



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

How Long, God?

Part 1: Where Are You, God?

Habakkuk 1:1-4

Tim Badal | July 9, 2017



Over the next few weeks we're going to be unfolding the prophetic message that came to a man who had a lot of questions for God. The prophet Habakkuk strongly laments his time and situation. Today we can look at our world as well and wonder if any of it makes sense. We see so much injustice and struggle and sin that we ask, "God, where are You? Why aren't You doing something?" These are the same questions Habakkuk was asking in his day. There was a lot of violence and treachery, and he wondered, as a follower of God, how a loving and powerful God could apparently sit idly by while all kinds of evil was taking place.

Of course, sometimes we get too busy to see the evil around us. I was struck by this evil when I recently saw the story of a mother named Isabel Martinez on TV. You may have heard of this horrific story as well. A mom of four, who was married to a man in suburban Atlanta, for some unknown reason—some sort of evil in her heart—stabbed all four of her children and her husband to death. What made me even more angry was when they showed her being arraigned in the courtroom. You would have thought you would have seen a stoic woman; one who seemed distant. No. When the camera came on Isabel, she gave two thumbs up and smiled. How can God allow innocence, like four kids and a loving husband, to be snuffed out—and then the murderer give a smile and thumbs up? It seems as if God doesn't care about justice.

As we take a broader view of this issue of evil, we see injustice all around us in our world. In the last century we have seen more people killed through war than the total number of people killed in all the preceding centuries. Many of the millions who were killed were innocent people, non-combatants. We've seen the mass slaughter of entire people groups through genocide and holocausts. There are too many of those in the past hundred years even to mention.

In our country alone we've seen almost 60 million unborn children killed through abortion. We've seen millions upon millions of kids kidnapped or put into all kinds of slavery. In our world today the innocent are continually harassed, beaten down and exploited. They are even maimed or murdered. By whom? Evil and corrupt people.

Right now as we sit in our comfortable sanctuary, there are myriads of people who are crying out in pain because of affliction caused by famines or storms. They're crying out for a reprieve, for deliverance. And in this moment we have two questions: "Where are You, God?" and "Why are You allowing this to continue?"

Bringing this closer to home, some of you are asking these same questions—not because of what you've seen in the news, but because you have your own situation of struggle or injustice in your life. You've sought to follow and obey God, but all you see is that you're falling farther and farther behind while evil, sinful people are prospering. You've followed God, but your marriage is a wreck. You've been obedient, but there's still no money. You've made God your priority, but the doctor keeps giving you worse and worse medical news. It seems the holier you become, the more suffering and sorrow and lacking abound, while pagans are finding happiness and contentment.

So as Christians, we ask again, "Where is God? How long will He allow the faithful to languish and the pagan to prosper?" This is the theme of the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. How can a follower of God do what seemingly is right, yet his life and his friends' and family's lives—and his entire nation—are being torn apart? How can we follow God and still find trouble, rather than peace or tranquility, around every corner? Why don't those who are holy get a break? What is a Christian to do when their world is falling apart?

You see, Habakkuk is one who, like Job, teaches us that although we follow God, we are not exempt from struggles or trials. Or like the weeping prophet Jeremiah, he laments the disobedience of God's people and calls them to become obedient again. Habakkuk serves as a teacher, a lesson writer, if you will, about what it means to wait patiently for God—even when the world seems to be falling apart.

One of the things that we as Christians don't do well—or maybe I should say what I don't do well—is wait. A couple years ago we were waiting for a diagnosis for Amanda which turned out to be cancer. I remember just dying inside, allowing all kinds of fear and anxiety to overwhelm me. At one point I could barely breathe, yet at the same time felt like I needed to vomit. Waiting isn't fun. Especially when we're waiting for an answer that could potentially take away sorrow, it seems like moments last for centuries. So we do need someone to tell us how to wait.

