



EQUIPPING CHURCH LEADERS
• EAST AFRICA •

HABAKKUK

by

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Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah. He wrote this book in a time of crisis. He is thought to have written shortly before or after the battle of Carchemish (605 BC), when Babylonia and its allies the Medes and Persians destroyed Assyria and its ally Egypt. The first two chapters of Habakkuk are a dialogue between Habakkuk and God; chapter three is the prayer of Habakkuk and his confession of faith. This book raises important issues including: sin, evil, suffering, injustice, and God's view of these matters; and when God is silent and acts contrary to the way we think he should. In many ways, themes that are prominent in the books of Job, Revelation, and a number of the Psalms are echoed by Habakkuk. Appendix 1 deals with the "problem of evil," and Appendix 2 gives multiple examples of the Doctrine of Concurrence, i.e., the same event is attributed both to God and to secondary agents.

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I. Introduction

A. *The Author*

Habakkuk is one of the twelve “minor prophets.”¹ Habakkuk identifies himself as “*Habakkuk the prophet*” in **Hab 1:1** and **3:1**. The introduction of one of the two texts of the apocryphal OT book *Bel and the Dragon* states that it is “from the prophecy of Habakkuk, the son of Jesus [Joshua], of the tribe of Levi.” It is reasonable to assume that Habakkuk was a Levite associated with the temple singers and musicians (see **1 Chron 25:1-8**), since **Hab 3:1** states that **chapter 3** is “*a prayer . . . according to Shigionoth.*” A “shigionoth” has been variously described as: “a musical term that relates to how a psalm should be performed” (Mansfield 2017: Shigionoth); “indicating the musical setting for the prayer” (*Africa Study Bible*, Hab 3:1, note); and “a highly emotional poetic form” (*New American Standard Bible*, Hab 3:1, note). Further, **Hab 3:19** concludes by stating that it is “*for the choir director, on my stringed instruments.*” This “indicates that he owned instruments: only a Levite was authorized to use an instrument to accompany his songs in the Temple” (Hirsch 2002-2011: Habakkuk). Otherwise, nothing specific is known about Habakkuk, and his name does not appear in any other book of the Bible.

Even the meaning of Habakkuk’s name is unclear. On the one hand, “It seems to be a loan-word representing the Assyrian “hambakûku,” a garden-plant” (Hirsch 2002-2011: Habakkuk). Others contend that the name is derived from a Hebrew word meaning “clasp” or “embrace,” either because of his love for the Lord or because he wrestles with God (Stephens-Hodge 1970: 787).

B. *Date and Occasion*

Habakkuk wrote in a time of crisis for the nation of Judah.² The book begins by chronicling the violence, iniquity, wickedness, strife, and perversion of justice which were widespread in the land. **Hab 1:6** then speaks of God “*raising up the Chaldeans [i.e., Babylonians]*” who would come against and destroy Judah as God’s agents of judgment. Babylonia, in fact, rose and destroyed the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 BC, destroyed the remainder of the Assyrian Empire and defeated Egypt in 605 BC, and ultimately defeated Judah, destroying Jerusalem, the temple, and carrying away the people to exile in Babylon in 586 BC. Thus, the historical background places the book sometime in the period of the reign of Josiah (640-609 BC) or Jehoiakim (609-598 BC), although some see the setting somewhat earlier, during the reign of Manasseh (697-642 BC) (see Armerding 1985: 493; Patterson 1989: 666-67; Stephens-Hodge 1970: 767). Donald Gowan notes that linguistic studies have compared the Hebrew of Habakkuk with other writings and indicate that, given the history of the development of the Hebrew language, Habakkuk probably was written somewhere near 600 BC (Gowan 1976: 16).

Habakkuk does not specifically identify the source of the violence, iniquity, wickedness, strife, and perversion of justice in the land. Most commentators view this as domestic evil, although some view it as foreign oppressors (perhaps the Assyrians). Philip Whitehead observes that if the sources of the evil and injustice were foreign oppressors, then “the moral dilemma of the justice of God in Habakkuk is even sharper, because the ‘Chaldeans’ are not sent as a punishment for Judah’s own unfaithfulness, but as an intensification of an already-existing foreign oppression” (Whitehead 2016: 266). The better view is that the source of the evil and injustice was within Judah itself. This is seen in two ways: the wording Habakkuk uses and historically.

The wording Habakkuk uses for the evil and injustice is similar to the wording the other prophets use concerning Israel’s (Judah’s) unfaithfulness to God. Carl Armerding explains, “Normally where ‘justice’ and social ‘violence’ are opposed, the ‘wicked’ are Israelites unless clearly identified in other terms (e.g., Exod 23:1-9; Isa 5:7-15). Here, in a similar context, they may be assumed to be Judeans in accord with this pattern.” (Armerding 1985: 499) Whitehead adds, “Given that the precise injustices referred to are often, in the Latter Prophets, those of a domestic nature, I suggest that the ‘foreign oppressor’ reading of 1:2-4 is less probable. Habakkuk complains of ‘violence’ (חַמַּס) and ‘destruction’ (שִׁדָּה) in 1:3, terms used to describe internal corruption in Ezek 45:9 and Amos 3:10, and his concern for ‘justice’ (מִשְׁפָּט) fits more easily with domestic oppression.” (Whitehead 2016: 266)

Historically, Manasseh was Judah’s worst king: he erected alters to idols, including in the temple itself; he made his son pass through the fire [i.e., infant sacrifice]; he practiced witchcraft and divination; he dealt with

¹ The minor prophets are called “minor,” not because their prophecies are any less important than those of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, but because, in general, their books are shorter.

