

A Question of Tolerance

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Date: 11 September 2022

Preacher: Archie Winnington-Ingram

[0 : 00] We've obviously got quite a lot to get through this evening. It would be great as ever if you keep that open in front of you. We're going to spend a lot of time in bits of it, scoot over other bits, but hopefully we'll get to the end in not too long.

Let me pray. We all need God's help this evening. Heavenly Father, I pray that you would give us eyes to see, ears to hear, the truth of your promise in your word this evening.

Help us, each of us, to trust in you, to have faith in you. Be with us by your Holy Spirit, we pray. In Jesus' name.

Amen. And last week, we began by imagining ourselves, if you remember, in the English Channel. It was 1939. 1939, we were on our way to war in France, but there was a big storm.

We were in a small boat. There was a big storm. And really, that was just a picture of the mess, a picture of the mess of life, the mess of the world around us, and being really honest with ourselves, the mess of our own lives, the mess in our own hearts.

[1 : 19] And this week, I want you to imagine, I guess, quite a similar picture. It's six years on, still World War II, 1945. It's D-Day. This time, your crossing to France was relatively smooth, but now, you can imagine yourself, you've come off the boat, and you're wading through the sort of waist-deep sea.

The waves are starting to feel more intense, but that is nothing compared to the gunfire all around you, the shells dropping, the whistles, the screams.

It's a mess. Last week, as we thought about the mess of the storm in our little boat on that very first crossing to France, well, if we're honest, the truth is that in life, mess is not reduced to a single moment.

Life just seems to get messier all the time, doesn't it? Injustice gets sharper. Trauma gets increasingly painful. And on this side of the cross, we continue to ask, where is God in all of this mess?

How are we supposed to have faith in the mess? Just a reminder of where we were last week in terms of the history of Habakkuk.

[2 : 42] Habakkuk is a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom, Israel, has been conquered 100 years before. They've been carried off into exile. And in the south, things have been getting increasingly evil.

For that 100 years, bad king after bad king. Habakkuk probably experienced something of a revival under the good king, Josiah. But now, under Josiah's son, Jehoiakim, there is a return to evil days. And so last week, in that context, Habakkuk cried out to God. He was, if you like, a faithful prophet in amongst the mess all around him. And he cries out, knowing God to be a God of justice, he cries out a super honest question.

How long? How long until you come and do something about the injustice that is going on amongst your people, God? And we saw last week that God responded with this promise of surprising justice.

God said, I'm going to raise up the Babylonians to bring that justice. The Babylonians, the violent and evil empire next door. Which obviously begs the question, and we'll see this evening, the question that Habakkuk asks, how can you let the guilty people of Babylon get away with the judgment of your people?

[4 : 05] Last week, we thought about the surprising justice of the cross, where the victory, the victory over sin and death really was won. And yet, living on this side of the cross, we still ask that question, don't we?

What are you going to do about all the guilty people? It's now a week or so after D-Day. The war on the beaches was won, but it definitely isn't over.

In fact, you're still fighting battles. Some of your friends probably won't make it. It's definitely still a mess. The world sometimes feels a bit like that, I think.

For the Christian, we know, we're so often told, aren't we, Jesus is victorious. The victory is won. Justice has been achieved.

If you're here this evening and you don't know Jesus, that is the message. Jesus is the one who brings justice. That his death on the cross is what did it, where he defeated evil, where he cried, it is finished.

[5 : 14] He rose again. He defeated death. That's the message. It's the big justice moment. And yet we look around today, 2,000 years later, and the world is still a mess.

We thought last week about how we contribute to that mess. About how faith in Jesus, faith in that big justice moment, is so important for us.

Because it was a just God making a way to justify his people, like we read in Romans chapter 3 just now. Clothing them in his righteousness, removing their guilt, those who have faith in him.

But really, that's got to just be a start. Because ultimately, just like Habakkuk, on this side of that problem, on this side of that promise, sorry, we are left with questions.

And so again, this week, we're going to ask them with Habakkuk, we're going to ask an honest question. And this time, we will see the promise.

