

Life's Biggest Question and God's Answer

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



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Why dost thou show me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? For spoiling and violence are before me; and there are those who raise up strife and contention. (Habakkuk 1:3)

After you have seen the evening newscast or read the morning newspaper, has the thought come to your mind, *This country – and the world – are in a mess! Why doesn't God do something about it?* Habakkuk walked about in his nation and saw iniquity, evil, injustice, and violence taking place and asked, "God, why don't You do something about it?"

The time in history was probably near the end of the sixth century B.C., between the reigns of Josiah and Jehoiakim. The nation Israel had split into two kingdoms, and Habakkuk was God's spokesman to the Southern Kingdom. He appeared in the twilight, just before the darkness of the Babylonian captivity. The Northern Kingdom had already fallen to the brutal Assyrian forces. Now Babylonia had gained ascendancy, and God had warned that the Southern Kingdom would fall to Babylon unless it changed its ways. Due to a period of revival, half-hearted though it was, God graciously suspended the impending judgment of the Babylonian captivity to give this nation an eleventh-hour reprieve. This has always been God's method – slow to anger, merciful, not willing that any should perish (see Psalms 103:8 and 2 Peter 3:9).

But this hiatus of judgment puzzled the prophet Habakkuk. He didn't quite understand it. He had a problem with God's reluctance to move when all around there was all of this evil! The way Habakkuk saw it, God was permitting evil on every hand, was doing nothing about it, and that was a mystery to the prophet. He didn't quite understand why a holy God didn't move in and judge when it seemed so essential.

Habakkuk is the "doubting Thomas" of the Old Testament. He had a question mark for a brain. I think that you can reduce the doubt of this man to one word: Why? Isn't this fundamentally the question of the human race? The oldest book in the Bible probably is the Book of Job. The question that Job and his friends spent most of the book talking about was why God permitted evil to come to him. Why? A great many people today wonder *why* God does not move in and do something about the evil in the world. This is the question that is basic to all questions today. If it is not your question, it certainly is mine. The question of Habakkuk was precisely that: Why was God permitting evil to manifest itself and run rampant in the nation of Israel? Why does God permit evil? Why would a holy, gracious, good God permit these things to take place?

Some time ago I had the privilege of talking to two brilliant professors at respected universities. Both of them are fine Christian men, by the way, and it is unusual to find men of their caliber and Christian testimony in the institutions where they are. They were telling me that the method pursued by godless professors in our universities to destroy the faith of impressionable young people under their instruction is to first attempt to destroy their faith in the character of God and then in the integrity of the Word of God. I'm sure some of us thought they made a direct frontal attack on the Bible. But they don't quite do that. Instead, they use this old bromide: "You do not believe that a God of love would permit evil and suffering in the world, do you? And you can't possibly believe a God of love would have a place like hell or that He would permit evil men and women to prosper, do you?" That's the way they begin to destroy confidence in the character of God. Then they move from that to destroying confidence in the Word of God. That method is not new; it's as old as the human family. The enemy used that same method in the Garden of Eden. Satan came, not with a frontal attack on the Word of God, but by saying through the serpent, "You don't mean to tell me that God doesn't want you to eat

of that tree. Do you mean a good God would keep you from eating from that tree when it would give you the knowledge of good and evil?" (See Genesis 3:1-6.)

That line of questioning, may I say, happens to be the same question of God's own *prophet!* Why will a God of love, a holy God, permit evil in this world? Let's look at Habakkuk's specific question as it fit into the local situation of his day. Notice that he says, "There are those who raise up strife and contention." This man walked about in the nation, and he saw sin, iniquity, evil, injustice – all of that taking place – so he asked God, "Why don't You do something about it?"

Therefore, the law is slacked, and justice doth never go forth; for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore, justice goeth forth perverted.
(Habakkuk 1:4)

This is my question also, and I'm sure it's yours. Why doesn't God do something about injustice in this world today? Why did He permit Communism to arise? Why does God permit all of this sin? Why doesn't He judge the wicked? Why does He permit evil men and women to prosper today? In this country we see flagrant disregard of God's commandments all the way from Hollywood to Washington, D.C., and they're getting by with it, let me tell you! And God seems to be doing nothing about it.

