

“What’s the Outlook from Your Lookout?”

Habakkuk Chapter 1

Series: How Long O Lord? Week 1

The Woodside Church

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How’s the outlook from your lookout? For seven months our homes have become like lookout towers. We look out on the world through TV, phones and the internet. So how does the world look from your vantage point? From what I am hearing and seeing, things do not look very good. The coronavirus still stalks the land driving up spikes here and there. Most schools and colleges meet only online and those which attempt to open are abruptly reversing their decision. Hurricanes, tornadoes and wildfires ravage the landscape in record numbers. Businesses are declaring bankruptcy. Political attacks and counter attacks are tearing our nation, our communities and our families asunder. And almost every week there is new cellphone footage of more black citizens shot, injured or killed sparking peaceful protests and fiery riots.

Since the start of 2020, some of you shared with me the outlook from your lookout is not good. You are praying for a solution to a problem...and you’re still waiting. Maybe you’re waiting to find a mate or to heal a painful marriage. Maybe you’re waiting to find a job, change your career, keep your business open. Maybe you’re waiting to get pregnant or to figure out how to raise a troubled child or teen. Maybe you’re waiting to get back medical tests, undergo surgery or recover from depression or addiction. Maybe you’re waiting for a loved one to recover from an illness or to be released from suffering.

Waiting. At times you want to cry, “How long O Lord?” How long must I wait for an answer from you? How long must this injustice go on? How much long must we suffer? Sometimes you may feel like giving up or giving in. What do you do when the outlook from your lookout is so dark?

There was a man who asked the same question. His name is Habakkuk. Now repeat after me: Habakkuk. It’s amazing that someone with such a long name left such a short book – just three chapters. He lived over 2,600 years ago but his words are as timely as today’s News. In these three chapters, Habakkuk has a conversation with God. Well it’s more like a shouting match. He is frustrated, depressed and bitter about the world he sees from his lookout. So he yells,

How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted. (Habakkuk 1:2-4)

Habakkuk lives about 600 years before Jesus. A century before him, the northern kingdom of Israel was devastated and deported by the Assyrian Empire. All that remains is the tiny southern kingdom of Judah where Habakkuk lives - perhaps in the capital city Jerusalem. From his lookout Habakkuk sees violence, destruction, strife, conflict, wickedness, wrong in his community. He especially cries to God for justice. He says justice is paralyzed, perverted, never prevails. In the Bible justice is both civil and spiritual, horizontal and vertical, how we treat people and how we treat God. The

people in Habakkuk's time are doing badly in both directions. They worship idols, bribe judges, cheat their workers, mistreat the poor, commit violence and get away with all of it.

So Habakkuk cries out to God. "Do you see what is going on down here Lord? How long are you going to let them get away with this? Why do you let injustice run wild?" He is tired of waiting for God to clean up the mess in Judah. He wants answers and he wants them now. Eventually God gives him an answer. But it isn't the answer Habakkuk wants to hear. God says,

Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. (Habakkuk 1:5-7)

As the Assyrian empire devastated and deported the northern kingdom of Israel, so now the Babylonian empire is about to descend and destroy the southern kingdom of Judah. You can almost hear old Habakkuk say, "Uh, God...that isn't what I had in mind."

Why would God send enemy armies to attack His chosen people? Perhaps you even wonder, "Does God do that today? Does He punish us as He did the Israelites?" Certainly God can discipline us for our disobedience. He is a just God who takes sin seriously. Since we all sin every day, the fact we humans survive at all is a testimony to His grace, mercy and forgiveness. Some have asked me, "Did God send the coronavirus?" or more personally, "Am I struggling and suffering because God is punishing me?" I counsel you not to jump to that conclusion. Scripture tells us the more common way God disciplines us is not by sending suffering but by allowing us to have our way. Paul teaches in Romans.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts... (Romans 1:21-24)

The people in Habakkuk's time worship the gods and idols of the Babylonians. They continually break God's law and practice injustice. So the Lord lets them have their wish: He gives them over into the hands of the lawless Babylonians. Habakkuk is shocked. It is not what he wants or expects.

The Bible says: We reap what we sow. Often we create our own mess. Paul warns us,

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. Galatians 6:7-10

If we do wrong we will get wrong. If indulge selfishness, we will reap destruction. If we practice injustice we will get lawlessness. If we ignore injustice it will exact a heavy toll. If we sow good, we will grow good. If we practice good, God will give a harvest of good.

For our week of vacation, my family rented a house near the battlefields of Gettysburg. In the morning I rode my bike and watched the sunrise over the quiet, serene rolling farmland. So breathtakingly beautiful, it is easy to forget the horrific carnage which unfolded over the three days before July 4, 1863. On Cemetery Ridge, in the Peach Orchard, the Wheatfield, the Devil's Den, Little Round Top and Culp's Hill the Union suffered 23,000 casualties while the Confederates sustained as many as 28,000 casualties. 51,000 men killed, wounded or missing in just three days – the bloodiest battle in American history. When the guns ceased, the bodies littered those farmlands for months. The armies left them behind for the townsfolk to heal and bury.

