

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 9/8/02 Brad Brandt

Habakkuk 1:1-11 "Why Doesn't God Do Something?"**

Main Idea: Habakkuk 1:1-11 shows us how to make sense of life in this post 9-11 world. We can gain much practical help by taking a close look at a conversation Habakkuk had with God.

I. We see a prophet's struggle (1-4).

A. Habakkuk wrestled with questions (1-3a).

1. How can a holy God permit spiritual decay?
2. Why doesn't God do something about injustice?
3. Why should I be holy when it doesn't seem to matter?

B. Habakkuk wrestled with what he saw (3b-4).

1. Society was full of violence.

2. The law was paralyzed.

3. Good people were suffering.

C. Habakkuk wrestled with the same confusion we face.

1. At times, God doesn't seem to answer prayer.
2. At times, God doesn't seem to control human evil.

II. We see God's answer (5-11).

A. The Lord sees (5a).

1. He observes His people.

2. He observes the nations, too.

B. The Lord will take action (5b).

C. The Lord's ways won't always make sense to us (6-11).

1. He brought the Babylonians to power (6a).

2. He knew how wicked the Babylonians were (6b-11).

3. He used the Babylonians to judge His own people.

Make It Personal: In order to make sense of a 9-11 world...

1. Get to know God better.

2. Let God be God in your life.

3. Resolve to live by faith.

4. Remember you don't see the whole picture.

One year ago, on September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked our country by bombing the world trade center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. Thousands of people lost their lives. Billions of dollars went up in smoke. Our president declared war. Life changed overnight.

It's been a year now. What have we learned since 9-11? From my perspective, the past twelve months have brought some realities to the surface for us, such as...

We aren't as invincible as we tend to think, either as individuals or as a nation.

The world is a lot smaller than it used to seem.

We need the Lord.

We need each other.

We're quick to forget. Isn't it amazing how quickly we got on with life once the dust settled last September? True, a lot of people went to church the week or two after the attack, but within a month church attendance

returned to its previous rate. Interestingly, this summer showed the highest earnings in movie box office sales ever. We may say God got our attention, but for a lot of people it's back to "business as usual."

One thing 9-11 did force us to do is ask questions. PBS is airing a special program this week, entitled "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero." PBS addresses the subject, "Where Was God on Sept. 11?" The answers are diverse.

"I got a sense there was really an intense conversation taking place -- not just in New York, but nationally -- about where was God," said Helen Whitney, the program's producer and co-writer. "And not only about where was God and who is this God, but also the problem of evil and the role of religion. All of the big theology questions were being asked."

Asked by priests, rabbis, chaplains, security guards, stockbrokers, opera singers, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, atheists and Catholics -- all of whom speak candidly in the film, their horror recalled in quaking voices and choked silences. Listen to some of the responses:

"Religion drove those planes into those buildings," said Rabbi Brad Hirschfeld. "And that's upsetting, but that's what happened."

"Whatever God's plan is, was and shall be -- is, was and shall be," said one investment banker who escaped from the burning towers. "I can't question it."

For Bernie Heeran, a retired firefighter whose son died in the towers, God "had nothing to do with this." "There were a lot more people who could have been killed," Heeran said. "He was fighting evil that day like He does every day."

An Episcopal priest had this to say, "After Sept. 11, the face of God was a blank slate for me. God could not be counted on in the way I thought God could be counted on. I was left with nothing but that thing we call faith -- but faith in what? I wasn't so sure."

Agnostic photographer Luca Babini, who said she doesn't know if she ever believed in God, now wishes "there was a God that I could access and that it could be proven that I can access him. I wish God had a telephone number since Sept. 11," she said.

But for other atheists, the attacks simply confirmed their beliefs. "That human beings could do this to other human beings, for me it just, it confirms my atheism," said author Kanan Makiya, a professor of Middle East studies. "And then that does leave you very, very isolated. Not knowing where to turn."

