

# Habakkuk 1:2-4

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*Habakkuk complains to God as he witnesses wickedness and injustice that remain unpunished in his society.*

Habakkuk expressed his concerns regarding the wickedness and injustice that prevailed in Judah in his day. He began his protest with the interrogative phrase, *How long?* The phrase “*how long*” can be translated as “until when.” It indicates that a situation has been going on for some time. That was the case in Habakkuk’s day. The people of Judah ignored the laws of God continually, and the prophet saw no terminus in sight.

Therefore, he cried out, “*How long.*” The Suzerain-Vassal style covenant Israel had entered into with God contained specific remedies against Israel if they forsook the principles of self-governance and loving their neighbor as themselves as prescribed in the terms of the covenant, which can be summarized as “Love and obey God by loving your neighbor as yourself” ([Read our article on Suzerain-Vassal Treaties](#)). This was so Israel would be separated from the world (holy) and love rather than exploit. Israel was assigned to serve a priestly function, showing a better way to surrounding nations (Exodus 19:6). If they failed in their task, the covenant provided that they would be disciplined, and perish from the land (Deuteronomy 8:19-20).

Habakkuk then is asking “When are you going to exercise discipline upon Israel and stop this injustice?” Although the prophet was concerned about the future of Judah, he had a correct view of God. He did not complain against God or speak evil about God. Instead, he petitioned God to act in the manner in which God had promised to act. He took his burdens to God in prayer. And knowing that he could solicit God’s help for relief, *Habakkuk* addressed God directly, saying, *How long, O LORD, will I call for help?* Habakkuk desired that Judah would return to being holy and do its priestly job; he was grieved to see exploitation in the place of love.

The term translated *LORD* is God’s covenant name, *Yahweh*. It means “The Existent One” and emphasizes that all that exists depends upon God for its existence (Colossians 1:17). It is the name that God disclosed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14, 15). The prophet spoke to God using His covenant name, *LORD*, to remind God of His covenant relationship with the people of Judah. Habakkuk belonged to God and depended on Him. He now calls upon God to intervene in his situation when he *called for help*.

The verb translated as *call for help* is “šaw‘â” in the Hebrew language. It often appears in retrospectives on past *distress* (2 Samuel 22:7; Psalm 18:6; 31:22). In such contexts, it means petitioning God to provide help in a dangerous situation. For example, Jonah reflected on his past experiences in the sea when he “cried for help from the depth of Sheol” (Jonah 2:2). Jonah concluded that the LORD “heard my voice” (Jonah 2:2). However, in our passage, *the LORD* had delayed His justice, therefore the prophet said, *How long will I call for help and You will not hear?* Habakkuk is in distress that he has petitioned God to cleanse Israel of injustice and God has yet to act.

The verb *hear* [“shama” in Hebrew] often expresses not just the physical act of listening but of responding positively to what is stated. It means to listen attentively to someone’s request and respond favorably to him. The verb is synonymous with the verb “obey” (Deuteronomy 6:4). In this case, Habakkuk desires God to answer his petition.

The prophet thought that God had not paid attention to his plea. So, he continued his lament and said, *I cry out to You, ‘Violence!’* The verb translated as *cry out* is “zā‘aq” in Hebrew. It often describes someone in acute distress who is seeking immediate assistance (Exodus 14:10; Numbers 12:13). The term translated as *violence* can apply to actions ranging from murder and rape to wickedness and bloodshed (Obadiah 1:10). It thus describes chaos and anarchy. Habakkuk does not observe a society that reflects self-governance, love for neighbors, and treating others with respect. He sees the opposite. *Violence* is the ultimate in exploitative behavior.

Israel had sunk to the exploitative standards of its neighbors, standards which God had punished by displacing them with Israel. Now, the covenant terms called for Israel to suffer a similar fate (Deuteronomy 8:19-20). God’s stated reason for destroying the earth by water during the time of Noah was because it had filled with violence (Genesis 6:11). God’s design is for humans to live in harmony, serving one another. His covenant with Israel laid out terms which would bring about this result, if observed. Now Habakkuk witnessed *violence* in place of neighborly love in the land of Judah and cried out to *the LORD*. But since *the LORD* did not provide relief quickly, Habakkuk thought He was inattentive. As he stated, *Yet You do not save*.

The verb *save* means to deliver or rescue someone from something. The context determines what is being rescued from what. God saved Israel from slavery when He rescued Israel out of the hand of Pharaoh and the Egyptians “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders” (Deuteronomy 26:8). In our passage, the prophet expected God to act quickly in his favor because *violence* was increasing in his society. He desired God to rescue Judah from corruption and wickedness, and restore it to its proper covenant behavior, based on obedience to God and service to one another.

