

Don't Look Away

Habakkuk 1-2:1

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Good morning. If you are a guest or a visitor, welcome. We're glad that you would join us this morning. My name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here. And if we haven't met, I would love to meet you, to greet you, to welcome you to CTK, because we're glad that you would join us and glad that you're here. And this morning, we are starting a new sermon series. It's just going to be for three weeks. Last week, we completed our series in the Old Testament prophet Daniel. And this morning, we're going to look at another prophet. This is the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Habakkuk. If you're not sure where that is, I understand. But Habakkuk's near the end of the Old Testament. It's one of the minor prophets, as I said. If you got to Nahum, just go one more book over. If you got to Zephaniah, you went a little too far. So I'm sure that cleared everything up for y'all. But if you don't have a Bible, you can also follow along in the Bibles in the chairs. The passage is on page 785.

So maybe you're wondering, why are we going to spend three weeks in the book of Habakkuk? And that's a fair question. And there's a few reasons. The first is Habakkuk is a minor prophet. And I imagine, well, I've been confirmed by your laughs already, that we're not very familiar with the minor prophets. I know that if we were to turn, if we're looking for a passage, we're going to look to a book of the Bible that was going to give us comfort in a time of need. If we're looking for encouragement, those sorts of things, our instinct is to turn to maybe the Psalms or the Gospels or a Pauline Epistle. But oftentimes, we're not thinking Habakkuk or Zephaniah or Zechariah, right? We're not thinking those books. And yet, these books are part of God's Word. He has preserved them for us. And so, even though we're not familiar with them, they're still given to us. And so, it's good and right for us from time to time to return to them or to turn to them for the first time. And so, actually, my plan in the near future, in the distant future, is that from time to time, in between longer series, to take some time, a few weeks, and spend them in these minor prophets.

Now, they're minor not because they're less important, they're minor because they're shorter. So, Habakkuk's three chapters, we're going to spend three weeks in it. But that's not the only reason that we're going to spend time in Habakkuk. It's not just simply because we're unfamiliar and we want to become familiar with this book, but also because Habakkuk speaks to our moment right now. You see, a little bit of history would help us. Habakkuk was written to the Southern Kingdom. So, Israel, remember, there was a disagreement, there was strife, there was fighting amongst Israel, and so they split into two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. So, Habakkuk is writing to the Southern Kingdom, and he's writing in the late 7th century BC. So, what this means is that he is a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, and he is writing prior to the exile.

So, Daniel that we just finished, Daniel is about exile. This is happening right before that, okay? Habakkuk's writing right before that. And what's going on is Habakkuk's looking out onto the world, and he's seeing the geopolitical threats that are coming, right? Babylon is coming to Israel, coming against it. But also, Habakkuk looks not just to those things occurring outside of Israel, but those things occurring within Israel. And what he sees is injustice. He sees idolatry. Habakkuk sees evil and the innocent being mistreated and wars and rumors of wars. I mean, that sounds like our day, doesn't it? I mean, the powerful using

power for their own sake, injustice and evil and wickedness seemingly going unchecked. I mean, we feel that, don't we? And that's what Habakkuk feels. And he sees it. And so, when he sees the evil, what's he going to do? Well, that's what we're going to talk about this morning. Now, before we dive into our passage, let me just say, if you're interested in reading more about Habakkuk, there's a book that has been very helpful to me. It's short. It's been written for, not as a commentary, but more of an exposition. It's called *Faithful Doubt*. It's written actually by a friend of mine. His name is Travis Scott. Not the rapper Travis Scott, the pastor Travis Scott. Very helpful. Some of you don't know who the rapper is, but that's okay. Anyway, I didn't want you to Google Travis Scott and come across something strange. Anyway, it's a really helpful book. I would commend it to you.

Now, as we move into the passage and we start thinking about it, I do want us to consider that idea. What is it that we are to do when we see evil, when we see wickedness? What is our response to be? And as I was thinking about this, I actually came across an interview that was in the New York Times just two weeks ago. It was an interview with the award-winning actor Bob Odenkirk. Now, Bob Odenkirk is made famous from his roles on *Saturday Night Live* and *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. And he was being interviewed by this person from the New York Times. And near the end of the interview, the interviewer quotes from Odenkirk's memoir, where he writes, "show business is a distraction, which is arguably the key to life on earth, because life on earth is so bleak and painful, and the only and best response to that is to look away." Now, when pressed about this, the interviewer, she pressed Odenkirk even further and was like, "this seems very bleak," right? "This seems dire. This seems horrific." And he doubled down and said, "no, no, no, no, no. When we come across horror and pain in this world, the response is to turn away." So, what do you think about that? Evil, injustice, wickedness, horror. Are we simply to turn away? I mean, that's one way that we can deal with the pain and the difficult. But let's see what Habakkuk does. Let's read Habakkuk 1, beginning in verse 1, and we're going to read through chapter 2, verse 1.

