

Time of Grace Ministry
Life's Big Questions: Why Is Evil Unpunished?
Habakkuk 1:2,3; Isaiah 48:9; 2 Peter 3:9
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Pastor Mark Jeske

You know, when you come to be a believer and you come into faith in a God who's almighty, we trust in his protection; we know he's created us and that he'll be taking care of us. But I've got two great big ethical dilemmas. One is why does bad stuff happen? And if we're being protected, why does evil often make our lives so painful and hard? And the second dilemma is why do evildoers seem to get away with what they're doing? It's outrageous. If God is all-powerful, why does it seem as though they're getting away with it?

Pastor Jon Enter is going to lead us in a Bible study in the prophet Habakkuk to deal with that very difficult question: Why does it seem as though evil goes unpunished?

Pastor Jon Enter

So when was the last time that you read through the minor prophets at the end of the book of the Old Testament? The minor prophets are oftentimes looked over, passed by, because they're – well, they're minor, they're small, they're tiny. When you add up all those books, the chapters within those books of the minor prophets, there's 67 different chapters there. Just to put that into comparison, the book of Isaiah has 66 chapters. So the one book is almost the same size as these 12 books at the end of the Old Testament. And so, people pass them by but they're fantastically interesting. There's so much for God to teach us in our hearts and lives and we're going to look at two of those books for us today.

Probably, the most commonly known minor prophet would definitely be the minor prophet of Jonah. This is a story that little kids absolutely love; it finds its way into nursery tales, it finds its way into Sunday School classrooms. But when you really look at this account, the way we teach it to kids is kind of weird; it's kind of off. If you know the story of Jonah – so Jonah is told by God, hey, go to the Ninevites, this wicked, wicked people, and go tell them about my grace and Jonah doesn't want to. He says, "no" because he didn't think they deserved it; that they were so evil and so corrupt that he was afraid they might come to faith. He was afraid that they might turn around. He didn't want to give that message. He was afraid of their evil and so, Jonah, as you know, goes the wrong way – hops a boat, goes opposite direction. God will not put up with it, sends a massive storm upon them and if you know the account, what happens? The sailors chuck Jonah over the side of the boat and he's going down, sinking down. At the last possible moment, God sends the whale, the big fish. But the way we look at that, it's like a Precious Moment's version. You ever notice that? With the little kid's version, there's a little side cut-out of the whale, it's like a double-decker humpback whale and you see the cross section cut-out and Jonah sitting in there in his little lazy boy, he's got a side table, he's drinking iced tea, he's got the rug in front of him.

No! This is not what happened! I mean, to understand, he's being digested, people! That sounds awful and he's in there for how long? Three days? I'm guessing he didn't pack a Ziploc baggie of food. So now he's not eating for three days. I'm sure he didn't bring a couple of water bottles to hydrate himself so he isn't drinking for three days. He's being digested for three days. He isn't sleeping because if he tries to sleep, the water's going to drown him so he's not sleeping for three days. I mean, think about what is actually going on here, the punishment that is there. Then when you look at the Hebrew, we have the Precious Moment's version, the kid's version, that the whale comes gently up to the shoreline and yawns, opens its mouth, and out walks Jonah all happy and reprogrammed. If I have the Hebrew correct, it has the idea that the whale or big fish violently vomited Jonah on the shore. That's a fun story to tell kids!

So we have that story inside the minor prophets, right? Where someone crosses God and there's incredible punishment that is there. God acts, God reacts, and then we have the account that we're going to look at tonight. We're looking at Habakkuk. So if you want to open up the Bibles in front of you, a device in front of you or with you that you want to open up, to Habakkuk chapter one. Now we're just going to look at the first couple of verses here; I hope to inspire you and encourage you to dig further and read the three chapters of the book of Habakkuk moving forward.

So here we are, Habakkuk 1, we're going to do just verses two and three. So Habakkuk cries out: "How long, Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' I see Habakkuk pointing fingers and going, "Right there, God. There's the evil. Get him, God! You're a holy God, you're a righteous God, you can't stand sin, God. Violence is right there. Do something!" I know you can.

"Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?" That question that Habakkuk has there is the same question that you and I have as we look out and we see evil and brokenness in this world and we go, "God, why don't you act? Why don't you stop it? You've got the right, you've got the might. You've got the right, God. You're holy and righteous and created us to be holy and righteous. And when we break that, you can step in and you're the only one that can. You've got the right, God, to do it. You've got the might, God, to do it." And when you look at the Old Testament, God went Old Testament on a bunch of people. When you look at the story of the flood at the beginning of the book of Genesis that the world was only evil all the time and God pushes the reset button on the planet and everyone gets wiped out because of their sins and the rejection of God, with the exception of eight people. What do you see? You see God acting. You see judgment coming. As Noah pointed out – violence. Violence. Violence, but not for Habakkuk.