With the anniversary of 9-11, you're going to be hearing a lot of voices this week talk about God, faith, tragedy, and a host of other related subjects. But there is one voice you won't hear from on PBS or on any other network. It's *God's* voice.

You say, "Does God have anything to say to us about how to respond to 9-11?" I think He does. Where can we hear this message? By turning in His Word to a very relevant section, the Old Testament prophets.

The prophets, men like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, and Malachi, helped their people make sense of the times from God's perspective. "Thus saith the Lord," they announced. But they did so in a political, historical context. The prophets were preachers and reformers. God's Word was their textbook. They constantly looked back to the Law God had given Moses in the 15th century B.C. and exhorted their people to live in obedience.

They were men of great passion, both for God and His people. Without a doubt they understood the heart and mind of God. But they also understood the age in which they lived. The messages they delivered were

relevant and timely. They preached in light of current events.

Take Isaiah, for instance. In the eighth century B.C. Judah had a coalition of Israel and Syria breathing down its neck. Judah's king was considering entering a political alliance with the nation of Assyria to find help. It only made sense. If a bully is picking on you, pay a bigger bully to help you. But the prophet Isaiah said "No! Don't trust in man. Trust in the Lord!" (see Isaiah 7) It was a timely, even political message.

The prophet Daniel certainly delivered a relevant message, too. He actually delivered the Word of God to powerful kings, like Nebuchadnezzar.

Hosea lived in a time when Israel was more interested in pleasure than holiness. So did Amos. Both of them rebuked their people for their waywardness, warning of impending judgment. Haggai lived in a society with mixed up priorities. So he challenged them about it. How can you say you don't have time for God's house if you've got time to remodel your own house?

The prophets were men who knew God, knew God's Word, and knew their times. They didn't mince words in urging people to get in line with God's will, nor did they fail to spell out the inevitable consequences for refusal. The prophets were men who stood in the gap, indeed they bridged the gap between God and man.

We need a prophetic voice today. In this post 9-11 world, the prophets can help us make sense of world events. By the way, the prophets did not deliver a popular message. They won't tickle our ears. They tell us what we *need* to hear, though that may not be what we *want* to hear.

We could look to several Old Testament prophets for guidance, but I've chosen one with a particularly relevant message for us. His name was *Habakkuk*. In the next three weeks or so, we'll investigate the man and his message. What you're about to hear could change your life.

Have you ever been watching the news and found yourself thinking, "Why doesn't God do something?" If so, you're in good company. That's how Habakkuk felt. Habakkuk 1:1-11 shows us how to make sense of life in this post 9-11 world. We can gain much practical help by taking a close look at a conversation Habakkuk had with God.

I. We see a prophet's struggle (1-4).

The book begins, "The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received." The KJV states, "The burden which Habakkuk, the prophet, did see." Habakkuk had a struggle on his hands, an internal struggle. We need some background to understand why.

Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah. He ministered in the seventh century B.C. and wrote this book somewhere between 612 and 606 B.C. It was an extremely explosive time in Israel's history. What was happening?

First, Josiah had brought about reforms. There were spiritual reforms, which sadly, were short-lived. And there were economic reforms which resulted in the people enjoying a time of peace and prosperity.

But the days of prosperity ended quickly when Pharaoh Neco went up to help the Assyrians fight the Babylonians. Josiah got in the way and was killed by Neco. Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, was taken captive, and Jehoiakim was placed on the throne in Judah.

Jehoiakim was a wicked king. He actually tore up the scroll of God's Word given to him by the prophet Jeremiah. The country went down the tube morally almost overnight. The people, not surprisingly, began to experience great stress and anxiety.

What's more there was a new bully on the block. There were three world powers in the seventh century: Egypt—but she was declining; Assyria—but she, too, was in decline; and Babylon—who was gaining momentum. Indeed, in 606 B.C. Babylon defeated Assyria to become king of the hill in the Middle East.

That's the world in which Habakkuk lived and ministered. He had experienced both the national revival under Josiah and the flagrant apostasy that followed under Jehoiakim. And while watching his nation go down the tubes he must have wondered, "Why doesn't God do something?"

