

How Long, O Lord? May 14th, 2017 Alan Every

We live in difficult, violent times. Daily, we're confronted with some form of violence, either here or overseas. Last month, Syria used chemical warfare on its own people. A few days later more than 40 Coptic Christians were killed by suicide bombers in Egypt. In Australia, reports of domestic violence are common in the media. It is right for us to ask: "When will it all end? What will God do about it?"

Habakkuk is a prophet who speaks into our situation. Yet, he was writing in the last part of the seventh century (i.e., in the 600s) BC. That was a long time ago.

Habakkuk himself is a mystery. The most reliable information about him is in 1:1, ***The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.*** Literally, Habakkuk saw this *oracle* (a word that can also be translated as 'burden'). The word pictures that he paints for us are so dramatic that we too can almost 'see' what Habakkuk is describing.

Truly, it was a burden Judah would bear. God was raising up the Babylonians to be His instruments of divine justice. For, amongst God's people in Judah, there's injustice and violence. However, the Babylonians practice an even more intolerable form of justice. In turn this leads Habakkuk to question why God would allow a lawless and ruthless nation bring justice upon Judah.

Before going any further let us briefly consider some historical background to Habakkuk's oracle. The Assyrian Empire had been the dominant power in the Near East. Towards the end of the 7th century BC the Assyrian Empire's power faded. This was the time when Josiah, Judah's godly young king, reigned. Meanwhile, the Babylonian Empire was asserting itself as a significant threat.

In 609 BC, Neco, the king of Egypt, fought against Josiah and killed him (2 Kings 23:29-30). His death was a disaster for the Jews. He had been a just and merciful ruler.

Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, then came to the throne. He was an evil king. Three months later, Egypt's king Neco deposed Jehoahaz and took him captive to Egypt. Another of Josiah's sons, Jehoiakim, became king. 2 Kings 23:37, ***He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father had done.***

In 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian prince, fought Egypt's king Neco (Jeremiah 46:2). Before long, Egypt, Syria and Palestine came under Babylonian control. Jehoiakim now had to swear allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar. But by 601 BC Jehoiakim had broken his promise to Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:1). Then, (2 Kings 24:2), ***The LORD sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against him.***

After a very brief reign by Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, Nebuchadnezzar placed Zedekiah on the throne. He was another of Josiah's sons. But after nine years, he rebelled. This time the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. The dynasty of Judah's kings was ended. Many people were deported to parts of the Babylonian Empire. Habakkuk truly lived in violent times.

Habakkuk begins by telling God his complaint in 1:2-4. He expresses his grief about what's happening amongst his people. His first cry is (1:2) ***How long, O LORD, must I call for help and you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?*** Clearly, he'd been crying out to the Lord for some time. And, his prayer for justice hadn't been answered.

Yet Habakkuk wasn't the first one to call for God's people to walk rightly before Him. We read in Numbers 14:11 about God's cry against His rebellious people. ***The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt?"*** And that wasn't even the first complaint that God had ever had against His people.

Nor would this be the last complaint in Scripture. In Revelation 6:10 we read about the saints crying out in heaven. They also long for justice. ***They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"***

God's silence is almost intolerable to Habakkuk. His second cry is in 1:3a, ***Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?*** Habakkuk continues with his complaint. 1:3b, ***Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife and conflict abounds.*** For emphasis, he uses three pairs of words, where one or two words would've been enough—***injustice...wrong; Destruction and violence; strife and conflict.***

Josiah had been a good king. But his sons, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah caused much trouble, leading up to the Babylonian exile. The Judean society was spiritually bankrupt and morally corrupt. Habakkuk's problem is that God doesn't seem to be doing anything to overcome this evil.

It's debatable whether one generation is more corrupt than any other. Wickedness goes back to Adam and Eve. However, violence can increase from time to time. Clearly, this had happened in Judah.

Yet, in recent years we've witnessed greater violence in the Middle East than has been known in for a long time. Violence is increasing here in Melbourne. In September 2016, *The Age* newspaper referred to Victoria as the murder capital of Australia.

