

## God's Solutions Habakkuk 1:1-11

(read vv. 1-4) Although Habakkuk wrote this book around 600 B.C., Ancient Israel didn't have a corner on the kinds of problems he complained about. Strife and contention? Check. Is there anything else on our TV screens? Occupy Wallstreet and Black Lives Matter protesters fill the streets, and the candidates from both major parties seem to spend most of their time attacking one another. Presidential debates have degenerated into junior-high shouting matches, and Congress is so gridlocked that a budget hasn't been passed in years.

Spoiling and violence? Check. The Middle East is once again convulsed in war, and millions of refugees are flooding into Europe, rocking the foundations of cultures that are centuries old. Meanwhile, the wheels seem to be coming off of American society, in a way we haven't seen since the late 1960's, with riots and protests and terrorist attacks seemingly everywhere. Just this weekend, there was another shooting at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio.

But all these problems aren't just in faraway places. A year and a half before the Columbine shootings in Littleton, Colorado, a similar incident happened at Pearl High School right here in Mississippi. More recently, a co-ed at Mississippi State, a graduate of Warren Central, and her fiancée, who grew up in Starkville, have admitted that they wanted to join ISIS and become terrorists. And less than a month ago a Claiborne County man was savagely murdered by four other young men – who knows why.

Yes, Habakkuk would certainly understand our own feelings of helplessness in the face of all these social ills. In his days the law, the administration of justice hadn't simply become slack, numb, paralyzed.

No, wrong judgment was proceeding, justice itself was being perverted to the point that wicked people seemed to be everywhere, getting away with everything. Sound familiar?

But perhaps the most disturbing thing about Habakkuk's plea is the complaint he directs toward God Himself. Things have gotten so bad, he wonders if God is even listening. He wonders if God cares anymore.

And maybe you've wondered about that too. Maybe, in the midst of all the lies, all the persecution, all the violence, all the cultural chaos, you've wondered where God is, and why He allows all these horrible things to go on.

If that's the case, then the first thing we need to learn from Habakkuk is that it's okay to turn these thoughts into prayers. It's okay to bring our confusion and even our anger into God's presence. It's perfectly legitimate to keep on praying that God will straighten things out, and even to inject a note of urgency into our prayers.

And why is that? Because when we are lifting up our problems to God in prayer, we are by definition looking in the right direction, we are looking to God to answer them. After all, we don't usually pray these sorts of prayers about things we can fix – we just get busy fixing them. Prayer, at least this sort of impassioned, helpless plea, is thus at root an expression of trust in God.

And so when we encounter all these overwhelming social and political ills, we don't need to give ourselves over to worry or to despair. Instead, the first thing we need to do is to pray. When you read a disturbing news item on the internet, don't just click on the next story – stop and pray about what you've just read. If you're watching the nightly news, press the mute button during the commercials and pray about what you've just heard. And the more overwhelmed we

feel, the more hopeless the situation seems, the more we all need to lift those particular concerns to God. For He, after all, is the Only One Who can solve any of these huge problems, right?

But there's another thing we can learn from the first few verses of Habakkuk: for if God is the only One Who can solve huge social problems, and if we need to trust Him to fix what we can't fix, He sometimes solves these sorts of problems in unexpected, and even seemingly disastrous ways. (read vv. 5-11)

For look at how God answers Habakkuk's complaint. God says that He will indeed bring an end to all the wickedness, to all the injustice, to all the corruption in Judea. But He will do it by allowing the Chaldeans, the people living in the area we now call southern Iraq, to invade and conquer Judea.

And God doesn't mince any words about these Chaldeans. He admits in verses 6-8 that they are, on the whole, quite a nasty piece of work: bitter and hasty, terrible and dreadful. He knows that they are the sorts of brigands who invade and conquer places that don't rightfully belong to them. He admits that they aren't in the least bit pious. They don't look to God's law to show them the right way of judgment, and they don't look to God to give them dignity and honor – no, they look to themselves for these things.

And God is quite upfront about what these terrible people will in fact do. In their overwhelming military might they will show no respect for any rightful authorities. They will scoff at any kings and show scorn for any princes who try to stand in their way. They will tear down any stronghold that tries to hold out against them, and they will carry off as many captives as there are grains of sand on the seashore. And all the while they are doing God's bidding, they will give all the glory to their own strength, to their own power.