The book is actually a dialogue between Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk was unique among the prophets because he did not speak for God to the people, but rather spoke to God about His people. Look at the beginning of his book and you'll notice three things about his struggle.

A. Habakkuk wrestled with questions (1-3a). "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? ³ Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?"

Does the rampant spread of sin in our society bother you? It's impossible to watch a television program without sin parading before our very eyes. Even shows that supposedly promote "family values" undermine God's holy standard. Does the spread of sin in society disturb you?

It did Habakkuk. Habakkuk was a godly man, a man who took holiness seriously. It grieved him to see his people living in flagrant violation of God's Word. But he had an even bigger struggle on his hands. It wasn't just what his people were doing. It was what God *wasn't* doing. Here were the questions Habakkuk wrestled with:

1. *How can a holy God permit spiritual decay?* Habakkuk was appalled by the gross sin in God's chosen country. God's people were unashamedly unfaithful to their covenant God. And Habakkuk couldn't take it any longer, so he complained to God, "How long are You going to put up with this mess, Lord? How long are You going to wait until You stop this slippery slide to the pit?" That, in essence, was question #1.

2. *Why doesn't God do something about injustice?* That's what he asked in verse 3, "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?" Lord, I see it. Don't You? And if You do see it, why don't you do something about it?

3. *Why should I be holy when it doesn't seem to matter?* Can you relate? Young people, some of you are surrounded by peers who party big time and mock you for your "standards." They seem so happy. Maybe you've thought what Habakkuk did, "Why should I be holy when it doesn't seem to matter?"

Life is full of questions, things that don't make sense to us. Why does God allow people who call themselves "Christian" to live like the devil? Why doesn't He do something? Why does God allow evil deeds to touch His people? Terrorists bomb *Christian* schools and hospitals. Where was God?

Habakkuk's struggle went beyond his questions, however. Secondly...

B. Habakkuk wrestled with what he saw (3b-4). "Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. ⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."

What Habakkuk saw didn't make sense to him. He knows God is holy. And he knows that God's people are supposed to be holy. But they weren't. And God didn't seem to notice...or care. The evidence confronted him day after day.

1. *Society was full of violence.* Verse 3, "Destruction and violence are before me." When a society turns from

God's standard, violence results.

2. *The law was paralyzed.* The law is "slacked," is how the KJV puts it. The word indicates that the law was either misapplied, or not enforced at all. Sounds like a commentary on our legal system today, doesn't it, with lawsuits and loopholes and "If you've got the money we'll get you out of this" approach to justice.

3. *Good people were suffering.* Verse 4, "The wicked hem in the righteous." Does God care when business executives create loopholes in the tax laws to avoid paying money they owe? Does it matter to Him when the bottom line dollar becomes more important than the welfare of the worker? Does He have an opinion about people who twist the law to protect the guilty and take advantage of the weak?

Habakkuk isn't talking here about what foreign powers were doing to Judah. He's talking about what the Jews were doing to themselves. There was great social injustice in his country. It was every man for himself, the survival of the fittest. Businessmen were corrupt. Widows and orphans were neglected. The standard of God's Word was ignored.

And Habakkuk couldn't take it any more. Perhaps you feel the same. Know this...

C. Habakkuk wrestled with the same confusion we face. It's a twofold confusion.

1. *At times, God doesn't seem to answer prayer.* Habakkuk had prayed and prayed for his nation, for the revival of God's people. But nothing happened, nothing *good* that is. Things just got worse.

And Habakkuk struggled. Does God really hear and answer prayer?

2. *At times, God doesn't seem to control human evil.* In Deuteronomy, God had promised that He would not stand by and watch evil spread throughout His people. But that's what was happening. The struggle intensified for Habakkuk. Maybe the world is so evil because the Lord doesn't care any more, or worse, He cares but He can't do anything about it.

Do you ever pray like Habakkuk prayed? There is nothing wrong with reverently "laying it on the table" before God. God wants us to be honest with Him. In fact, God hates it when our prayers are nothing more than memorized rituals. Jesus warned against vain repetition (Matt 6:7).