God, in His immeasurable love and grace, had dedicated a book in His Bible to teaching us this. Let's turn to **Habakkuk 1:1-4**, where we'll learn something about this man and his message, and also about what we can do when God seems silent or absent.

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.² O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?³ Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

⁴ So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

As we look at this opening section of Scripture, we will ask, "When God seems silent or far off or absent, what are we to do?"

1. When God seems absent, we must reacquaint ourselves with a little-known prophet.

Tucked away in the middle of 12 Minor Prophets is this little book by the prophet Habakkuk. His writings cover only 56 verses, something we can read through in just a short sitting, which I would encourage you to do. We have also put a six-minute video on our Facebook page that provides an overview of what was going on in Habakkuk's day.

We call Habakkuk a "minor prophet." That doesn't mean he's less significant than the major prophets, men like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel. They just wrote longer prophetic books. The 12 minor prophets are minor only because their writings are shorter in length. You might think of it like this: I'm a major preacher, and Pastor Steve is a minor preacher. [You can tell him I said that.] It's all about how long the teachings are.

All of the writings of the prophets are of great significance. We've actually already looked at some of them, including Haggai and Malachi, and we have learned great truths from them. Jonah is another minor prophet. The books or stories are short, but they contain prophetic messages that pack a big punch.

This involves learning about the man.

Habakkuk lived and wrote during a time when the nation of Israel was divided. Gone were the days of King David and King Solomon. After their reigns, the nation of Israel broke into two parts. Some of the tribes went to the north, and that northern kingdom was called Israel. The remaining two tribes that stayed in the south came to be called Judah.

One bad king after another ruled over the northern kingdom. The southern kingdom had a mix, with some good kings and then some bad kings. Habakkuk is writing to the southern kingdom—the nation of Judah—some 200 years after the glory days of King David and King Solomon. As with any country that is divided, the nations were vulnerable to attacks from without and within. Israel and Judah struggled to stay true to God and His righteous decrees. Especially in Israel, they began to live like the pagans around them.

Habakkuk was raised up in these dark times to bring a message from God to these people. In similar fashion, God is sending us today to speak a message to a troubled nation. You might not feel especially equipped, but Habakkuk probably didn't either. You might feel outnumbered; I'm sure he felt that way as well. But God has given us, as His ambassadors, something to proclaim to our nation and our world: the good news of Jesus Christ. It's the message of the gospel.

We are reminded here that it really only takes one person to herald a message. So I ask, are you proclaiming that message today? As He did with Habakkuk, God has given you and me a message that is not to be kept for ourselves, but rather is to be declared to all with whom we come into contact.

Habakkuk was given his message at the end of King Josiah's reign. King Josiah was the last of the holy kings in Judah. He had brought the Word of God back to the people. But the revival was short-lived and it seems to have been a "top down" revival. In other words, it became a law that the Scriptures had to be studied.

But we as Americans also need to realize that if morality is legislated and doesn't touch the heart, then the impact is felt only as long as the law is in force. Thus if we think Washington is the means whereby righteousness will be brought back to our nation, unless human hearts are changed those benefits will be short-lived.

So while Josiah did bring in revival, it was a bureaucratic revival. He ordered the people to study God's Word, to go to the temple and offer sacrifices, but it never impacted their hearts. A couple years after Josiah's reign, another king, Jehoiakim, replaced him. He was an evil king who no longer worshipped Jehovah, the God of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but rather worshipped the foreign deities of the neighboring countries.

Habakkuk watches how bad things become in only a matter of a couple years. Then he hears from God the message, "I'm going to deal with this sin. I'll bring an evil group of people into your land and your people will be taken into captivity." We know when Habakkuk lived because Scripture mentions him seeing this event with his own eyes. It was only about 30 more years after this word from God that the Chaldean armies from Babylon—modern-day Iraq—would conquer the nation of Judah.

But amazingly, we know nothing else about Habakkuk besides his name. There's no lineage or genealogy given. There's no mention of his parents or where he went to school or the degrees he had. We don't hear about his athletic achievements. There's nothing known of him, except that he loved God and walked faithfully with Him.

