

God's Surprising Plan

Habbakuk 1:1-3:19

Introduction:

My Plan: 1 year plan, 5 year plan, 10 year plan. God, let's sit down. I have a plan (unrolls blueprint).

- Ok God, here's how it's gonna work. I'll be rich, successful, and famous, *then* I'll help lots of people (interestingly, it never starts with poor, suffering, and obscure).
- "Mirror Christianity: The Self-Absorbed Individualism of the U.S. Church" (Keener).
- It's amazing how much of what we call Christianity looks suspiciously like us and not like Christ.

I *don't know* why God does what he does sometimes. "If ignorance is bliss, why aren't more people happy?" Compared to God, all of us are dumb.

- Yosemite National Park ranger on why it is hard to design the perfect garbage bin to keep bears from breaking it: "There is a considerable overlap between the intelligence of the smartest bears and the dumbest tourists."

The problem isn't that we lack knowledge, it's that we lack trust. We don't just want God to work, we want him to work the way we think is best.

- Too often my plan starts with me, not him. It is centered around my glory, and not his.
- The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps (Prov 16:9).

Questioning God: Habakkuk is not written to Israel (or Nineveh, Babylon, Edom, etc.). **It is written from the prophet to God!** This is a deeply personal conversation. Both Habakkuk, this unknown prophet, and God speak unfiltered.

- Isn't it funny how we sometimes sanitize language (e.g., "bless your heart" = "I wish I could say what I'm really thinking"; "Isn't he a gift" = "Your baby is ugly but I can't say it out loud"). We do this in church sometimes too (speak in pious rather than honest Christianese). Cf. golf course, smoking, drinking, cursing, finds out dad is a pastor and it's all "The Lord is Good" and "Amen" all of a sudden. This is not permission for vulgarity but a recognition that honesty and authenticity are essential to a real relationship with anyone (especially God). And, who do you think you're fooling? Certainly not God.
 - Habakkuk needs to have some words with God. It's important that we are honest with ourselves and with God if we are going to really grow in our relationship with him and change to be more like Christ.
- Are you being honest with **yourself** about where you are in your relationship with God? Are you being honest with **others**? Are you being honest with **God**?
 - Are you **ignoring** the problem (e.g., don't step on the scale), **justifying** the problem (e.g., I'll get to it later), **denying** the problem (e.g., it's not that bad)?

The journey of Habakkuk is from uncertainty and suspicion to complete trust in God. It is the path from doubt to faith. It's one I'd invite you on today.

- The structure is simple, Habakkuk asks two questions of God and gets two answers. There's a brief reminder of God's promise to judge evil, then it ends with a prayer of worship and trust.

1. Question #1: What's Taking So Long? (1:1-11)

^{1:1} The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. ² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? ³ Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴ So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

Injustice: Israel (South) is full of lawbreakers (i.e., Torah). Violence and injustice pervade their society. God, what are you going to do about? And what's taking so long?

- My kids favorite pastime is tattling, it's built into their DNA. But often, they're telling me things I *already know*.
- Have you ever wondered why God doesn't do something right away?

There is a level of distrust and presumption in these questions. They're accusatory.

- How long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? It's a loaded question. It includes an assumption that is not true.
 - Why is *Big Hero 6* the greatest animated movie ever?
- *God has heard*. An *honest* question would ask, "do you hear?."

⁵ "Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. ⁶ For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. ⁷ They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. ⁸ Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. ⁹ They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. ¹⁰ At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. ¹¹ Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!"

God Answers: It amazes me that God puts up with us at all. That is a huge sign of his mercy. Despite our faithlessness, rebellion, and apathy, he continues to draw near to us.

- How many of us have done something dumb, or ignored God, or done our own thing, but as soon as things fall apart we are running to God for help. What a merciful savior.
- God answers us in our doubts, he answers our loaded questions (not always the way we want). Take even your bad questions to him. He can handle it.

God Knows and is Working: He is aware. It's so silly when we go to God to *inform* him about something (as if he doesn't know).

