

I. Introduction

A. Thirty-five years ago, I was studying at the Science and Math library at DePauw University when I ended up on the wrong side of a practical joke.

B. I was there with a fraternity brother named Neil, who had assured me that he was there to study. I should not have believed him.

1. He not only was not a candidate for a Rhodes Scholarship. He had no business walking into the Science and Math library.

2. As you may know, college libraries tend to have degrees of seriousness. In the main library you hung out in the first floor if you wanted to talk, see friends, get a date, do something other than study. And the level of quiet and seriousness climbed every floor you went up.

3. And when you were really serious about studying. When you needed to be nose down in the books you went to the math and science library, because as a rule Chemistry and Physics majors are not the most raucous group, and you could be assured that they would be quiet.

C. So, I was seated next to my friend, Neil, minding my own business when I became aware that something was up, mostly because he was laughing very hard - in the way that you laugh in a church when you are trying to be quiet. There were tears were running down his face. And I honestly thought that he was crying for a minute. But when I pressed him for information he said, "I've got to study. I'll tell you later."

D. I was aware that a few people were looking at us. At least, I thought they were looking at us. They were really looking at me. I just didn't know it. I thought they were mad at me from bringing this guy who didn't know how to study into the Science and Math library.

E. I didn't realize that anything was going on until a note was dropped on my desk. On the outside of this note it said: pass back to Mike Woodruff. And next to that, crossed out, was a note that said, please pass down to the girl in the red sweat sweater. So I leaned back and looked way down this long line of study carrels, and at the end - about the only person not looking at me at that moment, was a girl in a red sweater. And then I looked back at the note. The first part was a note that I had supposedly written said:

1. Hi, my name is Mike Woodruff. I'm the guy in the blue shirt in the last study carrel, although you probably know who I am because I am sort of a Big Man on Campus. (This is not starting well).

F. At this point I look over at Neal, who is acting like he is studying, but his body is shaking and I suspect he is about to wet his pants he is laughing so hard.

1. You probably know who I am because I'm sort of a Big Man on Campus. But the truth is, I'm pretty shy and I don't date much but I sure do think you are cute. Will you go out with me? Please say yes. Most girls say no. And please tell me your name and your number so I can call you later. Thanks.

G. I now realize what is going on. Neal has written this note. That supposedly came from me and it has been passed down the line. And everyone between me and this girl in a red sweater, about twenty five carrels away, has read it. And now it has passed back, with her note to me:

1. Dear Mike. Thank you for your kind words. My name is Natalie. I'm sorry to say, I don't know who you are, and I am not in the Math and Science Library looking for a date. I have a steady boyfriend, so my answer is no. Hope things turn around for you.

H. You've been in similar situations - where the joke is on you. Or, where you walked into a bad situation.

I. And I don't want to limit these to practical jokes or funny stories. In fact, I opened with one only because this is really not a funny topic. Life is not usually that funny.

1. Most people do not spend their day laughing. Many are stressed or depressed, harried and frustrated.
2. People say that some day you're the windshield and some day you're the bug. But it seems like we're the bug a lot. And why do we ever have to be the bug?
3. Why terrorism, poverty and famine; Homelessness, drug abuse, child abuse, addictions, murder, rape, cancer, unemployment, corrupt government and unjust legal systems.
4. Why am I getting stepped on? Why am I suffering? Why did I get molested? Why did my child die? Why can't I have children? Why can't I get out of debt?
5. Why is my marriage in such trouble? Why is life unfair?

J. And the underlying question, which often isn't articulated, but should be, especially by those of us who declare our belief in an omnipotent and omniscient God, is, "Where is God? Where is the creator? If we serve a God who is:

1. Loving – as Scripture says He is. And powerful – able to intervene in time and space and make things right. Then why isn't he intervening in time and space and making things right? Why is there so much suffering and pain?

II. Welcome to the Book of Habakkuk

A. The question I just framed is the question asked by a man named Habakkuk close to 3,000 years ago.

B. He is one of the twelve minor prophets. He lived during the final decade of Israel's southern kingdom – just before her defeat and exile.

C. It was a time of idolatry, injustice and suffering.¹ It was also a time where Habakkuk saw the rising threat of Babylon. But he didn't warn the people. Unlike other prophets, Habakkuk doesn't accuse Israel of doing things wrong.

