

How Long Shall I Cry for Help?

In my last article the question was asked, "Why does evil *seemingly* go unpunished?" In this new series we're looking at the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk as he questions God pertaining to why he has *seemingly* failed to punish his sinful people, Judah. The first verse in chapter one reads, "The *oracle* that Habakkuk the prophet saw." Depending on the context, the Hebrew word translated, 'oracle' can also be translated by the English word 'burden.' The word can literally refer to a *burden* that must be carried (Exodus 23:5). The burden that's carried for those who proclaim God's word is a burden to give that word to the people no matter how it may be received. The prophet Jeremiah gets at this same thing when he says that trying not to speak God's word is likened to "a burning fire shut up in his bones which he cannot hold in but he has to speak." (Jer. 20:9). Habakkuk has a burden for the sinning people of Judah that he cries out to God about.

The prophet begins his questioning of God in verse 2: "How long shall I cry for help and you will not hear?" In verse 3 he references the sins of, "iniquity, wrong, destruction, violence, strife and contention." In verse 4 we read: "the law is *paralyzed*, and justice never goes forth. For the *wicked surround the righteous* so justice goes forth *perverted*." Although these verses certainly speak of serious problems, they only give us a look at the sins of the people of Judah in broad brushstrokes. We would have to look at other Old Testament prophets—including Jeremiah and Zephaniah who were prophesying at approximately this same time—to be more specific.

In Jeremiah 2:8 there's a striking indictment against the leaders of the people who had transgressed against God. "The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?' Those who handle the law did not know me; the shepherds transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit." Jeremiah speaks of those who are "in perpetual backsliding." (Jer. 8:5) In 23:14 the prophets of Jerusalem, "...commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of the evildoers so that no one turns from his evil..." In Zephaniah 1:5 God's people were both bowing to God *as well as* bowing to the pagan God, Milcom. Some have stopped following God at all (1:6) and others were 'complacent' (1:12) with no real desire for repentance and change.

This sampling of the sins of Judah is a terrible indictment of God's covenant people in the Old Testament. Sadly, much of this same thing goes on in the visible/universal church today, e.g., false worship, which can manifest itself in just going through the motions with no real thought of giving glory to God; lifestyle patterns of disobedience to God's word such as stealing, which would include withholding our time, talents and treasures from God;

adultery, fornication, idol worship, i.e., anything in our lives that we prioritize ahead of God and his word, including spouses, children and jobs; leaders in churches who are afraid to talk about sin and disobedience because of a fear of backlash from the people; those in the church who are perpetually divisive and refuse to work out their differences including seeking repentance and forgiveness where it's needed. These ongoing patterns of turning away from God with no desire for genuine repentance are an indictment on the worldliness that has crept in to the church in our day.

Looking back at our text in Habakkuk, I'll call your attention to the phrase in verse 4, "...the wicked surround the righteous." Who are these groups of people in the context of Judah and this prophecy of Habakkuk? It's important for a proper interpretation of Habakkuk to note that the 'wicked' here in verse 4 are those from Judah who remain in patterns of unrepentant sin. The 'righteous'—and this may be more obvious—are also children of Judah. In the context of our passage the 'righteous' are described by one Bible scholar as "people who live faithfully in their relationships in the [covenant] community and do the right thing by them." In contrast to that, the people who are 'wicked' are those people who "ignore the obligations of their relationships in the [covenant] community; they just live for themselves." Interestingly, both groups are claiming access to the Covenant God and yet, the righteous faithfully live out their responsibilities in the covenant community while the wicked live self-centered and self-consumed lives. Just as in Habakkuk's day, the people of God in our day need to cry out to God for help for those who—by their consistently unfaithful lives—show that they may not be God's true people at all.

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