You look and the same things happen with the waters of the Red Sea as the Egyptian army, the evil Egyptian armies, pursuing the Israelites as God has freed them finally and God crashes those waters down upon them and there's judgement that is there. You see it with Jonah when he crosses God and God sends the whale in a not fun relocation program. God does this! So why doesn't he always do it? Why do the Christian people, like you, working hard, striving hard to live according to what God's word says, why do you get stepped on? Beat up? Passed over? Why does injustice have to happen to you again and again and again until we're like Habakkuk? God, "Violence! Do something!" God, violence saves! God, where are you?

Why do you let evil go unpunished? Because Habakkuk is a book that we don't know a lot about, I wanted to do a bit of research on it to kind of connect to you a little bit more with Habakkuk. And so, I remembered that a lot of the names of the Bible characters in the Old Testament, they have meaning or significance. For instance, Abraham means father of many and that's what Abraham became is descendants of many as the sand in the seashore. Jacob, his name translated means heel grabber; one who trips up and that was Jacob; he was a conniver, a deceiver. But then there's Habakkuk. I researched his name. Do you know what it means? It's untranslatable. So I'm looking at it and I'm like, "Great. Well, that didn't work. I failed." But the more I thought about it, I'm like wait, that's perfect because there's not something about Habakkuk's name specific about him; he's just like everyone of us going, "God, I don't get this sometimes. God, I don't even get you sometimes. And why you, a perfect, holy, righteous God would allow evil to flourish? And not just flourish, but get ahead of me and ahead of me and me get pushed back."

So I did more research after I found out Habakkuk's name means nothing and then I did some more research to find out when Habakkuk was thinking maybe there's a huge injustice that was going on at that time and I could connect it to our lives. But when I searched and researched and searched and researched on Habakkuk, he didn't date his book. None of them put an actual book date in there, but they named kings or battles and Habakkuk doesn't put any of that in there. And again, I was bummed out until I realized, "Wait, this is good!" Because you can't pinpoint in history when he's going to cry out violence so it's just like any time now.

And so you and I look out in our society and we go, "God, I don't get why you're not acting and reacting? God, I don't get why you allow violence to happen and man, there's a lot of violence." According to NPR, NationalPublicRadio.org, since 1980 there has been over 211,000 unsolved murders inside the U.S. Over 211,000! So if you're watching those detective dramas on TV – CSI Miami or whatever – and after a half hour they always get the perp, they get the guy, liars! It's just not happening. You see inside your workplace; if someone gets the promotion, someone gets the big raise because they lied, because they cheated, because they took credit for something they did not do, because they did something behind closed doors that God says only husbands and wives are supposed to do, and all of a sudden they move up the chain and what happens to you when you follow what God's word says? You cry out, "Violence, God! I don't get it."

Inside of our families, there's people jockeying for positions, especially when there's money involved and mom and dad died, now there's an inheritance, families can fracture and they break and there's violence and evil that is set all over the place and we see this constantly in our lives. It's all around us. There's paid off politicians. There's corrupt cops. There's embezzling pastors. There's deadbeat dads. There's drunk driving moms. There's lazy teachers. There's professional con artists and the list goes on and on and on. And we sit here and look at this and go, "God, do something!" You've got that right, you've got that might, so act! And he doesn't always do that and so we join with Habakkuk and say, "God, I don't understand. Why do you let evil go unpunished?"

One of the wisest men – actually, probably the wisest man to ever live on the planet – Solomon, who God gave incredible wisdom, we suspect that Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes and

at the beginning of Ecclesiastes, chapter one, it says, “What has been will be again. What has been done will be done again. There’s nothing new under the sun.” Solomon, almost a thousand years ago, saw the cycle of evil just repackaging itself in different ways and still being there. And so, we look at this and go, “Where are you, God?” And the devil whispers to you and says, “Where is your God? Maybe he’s not that powerful? Maybe he’s not that just. Maybe he’s not perfect. Because if God – perfect, and holy, and righteous as he is – can let sin go unpunished and let evil prosper, maybe there isn’t a God.” And if you can’t beat them, well, join them! How many times in our lives have we seen evil prospering and we go, “Well, I want part of that,” and we end up joining the crowd and going in because God’s not acting, God’s not reacting. And it’s been throughout time.

Asaph. Asaph wrote in the psalms – this is Psalm 82 – he cried out just as Habakkuk did: “How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked?” Asaph saw what you see. Habakkuk saw what you see. And so, we’re still left with that question then going, “God, I don’t get it. Why do you let evil go unpunished? Violence! Bring judgement.” Could you imagine if God did? Could you imagine if every time someone sinned, a lightning bolt just took someone out? Did you hear what happened to Carl? I heard Carl called in sick when he wasn’t sick. And when he went out golfing, boom! Could you imagine if that’s how God acted?