[6 : 16] The promise from God is of complete justice. Let's begin. Let's begin with this honest question. Habakkuk begins, a bit like last week, actually, with an acknowledgement of who God is.

You see in verse 12, have a look at verse 12 in your Bible. Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, you will never die. See the titles that Habakkuk uses to address God here.

Again, he uses Lord in capital letters like that. We saw last week that's Yahweh. It's the word used to speak specifically of the God of Israel. It's the name that God revealed to Moses.

It really just essentially means the one who was, who is, and who forever will be. And so comes the appropriate question of verse 12, are you not from everlasting?

It's who you've told us you are. This is who you are. And you are my Holy One. My Holy One.

Habakkuk actually does something incredibly profound here.

[7 : 20] Because not only does he describe God as holy, which is to say so utterly perfect that he is quite unlike anything in the created world. In fact, his holiness is so complete that to be unholy in his presence is impossible.

And yet, he is mine, Habakkuk says. It is incredibly profound that the God of Israel is both holy and personal to his people.

And it is because of that, that Habakkuk can confidently say, still in verse 12, actually the translation in the NIV I don't think is as good here. You might have a footnote, but in the ESV it's we will, we will never die.

Habakkuk's theology is really good. He knows who God is, that he is eternal and holy. But he also knows that those who are his will live forever with him.

His theology is really good. And not only does he know God, he also accepts that God's surprising promise of justice that we heard last week in chapter 1 is true.

[8 : 33] He says, You, Lord, have appointed them to execute judgment. You, my rock, have ordained them to punish. Using that other title for God, my rock, in other words, the place I go to seek refuge.

You send the Babylonians to do justice in this place and I will flee to you, my strong foundation. He knows who this God is and he accepts that this is what he said he'll do.

This is what faith looks like in the mess. He's trusting that D-Day really was the victory. And as we keep reading, Habakkuk continues to illustrate really good theology.

See, in verse 13, he knows what God is like. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrongdoing. He's just saying you are so holy.

And so he asks his honest question. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

[9 : 44] Got to say that's a good question, isn't it? It's really the question we were left with last week. As God says he's going to raise up the Babylonians to bring his justice.

But then in verse 11 he describes them as guilty. In chapter 1, verse 11, the Babylonians are guilty. If God is too pure to look on evil, if he cannot tolerate wrongdoing, how can he possibly allow them to get away with it?

Aren't we asking that question? Don't we ask it today? And if we stick with the World War II theme, it's true that Joseph Stalin died in his own bed, the man responsible for more deaths in the deadliest century in human history than any other, and he died in his own bed, comfortable, at home.

He never faced the justice of a human court. How can we say that the cross brings justice? How could God possibly have allowed him to get away with it?

Maybe that's a question that you have. I think it's really got to be a question that we're all asking. How can this God, knowing what this God is like, how can he possibly allow such evil?

[10:59] I guess for some of us in the room, this might be a really deeply personal question. If you've been betrayed or abused or wronged, if you've faced significant discrimination, if you've just experienced the sharp end of the messy world that we live in, I am sure you're asking this question with Habakkuk, how can they possibly have been allowed to get away with it?

I'm not going to promise that you'll come away this evening with an absolutely satisfying answer to that question, but stay tuned because there is hope, there is comfort. Before we get there, see in verse 14, Habakkuk begins to lay out the charge against Babylon.

Here he's actually speaking of the nations that Babylon are going to conquer. You have made the people or you have made mankind like the fish in the sea, like the sea creatures that have no ruler. I think maybe especially he's thinking of his own nation, Judah, with such a useless and evil king at home. It's as though the people have no ruler at all. Their wickedness, their violence are left to run wild.

And then in verse 15, Habakkuk says, this is what the Babylonians are like. It's just as you say, God, this is what's coming. If we are the fish, then they come with their hooks and their nets and their dragnets to carry us off into exile.

