

# Why Is There Such Strife?

## *Habakkuk Series*

Habakkuk lived in Judah – the southern part of the land of Israel. Before Habakkuk was born, the land of Judah had been ruled by a succession of bad Kings who took the nation on a road away from God. These kings encouraged worship of idols and introduced pagan images into the Temple. Gradually the nation of Judah moved so much from the worship of Israel's God that Godly people began to be persecuted. According to Jewish legend, Isaiah the prophet was a victim of one of these kings, who had Isaiah sawn in two. This slide into Godlessness and pagan worship lasted nearly 100 years.

Then, when Habakkuk was a young child, an eight year old boy named Josiah came to the throne. Josiah reigned for 31 years, and during his 31 year reign, he began to bring about reform. He smashed the places of pagan worship and got rid of the idols. He called the nation to repentance and passed laws that called people to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. After Josiah had been king for 18 years, some workmen restoring the Temple rediscovered the book of Gods law. That discovery changed the King, and changed the nation. I'll talk a bit more about that soon. Now, back to Habakkuk.

Habakkuk had done most of his growing up during the reign of King Josiah. For most of his young years, the nation had been on a path to righteousness. The King was setting a Godly example from the top, in calling the nation back to worship of the true God. But suddenly everything changed. Josiah the King was killed in a battle with the Egyptians. Without Godly leadership at the top, the nation plunged headlong into wickedness. Josiah's sons succeeded him, and they were more wicked than their grandfather and great grandfather had been. They took the nation back to worshipping pagan gods. Society became more violent. The law was being flouted more and more, and the powerful were using the law to suit themselves. Conflict was everywhere. Righteous people were becoming fewer and fewer and evil people were getting the upper hand. The nation was falling apart.

This decline into wickedness was at the heart of Habakkuk's complaint to God. ***"How long, O 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 wrong? 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 1:1-4)**

Habakkuk's cry of despair to God can be echoed from the hearts of many Godly people around the world today. Everywhere we look we see violence. We see the see the injustice of a corporate like Enron wiping out the savings of thousands of little people. Every time we turn on our TV, there are images of mangled bodies from a bomb blast designed to kill as many innocent bystanders as possible. And it's not just in the Middle East or Afghanistan. We could probably track the last 50 years of any nation represented in this room this evening, and find statistics that show a correlation between a decline in faith in God, and an increase in violence, conflict, and a lack of respect for justice. You will know if that is true for your country, but let me just give you a few examples from mine, for that is a country I know well.

The image people have of New Zealand is a beautiful land of peace and plenty. But we are also a land that has been abandoning the Christian heritage on which we were founded. I believe there is a direct correlation between abandoning faith in God, and an increase in violence and injustice. 50 years ago, New Zealand averaged about 2 murders a year. Today the average is around 65. When I was a child, we didn't have drug education programmes at school, because drugs weren't a problem. But today, every child and teenager in New Zealand is vulnerable to drug dealer, who are peddling some pretty hard stuff to our kids. Alcohol abuse is a huge problem in our country, with large numbers of young people living for the weekend when they can binge drink. My eldest son is a senior emergency nurse in one of the largest hospitals in the country. They are seeing increasing numbers of people coming in with serious injuries from alcohol related fights and bashings.

Our Police don't normally carry firearms. But in the last 3 months, two policemen have been shot dead, and two others seriously injured after being shot by armed criminals. There is now a strong movement in the country to arm the Police. One of the biggest growth industries in my country is building more prisons. When a nation abandons God, there is a terrible price to pay.

And if you want an extreme example of a country sliding into chaos, look what is happening in Mexico with the drug wars. In 2009, Mexico had 8000 murders associated with drug dealing. In the first 6 months of 2010 there have been 6000 murders. Many of these people killed are not associated with drug dealing. They are good people - policemen, politicians, businessmen, judges - who refuse to take bribes or take part in the drug dealers' corrupt activities. If they refuse to cooperate with the drug cartels, they are shot.

The things that Habakkuk was seeing in his nation - an increase in violence; a rise in the amount of injustice; strife and conflict at all levels of society; and a perversion of justice - they are the things that bewilder many of us today. We ask ourselves: What is going on? Why is this happening? How come, despite all our attempts to educate people, and raise their living standards, it keeps getting worse? We have helping agencies, anger management courses and counselling services by the score, but the trend is still toward more violence. We educate our children in values of tolerance and fairness, yet bullying at school and on the internet is on the increase.