Friends, we thank God that he doesn’t always send a lightning bolt of destruction every single time we sin because there wouldn’t be a guy preaching and talking in front of you. There’d be no one sitting here right now. There’d be none of us left because when Adam and Eve broke the perfect planet that we have right now and fell into sin, God, who had the right and might, could have crushed them and booted them into oblivion and said, “Hey, the three of us had a good thing going before this. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we’re in good unity together; let’s just keep it us.” But God, your Lord, is a God of grace and a God of love. And so in his grace and in his love, he delays. And we go, “Well, that seems to contradict one another. If you’re a perfect God who can’t let sin go unpunished, why in the world would you – like can you even delay?” And God’s word says, “Yes.”

If you’re fast with your fingers and you’ve got your Bible in front of you or if you have your device, I’d really love for you to open up – because it’s pretty eye opening words – this is Isaiah 48; we’re going to land on verse nine. So again, it’s Isaiah 48:9. Right now we’re just going to do the first part of the verse and here it is: “For the sake of my name,” God’s talking here, “For the sake of my name, I delay my wrath.”

God says right there he does delay his wrath. And we go, “God, that’s not fair! Why would you let the evil go unpunished when it’s punishing me and beating me down? God, that’s not fair.” But if we go, “God, you’ve got to be fair,” well, that’s a pretty terrifying thing to ask of God because if God was truly fair, then the Garden of Eden, he doesn’t promise a Savior. If God is truly fair as we understand what fair is, you sin and then you are gone. If we cry out “violence” and God acted and react and we say, “God, it’s not fair if you don’t act like that,” well then there’s no Jesus. There’s no mercy of God’s incredible crosses, no reason for you to give up time to come into God’s house to learn about a God of grace because he wouldn’t be a God of grace if he didn’t delay.

So how does that work then? How does God delay and still be right and still be righteous and the answer is in the second half of that verse. I cut you off; let's go back. God says this: "For the sake of my name, I delay my wrath. And for my praise, I restrain it for you in order not to cut you off." God wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. God wants everyone to know the joy, the peace, that you and I have. And if God sent lightning bolt after lightning bolt any time we sinned, there'd be no one left to celebrate and be with him in glory. God delays so that he can bring peace. He can bring love. He can bring favor.

And so, when you and I get wronged by someone and we go, "God, I don't get this. Why? It seems like you're forgetting me." That's now what God's doing. God says, "In me, as you trust in me, I'm going to make you strong. I'm going to make you confident. I'm going to help you hold up through my word, through the peril and the problem that you're under right now. But it's not that I'm forgetting you, dear Christian. I'm remembering someone else who needs the peace that you have." God delays at times and for a reason, for a purpose, in order to draw someone back into him. Cause God could bring punishment every single time we sin. Maybe not the "kill you" punishment, but it would draw us into faith. Imagine if every single time that you broke the speed limit by one mile per hour your car broke down and it cost you \$500. Be honest, how many of you would have made it into church tonight? How many of you would be broken on the side of the road? "Argh, there's another \$500." Don't you think that would change how you drove? Would you stop breaking the speed limit? What if every single time you told a lie, a tooth fell out of your face. Do you think it would stop you from lying? Yeah, it would. But you'd be doing those things out of fear of God, terror of God; not of faith and faithfulness to your God. And so God, at times, delays his punishment for a purpose; to show you his mercy and to show you his grace.

In fact, it says it a little more clearer in 2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slow about its promise as some count slowness. But he's patient towards you; not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

Friends, we need to repent. We need to repent about those times when we get mad at other people and we want God's Old Testament justice to come down upon someone, to teach them a lesson when God is trying to draw them into a peace with him. We have to repent those times that we get angry at family members and loved ones and beat down on the closest ones around us as they are acting and reacting in ways that we think are violent and wishing evil upon them and we need to go to our God, the God of our grace and God of mercy, and thank our Lord that he does not treat us as our sins deserve. Or pay us according to our iniquities. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. Thank God that our God is a god that delays! Thank God that our God is a god of grace. Thank God that our God wants to give that grace to others but if they reject fully, those sins will be paid account, as they say, in judgment before God.

But friends, that's not where we want them to stand before God. We want them to stand before God in the here, in the now, to join us side by side, to repent to our Almighty and receive the beautiful blessing that God gives to those who trust in him: Grace. The forgiveness of Jesus that changes lives.

