

When God Feels Far Away

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[0 : 00] Well, there are times in life that we can't help but ask, where is God? Even the most devoted Christians will go through seasons in their life where God seems far away.

! And they're going through a particularly tough time or a difficulty in their life and they pray and pray and pray, but nothing happens.

Have you experienced this? I know I have. And it's in times like that that you want to trust God. You know, maybe the pastor will come around and visit you and read some Bible verses and you want to nod along and agree to what the Bible says and you want to be the faithful, good Christian, and yet it's really hard.

Why in those moments to believe that God is really there when He's just not doing anything in response to your prayers? Well, that is how the prophet Habakkuk felt about the situation he was in. We need to understand that that's the situation he's in and what he's going through as he starts this book. And he expresses it at the beginning.

[1 : 22] We read earlier verse 2 where he says, How long, Lord, must I call for help and you do not listen? It's a very blunt accusation, isn't it, to God.

And yet He can't hold it in anymore. And so He prays this prayer of what we call lament. It's a particular type of prayer and you find it often in Scripture, not just here but in the Psalms, in the Book of Lamentations, and in other places you'll find these prayers called prayers of lament where God's people are expressing their deeply held frustrations and their sadness about God to God. That's what makes a prayer of lament a particular type of prayer. It's God's people expressing their sadness and frustrations about God but to God. That's what Habakkuk is doing here and that's how this book starts, as a typical prayer of lament.

But then something unexpected happens, which makes Habakkuk's lament different from any other biblical lament. And what happens in the middle of Habakkuk's lament, unexpected, is that God answers him.

That is not normal for a prayer of lament. God intervenes in the middle of His prayer and starts talking. And this begins a dialogue between Habakkuk and God that produces one of the most fascinating little books in the Bible and reveals what God is actually doing in those times when He seems to be doing nothing.

[3 : 07] And that's what we're looking at this morning. There are three chapters to this book, this dialogue between Habakkuk and God, where God engages with him in his lament.

And I think it's such an important book for us when we're in those times and we're lamenting. God might not answer us, but this book shows us what God wants to say to His people when they're in these times and when they're lamenting.

So there's three chapters in this book. We're going to be looking at one chapter each week. And so we're starting, of course, with chapter one. And each of these chapters have their own treasures in them.

It's easy to rush ahead and to see how the conversation proceeds. And it's worth, actually, at home reading this in one sitting. It's a very short book. That'll equip you well to listen to each of the sermons.

But the sermons will go into each of the chapters and hopefully, with God's help, unearth the treasures in each. And so as we set off, what we need to do first is we need to see what started it all.

[4 : 07] We need to look at Habakkuk's initial complaint. And we see that in verse 2 to 4. So let's read that. How long, Lord, must I call for help and you do not listen?

Or cry out to you about violence and you do not save? Why do you force me to look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Oppression and violence are right in front of me.

Strife is ongoing and conflict escalates. This is why the law is ineffective. And justice never emerges. For the wicked restrict the righteous.

Therefore, justice comes out perverted. Okay, so Habakkuk's frustration with God in this opening lament is that he's not doing anything about the problems of Habakkuk's society.

God doesn't seem to be intervening and stopping anything bad from going on. And this is a time in Israel where evil was running rampant. Violence ruled the streets.

[5 : 10] Gang violence, the powerful, oppressing the weak. The law was not working. And just too many bad people were escaping justice.

That's the situation we're reading about here. Does it sound familiar? By any chance? I mean, you read these words, verse 2-4, this could be talking about South Africa in 2025, couldn't it?

Nothing's really changed. Oppression and violence are right in front of me. Strife is ongoing and conflict escalates. Oppression and violence, doesn't that describe our society today?

If we bother to look, which sometimes we don't want to. We sometimes want to hide away from what's going on in our society.

But I, this week, looked up a list of murders by city. And this is what I found. When I ranked it by, it was originally ranked by murders per 100,000.

[6 : 17] And it was some city in Mexico. But then I ranked it by absolute homicides. How many? And this is the situation. This is the top cities in the world, according to 2023-2024 crime data.