- What makes you *assume* he isn't working? Because you can't see it happening? Because you don't understand it?

- I don't understand microwaves, Tylenol, record players, or the word Wednesday (how'd that "d" sneak in there?).
- There is always more going on than you and I see. He is already answering our requests *before* we ask them
 - I've come to realize that the *moment* of salvation is *often* the culmination of a million little moments and transformations that have nothing to do with me (e.g., DeVargas, Sean, etc.).

Surprising Answer: God knows and sees the corruption of his people and will use Babylon (Chaldeans) to judge them. God is going to use the wicked nation of Babylon to judge the wickedness of his people.

- The reason he hadn't told Habbakuk his plan is because he knew Habbakuk wouldn't like it. "If I told you, you wouldn't believe it because you don't want it to happen that way."
 - This might seem odd for God to work this way, but that's because we only see things from our perspective and not his.
 - He is going to use the wicked nation of Babylon to judge his people for their sin (unfortunately, too often, God has to use the world to judge the church).
- Just like Oncologists use chemotherapy and surgeons use blades, God sometimes uses instruments of pain and destruction to judge and purify his church.
 - Rather than push back at God's surprising method, we are called to trust his plan and receive his discipline.

Mysterious Ways: "God works in mysterious ways" (not actually a Bible verse), comes from a William Cowper hymn: "God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform / He plants His footsteps in the sea / And rides upon the storm... Judge not the Lord by feeble sense / But trust Him for His grace / Behind a frowning providence / He hides a smiling face." The concept is perfectly illustrated here.

- If I wouldn't draw the plan that way, can I still trust God? Is God only good if he works in a way that suits my limited mind, perspective, and imagination?
 - So many things in my life I wouldn't have drawn them out the way God did. The difficult seasons of ministry. The hard seasons of family life. The disappointments and losses.
 - But God has used those things to make me who I am, to teach me humble trust. E.g., overwatering grass creates shallow roots. If he only worked the way I want then I'd be the god of my life (and I'd make a terrible God). I'd be lazy and apathetic in my faith. I would have avoided many of the people and places to which God called me. I would have missed the miraculous provision of God. I wouldn't be more like Christ, I'd be just like I was. If you think I have a long way to go, consider that I've already come a long way (Whitney wouldn't have liked me in high school).
 - Difficulty exposes spiritual fantasy that masquerades as faith. Faith is not about negotiating an acceptable outcome with God, but surrendering completely to him.
- "We don't become more like Jesus in seven easy steps but in seventy challenging years."

2. Question #2: Why Are You Doing it That Way (vv. 1:12-2:5)

¹² Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. ¹³ You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he? ¹⁴ You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. ¹⁵ He brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad. ¹⁶ Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich. ¹⁷ Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever? ^{2:1} I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

Use Bad Things: God is light, and in him is no darkness at all (1 Jn 1:5). He does not create evil (it is a perversion) but he can *use* evil (he is in charge of all things). God does not sin and performs no evil but he can use wicked people and sinful nations to accomplish his plan. He can also take things that are the result of wickedness and evil and still bring good things from them.

- How can a good God (good theology) allow these bad things to happen?
- God often uses evil people and unjust circumstances to remedy injustice. The **cross** is the “supreme expression of human injustice [and] the beginning of the end of all injustice” (Renz).

Doubt God’s Plan: The problem isn’t that God didn’t answer, it’s that he didn’t answer the way Habakkuk wanted.

- I think a little bit about John the Baptist who initially is very confident in Jesus and his plan, but once he is thrown in prison, he starts to have some doubts (prison will do that to you). Doubt often arises:
 - (1) **Difficult situations.**
 - (2) **Unmet expectations.** -and/or-
 - (3) **Limited perspective.**

Doubt does not disqualify you. But how you deal with it could. Having doubts is normal and natural. Trusting your doubts above Jesus is deadly. We put ourselves against Jesus **not** when we have moments of doubt **but** when we place our faith in ourselves rather than him; when our *doubts* become bigger than our *trust*. Jesus has compassion for doubters too.

