

Is God Fair?

By Pastor Cary Nack

INTRODUCTION

It was the “Trial of the Century”. It had all of the addictive ingredients that the American public clamors for: power, sex, money, suburbia, intrigue, mystery....and a young, pretty, pregnant wife. This was the trial of the century before the other “Trial of the Century”. In the early morning hours of July 4, 1954 Marilyn Sheppard was brutally murdered in the upstairs bedroom of her lakeside home in suburban Cleveland, Ohio. Her husband, Dr. Sam Sheppard, claims that while he had fallen asleep on the couch downstairs, his 7-year old son Chip and pregnant wife were sleeping in their bedrooms upstairs. According to Dr. Sheppard was woken by his wife screaming, rushed upstairs to her aid, was knocked unconscious by a large male intruder and regained consciousness later to find her bludgeoned to death. There was some evidence to support Sheppard’s story but when authorities discovered he had a mistress and the pressure from the media to prosecute someone continued to mount, Sheppard was arrested and charged with murder. The 8-week trial that followed made national headlines as the media printed stories daily that pointed to Sheppard’s guilt. After a jury found him guilty of murder, Sheppard was sent off to prison. For the next 11 years, Sheppard’s legal team filed appeals arguing that the jury had been swayed by all of the media attention the case received. Interestingly, back in those days jurors were not sequestered or screened as carefully as they are today. In fact, this case surfaced the issue of bias in our court system and led to changes in how jurors and media are handled in high-profile cases. After serving about 11 years in prison, the Supreme Court overturned Sheppard’s conviction and had him released from prison in 1966. Despite the fact that Sheppard had no prior criminal record, many still believed he was guilty of murdering his wife. In 1998, DNA testing of physical evidence from the crime scene revealed that there had indeed been another man at the murder scene. Dr. Sheppard died in 1970, but his son sued the state of Ohio for wrongful imprisonment in 2000 and lost.¹ The story of Dr. Sam Sheppard and the mysterious murder of his wife inspired a hit television series called *The Fugitive*, starring David Janssen that aired on ABC from 1963-1967. 30 years later a blockbuster movie bearing the same name was released, starring Harrison Ford and Tommy Lee Jones. In both *The Fugitive* TV series and movie, the lead character Dr. Richard Kimble is falsely accused of murdering his wife, escapes from prison and flees from federal authorities while pursuing the one-armed man that is the real murderer.

To this day, no one knows for certain who murdered Marilyn Sheppard.....but the Lord knows. I believe the story of Sam and Marilyn Sheppard has captivated the public for decades because **we cannot stand injustice**. The story stirs up empathy for the victim and thoughts of “That’s not right!”, “It’s not fair!” or “Someone has to do something about that!” Deep in our hearts, God has hard wired within us a longing for a world where rights are protected and wrongs are made right.

We're continuing our series called *Wrestling with God* during which we're asking some hard questions about the ways of the Lord we worship. This message is titled "**IS GOD FAIR?**". I'd like to invite you to open your copy of God's Word with me to **HABAKKUK CHAPTER 1**.

Review critical elements from last week...

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had already been disciplined for their own rebellion when the Lord dispatched the Assyrians to conquer them. Now, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was taking their turn at rebelling against God. You might remember that Habakkuk was dispatched to preach repentance to the people of Judah in the late 600's B.C. but God's people would not listen to him. This inspired the prophet to start a prayer journal to the Lord around 606-604 B.C.² We see in this short book that this man of God was disappointed that God's people would not repent, disappointed that God had not brought the revival he'd been praying for and disappointed that God was going to use the wicked nation of Babylon to punish Judah. Habakkuk's name means "to embrace"³ or "to wrestle"⁴. The Hebrew word paints a picture of a wrestler in the embrace of an opponent with which he is contending.⁵ It's a fitting name because this man just like us (Jas. 5:17) really wrestled with God but eventually embraces Him.

Series Key Verse: It's commonly accepted that the key verse in Habakkuk is in 2:4 because it succinctly captures what our response should be in times when we're wrestling with God. Let's read it out loud together from the ESV translation on the screen behind me...

...but the righteous shall live by his faith.

(Hab. 2:4, ESV)

We're going to be looking at chapter 1:12-17 today. The Big Idea I'd like you to write down, take home with you and remember is this...

Big Idea: God is not fair, but He is just.

The book of Habakkuk contains 3 prayers TO God and 2 responses FROM God. Today's passage is the prophet's second complaint to God. Last week, he complained the Lord took too long to intervene in the people's rebellion. This week, he complains that God is going to use the wicked, pagan nation of Babylon to discipline their rebellion.

