

How Long Lord?

GOD QUESTIONS #1 - Pastor Gary Combs - February 4, 2024 - Habakkuk 1:1-11

INTRO: Good morning church! We are beginning a new 5-week series today entitled, “GOD QUESTIONS: An Exposition of Habakkuk.” We’re going verse by verse through the little book written by the prophet Habakkuk. It’s one of the 12 Minor Prophets (the two classifications “Major” and “Minor” are based on the size of the books, not the significance of their message). Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum and Zephaniah. Based on internal evidence, the writing of his book took place “between the death of King Josiah of Judah in 609 BC and the beginning of the Babylonian captivity in 605 BC” (*The Believer’s Study Bible*, p.1266). Little is known about the author apart from his name, “which is derived from the Hebrew word meaning “embrace” and the fact that he is called a prophet in 1:1 and 3:1” (*The Believer’s Study Bible*, p.1266). It may be a little book, only 3 chapters, but it asks really big questions, the kind of questions about God that we all struggle with from time to time. Questions like: “Lord, how long must I wait before You answer my cry for help?” “Lord, how long must I wait before You answer my cry for rescue, for healing, for salvation?” “Lord, I know You see the evil in this world, why aren’t You doing anything about it?” “Lord, where’s Your justice?” “Where are You, Lord?” “How long, Lord?”



It’s these questions that make Habakkuk unique among the prophets. For while the other prophets represent God’s voice to His people, Habakkuk seems to stand as a representative of God’s people crying out to God. Indeed, the book of Habakkuk is a lament, crying out to God for answers about the violence, suffering, sin, strife, and injustice of this world.

What is lament? “A lament is a prayer expressing sorrow, pain, or confusion. Lament should be the chief way Christians process grief in God’s presence. Because many Christians have grown up in churches which always look on the bright side, lament can be jarring. And for believers whose lives are relatively free from tragedy, lament may seem unnecessary.” — Ryan Higginbottom (<https://openthe bible.org/article/biblical-lament-what-it-is-and-how-to-do-it/>)

Why would God want us to lament?

“Lament is a divinely-given liturgy for processing our pain so that we can rejoice. Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust. It is not only how Christians grieve; it’s the way Christians praise God through their sorrows. Lament is a pathway to praise when life gets hard. To cry is human, but to lament is Christian.” — Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (<https://www.markvroegop.com/blog/lament-leads-to-praise>)

“To cry is human.” After all, isn’t that how life begins? We come into this world with a cry. Leaving behind the warmth and safety of our mother’s womb, we enter wailing! It’s the language that we’re born already knowing. No one has to teach us to cry. Yet, to lament, that’s something we must learn. For lament is a prayer of faith. It is crying out your complaints, and fears, and griefs, sorrows, yes, and even your doubts to the Lord believing that He hears and believing that He will ultimately answer.

That’s why the key verse for understanding Habakkuk is:

Habakkuk 2:4 (ESV) ... but the righteous shall live by his faith.

Because while Habakkuk had many questions and complaints, he lifted them up by faith to the Lord in prayer.

Need: Do you have questions for God today? Are you asking, “Lord, how long?” How long before You answer my cry for help? I’m going through a divorce, my wife left me, I’m trying to raise these kids alone... Lord, how long before you send help? I’m hurting. I’m grieving. I’m lonely. Help! Maybe you’re facing a health scare. You’re asking, “Lord, why aren’t you healing me? Or why aren’t you healing my loved one? Or you’ve lost someone. “Lord, I don’t understand why? How long will this sorrow last? How long will this grief linger? Or maybe the violence and strife of this world is filling you with fear, you’re crying, “Lord, how long must we wait for Your return? How long, Lord?”

Trans: That’s why the little Habakkuk is so timely today. It teaches us how to cry out in lament to God.