That week I read a book on the life of President James Madison – considered by many the father of our Constitution in 1787. Madison was from Virginia, a close friend of Washington and Jefferson, was also, like them a slaveholder. Yet he felt deeply conflicted. Noah Feldman writes,

...Madison aspired to a world in which slavery would be abolished. They knew that, in various more civilized corners of the world, the journey to abolition had already begun, and they felt ashamed of their association with slavery. They just did not feel sufficiently ashamed to do anything about it, at least not while their livelihoods and those of their families depended on the labor of enslaved persons. They could compromise on slavery in the constitution – because they had always compromised on slavery in their own lives.¹

When it came to the evil institution of slavery, Madison and many of the Founders were conflicted and compromising. They didn't stop slavery in 1787 so it had to be stopped in 1865. In our Constitution they sowed the seeds which led to the bloody harvest on the hills of Gettysburg and other Civil War battlefields. In the Gettysburg Address and later in his Second Inaugural Address, President Lincoln recognized the blood spilled in this horrific four year war was the price our nation paid for the horror, abuse and enslavement of African people. Lincoln said,

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." (Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1864)

Our nation sowed slavery, nurtured slavery, compromised on slavery, overlooked slavery, was conflicted about slavery – no matter what we did – the result was the same – a harvest of blood in the Civil War. New estimates of the death toll for the Civil War reach up to 750,000.

¹ Noah Feldman, *The Three Lives of James Madison: Genius, Partisan, President* (New York: Random House, 2017) p. 164.

What is the point of this history lesson? God says to Habakkuk, to Abraham Lincoln and to us – what we sow as a nation is what we will reap. One of the discoveries I’ve made during the recent national conversation about racism is slavery did not end with the Civil War. It evolved. It turned into segregation, Jim Crow laws, poll taxes, lynchings, restricted real estate, unjust incarceration, and a host of other practices and laws designed to keep Black people in their place and deny them the same rights and opportunities that I as a white person enjoy. If we continue to deny or avoid these ugly truths, we will be just as conflicted and compromising as James Madison. We will continue to sow seeds and reap a harvest of injustice and violence. If we continue to ignore or avoid our neighbors who are poor, hungry, unemployed, addicted, burdened with severe mental illness we will reap a harvest of despair and destruction. If we continue to not wear masks, not socially distance, not wash our hands, and ignore what state and health officials advise us, we will sow Coronavirus seeds and reap a harvest that hurts our community and kills family and friends.

What can we do? Let’s begin where Habakkuk did – by opening ourselves up and asking God what we should do. Here are some ways to do that:

- Join us for the next two weeks of this **Habakkuk series**. Jamilla Stafford, a member of Woodside who was the first to share her story in the video from our African American members will help us understand and apply God’s guidance to Habakkuk.
- Sign up for a new group called **Overcoming Prejudice Together** starting Thursday, September 10, 7 pm – It’s a diverse group of Woodside people who will learn from God’s Word and each other how we can overcome racism through faith, education and alliance.
- Attend the **Exponential Roundtable** at Woodside on Monday, October 12, 1-6 pm. We will bring together Christians from all over the Delaware Valley to hear talks by diverse Christian speakers on how the Church can unite to be a force for good in these dark times.
- Join us for the fall Spiritual Growth Campaign – **Kingdom Come**. The core of Jesus’ teaching is the Kingdom of God. Starting September 27 we will discover the secrets of the Kingdom in 9 parables from the Gospel of Luke. Find out how He wants us to live as citizens of His Kingdom. We encourage every Growth Group to do this study and I especially encourage you to consider starting a Microchurch group for this study. Just find 3 friends to join you. It’s easy. We’ll show you how.

With such much injustice and violence around him, Habakkuk’s first step is to turn to God in prayer. That was the same step Benjamin Franklin suggested to the delegates at the Constitutional convention in Philadelphia. Franklin was 81 and in poor health. He said little during the Convention. You may be surprised to learn Franklin was a slaveholder but he freed his slaves and became an abolitionist at the end of his life. Franklin was also more of a philosopher than a believer in Jesus. Yet as heated arguments began flying back and forth, Franklin asked to speak. What he suggested surprised everyone. He recommended they pause, pray and ask God for guidance.

I have lived, sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – *that God governs in the affairs of men*. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?” Without God’s help Franklin concluded, “we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel. We shall be divided by our little partial local interests; our projects will

be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and a bye word down to future ages.”²

Let’s go up to our lookout towers and ask God what to do so we don’t build another Tower of Babel.

² Ibid., page 139.