SCRIPTURE

Hab. 1:12-17

EXPOSITION

[Read Hab. 1:12]

I. The Lord LOVINGLY DISCIPLINES the ones He loves. (1:12)

The Lord revealed in verses 5-11 that He intended to discipline His people by dismantling the remaining nation of Judah. God was going to raise up the Babylonians to conquer Jerusalem and relocate the Jews back to Babylon.

The prophet's perplexing question: "Are you going to eliminate your people forever?"

This was an important question because God had made covenants with his people earlier in the OT promising them land, an abundance of descendants, a national identity and never again wipe out His people. So, Habakkuk is struggling to figure out how the Lord is going to keep His covenants and execute this plan of dismantling the nation. So, he asks...

1:12 ***“are you not from everlasting”*** He’s reminding God of His covenant faithfulness throughout history. I would paraphrase it this way: “Aren’t you the one that called us into existence and then promised to be faithful to us forever?”

1:12 ***“O LORD, my God”*** In order to further persuade the Lord, the prophet uses the proper name of God that literally means “Jehovah, self-existing one”. The Jewish people believed this particular name for God was so sacred that it should not be spoken out loud. This is why it might appear in all caps in your bible. Habakkuk is invoking the character of God to make the case for God’s unfairness.

Illustration: It would be like me challenging you with a rhetorical question about your identity that is meant to show the contradiction in your behavior. “Aren’t you a Freedom Falcon?”; “Are you a Frontier Titan?”; “Didn’t you graduate from THE Ohio State University?”; “Isn’t your family name respected in this town?” ...THEN WHY DON’T YOU ACT LIKE IT, MAN?!?!

Now, before I move on I need to address a translation issue that has created conflicting renderings of the phrase right after ***“my Holy One”***. I don’t want to overwhelm you with unnecessary scholastic details but I DO want you be aware of this issue because it affects how we interpret this verse.

1:12 The ESV translation, which I enthusiastically endorse as the best of the best three translations on the market, contains the phrase ***“we shall not die”***. This rendering would lead us to interpret the prophet as expressing faith in Judah’s future. The NIV has ***“you will never die”***. The NIV’s rendering would lead us to interpret Habakkuk as affirming God’s eternal character. The NLT has ***“surely you don’t plan to wipe us out?”***. The NLT’s translation would lead us to interpret Habakkuk as expressing fear that he and the people of Judah would be killed.

Here’s the simplest explanation I can give for this discrepancy in the translations: some scholars believe that what was originally written is ***“you [God] will not die”***. However, early Hebrew scribes that were making manuscript copies of Habakkuk’s writing were afraid of insulting the eternal name of God used earlier in the verse by associating death with it. So, they changed the wording on some of the copies so that it reads ***“we will not die”***.⁶ I think the NIV and NET Bible give the best renderings of this verse: ***“you will never die”*** (NIV) and ***“you are immortal”*** (NET Bible).

Bottom line: Given the context I would paraphrase what Habakkuk says in this way...because you are everlasting and eternal...

Pastor Cary’s Paraphrase

“You have nothing to worry about because you’re never going to die. But what about us?”

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We're not eternal like you!"

In the first half of verse 12, the prophet ACCUSES God of not living up to His name. In the second half of verse 12, he ACKNOWLEDGES God's plan to use the Babylonians to dole out discipline. This brings up a topic rarely addressed in American pulpits these days because it's not popular. I'm referring to the discipline of the Lord.

The Lord disciplines His children...

A. Because JUSTICE is in HIS NATURE. (Hab. 1:12)

The combined consensus of the all the patriarchs, psalmists and prophets in the OT is that God is TOTALLY just.

- Gen. 18:25 – Abraham declared that God as Judge of the earth always does what's just.
- Ps. 9:7-8 – David declared that the Lord has established his throne for justice and He judges the world with righteousness.
- Ps. 75:2 – Asaph reminds us that the Lord will judge with equity at a time that He appoints.

1:12 ***"you have ordained them as judgment"*** Some translations use the word "appoint" instead of "ordained". The word used in the original language means "to set in place" or "to bring to pass" at a certain time (*suwm*).⁷ Habakkuk is acknowledging that the Lord ORDAINS seasons in the life of all His children in which He disciplines or refines them.

Illustration: JUST AS you would not want your own children running around town, breaking laws, damaging property, disobeying the authorities at school and bring shame to your family name; God will not tolerate HIS children going around harming themselves and bringing shame to the family name.

