

2.25.07 *Believing in a Just God in an Unjust World* Habakkuk 2:1-4, 2:18-3:2

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Writing probably around the year 607 BC, Habakkuk looks at his own country of Judah, as well as the growing threat of attack from the nation of Babylon, and observing injustice on every hand, the prophet cries out to God with some difficult questions that still echo today. Why are the wicked prospering? Why are the just and faithful beaten down? Why is God seemingly indifferent and inactive in the face of wickedness, exploitation, violence, and greed?

God's reply is even more shocking – God assures the prophet He is doing something. The Babylonians – a people even more corrupt than God's chosen nation – are about to descend as an instrument of God's judgment. God sometimes uses ungodly, unbelieving people to teach believers painful lessons. Last week Pastor Kevin mentioned about the rejoicing of the nations when Assyria was finally defeated. That rejoicing didn't last because not long after Habakkuk spoke his prophecy when the Babylonians came to power King Nebuchadnezzar wasted little time in advancing west into Palestine and Egypt in 605 BC the first year of his reign. He deported ten thousand of Jerusalem's leaders to Babylon. The nobles who had oppressed and extorted from the poor were the first to be carried away.

Habakkuk, like most of the prophets, struggled with his faith when he saw people flagrantly distort justice on every level without any fear of God. He wanted to know why God was allowing iniquity to go unpunished. God's answer about using Babylon was even more troubling but eventually Habakkuk reached the point where he could trust God even in the worst of circumstances and that trust enabled him to seek to live faithfully and to go on believing in and serving a just God in an unjust world. Like some of us, the prophet has complaints about what is going on in his world, but the Lord's answer is that God has a vision that will be fulfilled so stay humble and keep the faith. Habakkuk 2:1-4,

"I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart;

*I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.*

Then the Lord answered me and said:

*Write the vision; make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.*

*For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.*

*If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.*

Look at the proud!

***Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.”***

My mother always told me, “Life’s not fair.” That is true; we live in a world that is not just. Simply by where a person is born one has a much greater or less of a chance at a long, healthy, and good life. Kevin mentioned last week about the release of the film *Amazing Grace* and this year being the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade by Great Britain. However, the issue of **slavery is anything but history**. A recent article stated that, “**Twenty-seven million slaves exist in our world today**. Girls and boys, women and men of all ages are forced to toil in the rug loom sheds of Nepal, sell their bodies in the brothels of Rome, break rocks in the quarries of Pakistan, and fight wars in the jungles of Africa.

As many as 800,000 are trafficked across international borders annually, and up to 17,500 new victims are trafficked across our borders each year, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. More than 30,000 additional slaves are transported through the U.S. on their way to other international destinations. Attorneys from the U.S. Department of Justice have prosecuted 91 slave-trade cases in cities across the United States and in nearly every state of the nation.

Like the slaves who came to America's shores 200 years ago, today's slaves are not free to pursue their own destinies. They are coerced to perform work for the personal gain of those who subjugate them. If they try to escape the clutches of their masters, modern slaves risk personal violence or reprisals to their families.

President George W. Bush spoke of the global crisis of the slave trade before the United Nations General Assembly in September 2003. “*Each year 800,000 to 900,000 human beings are bought, sold, or forced across the world's borders,*” he said. “*The trade in human beings for any purpose must not be allowed to thrive in our time.*” Of those individuals extracted out of impoverished countries and trafficked across international borders, **80 percent are female and 50 percent are children**, according to the U.S. Department of State's “2005 Trafficking in Persons Report.” The commerce in human

b Or *faithfulness*

beings today rivals drug trafficking and the illegal arms trade for the top criminal activity on the planet.¹

Children are also disproportionately impacted by **the HIV/AIDS epidemic**. The February 2007 edition of our ABC International Ministries Update is about Hope, Help, and Healing for HIV/AIDS. The cover story by Bill Clemmer and Diana Millner begins, “As we struggle to understand the “war on terror” and the various ethnic and religious conflicts that dot our global landscape, it is easy to overlook our greatest global challenge – the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We must now contend with HIV as **the leading cause of death world wide among those aged 15-59, already claiming 25 million lives and orphaning 15 million children**. An estimated 40 million people are infected worldwide. Sub Saharan Africa is home to two-thirds of those living with HIV and over 90 % of children infected with HIV. While Sub Saharan Africa is the epicenter of the epidemic, there are also the “second wave” nations of China, India, and Russia, which have the fastest growing epidemics in the world.” On a global basis the church is finally starting to really mobilize to help meet the overwhelming needs that exist and I hope our church can get more involved, especially in helping folks like the Clemmer’s who are on the front lines of providing care.

Issues like slavery and HIV/AIDS and the oppression and suffering they cause are ones many people see as an example of the unjust world we live in, they can cause people to doubt the existence of God, and they cry out for God’s people to respond. It distresses me that so many issues in our day seem to create division among Christians as there seem to be at least a few who have a stronger allegiance to a political party than they do to the kingdom of God; more Christians who feel their politicians, writers, and bloggers are more infallible and more authoritative than the words of Jesus and the word of God. Too many people who describe themselves as Christians have an easier time telling you what their favorite radio or TV show host says and thinks about something, than they can tell you what Jesus says and thinks about a particular subject or where in the Bible he says it. Just as Habakkuk, Amos, Micah, and Hosea spoke strong words against their own nation and its leadership, the sad truth is we also have to hold our leaders and ourselves accountable.

