

How long Lord?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 October 2021

Preacher: Brian King

[0:00] 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Well, if you have the order of service in front of you on your phone or somewhere, you would know that there is a sermon outline on there which you can use to follow.

But the most important thing is to keep Habakkuk 1 open in front of you. So as we get ready to dive into this book, let's pray again and ask God for his help. Father, you are the one who has breathed out these very words for our edification.

So pray now that we might hear and inwardly digest these words. And through them, hold on steadfastly to the sure and steady hope we have in you.

And that what will be proclaimed will result in glory and honour and praise to your name. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Now, a couple of months ago, I just finished reading this book, Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson. You might have heard of it. It's won a number of awards and it's recently been made into a movie.

[1:13] And I have to say, I don't usually get angry when I read books. But I certainly got angry reading this one. You see, this book is all about blatant injustice.

It tells the true story of a young black man named Walter McMillian, who is falsely accused of murdering a white woman. Despite the fact that he is miles away from the scene at the time of the murder, as can be vouched for by multiple black witnesses.

Despite the fact that the prosecution's star witness has a blatant conflict of interest and contradicts himself multiple times, despite the fact that the prosecutors are shown to have withheld key evidence, a jury votes to declare Walter McMillian guilty in a trial lasting less than two days and a judge all too eager to sentence him to death.

And it is only through the tireless efforts of this book's author, who by the way is a Christian, that Walter McMillian is finally able to go free, though not before wasting years of his life in prison.

And indeed, the book is also a larger examination of the injustices that occur in the American criminal justice system. The overt racism that still takes place in parts of the country there, the abuse of power that is still present, is definitely a book to work you up.

[2:45] You see, if there's one thing that gets us all worked up, it's injustice, isn't it? That's why we get so annoyed whenever we see politicians say some of the most outrageous and disgraceful things.

But instead of getting censored, they get rewarded. It's why we find it so maddening when we discover that we have penans who have waited decades to be eagerly recognized as citizens of Malaysia.

But certain privileged foreigners dubiously get accorded Bumiputra status in record time. It's why we find it troubling that corruption and discrimination and exploitation is just as endemic within our society as COVID-19.

Whenever we see injustice, we get all worked up. But often after that, we get deflated. We feel like a tire that's been punctured.

Because often, nothing much happens. The world goes on as before. Nothing much changes. And we feel helpless. What we're left with is the burden of the why.

[3:55] Why is it like this? Welcome then to the world of Bargook. Today we're starting a short series in the Book of the Bible.

But we know remarkably little about this man. Unlike some other prophets like Jeremiah or Ezekiel, we know nothing of his birthplace, his biography, or his background.

We're not told about his ministry, what it was like, or how it was received. Indeed, his book is quite different from some of the other prophetic books in the Bible.

Usually when we read of an Amos or a Micah, for example, we'll find a prophet bringing a message from God. We'll find a prophet calling on the people of God or its leaders to turn from their ways. But Habakkuk doesn't. At least not in the typical way of direct address. Instead, the entire book is structured around a dialogue between him and God.

[5 : 04] He's addressing God rather than the people. And we're invited to eavesdrop in. And as soon as we begin eavesdropping, we begin to realize that the prophet is all worked up.

He's worked up. Because like us, he sees injustice in the world. But he's also worked up. Because he doesn't see how that injustice he sees.

He's a solid God he can't see. And so that launches him on his spiritual journey. And in this three weeks, we're going to come along to Habakkuk in his journey of faith.

We'll follow him as he moves in three chapters through four Ws. From why to waiting to woes to worship.

That's where we're going over these three weeks. But for today, we'll only be covering the beginning part of his journey. And on this journey, the prophet is asking, When all we see is injustice and wrongdoing, what do we do?

[6 : 14] When all we see is injustice and wrongdoing, what do we do? And so let's dive into this conversation of 1 verse 1 to 2 verse 1. Now, one of the things that comes up again and again in this particular dialogue, the idea of looking or seeing.

And so to follow this conversation, we'll look at it through four statements where looking is mentioned. So first look. Why do you make me look at injustice?

Verse 3. Straight away, Habakkuk gives us a glimpse into the society he's living in. It's one where there is discrimination and violence, strife and conflict.

These are not isolated incidents, but widespread throughout the population. They abound. They mushroom. They're plentiful. It's a picture of chaos, of a decaying social order, where people are just taking what they want, however they want, to satisfy their endless list of wants.