[12:30] Just like we've seen happen to our brothers in the north. It's a stark image. It's also a real image. There are actually drawings of the Babylonian empire carrying off captives in nets like fishing nets and dragging people with hooks through their noses and their cheeks.

These really are their tools of war. And here's the issue for Habakkuk in verse 16. Therefore, he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet.

These people that you are raising up, God, they want nothing to do with you. In fact, they'd rather worship their tools of war. They turn their military power into their gods.

And in doing so, in the rest of verse 16, they're able to live in luxury. They're able to enjoy the choicest food. They are utterly evil and yet materially prosperous.

I think it's worth pausing for a second here and just looking in the mirror together. Confessing that despite the prosperous years that our nation may have enjoyed and experienced, there are ways that we have contributed and continue to contribute to injustice in this world.

[13:45] And even more than nationally, more just individually in our relative prosperity, even as we think about the places where we buy things from, we've got to ask, are the producers, the farmers, the creatives, are they getting paid fairly for the goods that we use?

Are the people making our clothes being treated with justice? As we look in the mirror, as we ask these questions, I think it just becomes increasingly obvious, doesn't it?

Doesn't it become increasingly obvious that there are ways that we contribute to the injustice of this world, maybe even without thinking about it? But also, as like Habakkuk, we look out of the window, again, this ought to be a question that we have today, the injustice in the world.

I'm sure that as he rests his head on his pillow tonight, Vladimir Putin will have the nicest silk sheets, the very best pillow. It remains true that those who seem to cause the most injustice in this world are also very often those living the most luxurious lives.

And so we ask, along with Habakkuk in verse 17, is he, is the Babylonian to keep on emptying his net and destroying nations without mercy? That's the question, isn't it?

[15:11] It's very similar to the question of chapter one. How long are you going to let this persist? In chapter one, it was how long will you let the injustice at home persist? And now the question becomes universal.

How long are you going to let injustice in this world continue? And so with Habakkuk in verse one of chapter two, I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts.

I will look to see what he will say to me and what answer I am to give to this complaint. In other words, I will wait. I've offered my honest question and now I will wait.

Imagine again being in the army, D-Day has happened and every day, what are you doing? You're waiting for the announcement. War is over. It is finished.

That's what Habakkuk is waiting for, for it to be done. Justice, complete justice to be done. And just before we move on to that promise, let's just learn from this honest question as we look at it as a whole.

[16:17] See how Habakkuk asks it. He doesn't doubt who God is. He doesn't deny who God has revealed himself to be. And so would we, as best as we know how, speak to God as he has revealed himself to us in his word.

As both the everlasting God of judgment and also as my God, our God, the personal God. That is faith in the mess.

When we pray, how often we fall into one of these traps. either seeing God as so distant, so holy, so other, so beyond us that in our reverence we fail to enjoy relationship with him.

Friends, we can pray with Habakkuk, my God, and know that he is with us. We thought about that with Ray this morning for those of you who are here. And that's because of what Christ has done for us.

Though he is utterly holy and totally beyond us, he is nevertheless our friend. But on the other side of that coin there is another trap, isn't there, where we pray to God as though he is not holy, as though he is not eternal, as though he were nothing but our best friend who does not want us to change, who is not looking for repentance and faith.

[17:44] We have got to see that our God is both way bigger than we could possibly imagine and way more familiar than we could possibly hope. Notice too how Habakkuk humbly and honestly asks his question and then waits.

He waits for God to speak. Nowhere in the Bible does it tell us not to ask our questions. The more you ask questions of God, the more your faith will grow.

But as we go to God with our questions, we have to be prepared for him to speak. I'm not talking about an audible voice.

It might not even mean a supernatural sense of clarity revealed out of nowhere. And yet God has spoken and he does speak through his word today.

And so as we pray, as we approach God with our honest questions, especially about justice this evening, will we be prepared to patiently study his word and hear what he has to say to us?

[18:55] Indeed, we see here in Habakkuk how God would respond to exactly this question. Last week with a surprising promise of justice, this week we see a complete promise, complete justice.

