

Why Does God Allow Evil?

By David Feddes

If you could ask God one question, what would it be? Different people might have different questions, but perhaps the most-asked question would be, “God, why do you tolerate wrong?” That problem troubles many of us. We can’t understand why God allows bad people to hurt others. We can’t see why God doesn’t immediately stop evil in its tracks. Why allow terrorists to destroy people who are minding their own business? Why allow war and violence? Why allow bad parents to harm children? Why allow crooks and street gangs to cause so much misery? If we had a chance to ask God a direct question, a lot of us would like to ask him why God allows so much evil, so much sin and pain.

It’s not wrong to ask God about this. When our minds are spinning and our hearts are breaking, God doesn’t stifle our questions. He understands our pain and perplexity. We can bring our questions to him. An entire book of the Bible, the book of Habakkuk, records a conversation between God and a man who wondered why God allows evil. The book opens with the prophet Habakkuk’s desperate inquiry:

How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? (1:2-3).

Sometimes we fear that God doesn’t hear our questions or that we won’t get a reply. But the truth is that God does hear our questions, and he does respond. Almost any question you or I can think of has been asked in the Bible, and God has answered.

Some of us have the idea that we have to be very polite, very flattering when we talk to God. But in the Bible we find godly people who protest to God, who cry out to him and question him. If we look at injustice and bloodshed without crying out to God and asking hard questions, it’s probably not because our faith is so strong. It’s more likely because we’re hardened to evil and to the suffering of other people, or maybe it’s because we don’t trust God enough to tell him our deepest struggles. Habakkuk was sensitive to suffering and injustice, and at the same time he trusted God enough to ask the Lord bluntly, “Why do you tolerate wrong?”

A Shocking Reply

It’s okay for us to ask God tough questions, as long as we don’t curse him or give up on him. But if we ask God questions, then we’d better brace ourselves for answers that aren’t tame or soothing or sugary, answers that startle and even overwhelm us.

In the book of Habakkuk, when the prophet questions God, the Lord’s initial answer is shocking. It makes the problem even more troubling. God says, “I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told” (1:5). What is God going to do? He’s going to punish Habakkuk’s nation of Judah for its evil—and he’s going to do it through a nation that is even worse than Judah! The prophet’s question first came up because he saw many evils committed by his own countrymen, and he wondered how God could let them get away with such things. Now God replies that evildoers in Judah won’t get away with it—sinful Judah and its people will soon be punished. But God is going to use people even more cruel and godless to do it. God says, “I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people... They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves... they all come bent on violence... guilty men, whose own strength is their god” (1:6-11).

What kind of answer is that? The nation of Judah may be bad, but Babylon is worse. The Babylonians follow a false religion, and they're downright nasty people. Whatever Judah's faults, at least some people are loyal to the true God and believe the Scriptures, and few have become as evil as the Babylonians. Judah is nowhere near as violent or degraded as Babylon. How can God allow less sinful people to fall prey to guilty, ruthless killers who worship their own violent power?

In our own setting, earnest Christians have sometimes wondered how God could allow so much sin, injustice, and unbelief to grow like cancer in countries with so many people who claim to believe in Jesus. We wonder how churches could get so unbiblical, how society could become so immoral, and why God would allow so much evil. But what if God stops allowing our evil? What if God decides to punish the evil by letting us be hurt by enemies who are even worse than we are? What if God allows cruel killers who have no regard for others' lives or for their own lives to launch horrendous attacks?

When disaster strikes, we may be tempted to think that nobody is in control, or that the forces of evil have ultimate power. But even the most shocking events do not take God by surprise. God says in the Bible, "I bring prosperity and I create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things" (Isaiah 45:7). "When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?" (Amos 3:6) That's hard to swallow, isn't it? When disaster comes, we turn to God to be soothed and comforted. We don't want to think that God somehow had a hand in the disaster. But whether we like it or not, whether we understand it or not, God says, "I create disaster."

