



How can You Look upon Evil?

Justice is a rare commodity. We see it made hopeless in the hollow eyes and swollen bellies of starving children on our television screens. We see it shell-shocked and terrified in the wake of someone else's war. We see it violated and exploited by a grown-up who has betrayed a sacred trust. Injustice is common currency. We see it in big business and petty disagreements. We see it in politics and in the playground. Worse, far worse, we see it in ourselves. Sometimes we see it so much that we hardly see it at all.

So which direction is God looking?

Does He see? And if He sees, does He care? C.S. Lewis wrestled with these questions as he went through the pain of losing his beloved wife Joy to a particularly cruel form of cancer, and shortly after her death he penned these words:

Not that I am in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not "So there's no God after all," but "So this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer."

The prophet Habakkuk found himself troubled by the same questions as he contemplated a nation sinking into corruption, oppression and violence. How could God just sit back and watch? In this first of a short series of studies on justice, we are going to eavesdrop on Habakkuk's conversation with God as he asks Him exactly how committed to justice He actually is...

Read Habakkuk 1:1 – 4

- ➔ This is the first of two 'complaints' that Habakkuk makes against God.
- ❓ What is the emotional 'temperature' of his words?
- ❓ To what extent do you think his words reflect the world as we see it today?
- ❓ How free do you feel to express your anger or frustration to God? Should we adopt Habakkuk's style?

Background Bits

- Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Nahum, around 600BC.
- He prophesied in the southern kingdom Judah during the last few years before the nation was taken into exile in Babylon.
- The kings of Judah around that time turned their backs on the Lord, oppressing and exploiting the nation.
- Read a few verses starting from 2 Kings 23:36 to get a flavour of the times.

Read Habakkuk 1:5 – 11

- ➔ God's response is chilling. Babylonia was where modern Iraq now lies (ironically!) and

was considered to be the epitome of evil in the region. Now, of all people, God is planning to bring the Babylonians sweeping through Judah as His agents of judgement. Probably not the answer Habakkuk was looking for.

- ❓ How do you respond to God's answer? How does it make you feel? Is it just?
- ❓ Think about recent (or not so recent) world events. Do you see the hand of God at work?

Read Habakkuk 1:12 – 2:1

- ➔ Once again the prophet appeals to his God on behalf of his nation. "How can you bear to let this happen...?"
- ❓ Is there any difference in Habakkuk's tone here? Is he still trying to change God's mind?
- ❓ Habakkuk paints a picture of the Jews as sea creatures being scooped up by evil fishermen, who then sacrifice to their own nets. What do you think he is getting at here? Do we see the same behaviour or attitudes today?
- ❗ Habakkuk is unique among the prophets in that his writings are a dialogue between himself and God rather than words from God to the people. It is interesting, though, that in the final line of

2:1 we get a hint that the complaints he has delivered were actually spoken on behalf of the people. The roles of prophet and intercessor are closely intertwined.

Read Habakkuk 2:2 – 20

- ➔ And now God answers at length. “Write this down...” He tells the prophet, “and publish it abroad.” The question may have come from one man but the answer is intended to be broadcast far and wide.
- ❓ To what extent do the Lord’s words actually answer the questions that Habakkuk has asked?
- ❓ The last phrase of verse 4 is one of the most quoted in the Old Testament, and has become almost a paraphrase of the Christian gospel (see Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:37-38). How do you understand its meaning in *this* passage?
- ❓ Between verse 6 and the end of the chapter, God pronounces five woes. Trace them through and for each one discuss:
 - What attitude or behaviour is God condemning here?
 - What does He say will happen to those who are guilty in this area?
 - Where are the parallels with today’s world and society?

- ❗ Notice the lovely contrast in the last two verses between the lifeless idols which are unable to speak, and the Lord God *before whom* nothing can speak.
- ❓ Are there any hints in the passage about the timescale that it covers? How might this affect our perspective on the injustices that we encounter?

Final Thoughts

- ❓ Try to summarise what the book of Habakkuk teaches us about God’s response to injustice.
- ❓ How would you respond to someone who said that God will punish the unjust in His own time, and therefore it is not up to Christians to involve themselves in issues of social justice or reform?
- ❓ Who are the people in your group that are facing their own “How long, Oh Lord...” situations? Take the time to pray for one another.

If you see injustice and say nothing, you have taken the side of the oppressor.
Desmund Tutu