



Habakkuk (Part One)

Frustration with God is expressed in the writings of some of the ancient prophets. It surfaces in the life of the prophet Habakkuk.

It's amazing to me that God allows man to vent his frustration and make serious allegations against him. Listen to Habakkuk: "How long, O 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 wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted." (Habakkuk 1:2-3)

The prophet expresses his frustration in **three areas**:

The silence of God. "I call for help, but you do not listen." You are silent! We never hear from you! The psalmist was not shy in venting the same frustration: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" (Psalms 13:1-2)

His fervent pleas to God were not getting any response.

The inactivity of God. Habakkuk cries out to God and laments, "you do not save". You do nothing! You neither hear nor act. Jeremiah expresses similar words: "Why are you like a stranger in the land, like a traveller who stays only a night?" (Jeremiah 14:8)

The prophet is asking why God doesn't stay around a bit longer and help resolve the problems. To Jeremiah, and to us on occasions, God is so unlike the movie hero, Superman, who can detect the faintest cry for help and respond by flying "faster than a speeding bullet" to rescue a cat trapped in a tree or save a man in a burning building or foil a bank robbery.

Superman's "**ministry**" involves him in immediate and effective interventions when people call his name. It is God's apparent inactivity, God's failure to respond immediately to the cry for help, that creates frustration.

The indifference of God. When we feel God is silent and inactive it's only a short step to accusing him of being indifferent. "Why do you tolerate wrong?" the prophets asks, and repeats himself a little later, "Why do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" (Habakkuk 1:13)

Fortunately the book of Habakkuk does not end after the prophet has concluded his tirade against God. God does respond.



(Habakkuk 1:5-11)

God Answers the Prophet

God tells Habakkuk he is wrong about all three charges: God is not silent, inactive or indifferent. Behind the scenes God is at work preparing the Babylonians to come in judgement upon the very people Habakkuk sees living in rebellion against God.

There are times when it looks like God is doing nothing, as Habakkuk and others have thought, when in fact, God is doing extraordinary things.

For example:

(1) From an old couple, Abraham and Sarah, God raised up a nation of people at the time when it looked like he was doing nothing

(2) God raised up Moses to deliver the Hebrew people from slavery when it looked like he had forgotten them

(3) God raised up Esther to be queen so that the Jews could be saved from extinction when it looked like they didn't have a friend on their side.

But why does it take God so long to do something? Why doesn't he move at the pace expected by Habakkuk?

We must remember that God's judgement is tempered with patience and designed to lead sinners to repentance.

For example, God delayed his judgement on the Amorites "for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure". (Genesis 15:16)

God was giving them time to repent. And Paul reminds us that our salvation is due to the patience of God: "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" (Romans 2:4)



What the Prophet Teaches Us About God

Habakkuk teaches us that God's "slowness" in bringing judgement, and in responding to his pleas, is in fact a display of his gracious love towards sinners. He delays so that people have a chance to repent and turn to him.

The prophet teaches us that God does not operate on our schedule or follow our agenda. God has his own timetable and he has everything under his control.



Habakkuk (Part Two)

Those who have mistreated the poor, stolen from the weak, engaged in extortion and practiced idolatry will not escape God's judgement. "The cup from the Lord's right hand is coming around to you" is the message addressed to Israel. (Habakkuk 2:16)

Earlier Habakkuk expressed frustration with God for apparently doing nothing, for delaying in bringing judgement, but he has since learned that "the righteous live by faith". (Habakkuk 2:4)

Have Faith in Him

The Voice of Faith

Having taken a panoramic view of God's dealing with Israel, the prophet is impressed. He now wants God to display that same awesome power once again; to rise up and vindicate his holy name in the midst of his enemies.

"Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy." (Habakkuk 3:1)

The judgement is imminent, "Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay." (Habakkuk 2:3)

Though the coming judgement fills him with fear, the prophet has made God his strength and his refuge and will "live by faith". This faith is expressed in words that have been a source of encouragement for many of God's people through the ages:

"Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign Lord is my strength..." (Habakkuk 3:16-19)

Habakkuk is not ignoring the consequences of this coming judgement with its disruption to every area of life; he is aware of that, but he will trust in a holy and righteous God whose ways are perfect.