The prophet Habakkuk, having witnessed such a level of wickedness in the land of Judah, petitioned God for justice. Yet, God did not provide relief for some time. He did not deliver the righteous people from the wicked ones when Habakkuk expected Him to do so. The delay caused Habakkuk distress. Thus, he petitioned God to know how much longer he should cry for help waiting for a positive response from God. He felt that his patience had come to an end.

The situation was horrible in Habakkuk’s day. After the death of Josiah, the leaders of Judah plunged into idolatry, persisted in disobedience, and led God’s people astray. As a godly man, Habakkuk thought God would not allow wicked people to dominate Judah. And as he continued to experience wickedness and injustice in Judah, he asked God, *Why do You make me see iniquity and cause me to look on wickedness?*

The term *iniquity* (“āven” in Hebrew) is often used in prophetic literature to designate unlawful legal manipulations and social injustice (Micah 2:1). The term *wickedness* (“āmāl” in Hebrew) means trouble or wrongdoing. The psalmist David employed the terms *iniquity* and *wickedness*

in the same manner in Psalm 55, where he described the conditions that prevailed in the city of Jerusalem: “Day and night they go around her upon her walls and iniquity and mischief are in her midst” (Psalm 55:10). The specific sin observed by Habakkuk was *destruction and violence*. Habakkuk observed exploitation rather than service. This was in full violation of the Ten Commandments, and God’s provision for self-governance and service one to another.

Habakkuk observed the abundance of sins in Judah and the wickedness of the people. He was distressed that *the LORD*, the Holy One who sees and controls everything, remained inactive while the wicked ones triumphed. Thus, he declared, *Yes, destruction and violence are before me*.

The terms *destruction* and *violence* emphasize the truth that the people of Judah were getting wealthy through robbery and oppression rather than through service and hard labor. Wicked acts such as abuse of power, injustice, and oppressive deeds dominated the land of Judah. As a result, *strife exists and contention arises*. Strife is the opposite of self-control (Proverbs 15:18). It is folly (Proverbs 18:6). The people of Judah fought and quarreled among themselves because they lost their sense of belonging and became greedy. They no longer showed brotherly love to one another (Leviticus 19:18). Therefore, *the law is ignored*.

The term *law* (“Torah” in Hebrew) is used in a broad sense to refer to God’s instructions to His covenant people. This law was given in the format of an ancient Suzerain-Vassal treaty, and spelled out specific blessings for obedience, and cursings for violation ([Read our article on Suzerain-Vassal Treaties](#)).

The verb translated as *ignored* means to turn cold or to become ineffective. Simply put, the ordinances of God had little impact on the hearts of the people since they had selfish ambitions and were focused on serving their own appetites through exploitation of others, including violence. Because the people disregarded God’s law, *justice is never upheld*. This would imply that Judges rendered poor judgment. Perhaps they took bribes, or showed partiality to the rich and well-connected, in violation of the law (Deuteronomy 16:19-20) because *the wicked surround the righteous*. When there are so many wicked people, the influence of the righteous wanes.

The *wicked* in Judah were those who took advantage of others for their selfish gain. By contrast, the *righteous* were those who tried their best to advantage others or to be a blessing to them. In other words, the *righteous* served other people while the *wicked* put themselves before others. God’s covenant law called for Israelites to serve one another, and promised that the resulting society would be greatly blessed. Instead, Israel had sunk into a mode of being exploitive.

The *wicked* were dishonest and unfaithful. They committed heinous acts through oppression and corruption of the courts. But there was a righteous remnant, a group of people who were faithful to *the LORD*. They feared Him and lived a godly life. Unfortunately, they had limitations in what they could do to make a positive impact in the people’s lives because the *wicked surrounded* them and were powerful. *Therefore, justice comes out perverted*.

Perhaps innocent people lost their rights in courts because judges took bribes to render false justice. Judges turned justice upside down for their benefit. As a result, the *law* was powerless; chaos and anarchy prevailed in the land of Judah. The strong exploited the weak. Rule of law was no longer a barrier to wickedness. Rather than govern their own appetites, they extracted from others to satisfy them. This troubled Habakkuk because he knew that the LORD is a God of justice. He knew that God would not tolerate such wicked deeds. That is why he petitioned God for relief.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>2</sup> How long, O Lord, will I call for help,  
And You will not hear?  
I cry out to You, "Violence!"  
Yet You do not save.**

**<sup>3</sup> Why do You make me see iniquity,  
And cause *me* to look on wickedness?  
Yes, destruction and violence are before me;  
Strife exists and contention arises.**

**<sup>4</sup> Therefore the law is ignored  
And justice is never upheld.  
For the wicked surround the righteous;  
Therefore justice comes out perverted.**