² The nation of Israel divided in two when Solomon’s son Rehoboam was king in approximately 930 BC. The northern kingdom was called Israel; the southern kingdom was called Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by Assyria in 722 BC and ceased to exist.

mediums and spiritists; and did more evil “*than all the Amorites did who were before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols*” (2 Kgs 21:11). As a result, God vowed to bring “*such calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears will tingle*” (2 Kgs 21:12). It is true that Josiah succeeded Manasseh’s successor Amon, and Josiah did good in the eyes of the Lord. He destroyed the places of idol worship, found the book of the law and reinstated Passover, and did other reforms. Nevertheless, “*the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath with which His anger burned against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him. The Lord said, ‘I will remove Judah also from My sight, as I have removed Israel. And I will cast off Jerusalem, this city which I have chosen, and the temple of which I said, ‘My name shall be there.’*” (2 Kgs 23:26-27) Josiah’s reforms did not last. Instead, Judah fell back into its sinful ways, much like Israel in the days of the judges. Jehoahaz succeeded Josiah, reigned only three months, and was another evil king. He was succeeded by Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim became Babylon’s “servant” (2 Kgs 24:1). He shed much innocent blood, which “*the Lord would not forgive*” (2 Kgs 24:4). Jeremiah prophesied against him for desiring only his own dishonest gain, shedding innocent blood, and practicing oppression and extortion (Jer 22:13-19; see also Jer 26:1-23). This situation—unpunished rampant evil and injustice in the land, beginning at the highest level of government—sounds like the very situation about which Habakkuk cried out to the Lord.

C. Focus of the book

Habakkuk raises the questions that Christians and non-Christians alike raise: How can God—who is supposed to be all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good—ordain and allow rampant evil to exist in our nation and in our world? Further, in the face of such evil, why is God so silent? In addition to that, God’s answer to the problem of evil and injustice in Israel appears to be completely contrary to God’s own goodness, love of justice, and love of his people; namely, God will send an even more evil people, the Babylonians, to destroy Judah. Shimon Bakon states, “Habakkuk raises two or possibly three complaints, questioning . . . God’s moral rule. *How long O Lord shall I cry out and You not listen? Shall I shout to You ‘violence’ and You not save?* (1:2). He is troubled by God’s silence in the face of rampant violence and evil. With this outcry against God’s moral reign of the world, Habakkuk engages in a dialogue with the Lord.” (Bakon 2011: 26) Philip Whitehead adds, “The book of Habakkuk is at once concise and one of the most startling in the OT for a reader committed to faith in a benevolent God. Habakkuk questions God repeatedly concerning the suffering of the righteous, and although the book ends, tentatively, on a note of hope, it is unsettling and much more ambiguous in tone than, for example, the confident affirmation of the psalmist that he has never seen someone righteous abandoned, nor their children begging for bread (Ps 37:25).” (Whitehead 2016: 265). This book is thus very contemporary and relevant to us.

D. Structure and Outline

The *Jewish Encyclopedia* gives this overview of the book:

“It readily falls into two parts: (1) ch. i. and ii.; (2) ch. iii. The first part is a ‘massa’ (a condemnatory prophecy). . . . The first part is in the form of a dialogue. Ch. i. 2-4 laments the prevailing moral corruption, which God does not seem to heed; i. 5-11 contains the divine announcement of an impending judgment through the Chaldeans; i. 12-17 gives the prophet’s complaint of the excessive pride and cruelty of the enemy. In ch. ii. God admonishes Habakkuk not to judge hastily that evil is triumphant, but to remain confident (1-4). Five ‘woes,’ the contents of the ‘mashal’ or ‘taunting proverb’ (5-6), phrased by the very people oppressed by the conqueror, are enumerated (6, 9, 12, 13, 19). Ch. iii. is a psalm reciting various theophanies, describing God’s warlike power, which bends earth, mountains, and rivers to His purposes—yea, even sun and moon, in behalf of His people. The song concludes with a declaration that though the blessings of nature shall fail in days of dearth, the singer will rejoice in the Lord (17-19).” (Hirsch 2002-2011: Habakkuk, Book of)

The book may be outlined as follows:

I. Habakkuk’s First Dialogue with God (1:1-11)

A. Superscription (1:1)

B. Complaint: God is silent in the face of evil and injustice (1:2-4)

C. God’s response: You will not believe my response—I am raising up the Chaldeans to judge and destroy Judah, but they will be held guilty because they make their strength their god (1:5-11)

