

# A Question of Injustice

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[ 0 : 00 ] Great. Good evening, everyone. I'm really excited about this series. I know Habakkuk might feel a little bit random. Alistair alluded to the fact that it might be a slightly difficult book to find, but I hope that the next three weeks are a real blessing to you as we spend some time in this book. Before we dive in, why don't we pray together? Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask for your help this evening as we come to your word, as we come with many questions. Lord, we pray that you would be with us, that you would be helping us to understand. Lord, would you speak through me this evening? In Jesus' name. Amen.

So I want you to imagine with me to picture yourself in 1939. You're on a boat. It's a smallish sort of boat, and you're in the English Channel because you're on your way to World War II. You're on your way to fight at the front in France.

But you can't think about that now because your smallish sort of boat is sort of sinking. There's a storm thrashing all around you. Huge waves, gale force winds, relentless sideways rain. It looks like the end might come for you before you even land in France, before you even get to the war.

Might be quite hard to picture yourself there. Difficult to imagine. But I wonder how you might react in a situation like that. You know yourself better than I do. Maybe you're the sort of person that would panic, take your army hat off and hopelessly start bailing water out of your ship. Maybe you're the sort of person who would dive into the sea and try and swim back to Dover.

[ 1 : 40 ] Maybe you're the sort of person who would just curl up into a ball and do nothing, frozen, terrified. Maybe you're the sort of person who'd be in denial, just really pretending that everything was okay, even though it wasn't.

That's a pretty stark illustration, I think. But the truth is that life can feel a little bit like that, can't it? Like a bit of a storm. How do we respond in the storms of life?

Because if we're honest, the world that we live in, it's a bit of a mess. You just have to look at the news and see there's war, there's violence. In fact, I'm sure we don't even need to look at the news to know this in our own lives.

There's just buckets of injustice in the world that we live in. I'm sure we can all think of a particular person in our lives, maybe in our pasts, or a group of people, or a specific injustice that has really made your mess. Aren't we asking, whether we believe in God or not this evening, aren't we asking, what is he doing in all of this?

If he is supposed to be loving and good and powerful and just, then why does the world, why does life feel like such a mess? That's really our question this evening, but it's also going to be our question over the next three evenings.

[ 3 : 06 ] It's this, how do we have faith even in the mess? Let's dive into our text this evening, just as we get our bearings, and have a look at verse one with me.

The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received. So what are we coming to here? Well, that word translated prophecy, it really just means message or burden.

This is the burden that God has placed on Habakkuk's heart about the injustice of the world around him. But it's quite unlike some of the maybe more familiar prophetic books in this genre, because it's not addressed to a particular people.

Instead, this book, it takes the form of a conversation between Habakkuk and God. Maybe you picked up on that in the reading. Habakkuk sort of asks God a question, and then God responds. We'll see next week, the same thing happens again. He asks a second question, and God responds. And then in the final chapter, Habakkuk responds himself with this wonderful song. And we'll see as we go through that these questions that Habakkuk asks are incredibly specific, actually.

[ 4 : 10 ] Specific to the situation of a prophet in 7th century Judah. But his specific questions, they're also incredibly timeless, because at their heart, they're still the questions that we're asking today.

So what was Habakkuk's world like? Well, a bit of potted history. Israel was the northern kingdom. They had been conquered and carried off into exile by the Assyrian Empire.

Big crisis. And for Judah, the southern kingdom, that was followed by a century of bad kings, idol worship and violence. Until along comes King Josiah.

Josiah was a good king in a line of really bad kings. And there's something of a revival under King Josiah. The nation of Judah returns to worship the one true God.

But then Josiah dies in battle. One son replaces him. He only lasts a couple of months. But then his other son, Jehoiakim, becomes king. And he's awful.

[ 5 : 13 ] In fact, he reversed all the good that his father Josiah had done. There is a return to violence, to faithlessness. That's the sort of context then that Habakkuk asks this question in.

In the sort of violence and faithlessness and mess with the memory of a good king. He's a faithful prophet calling out to God in a messy world.

And in some ways, I think that being a Christian in Scotland today might feel a little bit like being a prophet in Judah. Certainly it can feel as though the church is slowly or maybe not so slowly dying. Easy to lament a decline in what we would see as true Christian spirituality. To look at the waning Christian influence in this country. To watch the powers of lawlessness and injustice.

Now, I have to say at this point that virtually every generation of Christian history has felt a bit like that. Like a faithful minority in a messy world. But it is certainly true today.

[ 6 : 21 ] And so we might feel a bit like Habakkuk as he asks his first question. Calling out in a messy world. So here's our first point then. It's an honest question.

A really honest question that Habakkuk asks. See in verse 2. How long, Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen. Or cry out to you violence.