The Relevance of Habakkuk

Habakkuk asked questions of God and the answers he received are the same answers we receive to our questions.

We ask:

Why do ungodly people prosper?

Is there any advantage in being upright?

Where is the God of divine justice when evil is taking place?

If God is so powerful why doesn't he do something?

How do we maintain our faith when God seems silent?

Are there any certainties we can hold to?

Can God be trusted?

God's answer to us is always the same: "live by faith". Trust me, God says, for I cannot be anything other than faithful.

Even though life may become complicated, throwing up problems and obstacles in our path, we deal with them the same way Habakkuk dealt with his – by trusting God.



What Habakkuk Teaches Us About God

(1) God's plans move according to his schedule and are not subject to our agenda.

(2) No matter how chaotic life becomes - whether in our family, our church or our nation - God is in control.

- (3) We live in a sinful world with the consequences of sin all about us. In the midst of such chaos, we must "live by faith", trusting God every step of the way.
- (4) God can be trusted.



Amos (Part One)

The ministry of Amos took place about 25 years before the ten northern tribes of Israel were taken captive by Assyria.

They resembled ripened fruit waiting to be picked since they "rejected the law of the Lord" and sold "the needy for a pair of sandals; they [trampled] on the heads of the poor... and [denied] justice to the oppressed." And, if that was not bad enough, their depravity pushed immorality to new lows as "Father and son use the same girl." (Amos 2:4-8)

This ungodly behaviour is coming from a people who were the recipients of God's special favour. God now reminds them that it was he who brought them up from Egypt and met their needs for forty years in the desert.

It was he who gave them the land they now occupy. And it was he who raised up the prophets to speak to them. "Is this not true, people of Israel?" God asks. (Amos 2:10-11)



Privilege Brings Responsibility

Israel was not like any other nation; God chose it for a purpose – to be the nation through whom the Saviour would come into the world.

They were a privileged people: "And the Lord has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands. He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honour high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised." (Deut 26:18-19)

They were not chosen because of their moral superiority or spiritual potential; their selection was a sovereign act of God and with this privilege came responsibility.

This is where Israel failed. "You only," God says, "have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins." (Amos 3:2)

And to emphasise the gap that now existed between them, God asks rhetorically, "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (Amos 3:3) Israel was no longer walking with God.



Prosperous and Indifferent

Israel is described as a nation bent on selfish indulgence and indifference towards God and his laws: "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, 'Bring us some drink.'" (Amos 4:1)

The region of Bashan was known for its rich pasture lands, hence its fine, well-fed, healthy cattle. The women of Israel had access to the best of everything, but they over-indulged, pampering themselves while ignoring the needs of the poor. "You trample on the poor... and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts." (Amos 5:11-12) "[You buy] the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals..." (Amos 8:6)

Not only did they not care about the poor, they refused to listen to God. Five times God reminds them that he had chastised them with a view to winning them back, "yet you have not returned to me," he says. (Amos 4:6,8,9,10,11).

If Israel thought that "the day of the Lord" (Amos 5:18) for which they longed would bring blessings upon them and vengeance upon their enemies, they were greatly mistaken, for instead, it would be a day of judgement upon them for their rebellion against God.



Amos (Part Two)

During the time of the prophet Amos, Israel had become a wicked nation. Yet they hadn't abandoned the practice of their religious duties. Their corrupt behaviour, however, rendered their worship an offence to Almighty God.

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts," God says, "I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps." (Amos 5:21-23)

When God uses such strong words - I hate, I despise... I cannot stand... I will not accept... I have no regard for... I will not listen - we all need to pay attention.

A spirit of complacency prevailed in the land. Israel was self-satisfied and displayed an attitude of indifference.

"You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph." (Amos 6:4-6)

No one "grieved over the ruin of Joseph". The spiritual decline in the nation, which brought a lowering of standards in every area of life, had been ignored. Israel was self-destructing and no one grieved. No one cared. No one was doing anything about it.