II. Habakkuk's Second Dialogue with God (1:12—2:20)

- A. Complaint: You are too pure to approve evil, so why do you look with favor on the Chaldeans who deal treacherously and swallow up those more righteous than they are (1:12-17)
- B. Habakkuk waits for God's response (2:1)
- C. God's response (2:2-20)
 - 1. Inscribe the vision; wait for it, it will surely come (2:2-3)
 - 2. The central point: The heart of the proud one is not right within him, but the righteous will live by faith (2:4)
 - 3. Five woes are pronounced against the haughty one (2:5-19)
 - 4. Conclusion: The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him (2:20)

III. Habakkuk's Prayer (3:1-19)

- A. Superscription (3:1)
- B. Invocation (3:2)
- C. Divine self-revelation (3:3-15)
- D. Confession of faith (3:16-19)

II. Commentary on Habakkuk

A. *First Dialogue (1:1-11)*

- **1:1:** *The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw:*

The identification of “*Habakkuk the prophet*” has been dealt with above in the section on the Author. **Verse 1** simply announces what will be coming next. One of the unique aspects of Habakkuk's prophecy is that, unlike the other prophets who were give a word from the Lord and were sent out to direct their prophecies to or against specific nations and peoples, Habakkuk was not sent out with a prophecy directed to or against specific nations or peoples but was speaking directly to or against God himself. However, the word “oracle” at the beginning of this book “signifies that that which God has placed upon Habakkuk's heart, he will hereby proclaim to all” (Patterson 1989: 668). Consequently, Habakkuk's complaints and questions to God do not come from impiety or presumptuousness but ultimately come from God himself. This probably is so because God knows we all have similar questions and complaints, so God explicitly raises them and deals with them.

- **1:2-4:** ²*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?* ³*Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.* ⁴*So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.*

The question Habakkuk raises in **v. 2** is one of the most profound questions we ask. He is raising what is known as the “problem of evil” and the issue of “theodicy,” i.e., an explanation of why a perfectly good, omniscient, omnipotent God ordains and permits evil. The term “theodicy” literally means “justifying God” (Sherry 2020: Theodicy). Habakkuk raises this issue in two different ways in his first and second dialogues with God: in the first dialogue he raises the issue of God's silence in the face of rampant evil and injustice; in the second dialogue he raises the issue of God's justice in using a more evil nation to judge and punish a more righteous nation.

The book of Habakkuk (along with, in substantial part, the books of Job, Revelation, and a number of the Psalms) is dedicated to the question with which he begins the book: “*How long, Lord?*” How long will I cry to you for help and you remain silent? How long will the wicked prosper and you do nothing? How long will justice be perverted before the wrongs are righted? (see **Pss 6:3; 13:1-2; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; Jer 12:4; Rev 6:10**) Because all people ask these questions—Christians and non-Christians alike—this book is relevant to us today. In fact, the book appears to be designed for all people in all times and all places. Philip Whitehead observes, “There is none of the biographical detail we find (for example) in Hosea or Amos or Jeremiah. Those biographical details that remain are all directed toward the matter at hand, and toward Habakkuk's dialogue and complaint with God. Thus, the book invites the interpreter to read Habakkuk

as addressing a common experience of faith, namely, the problem of God’s apparent injustice given the lawlessness and oppression present in the world.” (Whitehead 2016: 267-68) J. H. Eaton adds, “Its message is expressed in such general and typical terms that in essence it is readily understandable. For this reason it speaks with relevance to other ages, and here it is interesting to note that the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls [approximately 500 years after the events discussed in Habakkuk] found in chs 1-2 a guide to their own times and wrote the earliest commentary on Habakkuk in our possession.” (Eaton 1961: 82) Although Habakkuk asks questions that all people ask, it is important to note his frame of reference in asking the questions: “To ask how long injustice will be allowed to continue implies both that there is a God and that God is able to act to end the injustice. The implication is also that the oppression has frequently been complained of to God, that God is well aware of it, and that action to redress the injustice is expected of him.” (Whitehead 2016: 269)

In this section, v. 2 speaks of “violence” (Hebrew = *hamas*) which “denotes flagrant violation of moral law by which man injures primarily his fellowman (e.g., Gen 6:11). Its underlying meaning is one of ethical wrong, of which physical brutality is only one possible expression. . . . *Hamas* occurs six times in Habakkuk (1:2, 3, 9, 2:8, 17 [twice]) . . . it is therefore a key word in this prophecy.” (Armerding 1985: 500)

In v. 3 Habakkuk raises a companion question to “*How long?*” namely, “*Why?*” Again, everyone asks this question—Christians and non-Christians alike—when we are confronted with or experience injustice, suffering, and evil (see Exod 17:3; 32:11-12; Num 11:11, 20; 14:3; 20:4-5; 21:5; Josh 7:7; Judg 6:13; 21:3; 1 Sam 4:3; 1 Kgs 9:8; 2 Chron 7:21; Job 3:11-12, 20, 23; 7:20-21; 10:2, 18; 13:14, 24; 21:4, 7; Pss 10:1; 22:1; 42:9; 43:2; 44:23-24; 74:1, 11; 80:12; 88:14; Isa 63:17; Jer 9:12; 12:1; 13:22; 14:8-9, 19; 15:18; 22:8; Lam 5:20). There are two interesting aspects to this question. First, there is a translational issue. Some versions have the first part of Habakkuk’s question referring to himself but the second part of the question referring to God, e.g., “*Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?*” (ESV); “*Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?*” (NIV). Other versions have both parts of the question referring to Habakkuk himself, e.g., “*Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness?*” (NASB); “*Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble?*” (NKJV). Both the NASB and the NKJV have the “me” in the second part of the question in italics, indicating that the pronoun “me” is not in the original Hebrew. The absence of the pronoun accounts for the difference in translation.

