

The Covenantal God in the Presence of Evil

By [Tom J. Nettles](#)

Habakkuk probably was written in close proximity to the time that Assyria was replaced by Babylon as a world power, at least in that region. Assyria had overwhelmed Israel, the Northern Kingdom, in 722 BC, and Babylon crushed Assyria around 600. In 586 Babylon would take Judah and Jerusalem into exile giving rise to Ezekiel's prophecy, the eventual narratives of Ezra and Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, and the prophetic work of Haggai (during the time of Darius) and at virtually the same time, Zechariah. Habakkuk, therefore, precedes all this and sets the stage for a theological perplexity.

His incredulous narrative forces the question, "How does God, as a covenant keeping God, nevertheless demonstrate his strategic sovereignty over evil, rapacious, and uncovenanted peoples to manifest his own holiness, righteousness, and, yes, faithfulness to his purpose for the people that he intends to redeem?" This struggle of Habakkuk, if taken seriously by the people about to be overwhelmed by Babylon, should have served as a key for the believing exiles to give them a persevering faith as they heard, "Where is your God?" They were sustained when they asked "Why are you cast down oh my soul?" and could respond to their own question, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Psalm 42: 5, 11). Then, upon restoration, the former exiles could proclaim, "Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and praise is becoming. The Lord builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147: 1-3).

This whole scene of spiritual perplexity comes as God answers Habakkuk's question, "Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness?" (Habakkuk 1:3). The answer comes as an oracular vision from God (1). We see the two main aspects of prophecy in this oracle that God gave to Habakkuk.

First, Habakkuk is aware of the moral turpitude that has engulfed the people and cries to God for some way of correcting this. By Habakkuk's lamentation, we see the prophet as one that denounces moral evil and seeks to prompt the people to faithful conformity to God's covenant. He has cried for help in light of the perversity of the people and their continual and uncorrectable violation of justice (4). These are the people who have the law of God as a revelation of perfect justice and righteousness. Should they follow its practical outworking in society, they would be stable, just, compassionate, honest, and safe. Instead Habakkuk observed violence, iniquity, wickedness, strife, contention, lawlessness and

injustice even in the courts. Those few who are righteous, who take God's revealed truth as a light to their path and a lamp to their feet are bullied and pressed down by the wicked. Justice is perverted.

Viewing these things has prompted the prophet to cry to God for action and correction, and yet no intervention has come, no discipline of the transgressors; they still have the upper hand and have such power that they dominate the culture. Habakkuk has called for help, and God has not heard.

Second, in this moment of high insoluble despair, God answers. Habakkuk receives a word and a vision of the future concerning how God will deal with the people. He does this to demonstrate his own righteous character and to develop long-term his covenantal purpose. Charles Spurgeon, following the biblical insight of Jonathan Edwards, in preaching on "Divine Destruction and Protection," pointed to God's motive in his actions of destructive judgments and redeeming mercies. He posed a question similar to Habakkuk's: "What must that [God's] motive have been?" He answered, "He creates that he may display his own perfections. He does beget, as it were, creatures after his own image that he may live in them; that he may manifest to others that joy, the pleasure, the satisfaction, which he so intensely feels in himself."

For a joy that approaches the fullness that a creature should have in the Creator, the contrast between dependency and self-sufficient sovereignty must be absolute. No remnant of autonomy must remain. The dependency must be total. Not only does the creature attribute his existence and his well-being to his Creator and Lawgiver, but the contrast must be more profound. For the utter perfection of God to be seen and for the dependent being to feel and know the immutable fullness of God's self-satisfaction, his dependence must transcend the reality of absolute dependence for physical existence. The character of God, infinitely rich in mercy, grace, and wisdom shows itself only in the presence of absolute moral culpability and susceptibility to eternal judgment and misery. A sense of urgent and absolute gratitude must be felt in the spirit of man, in the sense of gaining from God what had been forfeited by sin. Not only as a creature, but as an aggressive destroyer of the moral image of the divine we must be able to confess, "Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (James 1:18 NKJV).

Habakkuk saw a vision, though it took a torturous path, that was designed to magnify the wisdom, holiness, and mercy of God. We must sense how deep spiritual despair can be in order to grasp how gracious and beautiful redemption is. Habakkuk will learn.

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