If you're struggling today, do what Habakkuk did. Bring your struggle to the Lord. Don't run from Him. Come to Him. And then hold on to your seat. In His time God will do with you what He did with Habakkuk.

II. We see God's answer (5-11).

You'll notice a pronoun change in verse 5, from "you" to "I." God begins to speak. Actually, the answer God gave was not only for Habakkuk but for all the people of Judah. The Hebrew terms in verse 5 are plural, "For I am going to do something in *your* days." Habakkuk's complaint was that God didn't seem to notice how bad things had gotten in Judah. So God answered Habakkuk, as well as the whole nation. In His answer we learn three things about the Lord.

A. The Lord sees (5a). "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed." Does the Lord see? He certainly does. He sees two things according to these words.

1. *He observes His people.* He knew what they were doing and He wasn't pleased, either. But notice something else about God.

2. *He observes the nations, too.* Yes, He chose Israel to be the apple of His eye, the people through whom He would work to send the Messiah into the world. He chose the nation of Israel.

But that doesn't mean He ignored the other nations. Here He says, "Look at the nations." Many of the prophets spoke about the surrounding nations. They confronted their sin, predicted their judgment, and foretold of the day when God would produce true worshipers of Him in the nations.

To Habakkuk God says, "Yes, I see. I see a whole lot more than You think I see."

B. The Lord will take action (5b). What kind of action? Verse 5—"For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told." I'll tell you, but you won't believe Me!

God doesn't always do the miraculous to accomplish His purposes. Quite frankly, He typically reserves the miraculous for rare occasions. Most commonly He used human agents to accomplish His plan.

Suppose as a parent you're frustrated with the spiritual apathy of your children, and you pray, "Lord, please do something!" What might He do? He could send a lightning bolt to get their attention, but He probably won't. He'll probably use a human agent. He might let them feel the pain of a broken relationship. He might use a boss to make life painful. He might even use the Law to show them the inevitable consequences of living life in rebellion against Him.

You can know this. The Lord sees. And the Lord will take action. But there's something else you must understand about our God.

C. The Lord's ways won't always make sense to us (6-11). What Habakkuk heard next floored him. He learned that God was indeed fed up with His people and that He was going to do something about it. He was going to take them to the woodshed for some firm discipline. And guess what He was going to use for the paddle? The Babylonians, also called the Chaldeans (inhabitants of the land we know today as Iraq).

Why would He do that? That's what Habakkuk wanted to know, as we'll see momentarily. But first, notice three things God said about the Babylonians.

1. *He brought the Babylonians to power (6a)*. "I am raising up the Babylonians." Never forget this. God raises up kingdoms, even wicked ones, and God disposes of them. No one surprises Him. According to God's schedule, even as God spoke to Habakkuk, the Babylonians were sweeping across the world, leaving havoc and destruction behind them. And it would soon be Judah's turn.

There's something else God said about the Babylonians.

2. *He knew how wicked the Babylonians were (6b-11)*. Listen to God's description of the character and conduct of the Babylonians:

"I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. ⁷ They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. ⁸ 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; ⁹ they all come bent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand. ¹⁰ They deride kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities; they build earthen ramps and capture them. ¹¹ Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—guilty men, whose own strength is their god."

The Babylonians certainly didn't win any Boy Scout awards. They were dreadful, aggressive, and self-promoting. God described the power of the Babylonian cavalry by mentioning three predators (8): the leopard, the wolf, and the vulture.

Simply put, the Babylonians were ruthless. They enjoyed violence. They subjected their opponents and

turned them into slaves. They scoffed at all other authorities but their own. They were proud and boastful, vicious, and most of all *blasphemous*. "Whose strength is their god," verse 11 says. They worshipped themselves.

Yet what was God's purpose for the Babylonians? He brought them to power, and though He knew how wicked they were...