Second, there is a practical implication for us of Habakkuk’s “*Why?*” question. Note that it is “*you [God] make me see iniquity*” and, if the NASB and NKJV are correct in their translation, “*you*” (God) “*cause me to look on wickedness?*” In other words, when iniquity is around us and we finally notice it, that is for a reason. God is causing it to register with us so that we will do something about it. We are to be God’s agents of redemption, not just passively lament that iniquity surrounds us.

In v. 4 Habakkuk focuses on the injustice and perverted justice he sees all around him. He is crying out to God because he knows “*the Lord is a God of justice*” (Isa 30:18; see also Deut 32:4; Zeph 3:5).³

- **1:5-11:**⁵ “*Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.* ⁶ *For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own.* ⁷ *They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.* ⁸ *Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour.* ⁹ *They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand.* ¹⁰ *At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it.* ¹¹ *Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!”*

Overview of God’s response

In this section, God responds to Habakkuk’s cries; yet his answer is not at all what Habakkuk desired or expected. To respond to the violence, sin, evil, and injustice about which Habakkuk complains, God says he is “*raising up the Chaldeans,*” an *even more violent and unjust* people. “*They are dreaded and fearsome; their*

³ Interestingly, Isa 30:18 concludes by adding “*blessed are all those who wait for him.*” That is Habakkuk’s own situation. He obviously feels that he has waited too long and that “justice delayed is justice denied.” Isa 30:18 is assuring Habakkuk—and us—that justice delayed is *not* justice denied. Every wrong will be made right (see Gen 18:25; Ps 9:7-8; Isa 3:10-11; Rom 8:28; 2 Cor 5:10; Col 3:25). His justice will be all-comprehensive, since he knows and will reveal everything, even the things we thought were hidden and the motives of our hearts (1 Sam 16:7; 1 Kgs 8:39; 1 Chron 28:9; Ps 44:21; Prov 15:3; 21:2; Eccl 12:14; Matt 10:26; Mark 4:22; Luke 8:17; 12:2-3; 16:15; Acts 11:24; Rom 8:27; 1 Cor 3:13; 4:5; Heb 4:13).

justice and dignity go forth from themselves. . . . They all come for violence. . . . They gather captives like sand. . . . At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress. . . . Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!” Jeremiah prophesies the same thing in **Jer 4:1—6:30**. There are a few things we should note about this. First, God specifically says that *he* is the one who is raising up the Chaldeans (v. 6). This is a specific instance of the fact that God rules over the nations, raising some up and putting others down (see **2 Chron 20:6; Job 12:23; Ps 33:10-11; 75:6-7; 135:10-12; 136:10-22; Prov 21:1; Isa 13:1—23:18; 40:21-24; 41:2-4; 45:1-7; Dan 2:20; 4:17, 32; 5:21; Rom 9:17; 13:1**). Consequently, the Bible tells us, “*Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and in the earth*” (**Ps 135:6**). God states that he “*declare[s] the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established and I will accomplish my good pleasure. . . . Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.’*” (**Isa 46:10-11**)

Second, what God is doing—i.e., raising up other nations to attack and destroy Israel if Israel violates the covenant with God and does not gladly and faithfully serve the Lord—was explicitly foretold by God to the Israelites even before they entered the promised land (**Deut 28:47-57**). Approximately 150 years before Habakkuk wrote, God again had announced the same principle of judgment against the northern kingdom of Israel through the prophet Amos: “*Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.*” (**Amos 3:1-2**; see also **Jer 25:29; 1 Pet 4:17**)

Third, God knows that the Chaldeans are a *godless* nation: “*their justice and dignity go forth from themselves . . . guilty men, whose own might is their god!*” This is not the first time God used more powerful, godless nations as the instruments of his judgment. God used Assyria to attack and destroy the northern kingdom of Israel in punishment for its sins and idolatry (**Amos 6:14; Hos 7:1—10:15**); he also used Assyria as the instrument of his wrath against Judah for its injustice (**Isa 8:5-8; 10:1-6; 29:1-8**). Again, those were specific instances of the fact that God uses or prevents war to bring about his good and perfect will (see **Exod 15:3-12; Judges 2:23—3:2; 1 Sam 17:45-47; 30:1-19; 2 Sam 5:17-25; 2 Chron 17:10; 20:15, 22**).