Jesus once commented on two tragic disasters. In one case, some people were stabbed and killed in the very act of worshiping at their temple. In another, a tower collapsed and killed a number of people. Jesus did not single out individual victims for blame. He said those who died were no more sinful than anyone else. But he didn't say, "These things just happen for no reason, and don't try to learn any lesson from what happened. Instead, he said, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:5).

Each of us is given a limited time to repent. In that time, we must turn to Christ for salvation and bear good fruit by obeying God and doing his will. The Lord, in his mercy, may even extend the time. He may give still another chance. But at some point, time runs out. We run out of chances. If God doesn't find the fruit he requires, unrepentant nations are cut down and destroyed, and unrepentant persons are cut down and thrown into the fire of hell.

Those are hard words. When God is silent, it can be hard to trust him; but when God speaks, it can be even harder to trust him, especially if he speaks a message we'd rather not hear. The prophet Habakkuk knows the feeling. God told Habakkuk that his own sinful nation would suffer at the hands of invaders who were even more evil. The prophet can't fully understand God's ways, and he wants to press the question further.

Rock-Solid Certainties

Before he probes further into things he can't understand, however he first accepts the truth of what God says, and he declares what he knows for sure. Habakkuk says,

O Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die. O Lord, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish (1:12).

Here amid Habakkuk's questioning and confusion, he declares rock-solid certainties, things he knows for sure.

One sure thing is that God is LORD, Jehovah, the awesome name which means, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). Another sure thing is that the great I AM is everlasting and no particular events in history can change that. Another sure thing is that Habakkuk, and every Bible-believing Christian, can call this God “*my God*” and have a personal relationship with him that no terrors and no questions can destroy. Another sure thing is that “my God” is also “my *Holy One*.” No matter how much evil we see around us and within us, God remains holy and beyond any stain of evil in his own being. Another sure thing, says the prophet, is that “we will not die.” We—God’s people—will never be totally exterminated. The Lord is faithful, and he will always preserve at least a remnant to survive and to flourish anew under his blessing. A final sure thing is that God rules over even the worst people and most horrendous events. Events unfold only as the Lord has “ordained” and “appointed.” If God has appointed attackers to punish, it may be terrifying, but at least God is still in control, not the evildoers. For Habakkuk, these things are absolutely sure, whatever else may be perplexing.

When you and I have questions that puzzle us, or when we hear an answer from God that seems to hurt more than it helps, we need to do what Habakkuk does. We need to pause and say what we know for sure. When we feel like we’re sinking in a swamp of confusion, we need a foothold on something solid, something that’s clear even when other things are confusing and perplexing. We must stand on the rock-solid certainties of God’s everlasting deity, his love for his own, his holiness, his faithfulness to preserve his church from extinction, and his power, wisdom, and control of all things. Then we can bring our questions to God without being swallowed up in the quicksand of unbelief.

Habakkuk, having affirmed what he knows for sure, goes on to question God with even greater urgency: “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?” (1:13) How can a holy God address sin by allowing even greater sin? Habakkuk knows his own people are far from perfect, but their enemies are worse. How can God let the enemy attack? There’s no way Habakkuk, or any mere human, can figure it all out. The only thing he can do is wait and see how God responds. “I will stand at my watch,” says Habakkuk. “I will look to see what he will say to me” (2:1). Habakkuk’s method (which should be our method too) is to reaffirm what he knows for sure of God, to bring his questions, and then to leave the matter with God and see how he will respond.

God does indeed respond, and his response has such an impact that by the end of the book of Habakkuk, the prophet is able to say, “I will rejoice in the Lord” 3:18).

The Lord is in His Holy Temple

The Lord makes it absolutely clear that at some point all evil will be crushed and good will prevail. It may not happen right away, but it will surely happen, in God’s good time. “The revelation awaits an appointed time,” God tells Habakkuk. “Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay” (2:3). God may tolerate wrong for a time, for reasons of his own, but he will not tolerate evil forever. Evil cannot go unchallenged or unpunished; the Lord of heaven and earth will see to that.

