

Series: Corona...Corona...*Habakkuk*

Sermon: "God, I Have a Question"

Text: *Habakkuk 1:1-4*

RGJR/FBCCS/6-14-20 UNEDITED

- Good morning! Good Afternoon! Good Evening! Whenever and wherever you are, thank you for thinking about God's Word with me.
- God's Word—Scripture—is such a gracious gift to us. The Creator who made the galaxies in the night sky gave mere creatures perfect Words so that we could know him and image him in his creation.
- We don't have to make up the nature or the story of our God as we go along to meet our personal needs and preferences or even to deal with our personal fears. We can know Him as he wants to be known because of His Word.
- You probably don't remember or never even knew the *series* title for all my sermons since mid-March. Unless you have read the *quick and dirty* manuscripts that accompany them. A bit *tongue in cheek*, with the melody of an old song in my head, the series has been named "*Corona...Corona.*"
- My original proposal for a quick update to the FBC website had the song in mind and, instead of the beautiful pictures of hands you see there now, Corona beer bottles for buttons. Some of the elders thought it was a little too early for that.
- The "*Corona...Corona*" title struck me in the moment and stuck with me because it was, certainly memorable, very different than my normal academic sounding titles and spoke to me of the *disruption* of the norm I was feeling. I never ever dreamed I would name a sermon series "*Corona...Corona!*" I mean, why would I *ever* be in circumstances to do that?!?
- But, here we are, nearly 3 months later and I still have cheap, Mexican beer in my head. That beer, I won't tell you what most Mexicans think of it, disrupted what I was used to—something very important to me—teaching the Word of the Creator God.

- I thought it best not to try to continue our study in *Genesis* until we could be together again. By-the-way, no exact promises, but that is likely much closer now. I had to stop a dream of teaching the big picture for understanding God's Word in our newly started, first course of Tyrannus—"Inductive Bible Study." I needed to put Galatians and Ephesians classes in AWANA on hold. Our Sunday AM "Yutes" discussions that always move us to ask, "What does God's Word say," were also cancelled for a time.
- I won't go into the "why," but I have purposely played the "*luddite*" by not trying to duplicate these teachings online. There was reasoning to that madness but it might not have seemed so reasonable had I known I would still be thinking "Coronas" in June.
- One thing this has done for me is clarified even more the importance of knowing God's Word so that we know the God of His Word—as He revealed Himself and not just our own little, designer gods of the moment. By-the-way, elsewhere, those "gods" are called "*idols*" and they can't help us.
- I've told you, more than once, from up front on Sunday, that my overwhelming preference is to teach through books of the Bible. This is in contrast to picking current themes or devising "how-to" sermons that seem to meet immediate felt needs in many of us.
- I know that I am self-focused enough that the themes I pick will eventually become more a picture of what I want and think I need than what God knows I need for me and for you.
- Eventually, my topical sermons can become more supports for my wish-dreams of "life" and "church" than for knowing the God of Scripture in order to show the world what He is like. So, preaching through Bible books can be a safeguard against selfish imbalance.

- I've needed to address some topics that were on all our minds over these last weeks. I'm OK with doing that. If I ignore them when they are screaming at all of us, most people won't hear the bigger ideas of Bible books. I think I have done that.
- But now, I need some balance. I need a check on my own ideas about what is going on. I need to look at the full idea of a book of the Bible that is relevant but that can point me, and hopefully then you as well, to what the God who made the universe thought we should know about Him and His ways in times like these.
- With this in mind, I ran into an old friend last week. As we were "social distancing," he asked me some very important questions—big questions that are not easy to think about and maybe even frightening to think about.
- Of course, I couldn't help but hear his questions—questions about God's nature—questions about the God revealed in the ***Scriptures*** in the context of Corona...Corona and the new scattered violence and destruction mixed with calls for "justice."
- The Bible, and the God self-revealed in its words, are not simply dead, academic concepts from the distant past.
- We are assured that these words with their ideas are "***living and powerful***"—that they are designed and able "***pierce deeply***" into human realities—able to cut through the disinformation and deception—including, very importantly, self-deception and to get at the reality—the truth of our ***thoughts and even our heart motives***.
- As I interacted with my old friend in a new setting of *Corona...Corona*—a setting neither of us had experienced before—he encouraged me to seek the truth underneath the truth—the foundational reality—in answering the questions he had forced upon my thinking.