The wording of God’s response

In his response to Habakkuk’s cry, God uses the same words Habakkuk used, thus indicating that he has heard Habakkuk’s cry and that, although Habakkuk may not like the answer, God is answering Habakkuk’s complaint. Thus, “look” and “see” in v. 5 correspond to “look” and “see” of v. 3. “Violence” in v. 9 corresponds to “violence” in v. 2. “Justice” in v. 7 corresponds to “justice” in v. 4.

The repeating of these words by God also is showing that he will be repaying faithless Judah according to its own deeds. Both by precept and example God judges people and nations and repays them “according to their deeds” (**Lev 24:17-22; Judg 1:6-7; 9:22-24, 56-57; 2 Sam 12:9-12; 1 Kgs 2:32-33; 20:35-42; 21:17-19; 2 Chron 6:23, 30; Job 4:8; 34:11; Ps 18:24; 31:23; 62:12; Prov 1:31; 11:25; 14:14; 22:8; 24:12; Eccl 12:13-14; Isa 59:18; Jer 17:10; 25:14; 32:19; Ezek 7:3, 8-9, 20, 23-24, 27; 9:10; 11:21; 16:43, 59; 18:30; 22:31; 24:14; 33:20; 35:6, 11, 15; 39:24; Hos 8:7; 10:13; 12:2; Joel 3:5-7; Obad 15; Zech 1:6; Matt 16:27; 25:14-30; Mark 4:24; Luke 6:37-38; 12:47-48; John 5:28-29; Rom 2:1-6; 12:19; 1 Cor 3:8, 11-15; 2 Cor 5:10; 11:15; Gal 6:7-8; Eph 6:8; Col 3:25; 2 Tim 4:14; Heb 10:26-27; 1 Pet 1:17; 2 Pet 2:20-22; Jude 14-15; Rev 2:23; 14:13; 20:11-13; 22:12**). An eye for an eye; what Judah has sown, it will reap; by its own standard, it will be measured back to them.⁴ However, Armerding points out that this same truth “applies equally to Judah or Babylon: the Lord’s judgment of sin in his own people is thus extended to the same sin among the Babylonians, which is made explicit in v. 11b and amplified in 2:6-19. The sovereignty of God does not eliminate human accountability; the time of the accounting merely varies (cf. Rom 2:4-11; 9:11-24; 1 Tim 5:24).” (Armerding 1985: 502)

What God is saying is an application of the principle announced in **1 Pet 4:12-13, 17-19**: “¹² *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ *But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. . . .* ¹⁷ *For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?* ¹⁸ *And ‘If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’* ¹⁹ *Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*” In **1 Pet 4:12-19**, “Peter is exhorting the church—the house of God—which was facing persecution, to persevere. The believers were also struggling to

⁴ This is known as the principle of *lex talionis* (the principle that a punishment inflicted should correspond in degree and kind to the offense of the wrongdoer).

separate from the former worldly sins that had once enslaved them (verses 1–4). Peter reminds them that the wicked will face God’s judgment (verse 5) but that believers in Christ must hold themselves to a higher standard than they once did. The ‘fiery trials’ that they were facing were to help refine them like gold (verse 12).” (“What does it mean” 2002-2020: n.p.) Israel and Judah experienced both “*the kindness and severity of God*” (**Rom 11:22**). Since the church is the new, true, spiritual Israel, the church can expect the same.⁵ J. Alec Motyer discusses this: “The church faces the same moral demand as Israel did, to ‘put to death what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness which is idolatry’ (Col. 3:5, author’s translation). Paul knows that Israel’s besetting sin of idolatry is an option for the church too, disguised, as always, as inordinate desire which is not longing and love for God.” (Motyer 2000: 596) God brings difficulties and suffering into the lives of his people to purify them. Consequently, believers “may be assured that their present sufferings—far from being an indication of God’s abandonment or of the failure of the hope promised in Christ’s resurrection—are in fact another indication that Christians are the new temple of God on which the Spirit rests and in which his fiery presence is purifying and proving his dwelling place.” (Johnson 1986: 291)

We—individually, as the church, and as societies—face the same issues that confronted ancient Judah. The question is: What are we going to do about sin, injustice, and evil? Are we going to let them run rampant as was true in Habakkuk’s day or act to correct them? We know that “*the Lord disciplines the one he loves*” (**Heb 12:6; Prov 3:12**). But we need to remember what Paul counseled, “³¹ *But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.*” ³² *But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.*” (**1 Cor 11:31-32**) Judah did not “judge itself truly,” so it was severely judged by God through the Babylonians. Are we “judging ourselves truly so that we would not be judged”?

There is another aspect of the wording God uses in **vv. 6-11** which does not appear in translations. **Verses 6-11** translate the pronouns for the Babylonians as “they” or “their.” In the Hebrew, however, almost all of those pronouns are actually in the masculine singular, i.e., “he” or “his.” This same use of the masculine singular pertaining to Babylon is repeated in God’s answer to Habakkuk’s second complaint in **Hab 2:4a, 5-19**. This is paralleled in **1:10** (“*They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it*”). The Hebrew actually says, “*He laughs at every fortress, for he piles up earth and takes her.*” “Her” refers to Jerusalem and her wall (Moseman 2017: 265-66). This language adds a more “personal,” if not also sexual, aspect to what God is telling Habakkuk and, for that reason, makes God’s answer all the more stunning and frightening.