A few years ago, Queensland statistics showed that it's commonly accepted that 1 in 6 boys is sexually abused before the age of 18. And 1 in 4 girls is sexually abused before the age of 18. Frankly speaking, increasing violence reflects a more secular society. As our society turns away from biblical morality, we're finding ever-increasing violence. Many people are frustrated because the law hasn't protected people in the community from being abused and even murdered. Perhaps they should ask themselves why this is so.

Habakkuk makes this point in 1:4, ***Therefore the law is paralysed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.*** He makes two significant points. *Firstly, justice* is not done because the law is *paralysed*. *Secondly, the wicked hem in* [= surround] *the righteous*.

In Victoria, animal abuse could land you in jail for 12 months. But you can abort an unborn child and get away with it.

Now, that's not an argument for approving of animal cruelty. Rather, I'm saying that we ought to care more for human life, especially for the unborn. In 2006 more than 71,000 babies were aborted in Australia. And what happened in Victoria recently? The parliament passed laws making abortion legal.

Christians feel trapped by the wickedness in the society around us. State and federal leaders have allowed wickedness to triumph. To make matters worse, there is growing intolerance towards Christianity.

Like Habakkuk we want to know why God doesn't do something. We've prayed that the bills in parliament would be defeated. Our prayers were not answered.

Sometimes, we too wonder if God hears our prayers. Are the deists right? Did God just create the universe only to stand by and watch it return to chaos? How long can God simply do nothing and say nothing? Doesn't He hear our prayers?

In 1:3a we get the impression that Habakkuk would be glad to get rid of the whole situation. ***Why do you make me look at injustice?*** Habakkuk wants to shut his eyes and pretend that the wickedness and violence could simply disappear. His questions are valid. Why do good people suffer? Why do the ungodly flourish? Why are justice and mercy disregarded? What is the point of praying? What is the point of having faith in God? What kind of God is He, who allows evil to prosper and the godly to suffer?

Habakkuk makes a strong point. But then, when God speaks, it's not what he expected to hear. Twice in 1:5a God uses words of seeing. ***“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed.”*** In 1:1 Habakkuk literally *saw* this *oracle*. In 1:3 he complained that he had to *look at injustice*. God now says, 'See what will happen'.

1:5b gives the reason for Habakkuk's future amazement. ***“For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”*** Everyone would see what God would do. Habakkuk's problem (and ours) is that he was caught up in his own set of circumstances. He was viewing life as though through a set of horse's blinkers. And so he'd been sucked down in a spiral of doubt and despair.

Paul quotes Habakkuk 1:5 in Acts 13:41. Paul warns the Jews that forgiveness of sins is found in Christ alone. Paul would now turn away from preaching Christ to them. From that time on, he witnessed to the Gentiles. As a result, the Jews stirred up the men of city. Those men then drove Paul and Barnabas out of the city (Acts 13:50).

The Apostle Paul is warning the Jews about how God judged His people in Habakkuk's day. It could well happen to the Jews in Paul's day, at any time. And, in AD 70 Jerusalem was burned and the temple destroyed by the Romans. Thousands of people were killed.

Consider the lawlessness we see today. Is it any different? People mock God with their immoral behaviour. Government's mock God by passing laws that approve of their immorality. Maybe I've told you about the man who mocked God. He gleefully exclaimed that God hadn't struck him dead. For him, there was no problem.

Don't ignore the warnings in Scripture. There will be a day of judgment. When Christ returns we'll all have to give an account of the life we've lived. Paul writes (Acts 17:31), ***“For he [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed [Jesus]. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”*** Our beliefs and behaviour have consequences.

But Christians have hope. We can stand before God with confidence. At the cross, the Lord Jesus paid the price for our sins. The Lord Jesus said, (John 5:24), ***“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”***

So God doesn't answer Habakkuk's complaints. He even tells him that something incredible will happen. Habakkuk 1:6 reveals God's astonishing plan. ***“I am raising up the Babylonians (the Chaldeans), that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own.”*** This would happen soon. The most incredible part was that God's own people would suffer. They would be given into the hands of the Babylonian's, who were more wicked than they were! Babylon would soon ***sweep across the whole earth.***

Someone once said, ***‘Those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it.’*** This could well apply to Judah. Eight hundred years earlier Israel had displaced the Canaanites. The latter were driven out because of their sin. Now, Judah would be driven away from this land because of their sin.