"The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

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.
So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

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.
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.
They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.
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.
They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand.
At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh.
They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it.
Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their
god!

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.
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?
You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler.
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.
Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he
lives in luxury, and his food is rich.
Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?
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.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Father, we ask that as we come to your Word, you would help us see, that we would see the world as it is, that we would see you as you are, and that you would give us eyes to see truth and beauty, goodness and rightness. God, we ask that you would help us. We need your help, and so we ask by your Spirit, be with us now, and we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Looking with Honesty

a.) At the World

So, Odenkirk said, look away. But what does Habakkuk do? He looks with honesty. He looks, he doesn't look away, he looks directly at the world, right? Our passage began, the oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. Now, that word there, oracle, is an interesting word, because it can mean that, simply oracle, a word that is coming from God, and Habakkuk functioning as the mouthpiece of God to his people, or that word can actually mean burden, the burden that Habakkuk the prophet saw. And Habakkuk is burdened. He looks at the world, and he sees evil, and he looks with honesty upon what is occurring, right? He looks at the world with honesty, and what does he see? He sees violence, and destruction, and strife. In verse 4, we're told “the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth.” In other words, the word of God is no longer governing the affairs of his people. They've disregarded it. They've cast it aside. They do as they please. That's what it's getting at when he says, “justice goes forth perverted.” You see, what Habakkuk sees is that the good, and the true, and the beautiful have been set aside and replaced with the ugly, with lies, and with evil. This is what surrounds Habakkuk. This is what he sees, a world where good is called evil, and evil is called good. And what makes matters worse is that this isn't just simply happening outside of God's people. It's not just happening out there, but it's actually happening within the people of God.

b.) To the Lord

And so, Habakkuk doesn't look away. He doesn't close his eyes. He honestly looks upon the horror, and he looks to the Lord. Right? He doesn't complain. Did you notice this? He doesn't actually speak to God's people. He doesn't complain to them. No, he takes his concern to the

Lord. Oh, Lord, he says. Oh, 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? All right, did you hear the content of his prayer? He doesn't simply go to the Lord and acknowledge the evil and wickedness that he's saying, but what does he say? There's evil.

There's pain. Where are you? Oh, God, I cry to you for help. Will you not hear? I cry to you violence. Will you not save? Will you not defend the innocent? Verse 3: "why do you idly look at wrong?" You see, from Habakkuk's perspective, it looks like God has looked away, that God is perhaps ignoring evil. Now, before moving on, I just want to ask how does that sit with you that Habakkuk would say these things to the Lord? I imagine for many of us this may be a little troubling. Tim Keller, the late Tim Keller, the pastor and writer, he made this very astute observation. When he interacts with people who had been dealing with suffering, had been weighed down by pain and burdens, he said that very often he would see one of two responses. The first response from those who maybe were irreligious would be that they wouldn't look to the Lord. They wouldn't consider what he may or may not be doing. They would simply look to other things to deal with their pain and their sadness. That's one way of dealing with suffering and with the evils of the world. The other way he saw from traditional religious people, they would turn to God, but they would often not ask the questions that were in their hearts. It was as though they felt like they couldn't actually be honest with the Lord about what they were really thinking. And so, he says both of those are actually not appropriate responses to suffering, to pain, to evil.

And Habakkuk, did you notice, he didn't do either of those things. Habakkuk didn't turn away from the Lord, he turned to him. And when he went to the Lord, what does he do? He is brutally honest. So, I wonder, I wonder if we have room in our prayers for this sort of conversation with God. I wonder if we have space in our community to allow others to pray these sorts of prayers. I wonder if Habakkuk was in our midst if we would say, "no, no, no, no, no, that's irreverent. That's not honor. You can't talk." Or would we be okay with him speaking this way? That we would be all right with bringing our pains and our hurts, our doubts, and our perceptions of what God is or isn't doing, that we would be okay with bringing those things to him? Or would we simply say, "no, that lacks faith?"