See in verse 2 as the Lord replies, write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. God is saying that these words that I'm speaking are meant to be permanent, written down, they're to be shared, they are for all to hear.

And at this point I think we've got to understand this is why this book was written because this complete promise, it doesn't just apply to Habakkuk's question about Judah, it doesn't just apply to Babylon, it doesn't just apply to the 7th century BC, something much bigger is happening here because God's word speaks today.

Indeed as we read on in verse 3, for the revelation awaits an appointed time, it speaks of the end and will not prove false.

In other words this complete justice, it is ultimately a justice that will not come until the very end of the world. When the curtains are closed and the show is over, when the message comes over the wireless, the war in Europe is over.

[20:23] It may seem slow in the coming. Remember Habakkuk prays in chapter 1, how long? But God responds here still in verse 3, though it linger, wait for it, it will certainly come and will not delay.

It may feel as though it's never going to come, but a thousand years is like a day for the eternal Lord of the universe. And the promise here is that it will come and that when it does, it will be swift.

But we have to ask what exactly will that justice look like? What does God's justice actually do?

Well read on with me. In verses 4 and 5 we get another picture of the Babylonian from God here.

He describes the Babylonian as puffed up, arrogant, as greedy as the grave. He gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples. It is primarily a picture of the Babylonian.

But as we dig into these verses, isn't this really just a picture of humanity? Humanity whose desires are not upright, who is never at rest, never satisfied.

[21 : 42] In other words, a humanity that lives as though God does not exist. And so indulging all our own desires and yet in doing so never finding rest for our souls, never finding true satisfaction.

The picture here is of a people who are utterly self-reliant and self-indulgent. People who are, at the beginning of verse 4, enemies of God.

And so what will God's justice do? Well, before we get there, have a look at this wonderful promise. Sorry, I'll go back.

There's this but at the end of verse 4. It's one of my favorite buts in the Bible. But the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.

There is another way. The promise is that we do not need to be self-reliant. That we can instead rely on God, trust him, be faithful to him and be found to be righteous in him.

[22 : 49] This is such an important concept for the Christian gospel. It's picked up by writers in the New Testament. They say the righteous shall live by faith. And it's really what we saw last week.

That is the surprising promise as we look to Jesus who lived a perfectly righteous life in our place, who took the justice of the world on his shoulders so that by faith his righteousness might be freely given to us.

If you're here and you don't know Jesus, that is the message. It's right at the heart of what we believe as Christians. And so it's in the context of that promise that we read the woes that follow. If you scan your eyes over the rest of chapter 2, we're going to speed up quite a lot here, but that's what we get.

Five woes. If you see that repeated refrain in the rest of chapter 2 at the beginning of each paragraph and then again at the beginning of verse 19, woe to him.

[23 : 55] In other words, judgment is coming to him. We don't have time to unpack each of these in detail, but see what God's justice looks like.

That's the question we want to answer. Track with me. The first is there in verses 6 and 7. He piles up stolen goods. God says he has taken things that don't belong to him.

It's theft. And then the judgment comes in verse 8. The peoples who are left will plunder you. The second is similar. It's empire building through injustice.

See in verse 9, he builds his house by unjust gain, setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin. He's amassing wealth.

The picture here, it's like he's a killer magpie, right? Not just pinching the shiny necklace and carrying it off to the safety of his nest, but also pecking the wearer to death. death. And the judgment for the Babylonian is in verse 10.

[24 : 57] It's shame for his house and ultimately death coming to him himself. The third woe begins to focus more sharply on violence.

See in verse 12, it is the bloodshed of empire building. And so comes the judgment in verse 13. As they bring destruction, so will they be destroyed.

They will be fuel for the fire. And then the image in the fourth woe, I think, becomes much more personal. The charge here, degrading their enemies.

See in verse 15, it's like an ancient date rape drug. He gets them drunk and gazes upon their nakedness. Terrific abuse, that.

And the judgment in verse 16, he will be filled with shame. It is his turn to be filled with wine and exposed. And the fifth and final woe, this is the climax of it all, idolatry.