God gives Habakkuk a vivid picture of the Babylonians. 1:7-9a, ***“They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honour. Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops headlong; their horsemen come from afar. They fly like a vulture swooping to devour; they all come bent on violence.”***

God turns Habakkuk's words back on him. Judah was lawless, but Babylon was ***a law to themselves.*** Violence characterised Judah, but the Babylonians were ***bent on violence.*** Judgment would come swiftly, terrifying the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

The Babylonians disregarded God and His righteousness. They'd make their own truth standards ***and promote their own honour.*** Babylon's armies have been described as the finest and best in the world. Capable of moving quickly across vast distances, these armies were arrogant bullies. We read more about them in 1:9b, ***“Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand.”*** Fearless, we read in 1:10, ***“They deride kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities; they build earthen ramps and capture them.”*** Yet while the Babylonians ***sweep across the whole earth*** (1:6), just as suddenly they're gone. 1:11, ***“Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—guilty men, whose own strength is their god.”*** The Lord gives Habakkuk and his people a taste of greater things to come.

From the second part of this chapter we learn four things. *First*, God is a righteous Judge. He knows everything that takes place on the earth He created. When sin occurs, God will punish it, even when it involves Him punishing His own people.

Second, God is sovereign over all of the earth. If deny it, then we deny God His rightful place in our lives. On the other hand, if we believe that God is the sovereign Creator, who is in charge of His universe, then our part is to trust in His providence. We are to trust in His care for what He has made and who He has made.

The Babylonians ***strength is their God.*** Arrogance would be their downfall. As F. F. Bruce notes, ***In the self-sufficiency and self-congratulation displayed by such rulers lay the seeds of their collapse.***

Third, God does hear and answer prayer, though His answer may not be what we want to hear. In prayer, we cannot come to God with a wish list and expect Him to provide everything. God is not Santa Claus. Then again, Santa can't provide anything. Santa doesn't exist. God's ways and His thoughts are not our ways and thoughts. His are far higher. We can only hope to think His thoughts after Him.

Fourth, under the hand of God, nations will rise and fall. God can even make use of the vices of men to execute His judgment. Even the wicked can be an instrument of His justice.

Like you, I long to see an end to injustice and violence. But that won't happen until the Lord Jesus returns. We also long for the new heaven and the new earth. But that won't happen either, until the Lord Jesus returns.

It seems strange that God used a more violent nation to humble His rebellious people. You and I might wonder how He could use injustice to bring about justice. Yet that's exactly what God did in the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus.

In Acts 2:23 the apostle Paul is speaking about the person and work of the Lord Jesus. ***“This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.”***

God was working behind the scenes in the death of Jesus. Even so, those who crucified the Lord are accountable for what they did. But then, God brought the Lord Jesus back to life. He was satisfied with the death the Christ for our sins.

God alone knows all things. He alone can control and use history for His purposes. He uses believers to bless His children. But there will be times when he uses the wicked to discipline, and to bring about repentance and faith. At other times, bad things happen to us in order to strengthen our faith.

Today, many people express their anger by saying that if God were good then He'd totally make an end to all evil and violence. But, where should God start? For, if He were to remove all evil then no one could stand. No one could live. No one is perfect. And God demands absolute perfection to live in His kingdom.

God says to Habakkuk in 1:5, ***“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”***

The most amazing thing God has ever done was to send His Son, Jesus. The Lord Jesus is the one way for you and me to get right with God. His death on cross for our sins is the most incredible way for us to be reconciled to God.

God is asking Habakkuk to trust in Him. He works out His purposes for His glory. Though Habakkuk, His prophet, God asks us to trust that His ways are perfect. Times change. Evil days are with us. But God doesn't change. His love for His people is steadfast and sure. Christ's resurrection from the dead confirms to us that His promises are true. Evil may prosper for a time. But our lives are safe and secure in our God's hands. Amen