¹ Sojourner’s Magazine, March 2007. Cry Freedom!The modern global slave trade and those who fight it. by *David Batson*

Obviously the most divisive issue we face as a nation is the war in Iraq. Regardless of what one thinks about war in general or the specific wars we are currently engaged in, we all acknowledge that war is the most destructive and deadly of human institutions and it leads to great abuses, inflicts incalculable suffering on the innocent, and is the greatest waste of resources both human and material that our race has ever invented.

Peter Storey, former president of the South African Council of Churches, captures our dilemma saying Americans “*have to expose and confront, the great disconnect between the kindness, compassion, and caring of most American people and the ruthless way American power is experienced, directly and indirectly, by the poor of the earth. I do not think that most Americans would allow for the sort of death toll that is occurring—especially of children, who we know are the innocent victims of this and any war—if we knew what was going on and therefore understood our real responsibility for it.*” Storey concludes,

“You have to help good people see how they have let their institutions do their sinning for them, this is not easy among people who really believe that their country does nothing but good, but it is necessary, not only for their future, but for us all.” A famous philosopher (Albert Camus) once said, “I should like to be able to love both justice and my country.” That is what we hope for, but we must never underestimate our ability to slowly—almost imperceptibly and without our full understanding—become something terrible to others and less than true representatives of Jesus. We can still trust in God’s ability to turn us around, to become a redemptive power in the world, when we repent. This is precisely what John Newton and others did which helped to inspire others and bring about change.

Jim Wallis describes a visit he made to the “Historic Holy Trinity Church in South London, the home church to William Wilberforce, the abolitionist parliamentarian who wrote Britain’s anti-slave-trade legislation. Wilberforce and a group of Christian fellow parliamentarians and lay people known as “the Saints” were behind many social reforms that swept England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. On the wall were pictures of typically English-looking gentlemen who helped to turn their country upside down.

The vicar pointed to an old, well-worn table. *“This is the table upon which William Wilberforce wrote the antislavery act,”* he said proudly. *“We now use this table every Sunday for communion.”* I was struck—here, in dramatic liturgical symbol, the secular and the sacred are brought together with powerful historical force. How did we ever

separate them? What became of religion that believed its duty was to change its society on behalf of justice?

William Wilberforce and his group of friends profoundly changed the political and social climate of their time. Wilberforce was a convert of the religious revivals that transformed 18th-century England. His life and his vocation as a Member of Parliament were profoundly changed by his newfound faith; Wilberforce became a force for moral politics. His mentor, John Newton, who worked in the slave trade before he became a minister, became well known for writing the beloved hymn "Amazing Grace." Later, he used his influence as a religious leader to lead the battle against slavery. In the light of his efforts, we can read his immortal words "*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me*" not merely as a testimony of private guilt and piety, but also of turning away from the sin of trafficking in human flesh. His conversion produced a social and political transformation as well as a personal one.

The same became true of Wilberforce, who first heard Newton speak when he was young but regarded his real conversion as confirmed following a series of conversations in 1785-86. At the conclusion of their conversations, Newton said: "*The Lord has raised you up for the good of the church and the good of the nation.*" Two years later Wilberforce introduced his first anti-slave-trade motion into Parliament. **It was defeated, and would be defeated nine more times until it passed in 1807.** It was a historic and moral victory, but Wilberforce wouldn't be satisfied until slavery was abolished altogether. A new Wilberforce biography notes, "probably the last letter" John Wesley ever wrote encouraged Wilberforce: "*Oh, be not weary in well-doing. Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might.*" Wilberforce continued working tirelessly toward that goal, year after year. **Finally, in 1833, the House of Commons passed a bill abolishing slavery, and Wilberforce died three days later, his work finally done."**

Wilberforce's life is a testament to the power of conversion and the persistence of faith. We need a new generation of William Wilberforces. The history from earlier centuries can inform a new generation of Christians in the struggle about how to reunite faith and social justice for our time."²

At a time when God's vision of establishing justice is not yet reality, Habakkuk calls us to join him in trusting God, remaining faithful, and working for justice. The prophet and people are directed to maintain a faithful commitment to God's justice and

² Jim Wallis, Heart and Minds, Revival for Justice, Sojourners, March 2007.

to persist in God's principles, even when that justice seems to be absent from the world around us.

The poet Wendell Berry wrote, “**Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.**” The righteous, the truly faithful, those who long for and work for justice not just in their own lives but in their nation as well, they will receive the strength to go on, not because the world is just (it isn't) and not because the world rewards those who work for justice (it often hurts or even kills them), but because they are possessed by the Lord's larger vision of the way things should be.

For the early Christians, who were regularly persecuted, their period of suffering demanded great trust in the reliability of God's promises in Jesus, the kind of believing that inspired one to endure in spite of the circumstances. The Letter to the Hebrews quotes Habakkuk in counseling believers to endure in the face of persecution and suffering. Hebrews 10:32-39,

*“But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. **For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.** For yet*

*“in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but **my righteous one will live by faith.***

My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.”

But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.”

Through Habakkuk, God is urging trust and endurance in tough times. Habakkuk challenges us to remain committed to the larger vision of God's justice and to work for it even in the face of circumstances that appear to contradict its reality. The tension between this vision of a just God and the world we live in is often stretched to the breaking point. It was for Habakkuk and other faithful Jews in the 6th century B.C., it was for persecuted Christians in the Roman Empire. And today each tragedy, whether individual or communal, national or international revives this tension and reminds us to remember Habakkuk's vision of faithful and steadfast endurance – such as that shown by people through the ages like William Wilberforce.