



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

How Long God?

Part 3: When God's Correction Seems Cruel

Habakkuk 1:12–2:1

Kevin O'Brien | August 6, 2017



As I prepared to preach the third sermon in our Habakkuk series, I was thinking about the words to a certain hymn: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a really wonderful guy like me.” That’s how it goes—right? We all know that’s not the way it goes and we all know why it doesn’t go that way. It doesn’t matter if we’re Old Testament believers or New Testament believers, we know we’re not so wonderful. We know there’s a reason we need to celebrate communion, because we need a Savior.

The Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said it this way: “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” I think it’s very true.

Kim Jong Un or ISIS are good examples of evil, right? We’re often tempted to call some people a bit closer to home evil. Usually we don’t want to call our neighbor evil—except for that one guy. We certainly don’t want to think of ourselves as being evil, so we get really good at changing the subject or deflecting blame. We fill our time, minds and lives with lots of stuff, so we don’t have to think about it. But we know the truth. Solzhenitsyn was right—both good and evil live inside us.

Habakkuk knew this. About a hundred years before he lived and wrote, the prophets Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Micah and Isaiah were all warning the northern kingdom of Israel, “You’re sinning. You’re breaking the covenant, and judgment is coming. Correction is coming.” Then in Habakkuk’s day, he and Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah were doing the exact same thing for the southern kingdom of Judah.

The people of Judah had forsaken their part of the covenant, and as we’ve seen, Habakkuk is crying out to God, “How long, Lord? All I see is fighting. All I see is violence.” Habakkuk 1:4 says it this way: “*The law has become paralyzed, and there is no justice in the course. The wicked far outnumber the righteous, so that justice has become perverted.*” There was no justice and what was called “justice” was twisted. It sounds eerily familiar to me. It sounds a lot like today.

Habakkuk knew the truth. He knew that his people, God’s people, had forgotten who they were. They had forgotten the covenant, and in fact they had become just like the people who were oppressing them. He wants them to return to the truth and to the covenant. He wants the people of the covenant to live as if they actually are the people of the covenant. What would that look like?

The people of Israel were called to make God’s name known among the nations. Their assignment was to show that there was a true God in Israel. He wasn’t a god of the storms or crops or the sun. He was not like the other ancient gods who supposedly needed human beings to serve them. Instead, He was a God Who chose a people to represent Him.

At the very beginning, in Exodus 19 when the covenant was given, Moses was talking to God on Mt. Sinai. God said to him, “You are going to be a special treasure for Me—a kingdom of priests.” That was their job. So Habakkuk realized, “We’re not doing our job.” So he called out to God, saying, “God, fix this. Do something. This is not right.” And God said, “Okay, I will.”

For 300 years the Assyrian Empire has terrorized the ancient Near East. They are brutal and cruel and merciless. These are the guys who invented crucifixion. And in 722 B.C., their king, Sennacherib, comes to the northern kingdom of Israel and destroys Samaria, taking over the land. One year later they besiege Jerusalem and Judah comes under their thumb as well. If you’re interested to know more, it’s described in 2 Kings 16–18.

But now, 100 years later, Assyria is in decline and there are whispers from the east. A new-old power is rising. For millennia, the city of Babylon had flourished. The Samaritans and Akkadians had empires that started there. The Amorite kingdom was also centered there. If you remember junior high history or geography, you've heard of Hammurabi and his law code. He was from Babylon.

Babylon was a city of gods and kings, of gardens and learning, and even the Assyrians had treated it with respect. In retrospect, that was probably a bad idea, because their vassal king, Nabopolassar—there's a nice name for you, if you're looking for a name for your child—made an alliance with the Medes and started taking over. In 612 B.C., right around the time Habakkuk is writing, Nabopolassar laid siege to Nineveh, and in three months the capital of Assyria fell. At that point a new Babylonian Empire was being born, and that's Habakkuk's world.

Habakkuk wants Israel and Judah to turn from wickedness and to right. But God tells him, "I've got this. Right now I'm raising up the Babylonians. They'll be coming across the desert like a strong wind. Correction is coming—hard and hot—and it's coming soon." Habakkuk does not like God's answer. To him, that kind of correction seems cruel.

I think today—2,600 years later—we're not so different from the people of God in the Old Testament. We are the church, the people of God, the people of the new covenant—as we celebrate in communion. It's really interesting that in 1 Peter 2:5, Peter uses very similar language to that which God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai. He says, *"And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests."* And in verse nine, *"You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light."*

So the job of the church today—Christians—is just the same as the job of the people of Israel in the Old Testament. We are to show Who God is, to bear witness to the real God—not some small gods, not the gods of the things we like. But all too often, just like Israel, we the church have a problem. We sell our birthright for a bit of political power or relative comfort. Maybe we know the truth, but instead of sharing it as good news with our family, friends and neighbors what do we do? We use that truth as a club to beat people over the head, because they are not like us. We are right.