This is difficult for American Christians to understand because the Jesus that so many of us hear about today is this emasculated, wimpy pushover that the Geek Squad could beat up in middle school. This is bad theology because it's NOT who Jesus is. The Scriptures tell us that NOT ONLY IS JESUS THE **SHEPHERD OF OUR SOULS** (1 Pt. 2:25), HE IS ALSO THE **RIGHTEOUS JUDGE** (2 Tim. 4:8) THAT WILL RETURN SOME DAY TO ESTABLISH HIS KINGDOM **RIDING A WHITE HORSE, WEARING A ROBE DIPPED IN BLOOD WITH A SWORD IN HIS HAND** WITH WHICH HE WILL STRIKE DOWN THE NATIONS (Rev. 19:11-13)! I PROMISE YOU THAT HE IS NOT SOMEONE TO BE TRIFLED WITH!

Here's another reason God disciplines His children...

B. Because there is SIN TO PURGE. (Heb. 12:4)

Cross-reference: Heb. 12:4-11

[Read Heb. 12:4-11]

12:4 ***"In your struggle against sin"*** The author of Hebrews isn't talking about sin being committed against us by other sinners. Instead, he was talking about the sin from within that plagues us all. Hebrews 12:6 says that Lord sometimes "chastises" His children because of disobedience. It is not God taking out His anger on us for our sin. That was already to Jesus Christ on our behalf on the Cross. Now, NOT – ALL –

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trials and troubles are caused by sin. I want to be clear about that. However, sometimes the Lord brings trials and troubles into our lives because there is a sin pattern hurting us and our relationship with Him that He wants to deal with. Also, NOT – ALL -- trials are God disciplining us. The Scriptures also list other sources from which trials can come such as: spiritual warfare, consequences from our own sin, results of the Fall and persecution from the world. At the same time, God’s Word says that if you’re life has been easy-peasy-lemon-squeezy since you professed faith in Christ then you have cause for concern --- because **all of His kids are getting spanked at one time or another!** If you’re going through a trial or feeling like your prayer are not being answered, it is certainly biblical to ask the question: “Lord, is there something I’ve done?”

Could it be that the very thing you are shaking your fist at God about right now could be the instrument He is using to bring you back into an intimate relationship with Him? **Like any good parent, the Lord cares more about WHO – WE – BECOME than how we feel about Him.**

C. Because there is SANCTIFICATION TO PROGRESS. (Heb. 12:10)

Sometimes the Lord ordains a season of discipline or refinement for us...NOT because we’ve done anything wrong...but simply because He wants us to grow. It could be a part of our character He wants to develop, a faith muscle that He wants to strengthen or wisdom He wants us to gain. Regardless, Hebrews 12 makes it clear that the Lord always has good planned for these difficult seasons. Part of His good is...

12:10 *“that we may share his holiness”* I’ve said this about sanctification before but I think it needs to be said again: IF WE THINK GOD’S ONLY PURPOSE IN OUR LIVES IS TO SPOIL US, COMFORT US AND DOTE ON US – THEN WE ARE SETTING OURSELVES UP TO BE DISAPPOINTED WITH GOD. Our spiritual journey didn’t end when we came to the cross and put our faith in Christ; it just got started! He wants to conform us to the image of His Son by making us holy and the sooner we get on that program, the better off our lives will be!

Illustration: A.W. Tozer once penned these words of encouragement for those that are in the refiner’s fire right now...

“If God has singled you out to be a special object of His grace you may expect Him to honor you with a stricter discipline and greater suffering than less favored ones are called upon to endure...If God sets out to make you an unusual Christian, He is not likely to be as gentle as He is usually pictured by the popular teachers. A sculptor does not use a manicure set to reduce the rude, unshapely marble to a thing of beauty. The saw, the hammer and the chisel are cruel tools, but without them the rough stone must remain forever formless and unbeautiful.”

-A.W. Tozer-⁸

Application(s): (1) We should see God’s discipline as a sign that He cares. God wants to do more than SAVE us, He wants to CHANGE US! When the Lord disciplines us, most of us start screaming: “Why have you left me?!?” But God is REALLY saying: “Are you kidding me? I just showed up! I’m doing a great working here!” **The world tells us that it is unloving to discipline our children -- but God’s Word says it is unloving NOT TO. (2)** We need to take our sin as

seriously as He does. The fact that the Lord disciplines His children is a reminder that He doesn't mess around with sin – so neither should we. This means keeping short accounts with God. When you blow it, confess it quickly, ask for forgiveness in the name of Jesus and move on. If you spend time in His Word and in prayer throughout the week, you'll notice that your appetite for sin will decrease and your hunger for the Lord will increase.