All of God's people have been faced with this problem. Even the psalmist said,

But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had almost slipped. For I was envious of the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs in their death; but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued with other men. (Psalm 73:2-5)

God gave the psalmist His answer, by the way. In Psalm 37 He says,

Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither like the green herb. (Psalm 37:1, 2)

But let's get back to Habakkuk, because he doesn't have his answer yet. But God does speak to him and tells him that He's going to do something about it, that actually they're not getting by with sin at all. God says in effect, "While My people continue in sin and My prophets continue to warn them and urge them to turn back to Me, I am preparing to deal with them."

For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful; their judgment and their dignity shall proceed from themselves. (Habakkuk 1:6, 7)

Then He goes on to describe what awful avengers the Chaldeans will be. My friend, read their history. They came in 605 B.C., again in 593 B.C., and then they came again in 587 B.C. You will see Nebuchadnezzar camped outside the wall at Jerusalem, and finally his army makes the breach in the wall. They burn the city, destroy the temple, and take the people into Babylonian

captivity. So God wasn't exaggerating when He said that these people who were coming would be His instruments of judgment upon God's people.

Now the substance of what He is saying here to Habakkuk is this: "You think that I'm not doing anything about evil, but I *am* doing something about it. I am preparing a nation down yonder on the banks of the Euphrates River. I'm shutting them out of Israel temporarily; they can't move until the time comes when Israel's cup of iniquity is filled up. (God never lets judgment come until the cup of iniquity is full.) But then I will let them pour into the land and overcome My people in judgment."

Now you may think that is an answer, but it was no answer for Habakkuk. To tell the truth, it created a bigger problem than he had at the beginning. It raised a greater question than his first! Let me paraphrase his next question: "You don't mean to tell me, Lord, that You are raising up a pagan, heathen nation to come and chastise *Your* people? They are more wicked than we are, and instead of our being judged, You ought to judge *them* first." (It's amazing how we think we can tell God how to run His business, and this prophet was doing just that. Many Christians today are telling God what to do, but He doesn't seem to follow any of our suggestions.)

Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, mine Holy One? We shall not die. (Habakkuk 1:12)

I think there should be a question mark there at the end. Note that Habakkuk says, "We shall not die." That is, "Do You really mean it?" Here's a man who a few moments before had been saying to God, "Why don't You *do* something?" God said, "I am doing something. I'm preparing that nation over there by the Euphrates River to come and chastise My people." But Habakkuk is not satisfied with that because he doesn't like Chaldeans. He knows that they are a very brutal people:

O LORD, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O Mighty God, thou hast established them for correction. Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity; why lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he? (Habakkuk 1:12, 13)

The question now is this: *Why are You permitting us to suffer at the hands of a nation that is more wicked than we are? They should be judged, not us.* But Habakkuk has already said that God should judge his own nation for their sins. You see, he's got an even bigger problem before him now.

"Why must this happen to us and not to them?" That is a question which any pastor today hears many times. "Why did God let this happen to *me*? I know So-and-so, and he is not near the Christian I am, and he never has any trouble at all!" Have you ever heard that question? Well, God gives Habakkuk an answer, and His answer to him is simply this: I'll judge them in time. I intend to deal with the Chaldeans (or Babylonians – the terms are synonymous). It is the same thing that God said earlier to Isaiah concerning the Northern Kingdom,

O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, the staff in whose hand is mine indignation.
(Isaiah 10:5)

In other words, “I’m using the Assyrians as a rod to chastise My people. When I get through with them, I’ll judge the Assyrians in time.”

Notice that the question of this man, though unanswered, did not cause him to lose his faith. Habakkuk is going to wait for God’s answer:

I will stand upon my watch, and set myself upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reprov'd.
(Habakkuk 2:1)

Today a great many Christians, or *professing* Christians, lose their faith because God won’t give them all the answers. Habakkuk did not lose his faith. He said, “I do not have the answer, but I’ll go to my tower where I can see and I’ll wait for it. I’m confident that God has the answer, and He will reprove me.” Now let me bring this down to our level. It is not for you and me to question God. We are to *believe* God and trust Him. It is almost blasphemy for a little creature down here, especially a child of God, to look up and ask, “Why?” In substance, God says to us, “I’m not giving you the answers. I’m asking you to trust Me and walk by faith.” You and I set our wills over against the will of God when we question what He does.