D. In fact, instead of speaking for God to the people – which is what prophets do – Habakkuk spoke to God, voicing his personal struggles, stating his doubts and confusion, wondering why, if God is good, he doesn't do something to squelch evil and eliminate suffering.² Much of what he writes is framed as a poem of lament. The book opens with two complaints.

III. In Habakkuk 1, Habakkuk asks, How much longer, God, are you going to allow bad things to happen?

A. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?
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.
¹So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

B. Habakkuk's first complaint is that life in Israel is horrible.

1. The people ignore God and his Law. As the result, there is lots of injustice and violence – all of which is being tolerated by Israel's leaders.

¹ Hab. 3:17 contains hints of this. J.D. Greear says: In a Country and Western song the situation would be described this way: My wife left me; I lost my job; my truck broke down and my dog died.

² Habakkuk and Jonah are both alike in that they are Minor Prophets who struggle to love like God loves.

2. Habakkuk complains that he keeps crying out for God to do something but nothing happens.

C. God then responds – verses 5 – 11 - saying, he knows about the corruption and He is about to do something big. Something they could hardly believe: He is going to send Babylonian³ to bring justice on Israel.

D. Which leads to Habakkuk's second Complaint – verses 12-17 – in which Habakkuk argues that God shouldn't use Babylon to punish Israel, because though Israel is bad, Babylon is worse . Babylon is more corrupt and more violent.

E. Hab asks, how a holy God could partner with someone like Babylon? Habakkuk 2 then opens with Habakkuk saying he is going to climb the tower – he is going to be a watchman standing on the wall scanning the horizon and waiting to see if God is going to show up and answer his questions.

F. He doesn't wait long. God answers. He tells Habakkuk to take out pen and paper and take notes on what he has to say. What does he say?

IV. Before we go there, let me take a minute to frame this problem.

A. What we are talking about is referred to- the question, “Why does God allow suffering? Why do bad things happen to good people? is referred to as the problem of evil.

B. The classic statement of this problem comes from Epicurus, the 5th century B.C. Greek philosopher who said:

1. If God really is all powerful, he could stop evil. And if he was ready all good, he would want to stop it. So, the fact that pain, suffering and injustice runs rampant means that God is either not all powerful or all good.

C. Or, as others abbreviate this; If he's good, he would. If he could he should. Since he doesn't, He isn't.

D. We could camp here for a while. But we are not going to.

1. For starters, it's not helpful to those who are suffering. Answers to philosophical questions are cold comfort to those who are hurting. The right response when someone is hurting is just to show up, offer love and silence.

2. Secondly, my experience is that those who show up at church generally do not want a philosophy lecture, so I will only say:

a) The syllogism breaks down. It does not follow that if God is all-loving and all-powerful that He would not allow evil to exist. Evil may have a purpose for a time.⁴

b) Secondly, the problem of evil is not simply a problem for Christians. Other religions are left trying to deal with it. Every religion and culture looks to help people deal with evil and suffering, because these are common experiences.

c) Some say evil is an illusion and if we can gain enlightenment it will not affect us. Some say suffering can help us become better. We are going to look at what Christianity says. Let me quickly note:

(1) Western secularism is the least able to help because it elevates comfort right now, and it doesn't suggest there is anything else out there.

³ The text says Chaldeans. But the Chaldeans are neo-Babylonians.

⁴ There are some who note that it seemed unthinkable that God allowed ISIS to rule and wreak the havoc that they did on people. But now many who saw that are turning to faith in Christ. God can use evil for good. (This does not make him the author of evil. It simply notes that he can overcome it.

(2) And the problem of evil is a problem for atheists – only in reverse. They are left with the problem of good. If there is no God, where do you get off having any moral outrage. If there is no higher power – ultimate truth – then how can you protest when the strong eat the weak? There is no cogent reason for us to protest.

(3) C.S. Lewis talks a bit about this in the intro to *Mere Christianity*, but perhaps a better place to direct people is to Martin Luther King's *Letter from A Birmingham Jail*. There King notes that we protest injustice because it violates a higher law.

V. We could go philosophical here. But we are not going to. We are going to go Biblical. We need to note how other sections of the Bible weigh in on this issue.