Well, here's the thing, y'all. I actually think Habakkuk's prayer is incredibly full of faith. I think this is a faithful prayer because he is coming to the Lord confident in who God is, in his character, in his power to act. He believes what God has said about himself. That's why he comes to him, right? Because he knows God is this God who loves his people. God is a God who is powerful to act against evil. God is able to do these things. And so when he sees or perceives that maybe God isn't doing these things, it doesn't make sense to Habakkuk. But he comes regardless. He comes because he believes that God will hear him. If he didn't have faith, Habakkuk would have never prayed. If he didn't have faith, he would have turned away and looked to someone or something else. But instead, he prays and he cries out. Now, listen, I don't know the questions or the burdens that you might have this morning. And I don't know the sadness or the pain that may be filling your heart. I don't know the doubts that might be in your mind. And maybe this morning, you showed up this morning and you're not experiencing any of those things. And thanks be to God, you're not. But you have and you will. And so when we feel those, when we have those questions, when we have those doubts, when we have that sadness and we look upon the world in our hearts, we can come and be honest with the Lord. He invites us to come and to cry out to him when we see evil and wickedness, when we have doubt and unbelief, when we are sad and weighed down, he

invites us come. We can come and we can pray. We can look at the world with honesty and we can look to the Lord being honest.

Hearing an Answer

And as we come to the Lord Habakkuk, he hears an answer. So I want us to think for a second, what do you expect God's answer to be when his prophet comes and says, "God, there is evil and wickedness abounding in the land. Please act." Okay, this is the prophet, right? He comes and he says these things to God: please act, please work, please move. And what would we expect God to say? We'd expect him to say, "no problem Habakkuk, I got this," right? To say, "I see what you see and I'm going to send salvation. I'm going to send an army of angels and the wickedness and evil. I'm going to consume them with fire from heaven," right? "I am going to go all Old Testament," right? That's what we'd expect God to say, right? But what does he say in verse 6? Behold, okay, I saw all this stuff.

Verse 6, "behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans." Chaldeans is another name for Babylonians. I'm raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation who marched through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings, not their own. And then he goes on to describe them. They're dreaded, they're fearsome, they devour their enemies, they bring violence and gather captives. Okay, do you hear God's response? Like let that sink in for a second. God said, "Habakkuk, I heard you and you're right, it is bad. And his answer is, it's getting worse." And we know it does, right? Because we read Daniel, we spent, you know, almost, well, it's May, we spent five months in the book of Daniel. We know it gets worse. Babylon comes and they sack Jerusalem and they take Israel into captivity and exile. God saw the evil of his people and he brought judgment. Now, looking back from our perspective, we can see what God was doing, but in the midst of it, I mean, let's be honest, that is not, that is surely not what Habakkuk was expecting. And to him, it wouldn't have made sense, right? I mean, because think about how we perceive difficulty and pain in our lives. We think today is bad, but tomorrow will get better, right? There are dark clouds, but there's a silver lining coming. The sun will come up tomorrow and everything will be roses. But what if there is no silver lining? And what if tomorrow actually gets worse? I mean, Habakkuk saw violence and God said, there's more coming. Habakkuk said, "they ignore your laws" and God said, "yep and they're going to make their own justice." Habakkuk prayed about the iniquity of his people and God said, "I'm sending guilty men. They're coming." I mean, it would have been confusing to Habakkuk and surely shocking to us, right?

But that's actually what God said it would be. Did you see in verse 5 when he begins his response? "Look among the nations and see. Wonder and be astonished, for I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if I told you." And he's right, right? Because there's no way Habakkuk can understand this. But the point is, Habakkuk's not called to understand. He's not called to understand all the ways of God. Friends, listen, there are going to be times when we pray and ask for relief from trial or deliverance from that person, you know, maybe that enemy that we have or freedom from illness or freedom from burdens or relief from stress. We're going to pray those things and there are times when God is going to answer exactly what we asked for. And give us exactly what we asked for. But there are times when he won't. When he's going to answer, but not in ways that we wanted or ways that we expected. So, what will we do in those moments? Well, friends, the truth of the matter is, is God knows far more than we do. Far more about the world, far more about us. I mean, think about all the ways that God worked that would have seemed odd or strange in the moment, right? Think about Noah building an ark. I mean, surely his neighbors thought he

was crazy, right? Or Joseph being sold by his brothers into slavery, right? Like, in the moment, surely it would have been like, we're done with that guy. Or David, the anointed one, the king to come, right? The king who was to lead Israel, he's threatened by Saul and has to live in caves. It wouldn't have made sense. Or that the Messiah, Jesus, would be crucified as a criminal in the moment his disciples thought all was lost. And yet this is what God is doing time and again, over and over.