One other aspect of the use of the singular in this passage deserves our attention. Recall that God said, “*I am raising up the Chaldeans*” (**v. 6**). David Moseman makes the point that “through the use of ‘he’ three times (vv. 7 and 10) and its corresponding verb forms, the text underscores that as he (Babylon) acts, so too does he (Yahweh). Consider verse 7: ‘Terrible and feared is he. From him his justice goes out, and from him his dignity goes out.’ Out of context, one could easily understand these words as referring to Yahweh. Likewise, one does not have to strain to hear echoes of Ps 2:4 in verse 10. And in verse 11, the use of ‘wind/spirit’ רוח (*rwh*), which is unstoppable and powerful and sweeps through and passes over, also reminds one of Yahweh.” (Moseman 2017: 266) This language highlights that it is God who is acting and judging Judah through the Babylonians.

However, as was pointed out above, the sovereignty of God and his use of human instruments like the Babylonians to effect his will does not eliminate human accountability. This is indicated in the middle of **v. 11** where there is an abrupt shift. The Babylonians may “*sweep by like the wind,*” but God has judged them as well. They are “*guilty men*” (lit. “*and he is guilty*”). Immediately after pronouncing Babylon guilty, the reason for its guilt is announced: “*[their] own might is their god!*” Armerding concludes, the Babylonian “ruthless arrogance is rightly epitomized as a form of self-deification. Such people acknowledge no accountability, seek no repentance, and offer no reparations, while violating the most fundamental order of created life. For such the verdict of ‘guilty’ can mean only the sentence of radical destruction (cf. 2:6-20; 3:13-16).” (Armerding 1985: 503-04)

Quotation in Acts 13

Finally, **v. 5** is quoted in **Acts 13:41**. Luke has slightly changed the wording from “*among the nations*” to “*you scoffers*” and added “*a work*” after “*in your days.*” I. Howard Marshall states, “Luke thus regards the present situation as a repetition of what happened in Habakkuk’s time, in which God again does a ‘work,’ and this is perhaps to be understood in the light of the use of *ergon* [work] to refer to the apostolic mission referred to in the broader context (13:2; 14:26), which provokes unbelief among the Jews and renders them liable to God’s judgment” (Marshall 2007: 587). Interestingly, in **Acts 13** Paul was speaking in a synagogue on the

⁵ The fact that the church is the new, true, spiritual Israel is discussed in detail at Menn 2018: 55-59.

Sabbath. Thus, in each case the “*work in your days that you would not believe*” was directed at the Jews of Judah. In Habakkuk’s day God was using the Babylonians to do his “work” of judgment, whereas in Paul’s day, God was using the church. Indeed, Paul even warned the people in the synagogue, “*Take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you*” (**Acts 13:40**). As noted in connection with **1:2-4**, above, Habakkuk’s message speaks to principles and issues across the ages, a fact which was recognized by Luke. The question for the church today is: Is God using the church as his instrument to bring blessing or judgment to others, or is the church now to be the subject or recipient of God’s judgment?

While the context of Paul’s quoting **Hab 1:5** was his apostolic mission, the most important aspect of **Acts 13:41** is the gospel itself. In the synagogue, Paul began by recounting the history of Israel, which pointed to and was fulfilled by the promised savior, Jesus (**Acts 13:16-25**). He then stressed the death and resurrection of Jesus which makes it possible that “*through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses*” (**Acts 13:38-39**). In other words, the principle that God is describing to Habakkuk in **Hab 1:5-11** and then in **2:5-19**—that he will bring good out of evil, justice out of injustice, and salvation out of destruction—finds its ultimate expression in Jesus Christ. While Habakkuk felt that God had abandoned him, on the cross Christ truly was abandoned by the Father (**Matt 27:46**). Because the Father abandoned Christ, if we are in Christ, we will never be abandoned (**Matt 28:20; Rom 8:31-39; Heb 13:5**). Even in the worst possible circumstances we may go through, we have assurance that Christ is with us; he is working in us and through us to comfort us (**2 Cor 1:3-5**) and conform us to his nature (**Rom 8:28-30**). In times of great trial, tribulation, and distress, we may experience peace and even joy not possible anywhere else (**John 14:27; 16:33; 1 Pet 1:3-9**). The gospel is unlike anything else and unlike any other religion in the world. It is God, through Christ, doing for us what we never could do for ourselves. The gospel is, indeed, “*a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you*” (**Acts 13:41**).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the social-political-economic situation of Judah in Habakkuk’s time compare to the social-political-economic situation of our country? What do you think God may do about it?
2. What can and should we—individually and as a church—do about the evil and injustice we see in our country and community?
3. When have you cried out to God about evil or injustice? How, if at all, has God answered your cries?
4. How have you reacted to God’s apparent silence in the face of evil or injustice or God’s apparent silence when you have cried out to him? How should we react?
5. How should we react when God is silent about the evil and injustice we see in our country and community?
6. Are we “judging ourselves truly so that we would not be judged” (1 Cor 11:31)?
7. God raised up an even more evil people (the Chaldeans) as his instrument to punish Judah for its sins.
 - How do you react to that?
 - Do you see examples of this today?
 - How can and should we react to that?
8. God’s answer to Habakkuk’s first complaint was not at all what Habakkuk expected. In fact, it was probably the opposite of what he expected.
 - Has something like that ever happened to you?
 - How did you react?
 - How should we react when something like that happens?
9. Is God using the church as his instrument to bring blessing or judgment to others, or is the church now to be the subject or recipient of God’s judgment?
10. How is the gospel unlike any other religion in the world?