Top homicides in the world. And guess who's on top? We are Cape Town. Followed by Durban. Followed by Johannesburg. Top three most violent cities in the world, according to homicides.

Right there. Isn't that concerning for you? Now, we may be able to very cleverly shelter ourselves from a lot of the violence.

We know where it goes on in Cape Town. But there's only so far you can go to shelter yourself. The truth is, if we bother to look and read the news and talk to the people who are working, you know, in the troubled areas, evil is running rampant.

And it's not just there. It's actually behind closed doors, right next door to us. There's broken homes. There's addiction to drugs.

[7 : 26] Far more than we realize. There's just horrendous abuse of women and children. Evil is running rampant.

And the question we could easily ask as we look at it, is God really here in Cape Town? In a city where evil seems to be winning.

You know, if God were here, wouldn't He do something about it? Now, you might have been a Christian for long enough to have a very neat theological answer for that.

Well, yes, you know, God is doing something about it through His church. And there's a reason that He allows evil to continue for a time, but He has a plan. And that's all true.

You know, we know the answers as Christians. The answers to evil. But the question is, what about when it touches your own life?

[8 : 31] Then all those theological answers seem to take a back seat. What about when you or a loved one are the victim of crime?

Or something else really bad happens in your life. You have a chronic illness that is just getting worse and worse.

Or you're diagnosed with cancer. And you pray. And you pray. But God doesn't do anything about it. And that is why all of us, at some point in our lives, will find ourselves crying out with Habakkuk in lament, How long, Lord, must I call for help?

And you do not listen. But it's precisely in those times that we need to hear God's unexpected answer, which is what we see next in the book.

So in the middle of Habakkuk's lament about the state of his world, God interrupts him. And we see God's interruption from verse 5. Look what he says. This is now God speaking.

[9 : 46] Look at the nations and observe. Be utterly astounded. For I am doing something in your days that you will not believe when you hear about it.

Okay, so let's just pause there. There's a few things to notice in God's answer to Habakkuk's complaint. Firstly, notice that God doesn't actually rebuke Habakkuk for saying what he said.

He doesn't rebuke him. He doesn't say, how dare you question me. No, he doesn't mind it. God doesn't mind Habakkuk asking these questions.

And it's the same with all of his people. It's the same with us. God doesn't mind us expressing our frustrations to him. Even when there are frustrations about him.

He doesn't mind us expressing those to him. In fact, he welcomes that. We see it throughout the Bible when his people do that. Lament, this type of prayer that God has given us examples of in his word, is a way that God wants his people to process their pain.

[11 : 02] Because there's various ways we can process our pain. Well, this is the way God has prescribed for us. He says, come, have it out. Be honest. Don't pretend that it's not there.

This is a blessing that God has given us. Permission to have it out with him. And to let him know how we really feel.

And it's amazing how often when we do that, when we come to him with those frustrations, and we actually put words to the negative emotions we're feeling, it's amazing how often God will answer us.

He will give us what we need from his word. Because it becomes a conversation. Just like it was with Habakkuk. God wants our prayers of lament not just to be one way, but he wants us to speak, but also to listen to what he has to say and open his word.

And it's amazing how often when we do that in those times, that God has something critical to say to us. That is exactly what we need to hear. So that's the first thing we see in God answering Habakkuk, that God doesn't mind us complaining in this way of lament to him.

[12 : 27] And he'll very often answer us in those times. But the second thing we see is that God doesn't always give us the answers we want. And he certainly didn't for Habakkuk.

Basically, the answer he gave to Habakkuk here in chapter 5 is, I'm going to answer you, but you're not going to like it. Look what he says, verse 5.

For I am doing something in your days that you will not believe when you hear about it. In other words, he's saying to him, this is going to be hard for you to take on board, Habakkuk. It's going to be hard for you to hear.

You're not going to like the answer. And so what is it? What is it that's so hard, that's going to be so difficult for Habakkuk to hear? Well, we see it in the next verse, verse 6. Look, I am raising up the Chaldeans.

