who will one day take heartache away completely and forever.

[35 : 38] I think Habakkuk's prayer is moving from point A Lord I'm struggling with the pain in the heartache. To chapter 3 I'm coming through and being able to focus more resolutely on the one who can put away heartache and pain forever.

And that's why Christianity is the only real hope. The cross and the resurrection in the midst of existential suffering like this. All right let's pray. Father we give thanks that in your word you address the problems we face.

And so I do ask tonight Lord in light of this that you would especially be with the people here tonight and our church family broader that can't be here who are deeply suffering, who are in significant pain.

More pain than just the normal wear and tear of life in a fallen world but the pain of death, the pain of diagnoses that are very difficult, the pain of watching loved ones suffer in some way, the pains of leaving, the pains of moving, the pains of chronic disease, the pains of chaos, the pains of violence, the pains of corruption, whatever it may be Lord.

Those in our family that are experiencing these things Lord and there are some send a great measure of your spirit to them. We ask for this in Christ's name.

[37 : 07] Amen.