This is an incredible reminder now in 2017 for parents like myself who think our kids are going to be successful because of what they do in the arts or academics or athletics, or because of their popularity. What we need to realize ourselves and teach our children is that there are two important things we should be known for. First, our name is important. It means we've existed. But more important than that is that we've walked with God and followed Him all the days of our lives.

Habakkuk had no résumé, but that's a reminder that résumés are no good unless you have a relationship with Jesus. Your position in the world means nothing—what matters is your position with God.

This involves learning about his message.

We know nothing more about this man of mystery other than his message. Habakkuk's message would not be the only warning given during that time. He's a contemporary of Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Ezekiel, each of whom called the people back to God and His ways. In this three-chapter book, we'll see a little bit about the man he was.

Because of his message, scholars have given him the title, "The Doubting Thomas of the Old Testament." He wrote a poem or song in these three chapters. In fact, his message in the final chapter would be used as a worship song during corporate worship for the people of God. His overall poem begins with a lament of sadness and disappointment, then moves to a place of praise.

The first thing we should notice about this message is that it comes from God Himself. Verse one tells us it is an "*oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.*" We will see over and over that God is responsible for Habakkuk's message. This is an important reminder to me—as the prophetic messenger in our local body—that my job is not to preach my agenda or my words or my ideas, but to proclaim from this pulpit the message God Himself gives. So as you're in this church, or if you are in another church, watch to see if the man in the pulpit is preaching God's Word and not his own ideas. Be Bereans (Acts 17:10–11). We are to proclaim the oracles of God, just as Habakkuk and the other faithful prophets did.

Next, we need to see that this message overwhelmed the messenger. Many versions of the Bible translate the word "oracle" as "burden," a heavy weight to carry. For Habakkuk, this was a burdensome message. We can see in it his deep concern for his nation and his people. In verse two he cries out, "*How long shall I cry to you for help...or cry to you 'Violence!?*" He's worked up. He's emotional and passionate.

This reminds us that we too should be burdened for our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our communities and the world in which we live. Sadly, far too many of us are calloused and comfortable. We have forgotten what it means to be shaken to our inner core. We live on cruise control in our suburban lives, unchanged by the circumstances around us. We live less than 45 miles from one of the most violent cities in the entire world. Hundreds of people this year will be mowed down in the streets of Chicago. Brothers and sisters, we spend time in that city. We do commerce in that city. But are our hearts burdened for the seemingly meaningless

violence and loss of life in this city that's just a stone's throw from here? Where is our burden? Where are we crying out in our prayers, asking God to act? This burden should lead us to action. We need to tell the world that there is a hope.

At the end of chapter three, Habakkuk concludes his message of burden by saying, "You are the God of our salvation." We need to share with the world that it is through repentance and trust in Jesus Christ that we find forgiveness of our sins. In Him we find the promise of redemption and restoration.

Listen, our burden is not pessimistic. Habakkuk is also not pessimistic, but rather is anticipating through hope and prayer for the promise of God to be fulfilled in his day. He knew the God Who promises would also be faithful. But in the meantime, what are we to do? Here are three points to our message.

1. Faith is tested — chapter one. Isn't that what happens when the troubles of life come our way?
2. Faith is taught — chapter two. God will teach the prophet and his posterity that faith is established and upheld by the power of a powerful God. He says, "Therefore, don't trust in men. Don't trust in armies or chariots or anything else in this world. Trust in God alone, because it is His world and He is in control."
3. Faith is triumphant — chapter three. If we're willing to live by faith and not by sight, if we're willing to hold on to God in the good times and bad, then we're told God will triumph over His enemies and will make all things new.

So where is your faith? Is it being tested? Is your faith being taught? Do you see your faith being triumphant over the circumstances of life? Let's take God's Word into our hands and listen to this great teacher who will help grow our faith and show us the result of our faith.