BODY: In the book of Habakkuk, the prophet cried out his questions and complaints to God believing that He would answer. We can cry out our questions and complaints to God believing that He will answer. How can we cry out our questions and complaints to God believing that He will answer? The text gives three ways we can cry out our questions and complaints to God believing that He will answer.

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Read text: Habakkuk 1:1-11 (ESV) ¹ The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. ² O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? ³ 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. ⁴ So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted. ⁵ "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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. ⁸ 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. ⁹ They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. ¹⁰ At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. ¹¹ Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!"

HOW TO CRY OUT TO GOD BELIEVING THAT HE WILL ANSWER:

1. Cry out believing that God will help.

EXP: (1-2) Circle the word "help" (2). Habakkuk doesn't question God's ability to help. He questions His timing: "How long" and His willingness to listen to his cry: "you will not hear."

"Oracle" (1) (אִשְׁרָא, *maśśā*) - Lit., "a load, burden." An oracle or prophecy, here one the prophet "saw."

"LORD" (2) (יְהוָה, *Yəhōvā*) - Jehovah the existing One; Yahweh, the proper name of the one true God.

"How long" (2) - When, from where. When are You going to answer me Lord?

"Cry" (2) (צָעַק, *šāva*) - to cry for help, (i.e. freedom from some trouble):—cry (aloud, out), shout.

"Help" (2) - "help" is implied by the use of *šāva* - to cry for help.

"Hear" (2) (שָׁמַע, *šāma*) - to hear, listen. How long must I *shevah* before You *shemah*? This lament sound like the lament of Job: Job 19:7 (ESV) Behold, I cry out, 'Violence!' but I am not answered; I call for help, but there is no justice.

ARG: God promises that He will help us.

Isaiah 41:10 (ESV) Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

We can pray with confidence that God will help in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:16 (ESV) Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

ILL:

APP: Stop bottling up your questions and complaints or medicating your pain or just wallowing in it. Instead, cry out to the Lord. Raise your "burdens" up to Him in prayer.

2. Cry out believing that God will save.

EXP: (2) Take note of the word "save." Habakkuk asked, "God, how long before you answer our cry to save us from the strife and violence in our nation?"

"Violence" (2,3,9) (חַמָּס, *hāmās*) - violence, wrong, cruelty, injustice. Ironically, today is a terrorist group. HAMAS—the acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya (Islamic Resistance Movement). Arabic: "zeal."

"Save" (2) (יָשַׁע, *yāša*) - to save, be saved, be delivered. Yasheh is the root of Yeshua, or Joshua.

ARG: Habakkuk's lament is similar to David's:

Psalms 69:1, 14 (ESV) Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck... Deliver me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.

ILL: The Israeli-Hamas War is further inflaming the world with violence.

Our missionaries in Istanbul were contacted by the Turkish police after masked gunmen claiming to be members of ISIS entered a Catholic church in Istanbul shooting several and killing one man. Many churches have stopped meeting since. Most synagogues in Turkey have been closed since the Hamas war.

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“Three US Army soldiers were killed and more than 30 service members were injured in a drone attack overnight on a small US outpost in Jordan, marking the first time US troops have been killed by enemy fire in the Middle East since the beginning of the Gaza war” (CNN, 1/29/24).

“A US destroyer shot down a Houthi anti-ship ballistic missile and three drones Wednesday, the US Central Command said. It followed a close call for a US warship that was targeted by the Iran-backed group in the Red Sea” (CNN, 1/31/24).

APP: Cry out for God’s salvation in our world today? We are the salt and the light. We are called to lament for the violence and strife in our world today.

3. Cry out believing that God will bring justice.

EXP: (3-11) Notice the word “justice” (4, 7). Habakkuk asked God why was “idly” (3) looking at wrong without bringing His justice. “God I know You see this injustice. You’ve even given me this oracle (“burden”), causing me to “see iniquity” (3) from Your perspective. So why don’t you do something about it?”