To reinforce the point, Amos asks, "Do horses run on rocky crags? Does one plow there [on rocky crags] with oxen?" Of course not. Yet Israel had done what should never have been done: they "turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into bitterness." (Amos 6:12)



Visions of the Coming Judgement

Amos is shown the impending judgement in a series of visions. The first two visions lead him to plead with God to extend mercy to Israel and his prayers buy them some time. (Amos 7:1-6)

In the third vision, Amos sees "the Lord standing by a wall that has been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said, 'I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.'" (Amos 7:7-8)

The plumb line shows just how crooked Israel has become. In the fourth vision, God shows Amos a basket of ripe fruit and says, "The time is ripe... for my people Israel, I will spare them no longer." (Amos 8:2)

When the judgement of God came upon Israel, it was not without justification. The people had ignored repeated warnings, rejected the prophets and embraced an ungodly lifestyle.

Here's another example of their behaviour: "Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?'" They were "skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat." (Amos 8:4-6)

Commercial life had become exceedingly corrupt, dishonest practice and extortion an everyday occurrence. Israel's sinfulness had reached capacity and there would no longer be any communication from God.

Their sins had brought them to a point where a word from God would be a waste of time. A spiritual famine would descend upon the land.

"The days are coming,' declares the Sovereign Lord, 'when I will send a famine through the land - not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.'" (Amos 8:11-12)

Have Faith in Him

Forever Faithful

Though Israel had become unfaithful, God would still fulfil all the promises he had made to them.

Through the descendants of Israel, God would bring into the world a Saviour whose sacrificial death would be a blessing to all who believe. (Amos 9:11-15) At the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15)

James quotes the prophet Amos to show that the conversion of the Gentiles shows the fulfilling of God's ancient promises.



What does the prophet Amos teach us about God?

1. Worship from an impure heart offends God
2. God notes injustice, greed and dishonest practices
3. God's judgement comes only after repeated warning
4. God is always faithful to his promises



Micah

Micah, like the other prophets of his time, warned Israel about the judgement that was coming because they had turned away from God. Their idolatrous practices had earned them "the wages of prostitutes". (Micah 1:7)

Their unfaithfulness incites the emotions of God: he feels betrayed, like a husband whose wife has become involved in an illicit affair. And the effects of Israel's sin are graphically described: "Her wound," God says, "is incurable." (Micah 1:9)

There is nothing that can be done for her. And the reason Israel ended up in this pitiful state was that she refused to listen to God's prophets.

However, Micah caustically remarks, "If a liar and deceiver comes and says, 'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,' he would be just the prophet for this people." (Micah 2:11)

Israel would learn that there are consequences for continually rejecting God; he will not always be available. "They will cry out to the Lord," Micah says, "but he will not answer them. At that time he will hide his face from them because of the evil they have done." (Micah 3:4)

The depth of their self-deceit is evident in their remark, "Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us." (Micah 3:11)

But God summons them to the bar of justice. "Stand up," God says, "plead your case... for the Lord has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel." (Micah 6:1-2)



What God Has Always Wanted

"With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:6-8)

From this scripture we learn that God doesn't want elaborate, sacrificial offerings coming from a heart that does not love him. What he wants is the daily practice of justice, the extension of mercy to those in need coupled with humility.



Who is Like Our God?

Israel had grown familiar with the pagan gods they adopted: gods that could not talk or see, gods that could not hear or respond to their cries, gods that needed to be carried. (Isaiah 46:1-6, Jeremiah 10:1-10)

They had turned from the true and living God, who was always willing to show mercy and to forgive.

As the prophet says, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:18-19)

God's mercy and forgiveness is best appreciated when seen against the background of Israel's sinfulness, their prostitution with other gods, their betrayal of the one true God, their ingratitude for all they had received from his bountiful hand.

All who repent will receive mercy and, to emphasise the extent of God's forgiveness, the prophet says that God will tread their sins underfoot and hurl their sins into the depths of the sea where they will never be found. Who, indeed, is like our God?



What the Prophet Teaches Us About God

What does the prophet Micah teach us about God?

1. Sin is not a minor offence but a betrayal of an intimate relationship with God
2. Mistreating people, especially the poor, does not go unnoticed by God
3. God will not be found by those who repeatedly refuse to listen to him
4. God desires a holy lifestyle from his people
5. God will never forget his ancient promises
6. God is gracious and forgiving to the penitent