Then correction comes. We need it as much as Israel did. And just like Habakkuk, we don't like God's answer. Suddenly, the correction that we ask for—"God, fix Your church," "God, heal our nation"—becomes, "Wait a minute. Hold it, God. I know we've messed up. We didn't do everything right, but You do know who they are. They're worse than we are."

So what do we do when God's correction seems cruel? That's what we'll be looking at today in Habakkuk 1:12–2:1. I'm reading from the New Living Translation, so it might be a little different from what you're used to. Habakkuk says:

¹² O Lord my God, my Holy One, you who are eternal—surely you do not plan to wipe us out? O Lord, our Rock, you have sent these Babylonians to correct us, to punish us for our many sins. ¹³ But you are pure and cannot stand the sight of evil. Will you wink at their treachery? Should you be silent while the wicked swallow up people more righteous than they? ¹⁴ Are we only fish to be caught and killed? Are we only sea creatures that have no leader? ¹⁵ Must we be strung up on their hooks and caught in their nets while they rejoice and celebrate? ¹⁶ Then they will worship their nets and burn incense in front of them. "These nets are the gods who have made us rich!" they will claim. ¹⁷ Will you let them get away with this forever? Will they succeed forever in their heartless conquests?

¹ I will climb up to my watchtower and stand at my guardpost. There I will wait to see what the Lord says and how he will answer my complaint.

Let me give you a little overview of where we're going this morning. We'll look at three choices that we need to make when we're facing correction from God that seems cruel. In each case we'll see the contrast between our natural temptation and the example Habakkuk gives us.

Choice 1: Start with God.

Our temptation: focus on the "injustice" of our situation

When suffering comes our way, when we are being corrected, our natural tendency is to focus on the injustice of our situation, whatever that is. "Woe is me. Look how terrible my situation is. It's so unfair. God, how could You do this to me?" Right? That's what we do.

The subtle, tricky part about this is we're not 100% wrong, because the best and most effective lies are the ones that contain an element of truth. In reality, very often the suffering we face—even if it's corrective—has evil involved in it. The Babylonians were not nice people. They're coming to take over and they're not doing it gently.

Look at verse 13: *"Will you wink at their treachery? Should you be silent while the wicked swallow up people more righteous than they?"* It's really tempting to think that all Habakkuk is doing is complaining. But that's not what he's doing here, because if we start with verse 13, we miss something really important.

Habakkuk's example: remember the God of Israel

The example Habakkuk gives us is that he remembered the God of Israel first. If we blow right by this, if we just get to the complaint, we miss perhaps the most crucial part of this passage. We miss the starting point. And if we miss the starting point, we get off on the wrong foot. If we don't start with God, what do we start with? Ourselves. If we don't start with God, we start with our needs and our problems, which leads to wrong choices. When we do that, we start with something that ultimately can't give us the answers we seek anyway—it just gets us stuck. That's not what Habakkuk does. He says, *"O Lord my God, my Holy One, you who are eternal."* That's just the first line of the first verse. We could spend the entire day just there. We won't, but we could.

Habakkuk has a problem with God's correction—why? Because at least on the surface of it, God's response—bringing the Babylonians in—seems to conflict with God's character. "God, how can You do this? How does this work?" And starting with God in our response, in the choices we make, changes our focus.

This one choice—at the very beginning—can mean the difference between a sinful reaction on the one hand and a sanctified reaction on the other. It's the difference between honoring God through lament—as Tim talked about a couple weeks ago—and frankly, being a whiner who's just accusing God. Those are very different things. And Habakkuk chooses to start with God.

In verse 12, that word "LORD" is probably all small capital letters in your Bible. When you see that in the Old Testament, that means Yahweh. Generally speaking, in most modern translations, they have an introduction to their translation at the beginning of your Bible that will probably tell you how they deal with divine names. "LORD" means Yahweh, the One Who is, the One without Whom there is nothing and can be nothing. This is the personal name of the God of Israel, not just any god. This is the God of the covenant, the One Who chooses a people.

But that's not all that Habakkuk says. "Oh LORD my God." The Hebrew word "God" here is the word *Elohim*. In this case, the emphasis is on God's power. He's not just any god—He's the God Who is the powerful God and Who is "my God." This is the only time in the Old Testament that this exact construction is used. And when it's the only time, we should pay attention.