[Read Hab. 1:13-17]

II. Our sense of **JUSTICE IS TAINTED** by our sin nature. (1:13-17)

Because Habakkuk felt like God was not being fair, he turned the spotlight off of the Judean's sin and onto the Babylonians.

The prophet's perplexing question: "How can you use more sinful people to punish less sinful people? God, you are being unjust in your justice!"

A. We **MINIMIZE** our own **SIN**. (1:13)

1:13 *"why are you silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?"* Whereas God sees ALL sin as worthy of punishment, Habakkuk started using a grading scale as though the Judean's sin was now ok, but the sins of the Babylonians was much worse. We all do that same thing. When WE sin, we plead for mercy. We may not say it out loud but we think the following in our hearts: "God I want you to make wrongs right ---- but not my wrongs!"

Illustration: Our sin nature is like body odor. We all have it, we think ours doesn't stink but everybody else's does. 😊

If you do not have a biblical theology of your own sin nature, you will minimize your sin, think you deserve more than you do and struggle with God's goodness.

Another way that our sense of justice is tainted is...

B. We **MAXIMIZE** the **SINS** of others. (1:14-17)

In verses 14-17, Habakkuk tries to make the case as to why the Babylonians are worse than the people of Judah.

1:15 *"He brings all of them up with a hook...he rejoices and is glad"* As he looks ahead to their coming capture, the prophet simultaneously complains to God for demoting His people to the role of wildlife (fish) and criticizes the Babylonians for their merciless treatment of their captives. Pastor Walter Chantry provided some background on Babylonian prisoner tactics when he wrote: "Babylonian art [has revealed] that those captured and marched off into captivity were strung together with literal hooks thrust through each person's lower lip. Such cruelty was proudly celebrated by the captors. No pity was shown to the defeated."⁹ This was the reputation of the Babylonians.

Illustration: show Cary's two fishing pictures...this is what Habakkuk feared would happen to his people.

The prophet's argument: What THEY do is worse than what WE'VE done.

God's counter-argument: "My people claim to know me but don't practice what they claim to believe! The Babylonians don't know me and act like it. At least the Babylonians have integrity in the fact that what they believe matches their character."

When WE sin, we beg for mercy. When OTHERS sin, we scream for justice.

We're not fair because we define fairness as whatever works for our benefit.

Is God fair? No, He's not. He heals some while others suffer. He blesses some more and blesses other less. He's not fair. And I submit to you today that it's a GOOD thing He's not. God's unfairness is one of the foundations for the Gospel. His justice demands that our sin be paid for on the Cross. We deserve Hell for our sin. But God, in his unfairness, "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). If God was fair in the way that WE would define fair, salvation through Jesus Christ would not be available to us. We all have rebelled against God but we can be justified through faith in the One Man who was completely obedient to God – His Son Jesus Christ.

Application(s): We should walk as grateful sinners under the trustworthy care of a just God. The maturing believer doesn't shake His fist at God saying "I deserve so much more!". He instead gets on his knees and tells God "I deserve so much less!" When we live like this, our finite, feeble brains will be okay not understanding the infinite, superior ways of a holy God.

Repeat Big Idea: God is not fair, but He is just. And I'm starting to be ok with that. How about you?

¹ <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/a-sensationalized-murder-trial-inspires-the-fugitive>

<http://crimefeed.com/2015/12/a-crime-to-remember-sheppard/>

² Blue, 1506. Although the date of authorship is much debated, I found Blue's argument for this date to be most logical given the fact that Habakkuk already seemed to recognize Babylon as a superpower.

³ J. Ronald Blue, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1985), 1505.

⁴ Warren Wiersbe, *Wiersbe Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 1469.

⁵ Walter J. Chantry, *Habakkuk: A Wrestler with God* (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, 2008), 1.

⁶ I was surprised that only two of the commentaries I have address this translation issue...

O. Palmer Robertson, *The New International Commentary On The Old Testament: Nahum-Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957).

Carl E. Armerding, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 7, Daniel-Minor Prophets*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1985), 510.

The NET Bible explains the issue succinctly in a translator note. After much study and considering the context, I believe the translations of the NIV and NET Bible to be the best option because they explain why the prophet is invoking the eternal names of God. He's afraid of dying but is trying to help God see that's not a problem He has to worry about.

⁷ Strong's Concordance H7760 from www.blueletterbible.org.

⁸ A.W. Tozer, *Tozer On Christian Leadership: A 366-Day Devotional* (Camp Hill, PA: Wing Spread Publishers, 2001), December 2.

⁹ Walter Chantry, *Habakkuk: A Wrestler with God* (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, 2008), 29.