There is injustice happening, and there seems to be no way to stop it. In verse 4, we're told the law is paralysed. On one level, that tells us that the courts are not doing what they were supposed to be doing.

[7 : 38] Going to the courts would not get you justice, because the judiciary are simply another tool to be wielded to benefit the greedy and the powerful.

Justice does not prevail. In fact, it's perverted. Now, that resonates with us here in Malaysia, doesn't it? We know that kind of experience all too well.

But there's probably more going on in that statement. You see, the law here isn't just merely referring to legislation that's been passed by the Dewan Rakyat. No, the law here is the Torah, that is, instruction from God himself.

Centuries before Habakkuk's time, God had declared that he wanted his people to be a light to the nations, a royal priesthood, and that his law, his Torah, would guide them to live as those who reflect his character.

Now, Habakkuk observes, this Torah has been rejected by God's own people. Their hearts are set on evil.

[8 : 50] They refuse to let Torah move in and through their lives. And so, verse 4 tells us something especially shameful, that injustice that's happening is not simply occurring amongst unbelievers.

What's happening here is not being committed by the pagans out there who do not know the living God. No, this is all happening amongst God's people.

And that's horrible, isn't it? Injustice and wrongdoing are always bad. But it's doubly worse when we realise it's taking place amongst those who call themselves God's people.

Have any of you today been wronged by those who call themselves Christians? I expect in today's audience, there would be at least one or two of you who have had some unpleasant experiences. Just this week, I read of a bitter experience of a Singaporean lady. Her mother had been influenced by two church friends to go against her daughter and take ivermectin, claiming that to get the vaccine instead would be satanic.

[10 : 05] Now, even if you have hesitations about the vaccine, that's clearly bad theology. Indeed, one of them supplied the drug itself, which is illegal in Singapore as only authorised personnel can do so.

And as a result, her mother suffered all the expected side effects and is currently still hospitalised as far as I know. And as the daughter put it, who was it who had to endure the trauma of a severely strained mother-daughter relationship?

It was not the church friends. It was her. Who was sitting outside the A and E in the N? It was not the church friends. It was her.

Who was it who had to foot the hospital bill? It was not the church friends. It was her. She clearly felt herself and her family to be the victims of injustice done against her in the name of Jesus.

And for those of us who bear the name of Jesus, we wince. We wince. When we're reminded from church history of certain shameful incidents.

[11 : 20] Like when otherwise pious Christian men owned slaves in the 17th century. We wince when we endure news about abuses of power and child sexual abuse worldwide.

And we ask, God, why do you make us look at injustice? These are the facts that can make us cry. These are the facts that make Habakkuk cry. But Habakkuk's problem isn't just a mere fact that injustice exists.

Look at the passage again, especially verse 2. Here's the issue.

The issue. The issue is not that bad things happen. It's that the good God isn't doing anything about it. It's not that injustice exists.

[12 : 30] It's that the just God isn't bringing justice. Some of us have sat in prayer meeting after prayer meeting, praying for God to act against injustice, against prejudice, against crooked ethics.

And some of us have probably wondered, after yet another prayer meeting has ended, whether God is listening. After all, God's not doing what I expect him to do.

The evil still get away with it. And that's where Habakkuk is. He's clearly been calling for help for a while. But it all seems to no avail.

But look at what Habakkuk is doing. As he struggles, he struggles with God. As he wrestles, he wrestles with God.

He's feeling confused and frustrated. And he says what he feels to God. You see, Habakkuk is a man of faith.

[13 : 39] And it is precisely because he is a man of faith that he is struggling. He cries out to God, not because he has given up on God. Instead, it's the very opposite.

You see, if you don't believe in a good, just and powerful God, then you can't really complain. If such a God does not exist, as someone I heard once explain, then that means injustice is either your fault, someone else's fault, or no one's fault.

The one thing it isn't is God's fault. So then, if such a God does not exist, you have no reason to even cry out as Habakkuk does in verses 2 and 3.

You have no basis to complain that God is silent. Because, well, if he doesn't actually exist, then of course he's not going to answer you.

Or, if he does exist, but he isn't really good or just, then why would he bother? You have to accept the world as it is.

[14 : 52] But because we are Christians who believe in a good, just, and powerful God, that's why we don't accept the world as it is.

That's why we don't accept injustice as just a fact of nature unable to be challenged. And that's why we can cry out to God the way Habakkuk does.

The Bible gives us complete permission to do so. Sometimes we're told that Christians can't doubt. We're told Christians can't lament.