The sins of a nation that has known God can be punished by the cruelty of worse people whose religion is horribly twisted. But in the end, those wicked people will themselves perish under God’s wrath. The ruthless Babylonians will meet their doom, and so will every nation and person, every aggressor and terrorist and criminal, who continues sinning against God and humanity. All their scheming and efforts will blow up in their own faces. God declares,

“Has not the Lord Almighty determined that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire, that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (2:13-14).

God leaves no doubt about the final outcome: evil will fail, good will prevail, and God’s glory will shine throughout the world.

Until that day comes, God says, “the righteous will live by his faith.” In fact, rather than *complain* that God tolerates wrong, the believer can *rejoice* that God tolerates wrong. Why does God tolerate bad things I see other people doing? Perhaps for the same reason he tolerates bad things *I* do. Only because God tolerates wrong for a time are any of us wrongdoers able to be saved. I can be righteous (right with God) only by faith in God’s mercy, not by depending on my own deeds, which are soiled by sin.

At times we complain about the evils of others, and we can’t help wondering why God doesn’t destroy them on the spot. But if God destroyed all sin on the spot and wiped every sinner from this planet, not one nation would survive. Not one person would survive. You would not survive. I would not survive. We have our own measuring stick to make ourselves look good and our own made-up religions to make ourselves feel in touch with the divine. “But,” thunders God in Habakkuk 2:20, “the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.” God doesn’t just say, “Let Babylonians and killers be silent.” God says, “Let all the earth—everybody—be silent before him.”

The Bible says that we “are all under sin... there is no one who does good, not even one... There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Scripture gives this grim verdict “so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God” (Romans 3:9-19). There’s a time to ask God questions about why he puts up with wrong, but there’s also a time to shut our mouths as unworthy sinners before him.

In awestruck silence we realize that we remain alive only because God—whose tolerance of sin we question—has mercifully tolerated my sin and yours. Let’s not fool ourselves. If God did not tolerate any sin for any period of time at all, you and I would be destroyed. “The Scriptures declare that the whole world is under sin” (Galatians 3:22), including you and me. “Death came to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). We are sinners who must all die, sooner or later. Some of us will die at the hands of other sinners who are worse in some ways than we are. It’s okay to cry out and ask why extremely evil people sometimes get the upper hand at the expense of those less evil. And it’s right for us to oppose killers and stop atrocities when we’re able to do so. But having said that, we also need to realize that all of us, no matter how we compare to each other, are dying sinners before God. Without his mercy, we’d all perish in hell forever.

Someone once asked me, “Why does God allow evil? Why doesn’t God squish Satan like a grape and destroy all evil?” Well, the time is coming when God will indeed crush Satan and destroy unrepentant sinners in hell. But in the meantime, as we ask why God doesn’t crush Satan and various human evildoers, we should also ask why God doesn’t crush you and me right now. After all, as Habakkuk put it, God’s “eyes are too pure to look on evil” (1:13), so his eyes are too pure to look on the evil that lurks inside me and sometimes comes out in my actions.

Why does God allow my evil? Why does God tolerate the wrongs I do? Because “the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Psalm 103:8). God’s love restrains his anger; his patience restrains his holy vengeance. The only way I can be right with God is to live by faith in his mercy, not by trusting my own virtue and claiming my own rights.

Living By Faith

God says, “The righteous will live by his faith” (2:4). What does it mean to live by faith? Well, let’s look at Habakkuk’s response of faith and see what our response of faith should be.

First, living by faith means believing God’s message. The Lord tells Habakkuk, “Write down the revelation and make it plain” (2:2). The prophet believes the message and writes it down. Faith humbly believes whatever God says. We have God’s complete message recorded in the Bible. Believe it!

Second, living by faith means revering God and being overwhelmed by his majesty. Habakkuk responds to God by saying, “I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord” (3:2). Faith doesn’t just agree with some facts. Faith stands in awe of God and his deeds.