“**Destruction**” (3) (דָּשׁ, *šōd*) - havoc, violence, destruction, devastation, ruin, spoiling

“**Law**” (4) (תּוֹרָה, *tôrâ*) - law, direction, instruction, the Deuteronomic or Mosaic Law

“**Paralyzed**” (4) (פּוֹגֵם, *pûḡ*) - to grow numb, be feeble, be benumbed, paralyzed. Powerless as in...

Romans 8:3 (NIV) For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering...

“**Justice**” (4,7) (מִשְׁפָּט, *mišpāṭ*) - judgment, justice.

“**Perverted**” (4) (עָקַל, *āqal*) - to be bent out of shape, distorted, crooked.

“**Look**” (5) (רָאָה, *rā’â*) - Behold, look at, inspect, consider. “**See**” (5) (נָבַט, *nābat*) - to look, regard, pay attention. “**Wonder**” (5) (תָּמַה, *tāmah*) - to be astounded, stunned. God answered with 3 imperatives.

“**Nation(s)**” (5,6) (גוֹיִם, *gōyim*) - heathen, Gentiles, nation, people: usually of non-Hebrew people.

“**I am doing a work... raising up**” (10) - God raised up the Babylonians to bring His justice on Judah. You may not see it nor understand it even when it comes, but God is already at work!

“**Chaldeans**” (6) (כַּשְׁדִּימָה, *kašdīmā*) - “clod-breakers;” a territory in lower Mesopotamia, the inhabitants of Chaldea, living on the lower Euphrates and Tigris. “**Babylonians**.”

“**Come from afar**” (8) (רָחֹק, *rāḥôq*) - Babylon was 938 miles from Judah. But after Nabopolassar defeated the Assyrians, Babylon became the greatest power of the ME. Egypt couldn’t ignore the realignment of international power. In 605 BC, Pharaoh Necho went to Assyria’s aid at Carchemish, where he was defeated by Nabopolassar’s son, Nebuchadnezzar. King Josiah of Judah tried to stop Necho from passing through to aid Assyria, but was killed in the battle of Megiddo. Ironically, he may have contributed to Assyria and Egypt’s loss to Babylon.



“**Come for violence**” (2,3,9) (חָמָס, *ḥāmās*) - the Chaldeans were Hamas. They came to seize. They were dreaded and fearsome and brought their own brand of justice.

“**Pile up earth**” (10) - they built ramps of earth against fortress walls to take it. They laughed at fortresses.

“**Might is their god**” (11) - they worshiped their strength or ascribed it to their own false gods.

ARG: Jesus is God’s ultimate answer as the One who will bring forth justice.

Isaiah 42:1-3 (ESV) ¹ Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ² He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

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God will bring about justice for His chosen ones who cry out to Him.

Luke 18:7-8 (NIV) ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

ILL: **Parable of the Persistent Widow.** Luke 18:1-6 (ESV) ¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"

APP: Habakkuk didn't have the rest of the story. He didn't have the NT and Jesus. He had this shocking word that God was bringing justice by raising up the Chaldeans. He had to trust God's justice without knowing the rest of the story... the Good News that Jesus saves and that Jesus will bring forth God's justice. Will you cry out about the injustice of this world, while also trusting that God is at work.

CONCLUSION: There are four essential elements of lament: 1) Cry out to God. 2) Bring your questions and complaints. 3) Ask boldly for help ("with confidence draw near"). And 4) Choose to trust. This is the destination for our laments. Whether we have to keep waiting for an answer or whether, like Habakkuk, we are given an answer that causes us to "be astounded," perhaps an answer that we don't even like at the time... we still say, "Lord, I still trust in You."

We enter this old world with a cry and the many troubles and trials of life continue to make us weep. Until Jesus returns, the world will be marked by tears. This is the human condition. But we don't have to cry alone. We don't have to grieve and question and complain to ourselves. There is One who hears our cry and answers...

Will you cry out believing that...

1. God will help?
2. God will save?
3. God will bring justice?

Let's pray.