They must be happy all the time, only sing songs with the word victory in them, and not be allowed to struggle. Indeed, a recent survey done by the Christian Copyright Licensing Group, CCLI, of the top 100 songs sung in church, discovered that in our top 25 songs, not a single question of lament is ever posed to God, and only one song makes a passing mention of justice.

And yet, that is out of step with the Psalms, the songbook of the Bible, where justice is frequently mentioned, and at least a third of them are Psalms of lament.

[16 : 12] The Bible gives us permission. As the Old Testament scholar John Goldingay once said, we need not attempt to bottle it up because God invites us to pour it out.

For when we lament, like Habakkuk does, we are creating a pathway to trust. For we are bringing our pain to God, not numbing our pain away from Him.

We are turning to Him rather than retreating from Him. We are choosing the harder but better path. For it takes faith to lament, whereas it takes no faith to keep silent.

It takes faith because when we lament like Habakkuk, we are still calling on God to act. We are still longing for Him to be true to His character.

We are still above all, trusting in Him. And so, if you are in pain today because of some genuine wrong that has been done against you, be honest with God about it.

[17 : 32] That is actually the most Christian thing you can do. And as we do so, we are invited to look again.

And so, secondly, look at the nations and watch and be utterly amazed. In verse 5, God says, you know what?

I do care about justice. I do care about the wrong that has been done to you. In fact, I care much more about it than you think. But look at what I am doing.

Verse 5 again. I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe even if you were told. And what might that be?

Verse 6, I am raising up the Babylonians. And so, here is what is happening. During the time Habakkuk lived, he was based in Judah, the southern kingdom.

[18 : 30] And there is a superpower on the rise. Assyria, the former superpower, has been in decline for quite a while now. And the new kingdom, called Babylon, was well on its way to replacing Assyria as the top dog in town.

They have already flexed their power, having defeated Egypt along the way. And just look at some of the ways they are described. In verse 8, they are described as swifter than leopards and fiercer than wolves.

They are like swooping eagles ready to feast. Verse 8 again. And they gather their captives like one gathers sand on a beach. Verse 9. In verse 10, they laugh at any defenses you try to put up against them.

And in verse 11, there are people who don't particularly care about God. Indeed, you could say their God is themselves. And you could understand why they might have thought so.

For if you were the political analyst in Habakkuk's day, you likely would have concluded that nothing could stand in their way. But God says, you know what?

[19 : 42] I am actually the power behind them. They are dominant, but they are still just an instrument. And the one wielding the instrument is me, God declares.

I am still very much the one in control even when the world looks out of control. And I have looked at the injustice of my people. And I am now about to bring judgment against them in the form of these fearsome Babylonians.

And we know that's exactly what comes to pass. Just a few years after this conversation, Babylon invades Judah and God's people are exiled.

You see, what are we to do when we see injustice and wrongdoing? We are to look again at God and remember who He is.

He is not just a village God in charge of some religion called Christianity. No, He is the God of all nations. and in His sovereignty, He is always working to reveal His glory.

[20 : 54] And sometimes, He works in really unexpected ways, using the most unexpected means. Habakkuk was certainly not expecting God to redirect His gaze to this ruthless and impetuous people.

He would certainly be amazed that God could be using these Babylonians. You see, sometimes we think we know how God should work.

Sometimes we might even dictate how He should work. We simply cannot imagine how He might be using the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Communist Party in China or white supremacists in America for His purposes.

Or on a more personal level, we simply cannot imagine how He might be using your unreasonable and unfair boss, or your client from hell, or the bullies in your class to bring about good.

And yet, God does. If Habakkuk studies his scriptures, he would have precedent. Think, for example, of Joseph in the book of Genesis.

[22 : 09] Here is someone defrauded by the powerful wife of a powerful foreign figure and unjustly imprisoned. And yet, God uses Egyptian injustice to ensure that His people are preserved and His promises come true as the family line of Abraham not only survive but thrive in famine.

And so, look at the nations and watch and be utterly amazed. And yet, there is still something troubling about all this, isn't there?

That is where our third look comes in. Thirdly, your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrongdoing.

When Habakkuk prayed to God to act, this was surely not what he was expecting. You see, when he prayed to God to fix injustice, to bring the nation back to a posture of faithfulness, what would he have been expecting?

He might have been expecting God to raise a Davidic king. He knew from earlier in the Old Testament that God promised to raise a king from the line of David who would be faithful to Torah, who would judge justly, whose righteousness would be his very belt.