[25 : 58] Putting man-made things, images and carvings, putting them in the place of God and saying to them, come to life, which of course they can't. The Lord, on the other hand, in verse 20, he is in his holy temple.

Be silent before him. Why? For he does have life, he will speak, and his judgment will come. So these are the five woes proclaimed against Babylon.

As we read them, what does that justice look like? What does God's justice do? Well, two key things for us. Firstly, notice how God's justice is just.

The punishment fits the crime. As the Babylonian plunders, so will he be plundered. As he builds a house, his house will be put to shame.

As he brings destruction, he will be destroyed. As he shames his enemies, he will be shamed. And ultimately, as he glorifies idols, God will be seen to be glorious.

[27 : 01] God's justice is just. Notice in that that it's not the one who has been wronged who executes that justice. God is the judge and he brings justice himself by his own means.

God's justice is just. Secondly, God's complete justice is ultimately eternal. See back in verse 3, way back in verse 3, we saw it speaks of the end.

This is not just a promise to Habakkuk that Babylon would not be spared God's judgment. Take it, that's why it is to be written down. And so we see in verse 14 that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

This is an image of God's glory in saving his people, bringing justice to the Babylonians so that through it and through his people the whole world might know him. But the final fulfillment of that promise, it is ultimately an eternal promise.

promise. It is a promise that is made good upon Jesus' return. As he paid the price for that justice to be done on the cross, as he proved that he had done so as he rose again, and he promised that he would ultimately return to carry out that justice and completion.

[28 : 26] Why? So that the whole earth might be filled with his glory. For us, there is immense comfort in this, as well as holy fear.

Comfort, because we can know that every injustice will be dealt with. That really is huge. But if God's justice is just, then every single injustice of human history, every murder, every rape, every war crime, every theft, every lie, whether they are dealt with humanly or not, whether they are dealt with on this side of eternity or not, God's justice is just.

That means that Stalin did not get away with it, not really. That means that any injustice that you have faced, if there is a specific person or a group of people that have wronged you, they have not and they will not get away with it.

There is comfort here, but I think there also ought to be a holy fear. For if we're honest, we know, don't we, that there are things that we have done, contributions to injustice that we have not paid for, that we could never pay for.

And so if God's justice is just, then we too must face it. And this is the wonderful good news of the Christian gospel.

[30 : 08] We know that if we will be found in Christ, if we would trust in him, if we would have faith in him, then on that final day, we might be spared his justice, not because he is not just, but because for those who trust in him, his justice has been done on the cross.

And for us, this is a wonderful truth. For in it, there is a forever hope, not simply that we, though guilty, might be justified, but that we might live forever in a new and perfect world, world filled with the glorious presence of the Lord, a world where we know him perfectly.

And friends, knowing that today changes everything. It changes our desire to tell people about Jesus. If there really is no other way to this wonderful eternity, do we not want to point people to him?

change is how we use our money. With our eyes fixed on eternity, material things just pale in comparison, changes how we spend our time.

It changes how we worry about things in this world. It is the real and only secret to true and lasting contentment and satisfaction in this life. The forever hope of complete, eternal justice.

[31 : 40] faith in the mess. Let me take you back just as we finish to World War II, to that strange in-between. D-Day has happened.

You can look back at D-Day and say that the victory is sure, despite the mess all around you. But you can look forward to waiting patiently for the war to be over.

So too in life, as we look back at the surprising justice of the cross, we know that victory has been secured. And though life feels like a real mess today, and though we like Habakkuk wait patiently in the watchtower, God's promise is of complete justice.

And in Christ we wait, looking to an eternity with a sure hope in him. This is faith in the mess.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the surprising justice of the cross.

[32 : 55] Lord, we confess that we deserve your justice. And so we thank you very much for Jesus.

We thank you for the complete promise of eternal justice. Pray that you would apply that promise to our hearts by your spirit this evening.

allow us to be comforted by it, to find hope in it. Would you help us to persevere, to have faith even in the mess?

In Jesus' name. Amen.