

Why Does Evil *Seemingly* Go Unpunished?

One question that's often posed by non-Christians is, "If there really is a God, why is there so much evil in the world?" In contrast to that, the question that's sometimes asked by those who believe in God is, "Why does God *seem* to allow evil to go unpunished?" Today we begin a new series of articles from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk that, as we'll see, answers some of the questions that people have about God and evil. One thing that Christians and non-Christians have in common is that we both share space in this broken world; we both experience joy as well as suffering, loss and death. The difference in how we view our life, however, is profound. One of the most well-known writers in America, and perhaps the world, was Mark Twain. Twain struggled to find meaning in life when he lost his 24-year-old daughter, Susy, to spinal meningitis. Listen to this man who wrote many best-selling novels struggle with the meaning of life in his own words from his autobiography:

"A myriad of men are born; they labor and sweat and struggle for bread; they squabble and scold and fight; they scramble for little (insignificant) advantages over each other; age creeps upon them; infirmities follow; shames and humiliations bring down their prides and their vanities; those they love are taken from them, and the joy of life is turned to aching grief. The burden of pain, care, misery, grows heavier year by year; at length ambition is dead, pride is dead, vanity is dead; *longing for release* is in their place. It comes at last—the only

un-poisoned gift earth ever had for them—and they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence; where they achieved nothing; where they were a mistake and a failure and a foolishness; there they have left no sign that they have existed—a world which will lament them a day and forget them forever."

These are some of the most hopeless words that I've ever read. Is Mark Twain's assessment of life really true? For God's people—although we, too, will experience the loss of loved ones—by God's grace, we have great promises that death is not the end; that evil *will be* punished and that even amidst the pain and loss, there is genuine hope. Although I'll give more information as we go, let me just take a moment to set the redemptive-historical events of the book of Habakkuk in place.

Almost nothing is known about this prophet whose only mention in scripture is in this book that bears his name. One thing we do know is that Habakkuk was a contemporary of several Old Testament writing prophets including, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Nahum, Zephaniah and possibly even Obadiah. The nation of Judah had fallen into grievous sin during the 55 year rule of wicked king Manasseh followed by two more years of godless rule by Manasseh's son, Amon. During this time the temple in Jerusalem had fallen into almost complete ruin. Many of the people of Judah followed the leaders into idol worship and other grievous sins. Beginning in 640 B.C. and for the next 31 years until 609 B.C. Judah was ruled by good King Josiah who was an example of *godly* leadership. He sought reforms which included tearing down the altars of Baal worship; he sought to repair the Temple and after the book of the law is found in the Temple, Josiah reinstated the Passover and called on all the people to keep the commands given in God's

word. Unfortunately, after Josiah's death, his son Jehoiakim soon came into power. Old habits die hard and soon the children of Judah fell back into their old sinful lifestyles. As we'll see, because of their sinfulness against God and their continued refusal to repent, Habakkuk prophesies the fall of Judah to the Babylonians

Habakkuk is prophesying sometime during the reign of Josiah and possibly during the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim. It's almost certain that Habakkuk lived to see the destruction of Nineveh in 612 B.C. which was prophesied by Nahum and some suggest that he may have even lived to see the final fall of Judah to Babylon in 586 B.C. which he—among others—prophesied. As we begin today, I want to note that Habakkuk gives us an insightful look at a prophet who is concerned about the sin of the people of Judah and the fact that God has *seemingly* allowed their sin to go unpunished. When God answers the prophets' question about the ongoing sin of Judah, Habakkuk struggles with God's response—at least at first. We'll begin our look at Habakkuk's questioning of God and evil next time. Does evil *really* go unpunished?

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.