[23 : 41] The very last thing he would have expected was for God to raise the Babylonians. After all, look at these Babylonians and notice something about them. The problem with God's people was that they were not acting in line with the law, and yet verse 7, the Babylonians are a law unto themselves.

The problem with God's people was that violence was rampant, and yet verse 9, the Babylonians are intent on violence. The problem with God's people were that they were clearly guilty, but then verse 11, so are the Babylonians.

And so Habakkuk asks verse 13, Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent? Why would the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

If the question earlier was, Why God are you not doing anything? Then the question now is, Why God are you doing this?

After all, did you notice that the question of justice hasn't quite been resolved yet? The Babylonians are indeed God's instruments of judgment. But because they themselves are people of injustice, in fact, they are probably worse than even the Israelites, they can't be God's solution to bring about real justice.

[25 : 12] After all, if God is truly holy, then to let the Babylonians themselves off would be a mark of inconsistency. And so what Habakkuk is doing here is holding God to account.

He says, God, you are my rock. Verse 12. You are utterly consistent. But now, I can't make sense of this apparent inconsistency.

You cannot tolerate wrongdoing, yet why do you tolerate Babylon? And such inconsistency feels like Habakkuk's world is being turned upside down. That's basically the point of verses 14 to 16. God, he says, your inconsistency makes the world feel like it's all chaos with no order. We feel like mere sea creatures, not men and women who were made to rule over the world.

In fact, the only ruler in town that we can see are these wicked Babylonians who are bringing your people into captivity the way fishermen catch fish. But how can that be?

[26 : 19] Habakkuk asks in verse 17. For verse 17, these are people who worship their fishing tools. They worship the creation rather than the creator.

How could you tolerate this, O Lord? How is this consistent with who you are? How can you let idolaters rule? the world no longer makes sense.

You see, here is the plain truth of living as a Christian. Sometimes, faith brings more questions than resolution. Sometimes, faith actually makes our world appear more chaotic, not less.

If you are a Christian today, or you are thinking about becoming a Christian, then I've got some surprising news for you. Sometimes, being a Christian might actually bring you less peace, not more.

For at the end of chapter 1, Habakkuk is left with the same question as at the beginning. How long, O Lord? Are you, verse 17, going to let wicked people keep emptying their nets, destroying nations without mercy?

[27 : 38] And that brings us to our final look for today. Fourthly, I will look to see what he will say to me.

After a whole chapter of lamenting and questioning, Habakkuk comes to a decision. I will wait, he says. I have made my case, I have submitted my complaint, I have poured out my heart.

So now, I wait for God to answer. In other words, I trust, I trust God will make his own case.

For as Peter once said to Jesus, Lord, to who else can we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. And Habakkuk believes the same.

To who else can he go? with his questions and his confusion. Only to God alone. Well, look at Habakkuk's convictions, verse 12.

[28 : 45] He believes God is the Holy One. In fact, he's my Holy One. You are my God, Habakkuk says. There is no other.

And you are everlasting. So that means you are not just holy temporarily, you are holy forever. And if that indeed is my conviction, Habakkuk says, then I'm prepared to wait for the apparent inconsistency to be reconciled.

And so at the end of today's passage, we're left with unresolved tension. Brothers and sisters, that's the shape of the Christian life, is it not?

From one perspective, the shape of the Christian life is unresolved tension. From one perspective, the Christian life is all about trusting continually in the God we can't see while living in an unjust world that we can see.

But now that we've looked at this conversation between Habakkuk and God as a whole, do we at least have more revelation about how we can live in this unresolved tension?

[30 : 01] To come back to the question at the beginning of this sermon, when all we see is injustice and wrongdoing, what can we do? Let me suggest three things from today's passage and further unpack a number of themes that we've already seen.

Number one, don't be afraid to express your emotions. As human beings, emotions are part of our makeup.

Sometimes we think that being all cool and collected means that we're clearly trusting God. But that isn't necessarily true. Sometimes the absence of anguish and sorrow at what we see around us is actually a sign that we are refusing to confront reality as it is.

It's a sign that we prefer to bury our heads in the sand rather than recognize just how deep the curse of sin has penetrated our broken world.

And it could be a sign that we're actually refusing to engage with God. We don't want to wrestle with Him and allow ourselves any hope that He will prove Himself to be good over time because that way we can be protected from being disappointed.

[31 : 23] In other words, we don't trust God enough with our pain and our hurt and our confusion. But that's not the way of Habakkuk.

He struggles with God in a sustained way. Even after God first answers him in 1 verse 5 to 11, that's still not enough because he still has questions.