Now notice how the Lord answers him:

Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie; though it tarry, wait for it, because it will surely come, it will not tarry.
(Habakkuk 2:2, 3)

In other words, “Habakkuk, I have the answer. You won’t live to see it, but it will be worked out in time, and I ask you to believe Me.”

Behold, his soul that is lifted up is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4)

The just shall live by his *faith*. God is saying to Habakkuk, “I want you to know that I do not give you answers to all the questions of this life. The main reason I don’t is not that I do not have them, but because I want you to walk by faith. And that’s the only way that you *can* walk by faith.” We are to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Therefore, God says to you and me many times, “My child, I’m asking you to walk with Me and believe Me.” But He didn’t say He would give us the answers.

This statement, “But the just shall live by his faith,” happens to be so important that the three major epistles in the New Testament not only quote it but make it very basic in their teaching. Paul, in that great declaration of the faith that saves, gives it to us:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For in it is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, The just shall live by faith. (Romans 1:16, 17)

Then this epistle moves into the great theme that God *justifies* a sinner by faith. God asks you and me to do the same thing He asked Habakkuk to do: believe Him that He will save you, that He will justify you, and that you will stand before God having your guilt absolutely removed by simply trusting the fact that Jesus Christ died for you on the cross. And that's not all. God not only asks us to believe Him in order to be justified by faith, but we are to continue to live by the faith principle.

Paul in the Epistle to the Galatians quotes this again:

But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident; for, The just shall live by faith. (Galatians 3:11)

Here the emphasis is not on justification as it is in Romans; he puts the emphasis on *faith*. You and I are guilty and polluted before God. You see, when man sinned in the Garden of Eden, sin moved in two directions: toward God (making man guilty) and toward man (making man polluted and corrupted). A polluted man can't bring anything that's clean to God, and faith is not meritorious. But faith is the only thing God will accept from you and me today. That's the reason Paul could say,

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

In Hebrews, the other epistle that quotes Habakkuk, we find a tremendous statement quoted right before the chapter that shows how men *lived* by faith:

Now the just shall live by faith; but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. (Hebrews 10:38)

He is saying that this is the way we are to live. You see, God justifies you when you come to Christ and accept Him as Savior. And, my friend, from then on it is a *life* of faith. "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

When I used to study mathematics, the answers were in the back of the book. I don't know about you, but the way I worked a problem was to turn to the back and get the answer, then work toward it. That is our problem today – we want the answer first so we can work from it. But God says to Habakkuk, "I have all the answers to the problems of life, but I'm not putting them in the back of the book. I do not give them to you, because I want you to stay with the problem for Me and walk by faith, going with Me step by step."

When Habakkuk witnessed the sin of his people and asked, "Why?", he was trying to look into the future, but we have the advantage of being able to look back on Israel's past – it is history now. We *see* the answer to Habakkuk's questions. God sent His own people into captivity; He *did* do something about their sin! Habakkuk had asked, "Why do You let me see iniquity?" God answered, "I'm doing something about it because you're right – I *am* holy. I can't even look upon sin. I am going to judge it, but I am *patient*."

There came a day when the Chaldeans did subjugate the Southern Kingdom. But God made it work out for the nation's good and for His glory! Listen to what He said,

Behold among the nations, and regard, and wonder marvelously; for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you. (Habakkuk 1:5)

When Paul began his missionary journey, he went to Antioch of Pisidia where he preached one of the greatest sermons ever preached. In it, he went back to Habakkuk and quoted this very verse:

But he, whom God raised again, saw no corruption. Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins; and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses. Beware, therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets; behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish; for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no way believe, though a man declare it unto you. (Acts 13:37-41)

This is an amazing application of Habakkuk 1:5. Paul is saying that God has provided a salvation, and He didn't do it (as Paul said elsewhere) in a corner – at the time of the crucifixion, Jews from all over the world were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They carried the word everywhere that Jesus of Nazareth had died on a cross, and that it was rumored He had been raised from the dead. Also, Jews from all over the world were back in Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the little group of believers. Multitudes were saved at that time and in succeeding days. When that news went out, the Roman world ignored it at first. Paul is telling them that God has worked a work in their days, “a work which ye shall in no way believe, though a man declare it unto you.”