Okay, it's time for a history lesson. Because you're probably going, who are the Chaldeans? Right? Okay, so Habakkuk was a prophet in Judah.

[13 : 32] Around 600 BC. There's the geography, map on the wall. And there on the left, the blue part, is the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom of Israel and Judah.

Now the Assyrians, big baddies, they had conquered the northern kingdom and only the southern kingdom of Judah was left because of their obedience and Josiah's reforms.

And you'll read about that in the Old Testament. They actually ended up obeying God and so he protected them from being conquered. But over a century had passed since then and things had changed and now they were as bad as the northern kingdom had got.

And that's why Habakkuk is complaining here about how bad a society has got. And in the meantime, over that century, a new enemy had arisen, the Babylonians, also known as the Chaldeans.

And they started there in what is modern-day Iraq, Babylon, and their kingdom expanded and they eventually defeated the Assyrians. They were even more hardcore than the Assyrians who were bad enough.

[14 : 37] And they even defeated the superpower of the day, Egypt, at the famous battle of Chalchimesh. It happened at the, no, Chalchimesh, right at the top there. But the whole green there, if you can see it, the shaded green, that's Babylon's empire.

And they came right to the borders again of Judah. And they were a nasty people. Okay? They enjoyed killing.

They saw it as sport. And it doesn't matter. Men, women, children, it didn't matter. Killing was fun for them. And they were really good at it. They were the best in the business.

You can see that in one of the things God says about them in verse 9. All of them come to do violence. Their faces are set in determination. They gather prisoners like sand.

Very interesting. The Hebrew word for violence there is Hamas. And we see the type of violence that is still being done.

[15:42] But that's the kind of violence that was being done in that day as well. Hamas type violence. And so, and so God is saying that to, to have a kick.

In answer to your question, the, the Chaldeans are coming. And it's not good news for you. But, the critical thing I want you to notice back in verse 6, is not just their coming, but I am the one sending them.

Do you see that? Look, I am raising up the Chaldeans. I'm sending them. I'm sending this violent people to you.

Because of the evil of Judah, what I'm going to do, God says, I'm going to send something even more evil to sort them out. Now, let's think about that.

Because that's, that's really difficult to process. I don't know about you, but it is for me. It was difficult for Habakkuk. And it's difficult for us to process that God will use evil things to accomplish His purposes in the world.

[17:04] That's what He's doing here. That's what He says to Habakkuk. I'm going to use this evil nation. I'm going to, I'm going to raise them up. I'm going to raise up this evil nation, this evil violent nation to do what I want it to do for me.

That God uses evil things to accomplish His purposes. And it's difficult for us to fathom, but God wants us to know in this book He does that. He does that in this world and He does that in our lives as well.

Because that's unsettling. Right? That God can just easily just use evil things, both in the world and in the lives of His people like this. That is unsettling because we assume God is our big protector, don't we?

who won't let bad things happen to His children. But according to this book, according to what we're reading here, that is not true.

Not only does God allow bad things, but often He can be the one who sends them. And that's hard. That's hard to process. But that's what we're reading here.

[18:17] And that is different also to the view that many Christians hold of good and evil in the world. It really challenges the way we normally think about good and evil.

You see, because many people will think on the one side you've got God and everything that is good and all the angels.

And on the other side you've got Satan and the demons and all the bad things and they're in conflict with each other. Good and bad, right? They're locked in this conflict and there are wins and losses on both sides.

And that's what we're experiencing in this world. This great conflict between good and bad. Between God and the good forces and Satan and the evil forces.

But there's a problem with that view. The problem with that view is that when evil things happen in your life, what that means, according to that view, is evil is stronger in that moment than God is.

[19:25] And that's not true. You see, the real answer for what's going on is much more difficult to process. The real answer is not that God is here against Satan and they're fighting this locked battle and there's good versus evil.

The real answer, the more difficult, but the biblical answer is God is actually the one in control above both good and evil. He's in complete control over both good and evil forces in our world. And it has always been that way. Even the devil, who is the origin of sin and evil in our world, never acted outside of God's control, evil in evil in evil in evil in Or as someone else said, the devil is on God's leash.

