

**Introduction:**

- A. Illus.: Have you followed the story in the news about **Pastor Corey Brooks** in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago? It's a very tough place. While crime has been declining in most of the city murders were up 40% there last year. It's "a hotbed of gang violence." And Pastor Brooks, who serves New Beginnings Church there, couldn't take it anymore. Back in mid-November a 17-year-old boy was killed, a victim of gang violence. As mourners filed into New Beginnings Church to see the casket, a gun fight broke out outside. Pastor Brooks was devastated because he had promised the boy's parents that the memorial to their son would be peaceful.

After that funeral, Pastor Brooks had an idea. There is a vacant motel across the street from his church that had become a drug den and a hangout for prostitutes. He decided to convert that property into a community center for the kids in the community. But it will cost \$450,000 just to buy and demolish that old building.

In order to raise awareness and money, Pastor Brooks decided to camp up there on the roof of that building till the money is raised. As long as it takes. On the roof of a building during a Chicago winter. So far, they've received \$215,000. But despite his vow to stay up there, the pastor has had to come down off the roof twice. Once on Dec. 4 to comfort the mother of a 16-year-old boy who had been shot to death, and then again this week for the funeral of Deontae Malone, another teenaged shooting victim.

- B. I cannot imagine what living in that neighborhood must be like. I admire what that pastor is doing! But someone—even Pastor Brooks—might well ask, "Why doesn't God do something!?" Christian people are pleading with God to save their neighborhood. So why does this go on? Sadly, that question has been around for a long time!

- C. About 625 years before Christ a prophet named Habakkuk asked this very thing. We know nothing about this man except that he was part of the Jewish community in and around Jerusalem in a time when society was falling into chaos. **Turn in your Bibles to Hab. 1 (p.698).** Most of the prophetic books are sermons preached to rebellious people, but this is a back-and-forth between Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk cries out, asking God how he can let these wicked people of Israel get away with their sin. God replies with a mind-bending answer. Habakkuk says, basically, “*You’re going to do **what?!?***” God explains, more or less. And finally Habakkuk prays a moving and faith-filled prayer. These three chapters will be our spiritual dwelling place for the next month.
- D. Listen again to **vv.1-4...** What tormented Habakkuk was not only the violence and injustice swallowing up his people, but that these were God’s people—both perpetrators and victims. This was happening among God’s chosen people. God’s name was on the line. Yet God did nothing to stop it, no matter how much Habakkuk and others prayed. *Nothing changed, except for the worse.* Other prophets, like Jeremiah, had hammered away on “the iron hearts of sin.” “*Repent or else God will judge!*” Habakkuk’s complaint to God was that their “*or else*” seems to have been an empty threat. God hadn’t stopped the wicked. If God’s own oppressed people—oppressed by their very kinsman—cannot get relief from the God they serve, then what hope is there? **What is God good for?**
- E. This tortured man of God is a gift to us, “*a most welcome [traveling] companion,*” as Eugene Peterson put it. Not so much for his answers as his questions. Not for his sermons, but for his prayers. To begin with, he models this:

I. WHEN “THE WICKED HEM IN THE RIGHTEOUS” GODLY PEOPLE POUND ON GOD’S DOOR (1:2-4)

A. Any society is doomed when the powerful are pitiless and no one listens to the laws of righteousness. Like Pastor Brooks, Habakkuk could put names behind these terrible words. *Violence* carried pictures of people he knew what had been beaten and killed. *Injustice* had names of people conned out of their meager bread, of corrupt judges and officials with greasy palms, of criminals brazenly walking the streets. Habakkuk could picture the *destruction* in the helpless eyes of people who stood at the temple doors, of property and families and the tattered fabric of society. He could hear *strife and conflict*—the angry shouts, the snarled threats, the cries of the back-alley victims.

“Therefore,” he says in v.4, “the law is paralyzed.”

Protest that something was against the law and people would just laugh at you. *What are you going to do about it?!* The law—*God’s law*—had no teeth. It couldn’t be enforced. He’s not talking about arcane zoning laws here. He’s talking about killing, adultery, stealing, lying, abusing people, corruption. The wicked got away with murder, and everything else as well.

B. Look at that line in v.4, “The wicked hem in the righteous.” That’s where all this lawless violence and injustice leads. The righteous ones—the salt and light of society—are surrounded, and all their routes of escape, all their avenues of appeal, are cut off. The good guys do not always win. Sometimes—too often—they are crushed. Tragically, sometimes the wicked win. Here Habakkuk and the remnant of the righteous in Jerusalem, backed up against each other as men surrounded by wolves, look wildly for help from their fellow citizens and find no allies; to the law of God and find no recourse; and they cry out to God himself and God apparently does nothing.

- C. When violence and injustice become intolerable the godly pound on God's door. To call Habakkuk's words a prayer seems inadequate: **v.2-3...** This isn't a prayer so much as a protest. *God, if I can't tolerate this, how in the world can you?* There's no folded hands and bowed head here. Here is a prayer with pounding fists, with bloodshot tear-filled eyes, with voice breaking. *"How long will you let this go on!?!? Waiting is only making things worse. Innocent people are suffering and you don't do anything!"*

"How long?" is a prayer often heard at the throne of grace. In fact, God teaches us to pray this way in several psalms: *"My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?" "How long will you hide your face from me?" "How long will my enemy triumph over me? How long will the enemy mock you, O God?" "How long will the wicked be jubilant?" "How long must your servant wait?"* **It's safe to say that anyone who follows the Lord will face times when God is agonizingly slow to respond and the only thing we can do is keep pounding on his door.**

- D. This prayer makes me uneasy. Not because it is so aggressive, but because mine aren't. I'll bet Pastor Brooks prays this way. I bet believers trying to stop human trafficking or corrupt governments or persecution of the church pray this way. But I usually don't. How about you?