Today the world asks, “Why doesn't God do something about sin?” My friend, God *has* done something about it! Nearly two thousand years ago He gave His Son to die. He intruded into the affairs of the world. Through Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, the human family can be forgiven of their sins. God said to Habakkuk, “Believe Me. I am going to work this thing out for good.” My beloved, without doubt this is one of the most wonderful examples of the fact that the hand of God is in the glove of human events! But to see how God answered Habakkuk, you've got to go to the watchtower of history and look back.

Habakkuk also questioned God relative to the Chaldeans, wondering why He did not punish them. Well, God judged them, too – go and look at Babylon today. It lies under the dust and rubble of the ages. The prophet Daniel, who was one of the captives taken to Babylon by the Chaldeans, gave God's warning to Babylon's last king by interpreting His handwriting on the wall: “Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting” (Daniel 5:27). It was a silent but eloquent testimony that God does something about evil – He judges it.

Let me translate the interrogations of Habakkuk into the language of our day:

1. Why does God permit evil?
2. Why doesn't God judge the wicked?

Why does God permit evil? Well, He permits it because He is long-suffering. He is “not willing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9), and He has provided a cross, a crucified Savior, so that no one needs to perish. This He did at the first coming of Christ.

Why doesn't God judge the wicked? God will answer that at the second coming of Christ, because at that time He will judge sin. All we need is a perspective to see the answers to these two questions. Christ came the first time to wear a crown of thorns and to die upon a cross. The next time He comes, He will wear a crown of glory and will hold the scepter that will rule the earth.

We have been moving on the national political level, but now let's make it personal. God has the answer for *your* problems, my beloved. "Why does God permit this to happen to me?" Is that what you're asking today? May I say this, and please let's not let this out: *I do not know*. Honestly, I do not know.

I stayed in a motel in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, where I could have gone out in front of it and thrown a rock over into Oklahoma. Since it was so close, my wife and I went over there and drove several miles into Oklahoma to where my dad is buried. I never get into that country without becoming a little nostalgic. Thinking of this message, I remembered being a fourteen-year-old boy standing by the fresh grave of my dad who had been killed in a cotton gin accident. As I stood there I wept and cried out, "Why, oh God, did You take him? Why did this have to happen to me?" Time has gone by, and today I may have an answer for that. I feel that it was God's method of dealing with a boy who would never have entered the ministry otherwise.

Later on in my life, I stood by a little white casket holding my firstborn daughter and asked the same question of God, "Why did You let this happen to me?" I do not have the answer to this day. But I want to say this to you, I have gone to my watchtower, and I shall wait. I am trusting the one who has the answer. He has reassured my heart, saying, "Just put your hand in Mine and walk with Me through the dark, and I'll give you your answers when the time comes." I don't know about you, but I'm trusting. God's Word says, "But without *faith* it is impossible to please him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). The just shall live by faith, my beloved.

Into my study several years ago a mother brought her daughter who was almost a raving maniac, hooked on dope. She cried out, "Oh, Dr. McGee, why does God let this happen to me?" I don't know. I stood with another mother by the casket of one of the finest young men I have looked upon in this life, killed in military action, and they wouldn't dare open the casket. She said, "Dr. McGee, why did this happen to me?" I don't know... *I don't* know.

But I do know this: Habakkuk got his answer. God took him to the watchtower, and Habakkuk, thinking that God was doing nothing, found that He was doing plenty. And then Habakkuk prayed:

O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid; O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy. (Habakkuk 3:2)

Habakkuk now reverses himself. He says, "I've heard Your speech, and I am afraid." What is he afraid of? Well, he had thought that God wasn't doing anything. Now he is afraid the Lord is doing too much! He says, "Lord, I didn't think that You were doing anything, but I see now that You are moving in judgment. And since you are, remember to be merciful even to the Chaldeans, and be merciful to Your people." Before, Habakkuk had been calling down fire from heaven not only upon his own nation who had departed from God, but also upon the Chaldeans. Now he is saying, Lord, don't forget to be merciful."

It does look today as if God is not doing anything, but if you and I could ascend to the watchtower of Habakkuk, if we could learn that the just shall live by His faith, if we could have a living faith in God and see what is moving behind the scenes and see the wheels that are turning, I think that we would be as surprised as this man was.

God has the answer to your problem. Do you believe Him? Will you trust Him?