B. Second Dialogue (1:12—2:20)

- **1:12-17:**¹² *Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.*¹³ *You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?*¹⁴ *You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler.*¹⁵ *He brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad.*¹⁶ *Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich.*¹⁷ *Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?*

Habakkuk's faith

This is Habakkuk's response to God's answer to his first question and complaint. Essentially, he is saying: "You, God, are supposed to be pure and holy and cannot even look at evil and wrong—so how can you raise up a godless people who are worse than us to judge and destroy us?" Most commentators make the point that Habakkuk is questioning God out of a relationship with God, which Habakkuk maintains, and from a position of faith. We see this in the fact that Habakkuk calls the Lord "*my God*" and "*my Holy One.*" Additionally, although the translation from the Hebrew uses the word "Lord" in v. 12, in the Hebrew, Habakkuk actually is using God's covenant name, YHWH (Yahweh) (see **Exod 3:13-16; 6:2-8**). He repeatedly uses YHWH when addressing God throughout the book (see **Hab 1:2, 12; 2:2; 3:2, 19**). The only exceptions to this are **Hab 3:3** where he says "God [Eloah] came from Teman" and **3:18** ("I will take joy in the God [Elohim, the plural of Eloah] of my salvation"). He probably is using that name for God because *Eloah* and *Elohim* connote supremacy, power, and strength (see **Pss 50:22; 114:7; 139:19** where *Eloah* is used), and **Hab 3:3-15** is all about God's supremacy and power over everyone and everything. In **Hab 1:11**, where God calls the Chaldeans "guilty men, whose own might is their god," he uses the term *Eloah* for "god" (*Eloah* is similarly used of the "anti-god" in **Dan 11:37-39**). **Chapter 3** contrasts the supremacy, power, and strength of the true God with the false god of the Babylonians "whose own might is their god."

In other words, Habakkuk is *not* saying (as do some people who consider the "problem of evil"), "I could never believe in a god who would ordain or allow such evil to happen." Whitehead says, "Habakkuk is no enemy of his God, or a doubter in the existence of God. He strenuously insists that God must be just (2:13) and it is this tension between present visible circumstances and what he knows God must bring about to vindicate this justice that must be filled by faith in the 'vision' offered in 2:2. Rather than insisting on a satisfactory resolution to the problem of suffering as a condition for faith, Habakkuk poses his questions from the position of faith." (Whitehead 2016: 280) Brian Allred adds, "While living by faith in light of life's perplexities includes being honest with God, we also learn from Habakkuk that it entails holding fast to what you know to be true about him. It is crucial to notice what frames Habakkuk's second set of questions (vv.12-13). He confesses God to be holy, faithful, sovereign, pure, and just. These attributes of the Lord serve as foundational and indisputable truths for Habakkuk even in the face of perplexing circumstances. In other words, when Habakkuk witnesses what is inconsistent with what he believes, he doesn't allow what he sees to determine what he believes. Rather, in his perplexity, he holds fast to what he knows to be true about his God." (Allred 2017: 179) Nowhere in this book does Habakkuk hint that he considers even the possibility of walking away from God. This is very important for Christians to remember when we face hardship, suffering, and evil.

Habakkuk's challenge to God

The form of Habakkuk's question in v. 12 ("Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One?") is far more pointed in the Hebrew than translations indicate. Francis Andersen states, "Nothing could be more abrupt than the beginning of Habakkuk's second prayer. There is nothing like it anywhere else in the Bible. God is not approached with courtesy and respect by reverent invocation, as in more decorous prayers. . . . Habakkuk's question, while reminding Yahweh that he is eternal, holy, immortal, nevertheless betrays, even if it does not openly express, a doubt that is part of the prophet's anguish. The attributes chosen do not include justice and power that one might expect Yahweh to display in governing the world and destroying the wicked. The attributes chosen are more fundamental, dealing with character and ultimate being rather than activity. . . . Because God is supposed to be holy and immortal, why are humans unprotected, and why has God's rule of the world been usurped with impunity by tyrants?" (Andersen 2001: 175)