Habakkuk says, "O Lord my God," because this is his God personally. He's in the middle of this national crisis, and his complaint is to his God. There is a reason he can come to God this way. He is a person, a child of the covenant, and that gives him standing. He can say to God—both as an individual and as a member of the people of God—"You are my God."

Then he says, "my Holy One." You know, it's one thing for us to question God; it's another thing for us to do it rightly. Habakkuk does it rightly. He does it by starting with Who God is: holy, pure, set apart. The implication here is that God by His very nature cannot do wrong. It looks like God's doing wrong here, because the Babylonians are terrible. They're worse than Israel.

But what Habakkuk is doing is showing us the way to start. "I know this looks bad, God, but I know Who You are." And that's where he starts. We do well when we question God and His correction, to remember the kind of God we are talking to. This is the God Who has proven Himself over and over to be holy and just, to be trustworthy. Of course, that's the question we really have, right? "God, can I trust You? Are You really for me? Have You changed?" And for a lot of us, "God, are You safe?"

Every time I think about this, I think about *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. If you're familiar with C.S. Lewis' book at all, the picture of Christ in this book is the lion, Aslan. There are four children who are the main characters, and the Beaver family is helping them. The kids are getting worried about the idea of this Aslan character, and they ask the Beavers, "Is he safe?" Mr. Beaver's response is, "Haven't you been listening? Of course he isn't safe. But he's the king, and he's good."

That's the God that Habakkuk is telling us about here. For the Christian, starting with God means starting with Jesus. Jesus says, *"I and the Father are one"* (John 10:30). He also says, *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father"* (John 14:9). If we want to understand God, if we want to see Him, if we want to start with God, we have to start with Jesus—Who He is, what He was like, what He taught, what He did. And we do that by reading the Gospels. We do this by reciting Who God is.

Habakkuk recites Who God is back to God. It's a reminder to himself and us of the trust we can place in God. And you know what? The early church did the same thing. Colossians 1:15–20 and Philippians 2 encapsulate Who Jesus is and what He's about. They were probably hymns in the early church, reciting Who God is back to one another and back to God. That is what Habakkuk does here which lays the foundation for the second choice.

Choice 2: Seek God's answers.

Our temptation: unthinking reaction

When faced with suffering, when faced with correction that seems cruel, our temptation is unthinking reaction. When we face suffering of any kind—especially when we believe it's unfair or out of proportion—what do we do? We react. We don't think; we just do. It's kind of like autopilot.

I am not at all tempted by the new technology of self-driving cars. I have no desire for that at all. I like to drive. Now, the little button you can push to do the parallel parking? That sounds good to me because that's not driving. And what about autopilot? There it goes.

Our reaction in difficult times is a bit different. It's sort of our "defend at all costs" mode. We react. We justify. And we inevitably make it about us when we react. So it's kind of interesting. If we have this unthinking reaction when faced with suffering, what do we do? We throw the first choice out the window, because we can't start with God when we react that way.

Habakkuk's example: real questions

But Habakkuk's reaction is not like that. He gives us real questions. When we were teenagers, it was pretty easy to fall in love with the idea of a person and not the actual person. You get a crush on someone and then you get to know the person, after the fact. You find yourself in this weird situation, because the beautiful person on the outside doesn't match up with what's going on inside. And sometimes we go to great lengths to avoid the hard questions, to justify that person whom we like, right? We explain away problems enough, but sooner or later we have to deal with reality. Something doesn't match up here. That's sort of what Habakkuk is dealing with right now, because what he sees of God on the outside and what he knows about God don't seem to match up to him.

But the difference between us at 15 and Habakkuk is this: he's not avoiding the hard questions. He asks lots of them in this passage. He doesn't shy away from tough questions; in fact, one could almost argue they get bigger and bigger as he goes on in this book. Habakkuk 1:12 says, "You aren't going to wipe us out, are You?" Verse 13, "Are You just going to wink at the Babylonians' treachery? You do see what they're like, right? Why are You silent? We may be bad, but they're worse." In verses 14–15, "We're Your people, right? So why are we're like fish ready to be caught, strung up on a stringer and then feasted on?"

Verse 16, "You see that they don't even recognize You, right? They're gloating. You raised them up, but they think it was all them. They don't see their need for You. They chalk it up to their skill, their power, their might. They wouldn't know the meaning of the word 'repentance' if it bit them. In fact, their entire religion denies You."