2. Recognize that our world is filled with similar problems.

We should recognize that the times Habakkuk lived in were very similar to our own times and the problems we face. You would think that in the 3,000 years of human history between then and now things might be different. But let's see what this ancient man in a distant country with a very different culture has to say to us. As Solomon reminded us, "*There's nothing new under the sun*" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Two themes in the teaching of Habakkuk ring true for us today.

These problems include man's sinful actions.

The first theme that was true then and is still true now is that man's actions are sinful. Habakkuk lived in a world in which sin was rampant. This sin could be found in three different areas. First, there was the sin of immorality. When we think of that sin, we usually assume it refers to sensual matters—sexual debauchery—including fornication and adultery. But that's not what we read about in Habakkuk's day. While it probably was going on, it apparently wasn't that much of a concern to him.

Rather, he was most disturbed by the violence and destruction in his day. As we saw in the opening verses, apparently mayhem was celebrated and cherished. To snuff out lives through acts of barbarism was a sign of their power. Notice the five words Habakkuk uses here: violence, iniquity, destruction, strife and contention.

In other words, his times were filled with havoc where treachery abounded. Oppressive behavior was commonplace. Scandal and debauchery were carried out without retribution. The weak were decimated by powerful enemies. That was 3,000 years ago, but it's as if it comes out of our morning newspapers. Our times too are treacherous. Our appetite for death and destruction is growing.

Sadly, it's not just the secular culture that struggles with these things, but it's even true about believers. You can see our version of violence and strife in what I would call our "national war spirit." There's something odd about us as Americans in that when we go to war, we get excited about it. We call the decimation of our world "shock and awe." We are excited when we see our planes dropping massive bombs. We have this morbid curiosity when our President and congress authorize the dropping of "the mother of all bombs." We never ask the question, "What did that bomb hit? What innocent lives were lost?"

Now, please. If you know me, you know I give a lot of credibility to our government to wage war when it is justified. But there is something odd about us as a nation when we get excited about going to war and dropping bombs on human beings, people whom God has created. Let us be so very careful that we are not crying out, as they did in the day of Habakkuk, "Violence and destruction!"

During the last Gulf War with Iraq and Afghanistan, I heard an individual in the church foyer say, "I hope our army makes that place a parking lot." Are you kidding me? That would be the death and destruction of millions of people. How would you feel if someone was to say that of you? Do you know what we call those types of people? Terrorists.

Let us be very careful to recognize who our enemy is. Let's be sure that when we feel justified, we make sure all contingencies are met and that with great patience and great sorrow we say, "It must lead to this." There is a time for justified war. I think as Americans—and even as American Christians—we have lost that definition.

The second thing I see in our world that was true in Habakkuk's day is that violence and destruction have become a culture of entertainment in our day. Can I tell you this convicts me probably more than it will convict anyone else? We watch movies where myriads of people are killed—and we're not shocked. In fact, we've learned that movie directors are trying to find more and more heinous ways for flesh and blood to be splattered in front of cameras, because that's what puts people's bottoms into seats in movie theaters. The more violence and carnage they come up with, the better for their industry.

Now, at least with regard to movies we are able to say, "If you're not a certain age, you can't watch these things." But then we have video games in which the whole intent of the game is to show that killing is enjoyable. Parents, if you've been asleep at the wheel, this is what your kids are watching. The goal of these games is to do away with human life.

This is exactly what the prophet is describing and warning us to be careful of. We must not grow callous in the pursuit of protecting human life. You see, we wonder why our young people walk into schools and cities and gun down people with no remorse. We in America have created a culture of violence and destruction.

Not only is there an issue of immorality, but the second issue Habakkuk addresses is the matter of injustice. This was the nation of Judah, and these were the people of God. They were the descendants of the patriarchs and King David. They were the people God had done great things for and had nurtured. These people had the law of the Lord. They had the Scriptures. They had a group who was given the job of teaching these things.