*O Lord, forgive us our numbing complacency and stir up in us this prophet-like passion for your righteousness and peace in violent, unjust places so that your good law prevails. Amen.*

## II. SOMETIMES GOD'S RESPONSE TO OUR POUNDING PRAYERS IS SHOCKING (1:5-11)

- A. What we pray for, of course, is rescue. *God, defeat the bad guys and bring relief to the faithful.* And God does that. There was the Exodus and the many miraculous defeats of Israel's enemies. There's an old spiritual that says, *"He*

*delivered Daniel from the lion's den, Jonah from the belly of the whale; The Hebrew children from the fiery furnace; Then why not every man?"* Surely that's what Pastor Brooks prays for. At the funeral this week, he pleaded with kids to change. He said, *"God is getting ready to do something in the inner cities of America. It's going to start on the South Side of Chicago in this church."* [Chicago Tribune, 1/5/12]. That's what he prays for, and that may well be what God does.

- B. But sometimes God's remedy for the oppression of the wicked—especially when the wicked are called by his name—is shocking. Vv.5-7... The Babylonians—from the region we know as Iraq—were an emerging regional force. Do you see what God is saying here: *"I am raising up the Babylonians."* They were *"ruthless and impetuous"* by themselves, but they would become a powerhouse with God's help. God gave them a leg up; the boost they needed. Go figure!

Look at them coming! Vv.8-11... God isn't telling Habakkuk about something in the distant future, the way we read Revelation. *"I'm going to do something in your days,"* God told the trembling prophet. *"You will see this with your own eyes."* It would be like God telling us, *"I'm giving the Iranian government the bomb, and they will use it on you in your lifetime."* Or if he came to Pastor Brooks there in his tent on top of that old motel and said, *"I'm sending Al Qaeda to clean up your community, and if you think what you've seen so far is bad, wait till you see what they do. If they want violence here, they'll get violence!"*

Habakkuk was stunned. This was all wrong. Again, he gives us a voice. Are you familiar with the punctuation mark called an interrobang? It's when you put question marks and exclamation points together. **Vv.12-13...**

### III. GO AHEAD AND ASK GOD: HOW CAN YOU POSSIBLY USE THE WICKED FOR GOOD (1:12-2:1)

- A. Did you see all the names for God there in **v.12**? *LORD, my God, my Holy One, my Rock*. It's as if Habakkuk is saying, "Look, you have names to live up to here!" **LORD**—Yahweh was God's covenant-making name. The implication is, *LORD, you married Israel so how can you use Babylon to destroy us?! My God* is Habakkuk saying, "I don't have any other gods to turn to, no other gods I trust. I'm counting on you." **My Holy One** says, "You cannot possibly do wrong. You are not like others. You must do what is righteous." **My Rock** is Habakkuk saying, "We depend on you to be strong and unchanging. If you cannot bear the weight of your people, we have no hope."
- B. What Habakkuk means in **v.13** is "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil" **without doing something about it**. So how could you possibly watch—let alone enable—something like this?! How can people like the Babylonians, with no sense of righteousness—wicked, ruthless, proud people—be agents of God's righteousness? How could God tolerate them? How can they even survive, let alone be God's instruments and the answer to our prayers?! What's next? Murderers from death row brought in to run a juvenile detention facility?! The Taliban brought in to clean up corruption in local government?!
- C. "I'll tell you what that's like, God," says Habakkuk, and he paints a picture in **vv.14-17**... "What is this?!" cries Habakkuk, "The survival of the fittest?! Are your people just bait in the food chain?! What's worse: when Babylon does pull us all into their nets like so much chum for the sharks, they're certainly not going to thank you, LORD! They're going to worship at the altar of their nets—of their own might and muscle. And you get nothing out of this. Where is the upside for you?! Who will praise you for your mercy or rejoice in your salvation?!"

## Conclusion

Having said his piece, Habakkuk says in **2:1**... And that is where we will wait, too, till next Sunday when we listen to God's reply. But let me leave you with a couple more things to think about:

The Babylonians came, of course, and crushed Judah and Jerusalem. The city was sacked in 586 BC, somewhere between 15 and 30 years after Habakkuk's prayer. The Jews were slaughtered and most of the survivors were marched off into exile. Jerusalem, temple and all, was destroyed.

**But with God, all is not as it seems.** Remember the Bible's very first prophecy in Gen. 3 where God tells the serpent about a coming son of woman: *He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*" Remember Isaiah's prophecy of the coming Messiah: *"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering... the punishment that brought us peace was upon him... by his wounds we are healed."* And sure enough, as Jesus hung on the cross he sounded much like Habakkuk: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* But the story wasn't finished. **God will live up to his name!**

Notice one other thing there in **2:1**... **Habakkuk doesn't walk out on God.** He is tormented and confused and desperate. But he waits to hear God. Standing up there on ramparts of Jerusalem he may see the dust rise from the hooves of Babylon's charging horses, but still he will wait to hear from God. One time when David was under fierce pressure, he wrote in Psalm 27,

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my light and my salvation—  
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life—  
of whom shall I be afraid? ...

<sup>7</sup> Hear my voice when I call, O LORD;  
be merciful to me and answer me.

<sup>8</sup> My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"  
Your face, LORD, I will seek.

<sup>9</sup> Do not hide your face from me,

do not turn your servant away in anger;  
you have been my helper.  
Do not reject me or forsake me,  
O God my Savior....

13 I am still confident of this:  
I will see the goodness of the LORD  
in the land of the living.

14 Wait for the LORD;  
be strong and take heart  
and wait for the LORD.

I suspect that Pastor Brooks, up there on that roof, has prayed  
that prayer, too.