A. When we go looking for answers, what do we find? It depends a bit on the way we frame the question. When we ask: *Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?* the first thing we have to do is define bad. After all, some of the hardest things that happen to us we later see as some of the best. Indeed, we are told to rejoice in trials – to count it all joy when we suffer, because that suffering can make us better.

B. The second thing we have to do is defend the idea that we are good.

1. Romans 3 states that no one is good. That all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.⁵ And the rest of Romans makes it pretty clear that the bar for good is much higher than we think.⁶

2. And if you don't like that line of thinking from Paul, we can look at the words of Jesus on the subject. When he was asked in Luke 13 why the Siloam Tower fell on 18 men and killed them. The question that we today rephrase as, why do bad things happen to good people, Jesus didn't answer the question but instead said: Do you think that they were guiltier than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you no. But unless you repent you too will perish. (Luke 13:1-5).

3. Which means, the Bible doesn't spend a lot of time answering the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" It suggests that we marvel that good things happen to bad people.

C. The third thing that happens when we turn to the Bible to ask why bad things are happening, is that the question is thrown right back at us.

1. God repeats the question. You want to know when I am going to do something about suffering? I want to know when are you going to do something about suffering? When are you going to do something about injustice and famine? Poverty and abuse? When are you going to demonstrate the kind of radical hospitality I have called you to demonstrate? When are you going to love your enemy and care for widows, orphans and aliens?

2. I have given you everything you need to make a huge difference on this front. And I have given you the example of Christ and told to follow that.

3. You are my answer. I will answer those problems when you do.

VI. Of course any discussion of evil and suffering that is grounded in the Bible has to consider what is said in Proverbs and Job. In the first we learn that a lot of the problems we face are our own fault.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, the great English thinker, was asked by the London Times to write a series of articles answering the question, "What is the problem with the world?" Chesterton responded with a short letter. Dear Sirs, the problem with the world quite frankly is me. Respectfully, G.K. Chesterton."

⁶ R. C. Sproul wrote: When I am asked 'why do bad things happen to good people?', I reply, "Well, when I meet a 'good people,' I'll let you now."

- A. Not all. But a lot of the things that happen to us are the result of the things we do. And so Proverbs says: stop playing the fool. Be wise. Follow the Law. Do the right thing.
- B. For the most part, what we find in the Bible in general – and Proverbs in particular – is the idea that suffering is often the consequences of our sin. We are reaping what we have sown.

VII. In Job - which is the classic study on why people suffer – we see that it's not always that simple.

- A. You may know the set up. Job opens with a conversation in which God says to Satan, "Isn't Job a great guy." And Satan says, "Job? Are you kidding me. He's a punk. The only reason he serves You is because You are lining his pockets. If you let me take it away from him, he would curse You to Your face."
- B. And God says "No he will not." And they place bets, with the odds clearly stacked against God, who has told Satan that he can do anything to Job but take his life, with God holding that Job will not curse Him."
- C. So, Satan goes out and takes Job's: family, wealth and health. And early in the book we find Job lying in a pile of ashes: boils all over his body and everyone he loves except his wife, dead. And everyone around him – including his wife – either saying that he is suffering because he has done something wrong or saying he should give up on God.
- D. The Book of Job is viewed as the classic book on suffering. And it is that, but I am with those who say it's also a case study on faith.⁷ I think we need to think about the Book of Job this way:
 - 1. We have gone to the theater to watch a mystery. But before the curtain lifts we are allowed in on a secret. The writer and director walk out to tell us what happened, informing us that that we now know more than the lead actor. From our seats the excitement is not over figuring out who did it. The excitement pivots on watching how to lead actor responds to what is going on.
- E. Then the curtain rises again and it starts. Job is the star – he is the detective trying to figure out why he is suffering. Why God is punishing him or simply ignoring him.
- F. What you know is, that isn't happening. In fact, far from being mad and punishing Job, God is pleased with him. And far from ignoring him, God is risking His reputation on Job's response.
 - 1. You know what is going on. The only thing you don't know is how Job will respond. What you do not know is, how Job's faith will weather the trials.
- G. Now it is a testimony to the book of Job that as you read it you completely forget what you know. You get so caught up in what is going on to Job that you start to think, "This doesn't make sense. This isn't right. What did he do wrong? He's a good person. Why are You punishing him?"
- H. You begin to empathize with Job and you agree with him as he runs right up to the edge of blasphemy and says,
 - 1. "Hey, God, I know I'm right. I know that You are wrong. I know that You have wronged me. And if You come down here, I'll prove it."
 - 2. It makes perfect sense to you that Job would put God on trial.
 - 3. You look forward, as Job does, to the chance for him to question God, because his case is so airtight.