And so he's still grappling with the word from God. And that's what we can do. Sometimes we have to grapple with God's word in a sustained way to chew on it the way a dog keeps chewing on a bone and cry out to the Holy Spirit for further understanding and illumination.

What we don't do is we draw from God. Number two, know that God works both against evil and true evil.

You see, Habakkuk 1 also delivers us a warning. It tells us that God is not indifferent to injustice. He really hates it. And he really hates it when his own people become those perpetrating injustice and wrongdoing.

[32 : 43] He hates it enough to unleash the Babylonians on them. And so Habakkuk 1 asks us to ponder what sort of people are we becoming?

How are we dealing with others? Whether as a parent, a child, a sibling, a spouse, a student, a teacher, an employer, an employee, a church leader, or a worshipper, are we concerned to do what is right and to make effort to put things to right?

When we look at our actions, what we do, and when we look at our goals, what we hope to achieve, are they in line with the ways of the Lord?

For know this, God works against evil evil, even when that work is invisible to us. And if you are on the side of evil, then God is working against you.

God can leave us in somewhat of a conundrum because if we're truly honest, we know that we're not just people who have been wronged against, we are also people who have wronged others.

[34 : 05] We are not just victims, we are offenders. And that is the testimony of the entire Bible. And so God by right should act against us.

And yet this passage reminds us that God not only works against evil, but through evil. And that is good news because it is only as he works through evil that we can ultimately be in a true sense righteous.

For about 600 years after Habakkuk lived, another superpower came on stage. And it was a governor from that superpower who in giving in to Jewish conspirators acted in blatant self-interest and got Roman soldiers to nail the very son of God onto a criminal's cross.

You see, God did raise that king from David's line that Habakkuk longed for. But that king ended up suffering the greatest injustice in human history.

But through that unjust act, God showed himself to be both consistently just and consistently merciful. He showed himself just for sin must be punished.

[35 : 38] and it was so upon that very cross. And yet he showed himself merciful for Jesus took the penalty that was ours upon himself.

And through that act of evil, God defeated evil and loosened the grip of evil powers upon this world. that is the good news of Christianity in a nutshell.

God works against evil and true evil for our good. And this is our privilege as Christians. We see that more clearly than Habakkuk did.

That particular tension has for us been resolved. But here's the thing. The end of all injustice has not yet come about.

All evil has yet fully overthrown. And that brings us to our third and final lesson for today. Thirdly, be prepared to wait for that day to come.

[36 : 44] Be prepared to wait for God to show himself utterly consistent. Adopt not just the position of honesty but also the position of expectancy because the cross gives us confidence we know what sort of God we are dealing with.

That's what today's passage teaches us and indeed we'll hear more about what it means to wait next week. We'll see that waiting doesn't just mean doing nothing.

And don't just have humility honesty honesty and honesty and humility because remember who God is and who we are.

Let me illustrate. The Bible teacher Jen Wilkin tells a story about a kindergarten teacher. On Monday she instructs the five year olds in her class to take out their books and write today is Monday yesterday was Sunday tomorrow is Tuesday.

No problem everyone writes that. Everyone's happy. But the problem begins when she repeats the process on Tuesday. But as soon as she tells her class right today is Tuesday her class gets confused.

[38 : 04] But teacher you told us that today is Monday. Oh no Monday was yesterday today is Tuesday. And now the class gets even more confused. No teacher you said that tomorrow is Tuesday.

And now the class gets upset. From their perspective the teacher has told them a contradiction. She has told them first that today is Monday and now today is Tuesday. Which is it?

Can this teacher be trusted to tell the truth? Is she fickle and inconsistent? We smile when we hear that because we understand that the problem isn't with the teacher but because the kids haven't quite grasped the concept of yesterday today and tomorrow.

But in truth we are like those kids aren't we? From our perspective God looks fickle and inconsistent since he doesn't deal with injustice according to our sense of time.

But that's because we are not the creator. We cannot understand his timing. But we can be certain his timing is the right one. And according to his timing injustice will not last forever.

[39 : 19] For Jesus has already come and put the world on notice that it's only a matter of time before a new creation is coming before all wrongs will be put to right.

And so if you are not someone who trusts in Jesus today, the Bible says, the clock is ticking. Now is the day to turn to him. Don't wait any longer.

But if you are someone who trusts in Jesus today, then cry out to God, work as his agent of justice, and be prepared to wait.

Let's begin to do that now by praying. let's pray. Let's pray.