As a side note, the Babylonian religion referred to in verse 16 is a pretty good example of what human-made religion always does. Habakkuk shows that it's futile, because what do we end up doing? We worship the things we've made, thus we end up worshipping ourselves.

Then in verse 17, "How long? God, they're doing all the things that I asked You to punish us for—and worse. They're chewing up nations and spitting them out. It's not just us they're punishing; they're destroying everyone."

Do you know what I love about this passage more than anything else? God can handle our hardest questions. Sometimes we think—right here in the early 21st century—that we are the first people ever to wrestle with the kinds of questions we ask. "God, how can You....? I can't believe in a God Who..." And we act as if these questions have never been asked before—but they're right here in Habakkuk.

Frankly, for 2,000 years the church has been wrestling with these tough questions and giving answers. There is no question we can ask that God hasn't heard or can't handle. The specifics of our situations change; although even those aren't as unique as we'd like to believe they are. The technology changes. But the issues—the heart of the matter—don't change. When suffering comes, and

God's correction seems cruel, we get the opportunity to ask "Why?" Now, we may not like the answer we're given. We may not even get an answer that we can understand in this lifetime. But we get to ask. God never says to us, "Don't question Me." He's interacting with Habakkuk a lot right here.

The key is for us to build off that first choice, starting with God—Who He is, what He does—and that's what Habakkuk does. He doesn't react. He cries out to God for answers, because he knows Who God is and this doesn't seem to fit. He's not belligerent. He's not whining. He's not claiming to be better than God or more holy or any of those things, because he's the one who established, at the very beginning of this book, that Israel needs to be corrected.

His questions really boil down to these: How does Your response square with Your character? How can You use evil even to correct us? Why do you let them claim Your glory? As much as these questions on the surface are about the situation that Judah faces, really, at the bottom, these are questions about Who God is and about His relationship with His people. They're the very same questions we ask. We are made to communicate with God, to commune with the God Who made us. Genesis 1 tells us we are created in His image. I believe that what we see in Genesis is that this need to communicate with our Creator is hardwired into the very nature of the universe. That's part of who we are. So these questions to God and about God matter, because at the bottom, what they're really doing is asking is this the God we were made for, or is this some other god? This is the cry of the world around us. Most people do not question whether or not there is a God (new atheists notwithstanding). Most people ask, "Which God are you talking about and can I trust Him? Can I trust this God to be for me?" These are important questions. They are not easy questions and we come to them with our own expectations, baggage and hang-ups. All too often, we're not really asking the questions because we want an answer. We are asking them because we want to justify ourselves. We want to make ourselves feel better about the way we look at the world. So we have to ask ourselves: are we asking real questions? Are we asking questions like Habakkuk did, or to justify ourselves? He asks real questions because he wants real answers. He wants to hear from God, the One Whom he's always trusted, so he cries out in prayer and he asks those hard questions. As we'll see in a moment, he expects answers. But he can only ask the questions he asks because of where he started. He started with God, and he builds on that solid foundation, and then he asks the questions. It's about Who God is. So that's how he starts.

The Bible, you see, is God's revelation of Himself to us and with us. In and through the Bible, we see what God is like—what He wants for us, what He is willing and able to do on our behalf. This is a real-world, no-holds-barred, messy-kind-of-life text. We read it, and we learn from it, but not to master information or even to make sure that we have the right answers. Rather, we read it so that we might know God.

Over 20 years ago in a preaching class, when I was doing nine-minute sermons, we had to preach a sermon and the professor would sit in the back in a control room behind a window. We had to bring our own video cassettes, he would tape us, and he would critique us as we were doing it.

I will never forget one time Dr. Fink came out afterwards, handed me my tape and said, "Kevin, you clearly have the text. But my question is: does the text have you?" I have been haunted by that question in the best possible way ever since. And that's the point of this: that the text should have us. That God should have us. That was true for Habakkuk and that's why he could ask the questions he did. The disciples asked lots of questions because they knew and trusted Jesus. And that's what we're called to as well.

Choice 3: Stand guard.

The questions Habakkuk asked are good ones and that's why he makes his third choice: to stand guard. This is where "the rubber meets the road" responses occur. This is where life happens. The truth is that sometimes God's corrections seem all out of proportion to us and we cannot see in the moment why or how or what we're supposed to do. God can seem either untrustworthy or not in control—and I'm not sure which scenario is worse. But we only see a small part, so what we do next matters.

Our temptation: run away or become the monster we hate

In these moments, our temptation is to do one of two things. We either run or we become the monster we hate. It's fight or flight, right? Confronted with a bad situation, it is a literal physiological response. It works really well at preserving human life, but it is not a good idea when we're responding to God.