⁷ The illustration that follows is from Phil Yancey.

4. And so, at the end of the book, when God finally agrees to meet with Job you're thinking, "This is it. Job will nail him to the wall. There is no reason for his pain. There is no reason for this suffering. There is no reason for this injustice."

I. And then God comes down, and after 30 plus chapters of Job questioning god and demanding an answer, God doesn't answer Job's questions because the question isn't "Why do we suffer?" The question is...." How will we respond?" The question is one of faith.

VIII. And this is exactly where the book of Habakkuk leads us.

A. Habakkuk comes out and says, "God this isn't right. You can't use the Babylonians to punish us. It's not fair." And so, God responds in chapter 2 and says, "Habakkuk, take notes, because I will explain to you what many others will need to hear." And what does he say? What does He do?

B. He gives Habakkuk a vision that he says will be slow in coming but will come, and the righteous person will live by faith in their confidence that God will deliver on his promise.

C. The money verse here is Hab. 2:14: For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

D. What God promises is that one day he will judge Babylon and anyone who lives like them. The suggestion from the poetry is that the violence and oppression of nations leads to a revenge cycle that produces a pretty consistent list of bad things. They come out as five woes:

1. The first two deal with unfair economic practices whereby the rich oppress the poor
2. Number three is a critique of slave labor – of treating other humans poorly
3. Four is the abuse of alcohol, sex and power by leaders who are partying when they should be leading well. Leadership is serving.
4. The fifth is idolatry – the engine that drives these nations to do all of these things.

E. God says to Habakkuk, the bad things that are happening are not unique to Babylon. Given the human condition, all nations that gain power head down a similar path.

F. But don't worry. I've got this. Evil will be punished. Live by faith that one day I will prevail.

G. And this is what Habakkuk decides to do. The book ends – Hab. 3:17f:

1. 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,
2. "yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
3. "God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

IX. Now there is more to this for those who really sit and ponder this. Suffering is a big topic. It raises lots of questions. And there is much to learn.^s

^s There is so much here: Please note that when Habakkuk has doubts he goes to God with his frustrations and doubts and God welcomes the pushback. When we have questions about what god is doing, we need to take them to God first. Please also understand that one of the reasons that God doesn't step in and make things right is because when he does it's game over. What we really want is for God to step in and wipe out all of the evil we do not like, but not the evil in our life.

- A. It is important to note that what we learn from Books like Habakkuk, Job and Proverbs is that it's not always clear what is going on in the moment.
1. For instance: When we are prospering we cannot automatically infer that we are doing things right? After all, the Babylonians were prospering and God says He will get around to punishing them.
 2. And on the flip side, we cannot assume that when things are going wrong that we are doing the wrong things. Maybe.
- B. What we get from Habakkuk is the idea that when we suffer, we have a chance to be faithful. Indeed, we need to live by faith in the promises of God even when – especially when – things are hard.
- C. But the biggest thing we need to see – perhaps the most important thing to note – is that God's answer to our suffering gets updated in the New Testament when he shows up to suffer alongside us and to die for us.
- D. We can't definitely answer the question, why doesn't God show up and fix things right now, but we can rule some things out. It is not because he doesn't care. He cares.

X. Campus Pastor / Wrap up

- A. Today's message from Habakkuk gave voice to the challenges we face and some of the hard questions they raise.
- B. I hope that you will talk about this message in your small group this week.
- C. Let me also say:
1. If you are struggling right now, we'd love to pray for you. Please give us that chance. Don't face your trials and doubts alone. There will be people up front after the service who would consider it a privilege to pray with you.
 2. And let me say to everyone, we have the opportunity right now to lean in on the challenge found in Habakkuk 2:4 – the just will live by faith.
 - a) We have the opportunity today to live in light of God's promises. He is going to make it right. And for all of eternity we will live in a perfect world. Right now is the only chance we get to live faithfully in a broken world. To trust in him. *The just will live by faith.*