But you do not save. It's an honest question. But notice Habakkuk isn't doubting God's existence. Or even who God is.

He calls him Lord. It's a name that points to all that God has done. Raising up for himself a people. Rescuing them out of slavery in Egypt. Bringing them into the promised land.

It is this God to whom he prays. And notice too that he doesn't doubt that God is going to do something. It's God's timing, not his character, that Habakkuk questions here.

[ 7 : 22 ] He is desperate to see God's justice done. How long? And yet it seems no answer. He's been calling out about the violence of this King Jehoiakim.

Jehoiakim. How long? See in verse 3 the kind of thing that he's talking about. The injustice. The wrongdoing. The destruction and violence.

And strife and conflict. And so he just honestly asks. How long until you're going to do justice, Lord? Aren't we asking that question today? How long?

What are you going to do about our messy world? God. But Habakkuk isn't denying that God is a God of justice. Because it is God's justice that Habakkuk is concerned with.

You see in verse 4 he says the law is paralyzed. That's the law given by God to help his people live wisely in the world. Under these kings, under Jehoiakim, under the wicked, that law is not allowed to function.

[ 8 : 23 ] And so justice never prevails. Justice is perverted. And so just like us, Habakkuk is on the boat. He's in the storm. There's injustice all around him.

It's worth saying at this stage that if you look at the world that we live in, and if you see the injustice and it bothers you, that the mess, you know, as women continue to be trafficked into sex slavery, as war continues to rage, as vulnerable minorities all over the world are exploited and persecuted, if you see that this is the sort of world that we live in, and it bothers you, and it should bother you, if that's you, but you don't believe in this God, then you have to ask yourself, where are you getting your idea of justice from in the first place?

Because without God, Richard Dawkins puts it like this on the screen, in a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replications, in other words, in a world without God, some people are going to get lucky, and some people are going to get hurt, and we won't find any rhyme or reason to it.

DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to the music. If there is no rhyme or reason, if everything really is just left to chance, then why do each of us in this room feel as though

there should be justice?

Why do we cry out for justice in the first place? Well, let me suggest that it's only because that is the character of the God of the universe. And especially in this country today, it is only because the influence of his son, the son that we believe in, over the last 2,000 years.

[10:19] If you're keen to think a bit more about that, do grab me after. I've got a really good book recommendation for you here. I read it this summer. It's excellent. But it really is true that what we believe about justice in this country is rooted in the Christian faith.

But for now, as we consider what to do in the midst of all this mess, what can we learn from Habakkuk's question? A bit like being in a small, smallish sort of ship in a storm, I think the temptation is basically twofold.

Our first instinct might be to bury our head in the sand. In other words, to simply ignore the depths of injustice, to deny that the problem is really that bad, to keep on living our comfortable lives and refusing to actually get involved in the mess at all.

I guess that's like pretending there is no storm or curling up into the hull of the ship terrified. On the other hand, we might do the opposite, right? We might be the kind of person who's trying to fix it all ourselves.

Our instinct, it might be to throw ourselves headfirst into every justice fighting cause we can get our teeth into. But doing that faithlessly or in prayerlessness is failing to recognize who God is, failing to recognize what he has said about his justice and then becoming self-reliant, believing that we are capable of bringing his justice on our own.

[11:46] You do that, you will very quickly become discouraged at our inability to have any real impact. It's like trying to bail water from a ship in a storm with an army hat.

And so instead, this evening, would we learn from this honest prayer? Knowing who God is, knowing that he is a God who is perfectly just, a God who has displayed his character through the history of his people, who has promised ultimately to prove his justice finally, would we know that this is who God is and plead with him, your kingdom come, that his justice would be done?

We'll return to this over the coming weeks, but before we do, let's just have a look at the surprising promise of justice. And it is a surprising promise here that God gives Habakkuk.

See in verse five, look at the nations and watch and be utterly amazed for I'm going to do something in your days that you would not believe even if you were told.

What's God going to do about it? Well, something so surprising that Habakkuk would be amazed that he'd scarcely believe it. It's something coming from the nations. In verse six, he says, I am raising up the Babylonians.

[13:09] Your translation may have the Chaldeans. But these guys, the Babylonians or the Chaldeans, their empire had been and gone. A thousand years before Habakkuk's day, the Babylonian empire was the superpower.

They had long since been squashed. But the Babylonians or the Chaldeans apparently were going to rise up once more. That's surprising to Habakkuk. What about the Assyrian empire?

Those guys who had just wiped out the northern kingdom. They were the big bad guys. Surely it would be them. But there's a new kid on the block. Indeed, as we keep reading in verse six, they sweep across the whole earth to seize a dwelling not their own.