- He encouraged me, at least for the time, to get back to a balanced portion of God's Word instead of simply following my feelings and perception of the needs of the people I love. I agreed to do that—at least for the next few weeks.
- I think many of you know my friend as well. He has a strange name with lots of "K's" in it. I often misspell it but it is "H-A-B-A-K-K-U-K." If I pronounce as he does it is ch-BAK-uk. In English, we usually just say "Habakkuk."
- Habakkuk was one of the "**minor** prophets" in the Old Testament but there was nothing "**minor**" about his message back when it was recorded and there is nothing "**minor**" about its TRUTH in our present circumstances.
- There are differences of opinion about exactly when Habakkuk lived but it was nearer the ignominious end of Southern Kingdom of Judah than its glorious beginning.
- The Northern Kingdom—the 10 Northern tribes sometimes called "Israel" by themselves had already been defeated and taken into exile by the mighty Assyrians back in 722 BC. Now the last two southern tribes labeled "Judah," were closer to being ripped from their homes by devastating exile as well.
- Of course, we know that God had promised this exact, painful outcome to His people if they refused to trust Him for their lives rather than trusting in their own autonomous abilities.
- They were made to be "His People" not for the sake of making their own name in the world but for lifting up His name as they imaged Righteousness and spread real life throughout the earth.
- From *Genesis* 3 on, it has always been the same problem. "*Leave me alone God, I am building my own tower and I'm naming it after me!*"

- Contrary to all the talking-heads, politicians and so-called experts shouting out their vapid wisdom so easily these days with our new media, the problem remains the same today.
- It will not be solved until the reality of a sinful human drive to be autonomous from God is acknowledged. There just is no other true answer.
- Habakkuk gives us a short **prophetic** book in a time when God's people, as a nation, were, for the most part, not trusting God and finding life in Him.
- On top of that, add to it the rise of another destructive, god-less people who were an "existential threat" to the much smaller, remaining political Kingdom that had been the 12 tribes of Israel.
- Our goal here will be to hear the big questions the prophet asks—and he asks some big ones. Then, to hear the answers, God gives—they too are big answers.
- It would be a mistake to think we should equate directly the characters and people in the prophecy with people and groups in our day. It just doesn't work that way.
- In Habakkuk's day, there was Habakkuk and some other Israelites that knew what God had said about trusting Him for LIFE and that's how they desired to live. Then there was most of the rest of "God's people" who had decided to go the autonomous route and live life their way rather than God's way. Finally, there was rising storm-cloud of a foreign nation of people who never intended to live God's way and made no attempt to fake it. These folks were vicious. They wanted only power. They were also committed idolaters—rejecting Israel's God if they even cared to know anything about Him.
- So, we might be tempted to equate these three groups with those some see as "godly AMERICAN patriots"—saved Americans that

aren't very godly or patriotic and then those others out there that are just not part of godliness or American ways at all.

- Look, the nation of America is not the nation of Israel. Americans are not God's chosen people--nationally as Israel was chosen to be his people nationally. Christians have sometimes made that mistake historically and it gets you into some real binds theologically because it isn't the reality of Scripture.
- However, it is fair to see that, even with the differences, some of the circumstances are similar and raise questions about God and His ways with righteous and unrighteous people that fit both historical contexts and can teach us foundational truths about God so we know HIM and not our own, personal little "gods."
- Let me break my habit of presenting things inductively all the time by at least telling you in advance some of the biggest questions Habakkuk asks outright of God or at least clearly infers:
- ***"Can't you see this unrighteous mess God? Am I more righteous than you because I can certainly see it?"***
- ***"Well, then, can't you do something about it? Can't you make the world like you say in your own righteous Law the world was intended to be?"***
- ***"Is it possible you just don't care God? If so, why would I trust you?"***
- Gutsy questions! Big questions. Questions academics ponder in the realm of "theodicy."
- If God is good why is there evil? Even more importantly why does he allow evil to continue and often triumph over righteousness? Or even more difficult how can he use even the evil of humans against that evil to accomplish his righteous plans?