Friends, throughout your entire lives, you're going to have evil. There's going to be wickedness that happens around you and the devil's going to tempt you to think that God isn't loving and God isn't just and that God's forgotten you. No, he hasn't. He's remembering someone else. He's put you into their pathway in a unique way that you can witness to them and reach out to them about the peace and grace that God has given you that many more hearts might know the peace and love that we have in Christ. God hasn't forgotten you; he's remembering someone else to join you.

I don't know if you know who Bryan "Head" Welch is? He used to be the lead guitarist with the melt your face off heavy metal band known as Korn? When I talked to someone in my church one time, one guy's like, "Yeah, Korn!" I'm like, "Okay, we know who the Korn fan is in the group." Well, Brian "Head" Welch was doing everything that was against God. His music, if you've seen the lyrics of the band Korn, they're promoting what God says is evil and wrong and violence that is there and God, in a unique way, ended up bringing Brian "Head" Welch into faith. And he all of a sudden quit; he quit the band Korn, he quit all the money, he quit all the fame, he quit absolutely everything to make his life about his child and about his Lord. Now, I don't know the theology of Brian; I've never met him, I don't know that I will. But one thing I love is now that he loves God. If ever there was a man that God would bring violence and destruction on for leading so many people away from him, it would be him; it would be Brian. But God delayed to bring grace. And now the church that Brian happens to go to, there's Korn fans that go there just so they can meet Brian and then guess what he does? He witnesses to them about God's love and God's mercy and many more people are coming to know the same peace that you and I have in Christ. Why does God let evil go unpunished? Because God's a God of grace, a God of love, who wants more to know the peace that you have in Jesus.

This week, we're talking about the fight of our lives; the battle of our faith. It's a war that's waged inside of you. But long before you were brought to faith, there was a different war; a different battle that took place above. You see, the devil rebelled; he was a creative, perfect angel but he rebelled against God and with his evil angels, fought up in heaven against the archangel Michael and the good angels. And of course, Jesus and his good angels won; they always do. And Revelation 12 says that God cast the devil down from heaven to earth. Earth? Like here; where we live. God, that's where you decided to send the devil? Why would you do that? And you feel that; you feel the influence of evil of the devil around you.

Well, there's a couple reasons why God sent the devil here. One, heaven is only for those who are perfect, created perfect, or made perfect as you and I are by the mercy of Jesus. Also, God's judgment hall is in heaven; you don't want the devil there! The liar, the schemer. He got sent down so he can accuse you and say awful things about you but he can't have influence over your soul in heaven when it's on judgment before God. Instead, you have Jesus there! Your Savior. Your Redeemer. The one who loves you and has forgiven you.

But what about down here? The devil's among us and he's around us. God gives you words of peace and encouragement here about that situation in Revelation 20:2 and says this: "He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him." The devil's been bound! He's bound here. His influence can only go so far. He can't make you do anything; he can only tempt you.

When I was dating my wife, she warned me about this big massive dog that they had in their backyard named Buddha. And she said he's an angry dog and you've got to watch out for him but he's chained up so you're okay. So I get there to the house and I get out of my car, close the door, and I hear this "bark bark" of this dog. And I look in the backyard and sure enough, there's a dog chained up and as far as the chain can go, it's like death on this side. There's dirt and he chewed up the tree and the doghouse and then happy grass after that. You know, the entire time I dated my wife, Buddha, that dog, never bit me. Do you know why? I wasn't dumb enough to go near the thing! I stayed away. The devil is here among us but he's chained. He's bound up. You can only go so far to stay in the green pastures of Jesus' forgiveness, his mercy, his guidance for you in this life. You will be safe. May that give you comfort as you live in this world and know the devil's here but he's bound. He can only go so far. You are safe. You are safe in Jesus.

Pastor Mark Jeske

You know, I really found that message very comforting and inspiring; to encourage me to trust in God's power, to trust his wisdom, and most of all to trust his love. He knows what he's doing. Soon, we'll be home.

Would you like to pray with me for patience and strength in times of stress as we deal with the very real issues of evil in our lives?

Lord Jesus, we come to you today with a prayer, first of all, for greater understanding. We would like to fix all the problems on earth and problems of evil with force and power. But your way was actually to surrender to evil. Your solution to human sin was to allow yourself to be crucified and you called your followers to go with you in a time, a temporary time, of suffering and patience. Help us to be willing to take up our crosses and follow you. But Lord Jesus, though you were meek and mild once, when you come back you will rule as king. We joyfully wait for that day and pray for it to come soon. We eagerly wait for the day when you in glory will vanish all evil, all pain, suffering, sickness, and death from our lives. But that day still lies ahead. In the meantime, give us stamina, faith, and patience to wait for you. Help us to be strong and to give our words of encouragement to other strugglers and sufferers, as well.

Lord Jesus, come soon for your people. We pray in your name, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mark Jeske, reminding you that every day is a day of God's wonderful grace for you and it all starts now.