Third, living by faith means depending on God’s mercy. You don’t have real, saving faith until you admit that you are a sinner and that you deserve God’s wrath and judgment. Habakkuk says to God, “In wrath remember mercy” (3:2). Jesus says that you’ll never get right with God by being better than sinners around you. Rather, Jesus says to pray, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). Jesus died on a cross to pay the penalty for sin so that those who seek God’s mercy may receive it. Trust God’s mercy, purchased by the blood of Jesus. That’s the only way to be justified before God and saved from hell.

Fourth, living by faith means counting on God’s power and victory. At first Habakkuk had questions about evildoers within his nation and wicked attackers from without, but after catching a glimpse of the Lord’s majesty, the prophet knows God will triumph. Habakkuk says, “His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth. His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hands, where his power went before him... He stood, and shook the earth; he looked, and made the nations tremble” (3:3). One glimpse of God’s glory makes all the powers of evil seem small and shaky.

If you’ve read Christian author J.R.R. Tolkien’s classic *The Lord of the Rings*, you may remember when Frodo and his friend Sam, two small hobbits, are in the heart of the realm of Sauron, the dark lord of evil. As they approach the goal of their mission on Mount Doom, they feel weak and weary. The power of evil seems huge, heavy and horrible; defeat seems sure. But just then, an opening appears in the clouds, and starlight shines through. “Like a shaft, clear and cold,” writes Tolkien, “the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.” Victory wasn’t yet in their grasp at that moment, but they knew that the ultimate victory of good over evil was absolutely sure. So Frodo and Sam went on to play their own part in it.

We sometimes fear that God tolerates evil because he can’t do much about it. But the fact is that God can afford to tolerate evil for a time simply because he’s not endangered by it. He doesn’t feel threatened. His power is too great to be conquered by evil; his holiness is too high to be corrupted by evil. God’s infinite power is as far beyond the reach of evil as the most distant stars are beyond the reach of vandalism. God is so strong and so unthreatened by evil that the Lord Jesus could even enter into death itself and emerge victorious. Jesus says, “Do not be afraid. I am the First, and I am the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead; and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 1:17-18). Faith counts on God’s victory.

Fifth, living by faith means waiting for God to judge in his own time. Habakkuk at first trembled at the horror of evil, but eventually he trembled more at God and his judgments, and he was willing to wait for God. He said, “I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the

nation invading us” (3:16). Babylon would eventually fall, as will every evil empire. Meanwhile, faith waits. The book of Revelation describes a vision of Christian martyrs in heaven, people killed for their faith:

They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed” (Revelation 6:9-11).

Part of waiting is suffering along with other sufferers in this broken world, knowing that the sufferings of God’s people are part of God’s patient plan to purify them and to keep extending his love to those who still have not repented and still need to put their faith in Christ.

Sixth, living by faith means rejoicing in God, even if there’s not much to rejoice about in our present circumstances. Habakkuk sees terrible times coming, but his joy comes from God, not from circumstances. He writes,

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights (3:17-19).

Can you echo the prophet’s joy? Can you say, “Though the stock market drops and the economy plunges, though hurricanes and tidal waves destroy, though aggressors maim and kill, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

It’s a comfort to glimpse the majesty of God in his holy temple, as Habakkuk did, but it’s also comforting to know him as God with us, born as a baby in a manger, killed as a criminal on a cross. We cry to God, “Why do you tolerate wrong?” Jesus cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus was forsaken by his Father only for a time. After Jesus died, he rose victorious to eternal glory. We have a Savior who suffered his Father’s rejection to pay the penalty of our sin, and we have a Savior who knows our sorrows and questions firsthand. Jesus promises that after suffering comes glory, after horror comes heaven for those who trust him.

“The righteous will live by faith” in Jesus Christ. The Lord is too great to be conquered by evil, too holy to be corrupted by evil, too patient to be hurried by evil, and too loving to crush all evildoers immediately rather than give time for more of them to be saved. Knowing such a Savior, faith sings, “I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

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