- What we think as "free will" given to humans goes a long way in answering these questions but don't look to Habakkuk to delve into that more modern debate.
- He understands God has the right to do what he wants, but from his perspective, living in the midst of unrighteousness defeating righteousness, he is confused with how this might fit with who God says he is.
- I get that. You get that don't you? For example, I used to argue a great deal with God about murder of innocent babies by abortion. "Why don't you stop this now God? If I understand your righteousness, it seems like you would not let this evil continue one more minute."
- I could tell you what I learned about God from Word and how I got to know Him better from that so that I can now usually face this evil differently. See, for some of you, even saying what I just said suggests I have learned to rationalize or minimize the evil of abortion. That is not true at all but the potential misunderstanding is there.
- This is what Habakkuk was thinking and feeling. *"Look, God, it is wrong so you should fix that right now or I will wonder if I have the wrong picture of your righteousness, power, and person!"*
- With all this in mind—that we are looking for the big questions and answers that help us know our God as he reveals himself not how we make him out to be--let's get to the first few verses of Habakkuk's prophecy. Look at the introductory statement of just verse 1 to start—and again, I am reading out of the New International Version:
• **1:1 The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.**

- *"Oracle"* is not a word we use often but it is connected with the content of prophecy or something revealed by a "god"—in this case it is revealed by the One True Creator God of the universe.
- The word has an interesting connection to the idea of a "burden"—a weight one carries. Although the word translated "oracle" here might not carry all the *weight* of this *weight* idea, it does remind me that prophecy is a *weighty* matter.
- My point is, people love to proclaim themselves official and unofficial prophets of God telling us *"God said this to me"* or *"God told me this for you,"* be careful. Prophesying was more than a "cool" thing to do in Habakkuk's day.
- It was a matter of life and death and it usually was a very heavy burden to bear. One knew truth that others rejected. One was supposed to tell that truth even when that meant personal rejection.
- I won't make too much out of this next detail but I can't get it out of my exegetical thinking. Please note this label of "prophetic oracle" a "burden to bear" from God himself, comes at the very beginning of the book not simply as the introduction to the words of God himself a little later.
- That says to me that God is involved in this whole communication. It wasn't that one day Habakkuk just happened to think these thoughts and God said, "Oh, I had better answer him!" No, this whole question and answer session is God's communication. God wants these big questions exposed in his people and answered for his people.
- Some use this example of Habakkuk's questions and other pretty tough ones in Psalms and other places to not just grant permission for believers to question God but to turn it into a virtue no matter how and when it is done.

- God can handle my questions but sometimes, as in Job's case, my questioning can be impertinent. Let's remember, God is God and he really doesn't owe me any answers to justify himself.
- Next, verses 2-4 are a long "lamenting" question done poetically with Hebrew parallelism that gets lost a bit in the translation but the point remains as you will see. Let me read them and then make just a few expanding comments...

²How long, O LORD, must I call for help,

but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, "Violence!"

but you do not save?

³Why do you make me look at injustice?

Why do you tolerate wrong?

Destruction and violence are before me;

there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴Therefore the law is paralyzed,

and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,

so that justice is perverted.

- The "how long" that Habakkuk has been struggling in this unrighteous mess for some time. And, he hasn't just been *calling* to YAWEH, the Covenant LORD God of Israel who has made promises to His people, he has *been crying out* or even *shouting out* his prayers in his confusion and need.
- God "*not listening*" is not simply that God cannot hear but that God doesn't even seem to pay attention—doesn't seem to be interested in these prayers.
- Habakkuk has been shouting "Look at the violence—the evil cruelty" perpetrated on one another among your people God—LOOK! But God, you don't save those who are being wronged and hurt!"