### **Why is it happening?**

Well, there are plenty of secular answers on offer. The sociologists say that there is a direct connection between living standards and violence. If we improve people's living standards, with more jobs and better housing, there will be less frustration, which is the breeding ground for violence. Others say a better answer is education. If we educate people, then there will be more tolerance and understanding between people. Many of our political candidates say the reason there is so much violence is because we don't have enough police. If only the police were resourced properly, then we wouldn't have so much violence on our streets, in our schools and in our homes. Values campaigners argue that we need to clean up what we are feeding into young minds. Look at the violent nature of video games, movies and TV programmes. If we are feeding these sorts of values into our kids' heads, is it any wonder that violent behaviour is the result. Who is right? All these answers have a large measure of truth in them, but the problem is, we have been doing these things for years, and the problems are getting worse.

### **The "Christian" solution?**

There are some Christians who sincerely believe that if we had a Christian Government, with Christian Politicians who obeyed God's laws, everything would be OK. I want to applaud Christians who have got involved in politics. I'm glad they are there. Many of them have felt a distinct calling from God to get involved in an area of life that most of us would rather stay away from. Christian politicians need our prayer and encouragement. They are salt and light in the world that the Lord has put them in. But having said that, I don't believe a Christian Government is the answer. Here's why.

When Josiah became king at 8 years of age, he was mentored by a Godly priest named Hilkiah. When Josiah was old enough, he took action against the things that offended God. He began to purge the nation of its idols, getting rid of evil things his father and grandfather had set in place in the nation when they were king. Then, when Josiah was 26, the book of God's law was rediscovered in the Temple, and the king began to read it. What he read horrified him. He realised that if the nation didn't change, they were doomed.

### **Fixing The Nation Through Legislation.**

So Josiah tried to reform the nation morally and religiously by passing laws. As King, he had the power to do that. He decreed that everyone must worship God. Idols had to be destroyed. Legally, everyone had to be upright and righteous. Can you imagine a government passing laws to make us good? What if you were legally required to be in church on a Sunday? Can you imagine people sitting in church and hating it? What if it was a legal requirement to read the bible and pray? Imagine people reading the bible and resenting it. Praying, but just going through the motions. It just doesn't work. You can't change peoples hearts by passing laws and forcing them to be good. Reform without renewal just doesn't work.

It's interesting Jeremiah the prophet, and Josiah the King both lived at the same time. They were contemporaries of Habakkuk. But Jeremiah didn't support Josiah's reform. He told people that what God was looking for was a renewal of heart, not a reform of law. Josiah's intentions were right, but when he was killed in a battle at Armageddon by the Egyptians, his reform died with him. His reform didn't even change the heart of his own son Jehoiakim who followed him as King. Jehoiakim was a hedonist who was into anything that brought pleasure. Status. Big palaces. Material prosperity. Women. Comfort. Food. One generation on from a Godly government and Habakkuk's nation was worse than before.

### **What is the root cause of violence?**

If you track back from Habakkuk through the history of Gods dealings with people, you come back to the cause of violence. It's not poor living standards, or a lack of education, or not enough Police. It goes deeper than that. At the heart of violence is a rebellion against God and his ways that the Bible calls sin. It's described in detail in the first few chapters of the Book of Genesis. God is in the place of authority over the man and the woman, but there is something in their hearts that will not submit to Gods power and authority. They succumb to the temptation to take the place of God. They say to themselves "I want to be God in my own life. I want to be the Boss. I don't want to submit to God's ways." And the direct outcome of that attitude of rebellion against God is strife and violence in relationships. We see it in the relationship between the man and the woman. The man rules over the woman. They blame each other. They are alienated from God. Then in the next generation, one of their children kills the other in a cold blooded act of murder. And the rest of the Old Testament story is one long tragic story of violence and strife as the disease of sin infects everything they touch. That infection of sin has touched our lives as much as it had touched theirs. If we are honest, there is violence within us too. The stain of sin spreads along the generations to us.

### **Is there any hope?**

To find the answer for the question Habakkuk asked about violence and strife, we have to go forward in time from Habakkuk. We need to go forward to a cross on a hill just outside the city of Jerusalem where Jesus, the son of God, took upon himself all the violence that mankind could hurl at him. He allowed the people he had created to spit on him, beat him with fists and wooden clubs. He allowed evil men to flog him, ripping the skin from his back. They drove nails through his hands and feet and hung him up on a cross like a common criminal. And there he died, taking the punishment for our rebellion against God. His death brings us hope. It brings us life. By his wounds, we are healed. When we acknowledge that he died to take the punishment we deserved, we are made whole. When Jesus becomes our Saviour, the angry violent spirit within us comes under his control, and our lives are filled with his peace. So much effort in our world is being put into solutions to fix the problem from the outside, when the real solution is to deal with the problem on the inside of us. And that can only happen when we accept that Jesus took the punishment for our sin, and we ask him to make us new people from the inside out.

This is the deepest answer to Habakkuk's lament. It's not reform we need, but renewal. As followers of Jesus we have a message of hope for the world. For God's sake, proclaim this message.

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