But listen to Habakkuk's words. He not only speaks of iniquity, violence, strife and contention, but also he says in verse four, "*The law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous.*" So anyone who preached the law of God would be pushed away and told to stay in their corner. Because of that, anarchy rose up. You see, God had given them a plan and purpose, but it had been a half century since revival had broken out in their land under King Hezekiah. Fifty years had passed, and the people had become lax in their attention to the Word of God. Because of that the temple—the central place of worship—was no longer being attended to by the people and fell into disrepair. Anarchy ruled the day, all because people no longer hid God's Word in their hearts. Public worship became less and less important.

I'm blown away when I read how the law of God has lost its power and its place in society, as we look at our own world and lament the "good old days" when the Word of God and prayer were allowed in schools. Back then there were churches on every corner. Now instead we see debauchery and violence, and our tendency is to point to culture and blame it. But what Habakkuk seems to be saying is that the blame rested on the hearts and minds of those who were spiritual. Like the people of God in his day, we too are distracted by all kinds of things. Like them, we have lost our focus on God's Word. Biblical literacy is at an all-time low. It's so bad that people don't even own Bibles. Churches just project the words on a screen, because they know people didn't bring Bibles with them. People aren't studying the Word.

What about church attendance? Church attendance here in America is on a death spiral. Every year we see thousands upon thousands of churches closing their doors. Or because they don't want to be pushed against the wall by the people, churches no longer preach and teach the Word of God. This is because any time sin is called out in the church, they are accused of legalism. As a result, preachers just tell people what they want to hear—and we wonder why the world is where it is today.

So instead of pointing to culture, the blame should fall on the church. We have lost our way. We are not the church that Jesus said would storm the gates of hell and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). Instead, we can see breaches in so many of our walls and are barely even able to mount an assault. We live during days of great injustice and the reason is that we do not uphold the Word of God. Our day is much like the day of Habakkuk.

Finally, both immorality and injustice come from the same source: idolatry. Habakkuk lived in a time when God was no longer the God of Israel or Judah. Instead of turning to God, the people turned to other gods, the gods of the neighboring communities. Here's the crazy thing. When they were brought into the Promised Land, where they were now residing, God gave them a mandate: "I'm going to bless you so that you may be a blessing to your neighbors. I'm calling you out so you can be messengers who will bring your neighbors to Me." Their assignment was to have an impact on their neighbors.

Instead, as God's Word was diminished and the people stopped obeying His laws, the neighbors began to have an impact on them. And could that be said of some of us today? Rather than our having influence in our neighbors' lives, we've adopted their beliefs

and practices and entertainments. God says to us, "Didn't I call you out? Didn't I make you a people for Myself—a holy nation—so you would declare My excellencies to your neighbors? But like the people of Judah, you have followed them instead of being the light they need."

These problems include God's seeming absence.

Idolatry always leads us down a death spiral and these things lead us to the second problem, which is God's seeming absence. On one side, Habakkuk sees sin and violence and struggle. On the other side, he looks and wonders, "Where are You, God? Why aren't You doing something about this? You are the immovable God. You are the almighty God. You're the powerful God. Yet You're allowing evil kings and corrupt cultures to win the day. Why aren't You doing something?"

He cries out at the top of his lungs, "Evil is winning and righteousness is being routed. Where are You? Why won't You do something?" He's thinking, "Why won't You be the kind of God You used to be? Bring a flood! You were powerful back in the book of Exodus. Why don't You bring some plagues down on this? God, why are You allowing evil to prevail? Why don't You bring back Samson so he can slay our enemies? Why don't You bring back David to conquer the giants before us? How can You sit back in heaven and allow this stuff to take place? You don't care about us."

If we were honest, we could confess that these kinds of questions come from our own lips. In times of trouble, amidst moral decay and corruption, we ask, "Where are You, God?" When tragedy and sorrow strike, when innocence is taken, we ask, "Where was God? Why wasn't He doing anything? Why do we read about these amazing encounters in the Scripture, but then only hear crickets from heaven today? Why aren't You doing something, God? Why won't You respond? How can You let Your world go on this downward spiral so quickly and not address it?"