- God, you force me to keep looking at all this wrong—all this evil and the vanity of your people—all this “injustice” is the word the NIV uses. God, you won’t let me turn it off the cable news channels or keep it out of my updates. I can’t live my life without being confronted by its impact in quarantines and curfews.
- But God, you just seem to tolerate it—even act naively as if it isn’t really happening! ***It is happening God! Look, can’t you see what is going on??!!***
- I mean, God, just look at the *destruction*—the wasting, the robbery, the spoilage. Look at all the violence God!
- Everyone seems angry God. There is strife and conflict in nearly every human encounter. It feels like you can’t ever say the right words anymore. Somebody is mad no matter what!
- God, you gave us the Law—the righteous Torah—that describes how we should treat one another to honor your image. But, you’ve let it reach a point among your own people that your righteous precepts mean nothing anymore—they are without any power in peoples’ lives.
- God, can’t you see this means justice—or better your righteous ways—never turn out—living your way God never seems to win the day. Even among your own people, the Israelites of Judah, the real God-trusters are always on the losing side and the Self-trusters seem to always get their way—and it’s not *your* way!
- The Un-righteous Self-trusters among your people have us righteous God-trusters surrounded—we are massively out-numbered God.
- God, this means righteousness—your way to real LIFE never wins the day. People of ambitious autonomy—again, people among your own people—pervert life and how people see reality and truth. They twist it beyond any recognition of what you actually revealed.
- ***Can’t you see God? Can’t you do anything God? Don’t you care God?***

- Will God answer these questions for Habakkuk? We shall see. He certainly won't answer them the way Habakkuk wants them answered. But, again, is that what the book is about and why we are studying it together? No, it is not!
- As I was going through my little section expanding on the words in the text, no doubt some of us could easily assign people and groups to the righteous and unrighteous sides of Habakkuk's dilemma. However, I caution us again to be careful. This is not the point of the prophetic burden for us.
- Keep in mind, in these verses, the prophet is still only pointing out to God the evil among His own people. The best parallel, if you must have one, would be all the folks who call themselves Christians in the world today—claim to be God's people in Jesus.
- Habakkuk is not railing against unbelievers. He is screaming to God that those who claim to belong to God are the worst enemies of those who trust God.
- I'll let you put that in your free-grace application pipe and smoke it for a while. It has deep implications for what we call "the church" and what we do as "church."
- God, what are we supposed to do when even much of the church today—those who say they are yours—are really those who trust themselves instead of you for making this life work?
- ***God, can't you see the mess this confusion has made in what people think of as your church? Can't you fix it God? God, don't you care?***
- But, as fitting as it might feel for us in many ways, we are surely not yet at the point of this prophetic burden.
- Habakkuk certainly has not given us any answers in these first 4 verses. God will give us an answer or two in the verses that come for next week.

- Rather than leave you with a sense of, "Yes, that's right! The world is in an unrighteous mess again today and it seems God doesn't care!"...let me give you a hint as to one major thread Habakkuk will pull out of this tangled mess of how God works in accomplishing His plan in this unrighteous world.
- Remember, from watching the patterns in *Genesis*, one way or another, ***God will accomplish His righteous, perfect LIFE-giving plan for His creation!***
- Is my part to critique its means and timing in case God needs my suggestions. Up to this point that is what Habakkuk has done and he is a righteous prophet with an oracle from God!
- Consider that one idea—one thread in Habakkuk's book gets borrowed and repeated more than others by New Testament writers.
- I'll send you on a quest to find out what that unbreakable, sustaining thread of truth was in Habakkuk's day, in the days of the New Testament writers and that remains unbreakable for us even today.
- You'll find it in the critical introduction to Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* 1:17—in his clearly clarifying letter to the *Galatians* 3:11 and then interestingly "tweaked" in *Hebrews* 10:38.
- CONTEXT! CONTEXT! CONTEXT!...for each of these. Why do they say the same thing Habakkuk wrote in his book for living in situations of unrighteousness like the one he found himself in?
- It's very interesting how this truth has been applied by some, forgotten by some and even misapplied by some later exegetes!