- We use terms like “honest doubt” and “blind faith” when, in reality, often our doubts are not honest and our faith doesn’t have to be blind. Faith isn’t supposed to be empty but verified and grounded in the reality of Christ’s work and promises (e.g., the cross and empty tomb give us all the evidence we need to trust).
- Following Jesus inevitably comes up against the obstacle of doubt but, even in the midst of doubt, we have the opportunity to renew our trust in Jesus.

² And the LORD answered me: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. ³ For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. ⁴ “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is

not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. ⁵ “Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples.”

Wait: God will keep his word, write it down plainly. Don't be embarrassed about the promises of God (Noah, why are you building a boat in the middle of dry land?). He is going to judge his people, but he will also judge the wicked nations (such as Babylon).

- In the end, evil will not win (even the cross is not *the last word*, we have the resurrection, the ascension, and we await the second coming).

Be patient, “If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”

- **God does everything at just the right time.** He is an “on time God.” He didn't wait a minute too long to take on flesh and be born of a virgin, or a second too long before he started his public ministry, or a moment too long before he went to the cross, rose from the dead, or ascended to heaven. **So we can patiently trust him.**
 - Every second of waiting is an opportunity for more to come to faith.
 - Every second of waiting is an opportunity to be changed into his image.
- God is in the waiting as much as he is in the action.

Faithfulness: Not only is God going to judge Israel with Babylon, he is going to judge Babylon for their wickedness. He knows they have deified their military might as if it is a god. He makes clear in 2:6-20 that he sees their wickedness and they will get their just reward.¹

- Their economic oppression, greed, evil gain, violence, treating people as possession rather than image bearers, shame, dishonor, sexual sin, idolatry will be punished.
- And this is not unique to Babylon; sin will always bring the judgment of God.

Faith: In the meantime, the righteous shall live by his faith. This is a famous passage, quoted three times in the NT (Rom 1:17, Gal 3:11, Heb 10:38).

- In the NT, we see that true righteousness is given to those who have faith in Christ. True life (both now and forever) is through faith in the Son of God. And nowhere is it more clearly revealed than in the cross and resurrection where mercy and justice meet. The “revelation of God's righteousness” takes place “by faith and for faith” in the gospel. The

¹ ⁶ Shall not all these take up their taunt against him, with scoffing and riddles for him, and say, “Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own— for how long?— and loads himself with pledges!” ⁷ Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. ⁸ Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them. ⁹ “Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm! ¹⁰ You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. ¹¹ For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond. ¹² “Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity! ¹³ Behold, is it not from the LORD of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing? ¹⁴ For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁵ “Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink— you pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness! ¹⁶ You will have your fill of shame instead of glory. Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision! The cup in the LORD's right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory! ¹⁷ The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them. ¹⁸ “What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols! ¹⁹ Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it. ²⁰ But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.”

righteousness of God thus comes to the human being by the word of promise, now fulfilled in Christ and proclaimed, but not yet visible in the world.

- This type of “life of faith” is a participation in the gospel, from faith to faith. It is fully realized in the faithfulness of God to fulfill his promise of salvation.
- To receive the righteousness of God is a result of faith and it produces in us what Habakkuk calls us to, a life of trust that God will do what he says.
- Until injustice is remedied, the righteous *have life and live every day* through faith in Jesus Christ. Right standing with God and right living for God is by faith from start to finish. It is by faith that you receive the gift of salvation and it is by faith that you are called to live each day for Christ.
- **There is no life without faith and there is no living without faith.**

3. Prayer: I Remember and I Trust (3:1-19)

^{3:1} A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth. ² O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy. ³ God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. ⁴ His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power. ⁵ Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels. ⁶ He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways. ⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. ⁸ Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD? Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation? ⁹ You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows. Selah You split the earth with rivers. ¹⁰ The mountains saw you and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice; it lifted its hands on high. ¹¹ The sun and moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear. ¹² You marched through the earth in fury; you threshed the nations in anger. ¹³ You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. Selah ¹⁴ You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret. ¹⁵ You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters. ¹⁶ I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. ¹⁷ Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places. To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.