That's actually a good way of looking at it. You know, if you walk your dog, you'll normally, hopefully, if you obey the rules of Plumstead and the city of Cape Town, you'll have him on a leash. Because your dog is going to do what dogs do, right? It's going to see a cat and it's going to bark, or another dog and it's going to chase after and pull you on the leash. But even though your dog is doing what dogs do, you're still in control of it.

[20:57] You're still deciding whether that's going to go all the way and actually have a fight with the other dog or whether you're going to restrain him because he's on your leash. Well, the devil is on God's leash.

Evil is on God's leash. And what that means about Satan is that it means God let him rebel in ancient prehistory as a fallen angel when he rebelled against God and led others in rebellion against God.

God let him do that. God let him tempt humanity in Eden. And God even let him plot to have God's son Jesus arrested and killed.

Why? Why would God allow him to do these evil things? Well, we know as we read the Bible it's because through that evil God would achieve the ultimate good for our salvation and for his glory. And he was in control of every part of it, both the good and the evil. As we just read in our daily devotions a few weeks ago in Peter's sermon at Pentecost, Acts 2:23, he says, Jesus was delivered up according to God's determined plan and foreknowledge.

[22:14] He still goes on to say, you used lawless people to nail him to the cross and kill him, but according to Peter, that was all part of God's foreordained plan. His determined plan, that was all under God's control, all on God's leash.

God used evil people doing evil things to achieve his purposes. It was all on his leash. Like in Habakkuk's day, the evil Chaldeans, the Hamas of the day, were on God's leash.

And God was using them as his pet for his purposes. And that's the truth. That's the big sort of brain shift we need to get that Habakkuk introduces us to about the true nature of good and evil in this world.

It's not good versus evil. It's God over both good and evil. But of course, that raises an even bigger question, which is the next question Habakkuk goes on to ask.

So he thought his first question was a problem. Until God answers, now he's got an even bigger problem and it's expressed in verse 13. And it's this.

[23:29] Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrongdoing, so why do you tolerate those who are treacherous? The Chaldeans. Why are you silent?

While one who is wicked swallows up the one more righteous than himself? That's his new question. And it's a good question, isn't it? Essentially, he's asking, well, if God uses evil in the world like this, if he's actually in control of it, if it's on his leash, then how can he be good if he uses evil?

And that's the really big question in the opening chapter here of Habakkuk. That if God uses evil like this, how can he be good? And sorry to say, it's only answered in chapter 2 and 3.

So you're going to have to come back in the next two weeks to find out the answer. But before we get there, and it's easy to now want to jump ahead and see what's the answer to that burning question, but we've got to not leave chapter 1 behind too quickly, because there are some lessons in chapter 1 as I close that God has for us, I think, this morning.

two in particular, things that I want us to notice from this chapter. Firstly, God is not silent.

[24:58] God is not silent, and so speak to him. Let your frustrations out, and expect him to answer. In other words, learn to lament.

like Habakkuk, yeah, when you have doubts, when you have frustrations, rather than let that drive you away from God, take those things to him, he welcomes it, and he allows it, let it out, be honest with him.

Don't pretend like you don't have those things, and think that you have to act like a faithful, pious Christian, and never think these things about God. Actually, God knows you do, and he wants you to speak to him about them.

And seek out, when you do that, seek out his answer in his word. Seek out God's perspective on your particular pain and your struggle that you're going through. And that's exactly what Habakkuk ended up doing at the end of his second lament.

So you've got Habakkuk asking this question, God answering him, then Habakkuk has this bigger question, but right at the end, when he asks this bigger question, and he's really confused, and he doesn't know what's going on now based on God's first answer, and he asks, well how can you possibly be good?

[26:17] I don't get it, I don't understand. How does he end? It's actually the first verse of chapter 2, he says this, I will stand at my guard post and station myself on the lookout tower.

I will watch to see what he will say to me. You see what Habakkuk does here? As he had these big questions for God, he wasn't interested in other people's answers.