3. *He used the Babylonians to judge His own people.* "How could that be?" you ask. "How could God use the Babylonians to judge the people of Judah? The Babylonians were even *more* wicked!" That's exactly how Habakkuk responded, and we'll see God's answer next time.

But know this. Less than twenty years after the Lord gave Habakkuk this message, it happened just as God said. The Babylonians came to town and completely demolished Judah, burned the temple to the ground, and took the Jews into captivity.

The next time you find yourself saying, "Why doesn't God do something?" get ready. He might surprise you. The Lord does see. The Lord will take action. But His ways won't always make sense to us.

Corrie Ten Boom, by the grace of God, survived the Nazi concentration camps. She had this to say about God, "Often I have heard people say, 'How good God is! We prayed that it would not rain for our church picnic, and look at the lovely weather!'" Yes, God is good when He sends good weather. But God was also good when He allowed my sister, Betsie, to starve to death before my eyes in a German concentration camp. I remember one occasion when I was very discouraged there. Everything around us was dark, and there was darkness in my heart. I remember telling Betsie that I thought God had forgotten us. "No, Corrie," said Betsie, "He has not forgotten us. Remember His Word: 'For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him.'" Corrie concludes, "There is an ocean of God's love available--there is plenty for everyone. May God grant you never to doubt that victorious love--whatever the circumstances."

Brothers and sisters, we are living in a post-911 world. We need the message of Habakkuk. We need not only to hear it, but to make it personal...

Make It Personal: In order to make sense of a 9-11 world...

I challenge you to do four things.

1. *Get to know God better.* Many people have a tiny view of God. If that's true of you, you're going to have a hard time living in the real world. In the real world, things don't work like they did in *Leave It to Beaver*, where every problem had a nice and neat solution by the end of the 30-minute episode. Yes, there are answers to the problems of life, but there're not simplistic.

If you want to experience life, you must get to know God. If you want to make sense of life, you must get to know God *better*. How do we do that? By studying His Word. What steps are you taking to get to know God better in your life? I'm convinced that people who have a shallow relationship with God will have a shallow, unstable life.

2. *Let God be God in your life.* Who is in control of your life, God or you? My friend, this is God's world. If you are living in God's world without putting Him first in your life, you're guilty of trespassing.

That's what Adam and Eve tried to do. They thought they knew better than God what was best. So they did it. In so doing they brought God's judgment upon them and their descendants. That's why terrible things happen in this world. It's because people have gone their own way.

But God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to rescue sinners. He obeyed God's Law and died to pay the penalty for our disobedience. Then He conquered death. Today God offers forgiveness and new life to all who will believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In order to survive in this 9-11 world, we must settle this issue. Who is going to be God in your life, you or God Himself? Who's going to call the shots? I urge you to let God be God.

There's an important question we must answer. Are you willing to accept the radical methods God may choose to use to accomplish His purpose—in your life, in the lives of your family members and friends, and even in this country? In Habakkuk's day God chose to shake up His people by some pretty radical means. Are you willing to let God be God in your life?

3. *Resolve to live by faith.* Perhaps the main verse of this book is Habakkuk 2:4, a text quoted in the NT more than once. "The righteous will live by his faith." Habakkuk wrestled with some tough questions. And God gave him answers. But the bottom line for Habakkuk and for us is this. We must *live by faith*. We're saved by faith. We must live every day the same way, *by faith*.

God's ways won't always make sense to us. That's because He is God!

In order to live by faith, we mustn't settle for a tiny view of God. We all have a tendency to put God in a box and tell Him what He can or cannot do. Instead of agreeing with the biblical truth that man is created in the image of God, we try to squeeze God into the image of man. We attempt to bring God down to our size, to work in ways that make sense to us.

To make sense of a 9-11 world, we must get to know God better, let God be God in our lives, and then resolve to live *by faith*. One final thing...

4. *Remember you don't see the whole picture.* Are you wondering what God is up to in your life? Habakkuk's problem was that he couldn't see the whole picture. Neither can we. But God can and God does. Put your trust in Him today.