Prayer: A psalm as prayer (*subscription* cf. *superscription*, audience, instrument, and tune, meter, or type: Shigionoth, must be a “bop”).

- “Faithfulness to God is enacted in worship and sustained by the memory of divine deliverance” (Renz) “The answer to the problem of suffering and injustice cannot be found apart from the language of worship” (Renz).
- It might be a little cliché, but we do far too much complaining and not enough praising. We spend too much time doubting God’s future provision and not enough time recalling his past blessings.

We know God can act now because he has done it in the past.

- Habakkuk is simply coming to God asking for a new demonstration of mercy and wrath.
- Again, this isn’t **blind faith** because we have seen him do miraculous things before. We might be in a dry season but we *remember* his provision in the past. We *remember* his power and faithfulness. **God has fought for his people many times.**

Change of Perspective: Worship and prayer are not to change God but to change us. One reason you need daily worship and prayer (and definitely weekly worship and prayer with your church family) is that you and I need to **recalibrate** and **refocus**.

- We get **discouraged** and **distracted** and we need to be reminded of God’s **power**, **promise**, and **presence**.

Habakkuk *started* the book informing God about how to run his world and now is simply trusting that God knows best. There is **peace** and **joy** in being able to trust God in the midst of the craziness.

- He’s gone from **frustrated complaint** to **joyful praise**.
- Even when things look bad, you can trust God. We live by God’s strength (not our own).
 - **Vibrant faith is evidenced through persistent joy in times of suffering.**

Power: The God we worship is not some weak God, he is powerful. Habakkuk describes his power in terrifying glory in this chapter. He has shown his power by sending plagues and delivering Israel out of Egypt. He gave these traveling slaves the power to conquer the Promised Land.

- **God’s delay is not because of a lack of power it is because of his loving mercy.** When he judges, everyone will pay attention.

Future: Just like he delivered the Israelites from Egypt, he will deliver his people from bondage to the Babylonians and to all evil. In the NT, we see the great bondage that remains is to sin. And like Moses led the people through the Red Sea to freedom, Christ leads us to salvation through his death, burial, and resurrection.

- His messiah (his anointed) will bring salvation to his people from a greater slavery than Egypt, or Babylon, but sin. He will defeat not only the unjust empires of the world but all evil and death.

Conclusion

Now We Wait: So now we wait and worship. We work with hope and joy, not despair and defeat. Even if the world appears to be falling apart, we choose trust (seems pertinent in our particular cultural moment).

- The righteous life of faith is rooted in the fact that God loves his people and this world more than we do and will deal with all its evil. He has proven it on the cross. In that hope, we can be sustained in suffering.

What I see is a lot of people who want **the rescue of God but only on their own terms**. That's not faith. They want **the blessing of God, but only on their own terms**. It doesn't work like that. We have a lot of people who claim Christ but don't live faithfully for Christ.

- God is concerned not only with the outcome; he cares just as much about the process by which we get to it. God works through waiting. He refines us. He deepens our dependence on Him.

We may struggle with questions about God's methods (as Habakkuk did). But how God chooses to operate is up to Him. At times, He intervenes miraculously. Other times, He works behind the scenes. And, yes, he sometimes allows evil forces in our world to bring about His design. Like Habakkuk, if we view life from God's perspective, our response will be to worship the Lord, knowing He is in control of all things.

Non-Anxious Presence: The result is sure-footed confidence in God even in crazy circumstances.

- This becomes one of the most beautiful apologetics for the truth of the gospel. When you can be a "non-anxious presence in the midst of an anxious world" you stand out as unique!
- The Lord is pleased when we trust him to keep his promises. He is pleased that we cling to belief in his goodness when our circumstances seem bad.
- Courageous faith looks like obedience to God's commands when everyone else thinks you're crazy

Trust: God is faithful to deliver his people, including us, from every trouble, in his own way and time. Will we trust (Brownback) and act accordingly?