Waiting with Trust

He's doing the very thing he told Habakkuk, "behold, I am doing a work." You may not understand it. You may not believe it if I told you, but I am working. And so, what we are called to do is to trust. Trust - trust in God. And friends, the truth is, is that if our trust in God is dependent upon God answering every single request as we want, then our trust isn't in God, it's in what he can do for us. Our trust isn't in the Lord, it's in simply our desires. He answered Habakkuk and he answers us, "I am doing a work." We are not called to completely understand all his ways. What we are called to do is completely trust. And that's what we see Habakkuk responding with. In verses 12 through chapter 2, verse 1, Habakkuk responds. Again, there's lots of honesty, right? They're going to drag us away, they're going to be merciless, they're going to bring death. And then we get to chapter 2, verse 1, where Habakkuk says, "I will take my stand at my watch post 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." Now, this language of watch post, it invokes the role of the watchman. And the watchman would stand on the city walls and they would look out for the coming enemy and they would warn the city of the threat. And so when the prophet, when Habakkuk says, "I will take my stand at my watchpost," what he's saying is, "I will continue in my calling. I will continue in what you have called me to do as a prophet."

He was one who warned God's people and called them back to repentance. He's saying, "I will continue in what God has called me to do because his trust is in the Lord." Right? Threat and judgment, they're coming. But it doesn't change who God is. You see it in verse 12. Habakkuk asks, "are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One?" Now, of course, this is a rhetorical question. And the answer is yes. God is everlasting. God rules over all. God knows the beginning from the end. And do you see how Habakkuk describes him, what he calls him? He doesn't just call him God. He doesn't just call him the righteous one. He doesn't call him the Holy One. He says, "my God, my Holy One." Even in the midst of the horror and the sadness and the confusion, he still turns to God as my God, my Holy One. His faith is in the Lord and his will. Look at the end of verse 12. "O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof." Habakkuk has heard the way of the Lord, that the Lord will act, and he is trusting in the Lord to do what is right and what is needed. That's why he can say, "we shall not die." His faith and his hope is in, it's beyond what he can see.

It's in the Lord who has declared He will work. Habakkuk has complete trust that somehow, in some way, God is going to bring salvation out of judgment. He is going to bring justice out of injustice. That is what Habakkuk sees. And friends, that is what we see. That is what we see, not because we read the words simply of Habakkuk. We do see those, but also that is what we see when we look to the cross. Because in the cross, what we see is injustice. The greatest injustice ever perpetrated in this world because the sinless one, the Holy One, the one who kept all of God's ways, Jesus took on our sin, and he gave his life as a part of God's plan so that the people, we, me, and you, who deserve God's judgment, would not face God's

judgment. Instead, we would find grace and life. Friends, that is what we see. The Lord at work. The Lord at work to deliver his people. The Lord at work to bring grace and life.

Odinkirk said that the best response to the bleak, to the painful, to the horror is to look away and transform horror into good, into comforting things. To look away and to look to entertainment. That is what he said. That is where we will find the good. That is where we will be comforted. But we know, friends, that won't transform the horror. It won't change our pain. We can look to those momentary pleasures, but we know that they will not last. Habakkuk tells us, don't look away. Look with honesty and go with honesty to the Lord and hear his answer. He is at work and put your trust in him. O Lord, my God, my Holy One. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word and thank you that in the midst of pain, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of difficulty and sadness, that we can hear that you are at work. That we may not know all the ways, that we may not see how all the dots are fitted together. We may not see what all the things that you are doing, but we see you, the one who has sent your Son, our Savior, to give his life so that we would have life and so that we would trust you in all things, trusting that you are the one who is at work. And so we ask, Lord, give us that trust. Deepen our faith. Turn our eyes towards you and let us behold the good and Holy One. We pray all this in Christ's name and God's people said together, Amen.