There's a certain inevitability about what is coming. And so no wonder they are a feared and dreaded people. Maybe you can imagine the feeling. Seeing an empire gathering on the horizon, knowing that they're coming for your nation.

I wonder it might have been a bit like that for the people of Ukraine. I suspect the other countries in Eastern Europe right now might feel a little bit like this. Fear and dread. The imagery is terrifying.

[14:16] Have a look at verse eight. Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops headlong. Their horses come from afar. They fly like an eagle swooping to devour.

The Babylonians and their horses are compared to the most brutal predators. They are fast and fierce and ferocious. They advance in verse nine like the desert wind and gather prisoners like sand.

What grain of sand would stand a chance against the whipping wind? It's a picture of an army gathering up prisoners with ease. They mock kings, scoff at rulers, laugh at fortified cities.

In some ways, I think this image is even more brutal. This sort of foreboding laughter is terrifying. Babylon is like the bully in the playground. And this little kid finally stands up to him and the bully just laughs.

We all know what's coming next. He just sort of swipes the kid aside, moving on to his next victim, just as the Babylonian does in verse 11. They sweep past like the wind and go on.

[15:25] This is what's coming, God says. It's brutal. It's terrifying. But look back in verse six and see the real surprise.

It is God who is raising them up. They're simply his instrument carrying out his justice. That's surprising enough just as a plain fact.

But more than that, notice in verse seven, they are a law unto themselves and promote their own honor. We begin to get a note of irony here.

If you look back at verse four, the law is paralyzed for God's people. But now those who God is raising up to bring justice, well, they're lawless too. And just like the people of Judah, the people Habakkuk is complaining about, see in verse nine, the Babylonians come, they come intent on violence.

It's just the way that Judah was described. Worse than that, it is their own honor that they promote. If God's people are being judged for their faithlessness, their inability to promote God's honor, well, these people aren't interested in promoting God's honor at all.

[16:35] No, see at the end of verse 11, their own strength is their God. They're totally self-reliant. Actually, this is a pretty unusual thing in the ancient world, where basically every nation has their own gods, gods external to themselves, national gods and fertility gods and especially gods of war.

But this people, the Babylonian people, as it's described here, they are so self-reliant, so self-absorbed that their own strength is their God. Isn't that the ultimate idolatry?

And actually, not only is that the ultimate idolatry, but isn't it the most universal? To rely on our own efforts in life. So easy to fall into, whether you're a Christian here this evening or not, to be fundamentally self-reliant.

Even sort of specifically Christianly self-reliant, I think, relying on my own good deeds or my devotion or my growth in whatever area. But really, that reliance is a denial of the God who created us.

It's idolatry. We'll see in all of this, how the Babylonians are described. Essentially in verse 11, guilty people.

[17:54] These people, the people that God is raising up to judge Judah, well, they're just as bad as Judah themselves. It's as though God is saying on your small boat in the midst of the storm, here's how I'm going to fix your mess.

I'm going to send an even bigger storm. It's a surprising justice. And it begs the question, if justice is really to be done, then surely God's got to judge them too.

It's a good question. Well, if you come back next week, you'll see that's exactly the question that Habakkuk asks next. But for now, what do we do with this? Because we remain at sea.

The storm, it rages. This is the world that we live in. It's a mess. And how does this surprising promise of justice help us to have faith in the mess today?

There's a temptation here to think about today's events, I think, and to think about how they might be God's judgment like this. Right? People have said how COVID might be that, how war in Europe, or rising energy prices, or global warming, or whatever it is, is God judging his people.

[19:03] And that the book of Habakkuk is there to point to those events, to draw straight lines from Old Testament prophecy to today like that. But that is not what the Bible is encouraging us to do.

We know that God used the Babylonians to judge his people like this. He promises to do it. The Bible says that it happens, and history confirms it. But that does not mean that we can point to anything today and say that it's definitely God's justice on a wicked people as the fulfillment of what he's saying in Habakkuk chapter one.

It might be that, but we cannot say confidently that we know that it is. And even if we could, that's not the point of this Bible prophecy. Instead, it points to an even greater surprising promise of justice.

As we look at the messy world that we live in, and as we desire that justice would be done, I think the key question really is, why is the world such a mess?

Who makes the world messy? If we answer that question, we then have another question, what would justice look like? You might lay the blame at God's feet.

[ 20 : 17 ] If he is the creator and he made the rules, and if he's all-powerful, then surely it's his fault. If the rules are being broken, then why shouldn't he just do something about it?

But could the blame lie elsewhere? Let me illustrate it like this. During the COVID pandemic, during lockdown, if I broke the rules, some unessential travel to go to the beach for a barbecue with my friends, or seven people gathering when only six were allowed, who would be to blame?