And all this is, in fact, what would happen just a few years after Habakkuk wrote these words. For the Babylonians did become the dominant power in the region. And they did invade Judea. And they did capture the city of Jerusalem, slaughtering thousands and destroying Solomon's temple. And they did carry off the few remaining refugees into exile in Babylon. And there the people of God would remain for 70 years, until the Persians defeated the Babylonians and allowed some of the Jews to return and rebuild the Temple.

So, make no mistake – God was planning to answer Habakkuk's prayers for justice. God would bring an end to all the oppression, all the corruption, all the violence in which His people were engaged. But the answer wasn't exactly what Habakkuk was expecting. It was a whole lot more than he bargained for.

But this wasn't just a problem for Habakkuk. For the fact is that God has continued to do the same sort of thing throughout human history. Many times, deeply rooted social ills have not in fact been solved by nips and tucks, not by legislative remedies or regulative changes or court decisions, but by cataclysmic upheavals. And it seems that the deeper the social ills go, the more traumatic are the events that finally bring them to an end.

And we don't have to go very far back in our own history to prove this point, do we? Just look at the institution of slavery in our own country from 1620 until 1865. It was totally unnecessary – after all, both tobacco and cotton were successfully and profitably cultivated on small farms. No, the only rationale for slavery was to satisfy greed, to allow much greater production of a valuable commodity than one family could reasonably grow on their own.

And didn't slavery make our society a whole lot like what Habakkuk described in verses 1-4? Wasn't slavery, at root, based on violence,

forcing people to do work for which they were not paid? Didn't it engender much strife and contention, first within the South itself, and then between the regions of the country? And can anyone doubt that slavery perverted justice, as our lawmakers and courts continued to cover with the mantle of legality the gravest form of oppression?

So, how did God bring an end to this deeply rooted social problem? It wasn't through the efforts of the American Colonization Society to persuade masters to free their slaves and transport them back to Africa. It wasn't through the machinations of the Congress, carefully balancing the number of free and slave states, deciding which territories would allow slavery and which wouldn't. And it wasn't by getting a President elected who promised he would prevent the expansion of slavery into any more territory.

No, slavery was only destroyed by a terrible war, a war that was nothing less than catastrophic in all its costs. More Americans died in the War Between the States than in any other war we have ever fought. It cost the lives of over 2 percent of all Americans, and the economic results in the South were simply disastrous. The abolition of slavery meant that one half of all the region's agricultural property simply disappeared. After the war, sharecropping became the only viable way to capitalize farming pursuits, but that non-cash system in turn trapped generations of both whites and blacks in poverty. The South didn't really start to see good economic times until after World War II – come to think of it, we were mired in poverty about the same amount of time that the Ancient Jews were in exile in Babylon.

So, what can we learn from this passage in Habakkuk? Prayer is of course the proper response to whatever intractable problems we face, because we must trust God to solve them. But we must also trust God to solve them in His time and in His way. And we must realize that

God's solutions sometimes end up being far more costly than we could ever imagine.

But here's one more thought – could it be that some of the overwhelming disruptions in our society and throughout our world, could it be that some of the terrible situations we see as problems are actually being used by God to solve other even more intractable issues? While we are probably too close to the situation in America to discern God's will clearly, that certainly seems to be the case overseas.

For example, we've all prayed that God would do something about the violence, the injustice and the oppression that the ISIS thugs are causing in Iraq and Syria. We decry the martyrdom of many of our Christian brothers and sisters and wonder what God is doing about it. But at the same time, the violence of ISIS is giving many Muslims in the area a good hard look at the essence of Islam. And the willingness of many Christians to die rather than to deny Jesus is providing a clear and compelling alternative for them. As a result, we are hearing of many people turning away from Islam throughout the region. Could it be that God is using ISIS to undermine Islam and to bring many people to Himself? It certainly seems like it.

And could the same sort of thing be happening in this country, right under our noses? Could God, for example, eventually use the fractiousness and the ineffectualness of our modern political system to bring us Americans to a deeper reliance on God instead of on our politicians? Could God use the increasing sexual confusion of our times to cause us Americans to return to a more Biblical concept of marriage as a permanent, mutually self-sacrificial covenant? And if God allows us to experience hard economic times again, as seems increasingly likely, could the loss of our material things cause us to value Christ and the things of the Spirit the way that we should?

We don't know, and trying to figure all that out is really beside the point. No, it's enough for us to know that we need to pray, and pray earnestly especially about the sorts of social problems that seem impossible for us, trusting God to do what we cannot. But no matter how difficult and dangerous the times may become, of this we can be certain: God is in control. And God can use even the worst of our circumstances to accomplish His good and perfect will.