Scripture tells us that “God created man in His own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Genesis 1:27). This is one of the great statements of the Word of God. I cannot conceive of anything else quite as wonderful as this. But what does it mean? “In the image of God” doesn’t mean physically, because God is not corporeal. Man is like God, I think, as a trinity – man is physically and mentally and spiritually a being. Paul says that very thing: “I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Although this is true, “in the image of God” actually means more than that. I think that it refers to the fact that man is a personality, and as a personality he is conscious of his own self. In other words, you know that you are who you are. You can say, “I am.” God also gave to man a *moral* nature, and along with that a responsibility. Man can choose this and not choose that because that is wrong and this is right. Psychologists would like to get rid of that moral nature today, but they can’t. Man is responsible for the choices he makes. Only man can say, “I ought,” because we have a moral nature. The third thing God gave to man – and I think He took a big chance by doing it – is a free will, the ability to choose to obey God or choose evil. With that, man can say, “I will.” So man can say, “I am...I ought...I will,” making us like God in these three respects. I believe this is what is meant by God creating man in His own image.

Now this likeness to God got marred – and part of it was practically wrecked – at the Fall. But, my friend, you can trust Christ. That’s the way out for fallen man who is in sin today. When you trust Christ, there begins a work *in* you. God wants to conform you to the image, if you please, of Jesus Christ! He wants to make you like the Lord Jesus Christ. This is His goal. Have you ever noticed how Scripture emphasizes that? We like to quote Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” Why don’t we go on with Romans 8:29, since the two verses belong together? “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son....” God is working on a plan today of bringing a group of people who will trust Christ into conformity to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s His purpose. Predestination has to do with that plan and with that plan alone. God’s goal for those who are His own is to bring us back to what God intended us to be before Adam fell.

Let me give another Scripture:

But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

The Holy Spirit is in the world to take those of us who are trusting Christ and to form Christ within us. “The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:47). Now note this in verse 49: “And as we have borne the image of the earthy....” The reason all of us look alike is because we’ve borne the image of the earthy; we’re all sons of Adam. We’re all really kin to each other – some closer kin than others, but we all are kin. We have borne the image of the earthy. Now listen, “...We shall also bear the image of the

heavenly.” Let me paraphrase what God is saying to those who are His own: “I don’t give you the answer as to why I permit certain things to happen to you, why suffering and oftentimes tragedy should come. Although I don’t give you the answer, I want you to know this: I am working all things together for good that I might conform you to the image of Christ. That’s what I’m working on.”

I’d like to close with an illustration. Suppose you lived in the day of Michelangelo, and one day you went to see him in his studio. He said, “I have something to show you,” and he took you in and showed you a huge block of dirty-looking rock. You said, “Why in the world did you lug that old hunk of dirty rock into your studio?” He says, “Well, I have in my mind an ideal. I intend to take that block of marble and with my chisel and hammer I’m going to make it into something beautiful.” You’d say, “Believe me, brother, I don’t see how you can do that!” A year goes by, and you go down to visit him again. He says to you, “Come in, I want to show you something.” Let’s say it was his famous sculptured likeness of Moses – a beautiful, white piece of statuary – and you say, “My, that is beautiful! What an inspiring thing it is.” He’d say, “You remember when you were here a year ago and looked at that old dirty piece of marble? Well, this is it.” You would be dumbfounded.

The Holy Spirit is in the world, and He is the sculptor – that by the Spirit we might be conformed to the image of Christ. He has the ideal in His mind, He knows what He wants to do with us. He uses the chisel of discipline, the chisel of our circumstances, and the chisel of suffering to dig deep, because we are dirty, rough, cold, unyielding rock – hard as nails. But He doesn’t give up. He takes His chisel and, using the hammer of the Word of God, He begins to work. It takes time, because we’re not lovely. When He finds us, we are crude, hard, unyielding, cold, and unsightly. Will you forgive me for saying this about you? That is what we are in God’s sight – just a block of rough rock. But He, the Holy Spirit, has the ideal.

As He begins to work in our lives, suffering comes to us and other things come that we cannot understand. We look up and ask, “Why? Oh God, why?” He says, “That’s all right, you’re just a hard piece of marble, and I have to dig in deep to make you the kind of person I want you to be in heaven someday.”

Throughout the Bible, we read of the way God trained and severely tested His men. David experienced this, and he concludes his prayer in Psalm 17:15 by saying, “...I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.” John, the last living apostle, wrote, “Beloved, now are we children of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Will you believe Him? He won’t give you the answer to all your whys, but He asks you to wait and to trust Him.