Me for breaking the rules, or the government for failing to enforce them? God created us with free will, the freedom to choose between right and wrong.

We are not robots. We are capable of making real decisions with profound consequences. Who then is to blame for the injustice of this world?

Well, the Bible is clear about that. I am. And you are. The Bible teaches that God created a perfect world without injustice, and that human rebellion against God is what ruined it.

[ 21 : 30 ] As our relationship with God was broken, as our relationship with each other, and our relationship with the created world, isn't that just describing the mess that we live in? And so in this sort of world, what does justice look like?

Well, come to Acts chapter 13 with me. It's on the screen. Here Paul is preaching to the Jews at the synagogue, and he retells Israel's story, how Israel was consistently unfaithful to her God, and then ultimately Paul shows how Jesus is the solution.

And he concludes, Let it be known to you, therefore, brothers, that through this man, that is Jesus, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

And by him, everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. Here is the surprising justice of God.

For God's people, for the Jews in the first century when Jesus was around, justice had been simple. It was provided in the law, the law of Moses. Follow that, and justice would be complete.

[ 22 : 42 ] And built into that law was the promise, of course, of forgiveness through sacrifice. But it didn't work because the people didn't follow the law. We've seen that in Habakkuk already.

And the sacrifices had to be continually made. It wasn't a mistake that it didn't work. The whole point of it was to point to this surprising justice of God, that one day he would do it for us.

It's the once and for all time sacrifice of Jesus. And notice, God uses guilty people to carry out that justice. Just like the promise in Habakkuk, this is the surprising justice of the cross.

As God comes down in the person of Jesus and he's crucified, nailed to the cross by who? Nailed to the cross by the Romans, by an idolatrous, violent empire, an empire that the New Testament calls Babylon.

And in that moment, he took the guilt of the world on his shoulders. Why? Well, it's as we read in Romans 3 earlier in our service. He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

[ 24 : 01 ] So that all those who have faith in him, seeing that we are guilty, that we contribute to the mess, that there is mess in our hearts, faith in this mess is knowing that God is just in Jesus.

Knowing that justice has been satisfied in Jesus and knowing that we have been justified in Jesus. And that is a surprising justice.

As Paul continues in Acts chapter 13, he quotes from Habakkuk. It's at the bottom there. I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe even if no one tells you.

This is the surprising justice of God, so surprising that the Jews that Paul is talking to here would hardly believe. And this is where we've got to start for faith in the mess.

It's not a complete answer, not yet, but it's a start. William Thomas, he's often known as Staffordshire Tom, was drunk, as usual.

[ 25 : 10 ] He was sat in his normal seat in the working men's club in Aberavon in the Welsh Valleys or South Wales, and even the other regulars had learned to avoid him because it was his habit to complain.

He'd spent a lifetime in the mines on low wages, awful conditions. He was well acquainted with injustice. And when he got drunk, he was very quick to share his opinions about the mess of life, about the mess of the world around him.

And so as you might imagine, he sat there feeling lonely, hopeless, and depressed, staring into his pint. And there were lots of little groups, just threes and fours at the tables around him, chatting

away, and he couldn't help but overhear one conversation.

He caught the words preacher and church, and he was just about ready to switch off when he heard this sentence. Yes, the man said no one was hopeless.

He said there was hope for everybody. Bill's mouth fell open, his eyes bulged wide. He thought to himself, if there's hope for everybody, then there's hope for me.

[ 26 : 22 ] And he went to that church and he discovered hope in the faith of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ. And so let me take you back to that smallish boat in the storm.

Whatever your instinct, whether you get to work or bury your head, Habakkuk would encourage us, knowing who God is, knowing that he is a God of justice, he would encourage us to ask honestly, how long?

But he would also encourage us to see God's promise, a promise of surprising justice. It might and it should leave us with questions about ultimate and eternal justice.

We'll come to that next week. But for now, see the surprising justice of the cross. Let's start there, acknowledging that even in this mess, acknowledging together that we desperately need the hope of this faith.

Friends, in all of the mess of the world, in all of the mess that we have caused, in the mess of our own hearts, there is hope. Hope in the faith of the gospel, hope in Jesus.

[ 27 : 29 ] Even in all our questions, let's start there. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you this evening and we cry out with Habakkuk.

How long? We look at the injustice of the world we live in and we ask, Lord, that your justice would be done. And in the meantime, Lord, would you comfort us in this mess?

Would you be with us by your Spirit? And as we consider the ways that we have, the ways that we do contribute to injustice, Lord, we thank you so much for what you've done in Jesus.

being both just and the justifier, that we might be justified. In Jesus' name, Amen.