A lot of people, when faced with the consequences of sin—or the sins of someone we love—simply run away. We run away from the situation or the truth or from God Himself. We run away from marriages we have ruined because of our actions. We see a

person we love who comes out as gay and instead of being loving and truthful, we decide to change what we believe. Or worse, we say, "God, if that's what You're like, I want nothing to do with you." We walk away.

Why did Israel keep on having the same problems over and over? Why do we? Israel ran from correction and wanted to do it their way. We want to do it our way, to be the ones in control. We think we know better than God, that the things we want here and now are more important than what God says we need. We don't think we're really that bad.

Then we have the opposite temptation. Some of us run away, but some of us fight. You've all met Christians like this, right? They're mad at pretty much everyone—especially someone who says something they disagree with. It doesn't matter if you're a believer or a non-believer—if you say something they disagree with, you're going to get it and you can see it coming.

Instead of telling the truth in love, instead of being Christ to people, we club people over the head with the truth, wrapping it up in Christian words. Instead of acting like the people of God, we act like the Assyrians and the Babylonians who are oppressors. And that's exactly what Habakkuk said was wrong. But that's not what Habakkuk does.

Habakkuk's example: patient vigilance that expects a response

Habakkuk is patiently vigilant, expecting a response. He makes the harder choice. He chooses to stand guard. *"I will climb up to my watchtower and stand at my guard post. There I will wait to see what the Lord says and how he will answer my complaint."* Remember, he's not happy with God. He's not happy about God's correction, but he remembers Who God is and sets out his questions. Then he waits for God's response. And that's what we need to do.

The Hebrew in this last phrase is kind of tricky. Scholars are divided. Some people say it should read that God is going to answer Habakkuk's response. Other scholars say, "No, Habakkuk is going to have the answer for when God rebukes him." Either is possible, but in either case, there is a very real choice that's being made here. He does something important. He doesn't decide that he's going to solve the seeming contradiction between God's character and the coming correction. He doesn't decide, "I get the final word," or, "I'm going to fix this." He decides to wait to see what God is going to do—and that's hard.

But that's what we need to do. We can be patient and alert, standing guard and watching for what God is doing. God said in Habakkuk 1:5, "See what I am doing..." But to do this we have to be in a position to see and hear from Him. We have to be alert and paying attention. That's what guard towers are for.

At the very least, I think this means two things. The first is prayer. This entire book is Habakkuk praying to God and God responding to him. And we have to make sure that we are praying, even when it seems that God is simply going to be silent.

The second goes back to the very first point. We cannot know what God is like when we don't pay attention to what He is known to have done and what He has told us. A lot of us think we know Who God is and what God's all about, and it's all of the things we feel, instead of what He has shown us. We need both of those things in order to be in a position to stand guard.

I want to add this about watch towers: They are designed to protect a city or a castle. They are not solo endeavors. Furthermore, when you climb up a watch tower to your guard post, the whole point is to get 360° of vision and you can't do that on your own. You need more than one person. We are the body of Christ together. We celebrate the body in communion. God saves us as individuals, but not to live as individuals. We are to be a part of His body—and that's what a watch tower is for. If we aren't doing that, do you know what happens? We climb up in the watch tower on our own and we can only look in one direction, so we miss what God's doing behind us. We need one another for this.

God is never going to give us all the answers we seek. He's certainly not going to do things completely in the way we think He ought to do them. But over and over again Scripture shows us that God is trustworthy. Our questions are real. The things that we face are real. And frankly, the correction we need is real. But our hope is even more real. What is our hope? We celebrate it at communion.

Instead of a prayer at the end, I want to read Hebrews 12:1–13, because I believe that in this passage the writer of Hebrews is essentially going through the exact same things that Habakkuk is showing us. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament. There is no different God. We just see Him differently because we see Him through the Person and work of Jesus. This is what the writer of Hebrews says to us and I want you to think of this as a prayer and an encouragement as we close. Hebrews 12:1–13:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the

champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up. After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin.

And have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as his children? He said, "My child, don't make light of the Lord's discipline, and don't give up when he corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child."

As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all. Since we respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us, shouldn't we submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever?

For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.

So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees. Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.

Amen and amen.

Village Bible Church | 847 North State Route 47, Sugar Grove, IL 60554 | (630) 466-7198 | www.villagebible.org/sugar-grove

All Scriptures quoted directly from the New Living Translation unless otherwise noted.

Note: This transcription has been provided by Sermon Transcribers (www.sermontranscribers.net).