He wasn't just going to Google it, or ask ChatGPT to give him a nice, neat, theological answer. No. He was willing to wait for God and God alone to answer him.

And he went up to the ramparts, and he was going to wait there and trust that God would answer him in God's way and in God's time. And we've got to do the same.

In our struggles, we've got to go up to the ramparts and wait for God. That's the first thing. God is not silent.

[27 : 25] But secondly, the second thing we see about God in this chapter is that God is not idle either. Even when evil seems to be winning in this world, and everything seems to be going to pot in the world around you and in your life, that doesn't mean God is not doing anything about it.

He is more involved and in control than you think. And he is fulfilling his purposes in it. Just because evil things are happening, just because bad things are happening in your life, does not mean God is far away.

He is there in the middle of it, in control of it, more than you know. Now I get that that is really hard to process when you are actually suffering from evil, when you yourself are the victim of violence, or you get that diagnosis.

It is really hard to remember that God is in the midst of this and he is in control of it. But in some ways it is also a strange relief to know that.

That as a Christian, the suffering I face is not a result of random forces or a result of evils winning in this situation.

[28 : 57] no, it is still under the complete control of a God who is still good somehow. And a God who has an ultimate plan in all of it.

And that, knowing that as a Christian will allow me to rest even in the suffering. It's actually more comforting to know that there is a God who sends the evil and allows it than a God who is not in control of it.

And those are the only two options. And the truth we learn in Habakkuk is the first option is true. God is the God who is over both good and evil in our lives.

And understanding this and being able therefore to face suffering and evil because of that perspective is something that has sustained Christians throughout the ages and is the testimony of Christian martyrs throughout history who faced the violence and the evil of other people and died by their hands.

One of them that comes to mind that I've just been reading about this week is Hugh Latimer who we named Latimer House after. You might not know who he is. Well he was an Anglican bishop in the 1500s who was tried and sentenced in 1555 under the reign of Bloody Mary the Catholic Queen of England when they were persecuting the Protestants.

[30 : 33] And him and another guy, a younger guy, Nicholas Ridley were taken and bound and they were going to be burned alive, burned at the stake. And as they were getting tied up and the fires were starting and Nicholas Ridley was in distress.

He was crying and he was scared. Wouldn't you be? Hugh Latimer, this old wise Christian man, turns to him and apparently these are his final heard words to Ridley.

He says, Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light a candle in England as I trust shall never be put out. See, what stands out for me about that is that this is a man who was suffering evil but he was suffering it calmly because he knew who was in control of it.

This was not some random tyrant. This was not the results of random evil. He knew who was in control of the situation and he knew that God would use it for the ultimate good which he turned out to do.

And as Christians, you know, we see the ultimate example of God doing this, using evil for good, in the gospel. If we believe the gospel, we actually believe that God was in control of the evil that caused Jesus to go to the cross.

[31 : 54] And in Jesus, we also see a God who doesn't sit idly by while humans suffer. But in him coming to the world as Jesus and then suffering himself, he shows that he is a God who is willing to come into our suffering with us and suffer with us, alongside us.

He lets himself suffer evil that he is in control over. evil. And then he uses that very evil to accomplish the greatest good by breaking the power of evil and sin over his people.

And because of that, because of that, because of God's control over evil and his willingness to enter into it, we can know the truths that we read in Romans 8, 28, that all things, all things, both the evil

and the good, work together for the good of those who love God and who are called according to his purpose.

Well, let's pray. Oh God, we approach you in humble fear of you, that you are a God who is in control of both good and evil.

people. Lord, we thank you for your word and challenging how we think about you. And we pray that you would forgive us for small thoughts of you.

[33 : 29] Help us to realize your absolute sovereignty over our world, both the good and the bad, and help us to humbly accept that truth even if we don't understand it.

And Lord, help us to lament. Help us to be people like Habakkuk who bring our frustrations to you and who wait for your answer in faith.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Thank you so much, thank you so much, thank you so much, thank you so much, thank you so much, thank you so much, thank you so much, thank you so much, thank you so much, thank you so much, thank you so much, thank you so much,