It's a tale as old as time. It was true for Habakkuk, and it's true for us today. So what are we to do when God is silent?

3. Renew the prescription that God provides.

I'm going to close with this, because you as people need to apply this very specifically to your own lives. Let me share something with you from the first four verses of this book. When you find yourself wondering where God is amidst your troubles, this is the book for you. In these four verses we get a set of remedies for the times when we feel like the prophet does. "Where are You, God? How long are You going to allow these things to take place?"

This involves being honest with God about your struggles.

The heading in my Bible between verses one and two says, "Habakkuk's complaint." That's exactly what it was—he was complaining to God. How refreshing is that? Habakkuk goes to the website of God like we go to Amazon. He has seen what God has done, so he goes to the review section on that site and gives God one star. "Customer Service stinks. He doesn't live up to what He says He's going to do. I was told that this God was going to rule the nations. I was told this God was going to make low His enemies and would snuff out evil. None of that has been accomplished. In fact, it's gotten worse under His rule. I give Him one star. Don't buy into this God."

Some of us, in our times of tragedy and sorrow, want to give God one star. I want you to know there's a reason God allows us to study Scripture: He loves it when we're honest with Him. I think He loves it when we say, "I really don't like You that much. I'm not Your biggest fan right now." God tells us in the New Testament that we are to cast our cares on Him, because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:6–10). All those anxieties and concerns and unresolved situations should be taken to Him in honesty. Habakkuk cries out his complaints.

This involves staying humble and knowing God is in charge.

When God seems silent or distant or even absent, we should stay humble and know that He is in charge. In your honesty, be careful. You are talking with God. Don't say something that dishonors Him. Does Habakkuk complain? Yes. But notice what he does over and over again. He knows Who he's talking to. In verse two he says, "O Lord..." In verse 12, "O Lord my God, my holy one..." Verse 12 again, "O Lord...O rock..."

If you go down farther in the passage, Habakkuk 2:2, you'll see, "*The Lord answered me.*" Or in 3:1, "*O Lord, I've heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear.*" In verse seven he says God has everlasting ways. In verse eight he says, "*Was your wrath against*

the rivers, O Lord?" Then at the end of that chapter he says, "God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places."

Even amidst his complaint, he knew Who he was talking about. I want my boys to be honest with me, but I don't want them to disrespect me. God the Father doesn't want us to be disrespectful either. So realize that He is in control. We may not like what God is doing—and He gives us the right to ask and even to complain or criticize Him. But He's not okay with us dishonoring Him, for He is an all-consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:28–29). We must be very careful and humble, knowing He is in control.

This involves grabbing hold of God instead of other things.

Third, when God seems absent or distant, grab hold of Him instead of other things. Where is this in the text? Go back to Habakkuk 1:1: "*The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.*" We don't know much about Habakkuk, but we do know his name. His name in Hebrew literally means "the embracer of God." If you're pregnant and looking for a boy's name, this might be helpful. In modern vernacular, he's the hugger of God. He's the holder of God.

I know the world isn't easy. I know your faith is being rattled. I know it seems like evil has won the day. In those moments, Christian, when you feel like you're on the losing side, be honest with God, stay humble before Him and grab hold of Him as tightly as you can. The devil wants you to isolate yourself from His people and from Him. But do what my boys did when they were younger, when they heard claps of thunder. They would run to their dad, grab hold of me and say, "Father, protect me. Daddy, make sure I'm okay."

In moments when we feel as though the world is caving in, that's not the time to hold on to our bank accounts. That's not the time to hold on to other people. Rather, we should run and hold tightly to the God of the universe, because He is faithful. In times like this we should remember the words of Psalm 46—and this will be our closing prayer, sung by the Sons of Korah:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth.⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire.¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

So let's remember we are more than conquerors in Christ Jesus, knowing the God Who promised is faithful.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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