Habakkuk's confusion or perplexity is seen as this passage develops. He begins by calling on the name of the Lord "*my God, my Holy One.*" His calling God the "Rock" indicates he views God as the source of

stability and strength. Hence, he voices the assurance that “*we shall not die.*”⁶ He then acknowledges that “*you have ordained them [the Babylonians] as a judgment, and you . . . have established them for reproof,*” but he cannot seem to come to grips with the justice of God’s doing that. His initial complaint in v. 4 was that “*the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.*” Yet he acknowledges that “*You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong*” (v. 13). That is why he finds it inconceivable that God would ordain that “*the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he*” (v. 13).⁷ So he asks, “*Why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?*” (v. 13) In vv. 14-16 he views the Babylonians as fishermen and Judah and the other nations merely as fish, helpless prey to the Babylonian appetite that is unrestrained. Yet God is behind this because “*You [God] make mankind like the fish of the sea*” (v. 14). Therefore, he emphasizes the incongruity of God’s ordaining and establishing the Babylonians as judges (and executioners) when they worship and rejoice in nothing but their own will and their own power. They have no frame of reference other than themselves and satisfying their own lust for luxury. Consequently, while Habakkuk began by saying “*we shall not die,*” he ends by wondering “*Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?*” (v. 17) In this, he appears to be questioning not only the fairness or justice of God’s using idolatrous pagans who are far worse than the Judeans to punish Judah but also the *magnitude* or seeming excessiveness of the punishment and the suffering it will entail. In other words, “*Are you really a God of justice if you are going to tolerate injustice by wicked and godless pagans forever?*”

In essence, Habakkuk’s reaction was similar to that of Job. Many people, when they think of Job, think of his maintaining faith in the face of severe suffering and hardship. They think primarily of these passages:

- “²⁰ Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹ And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.’ ²² In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.” (Job 1:20-22)
- “⁹ Then his wife said to him, ‘Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.’ ¹⁰ But he said to her, ‘You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips.” (Job 2:9-10)
- “Though he slay me, I will hope in him.” (Job 13:15)⁸
- “²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. ²⁶ And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, ²⁷ whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” (Job 19:25-27)

However, we also must remember that, although Job did not lose his faith in God, he also indicted the morality or justice of God’s actions toward him and others:

- “¹⁶ If I summoned him and he answered me, I would not believe that he was listening to my voice. ¹⁷ For he crushes me with a tempest and multiplies my wounds without cause. . . . ²² It is all one; therefore I say, ‘He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.’ ²³ When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. ²⁴ The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the faces of its judges—if it is not he, who then is it?” (Job 9:16-17, 22-24)
- “⁷ Behold, I cry out, ‘Violence!’ but I am not answered; I call for help, but there is no justice. ⁸ He has walled up my way, so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths. ⁹ He has stripped from me my glory and taken the crown from my head. ¹⁰ He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone, and my hope has he pulled up like a tree. ¹¹ He has kindled his wrath against me and counts me as his adversary.” (Job 19:7-11)
- “⁷ Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? ⁸ Their offspring are established in their presence, and their descendants before their eyes. . . . ²³ One dies in his full vigor, being wholly at ease and secure, ²⁴ his pails full of milk and the marrow of his bones moist. ²⁵ Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having tasted of prosperity. ²⁶ They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them.” (Job 21:7-8, 23-26)

⁶ On the other hand, David Moseman plausibly suggests that “Rather than beginning with ‘Where are you, God,’ Habakkuk now begins with ‘Who are you, God?’ . . . This initial question concerning God’s eternal nature is followed by Habakkuk’s statement: ‘we shall not die.’ Habakkuk is still reeling from ‘and he took her’ and, in disbelief, affirming that what he has seen cannot be—‘we shall not die.’ Jerusalem and life as he knows it cannot be destroyed.” (Moseman 2017: 266-67)

⁷ He does not comprehend that this is part of God’s application of the principle of *lex talionis*, i.e., what Judah has sown, it will reap; by its own standard, it will be measured back to them.

⁸ However, this verse ends by saying “yet I will argue my ways to his face.”

- *“²⁰ I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me. ²¹ You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me. ²² You lift me up on the wind; you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm. ²³ For I know that you will bring me to death and to the house appointed for all living.” (Job 30:20-23)*

C. S. Lewis, whose wife died of cancer, had a similar reaction. Lewis said, “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’” (Lewis 1961: 9-10)

Our situation compared to Habakkuk’s

We need to *know* that God is holy, just, good, faithful, loving, and sovereign, particularly when we are faced with great injustice, suffering, evil, and loss. Habakkuk would have been able to look back at Israel’s great deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the visible pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, the manna in the wilderness, the water from the rock, the defeat of the Canaanites, and the establishing of the nation of Israel in the land as signs of God’s sovereign power, justice, and loving redemption. We are in a much better position than Habakkuk was in. **Rom 8:28** says, “We *know* that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” How could Paul, who suffered imprisonments, scourgings, stonings, and shipwrecks (see **2 Cor 11:23-33**), be confident of God’s goodness, faithfulness, justice, and love? He answers that question in **Rom 8:31-32** when he says, “³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” As Allred points out, “Paul’s certainty is rooted in the cross. Jesus Christ crucified and risen: this is the basis of Paul’s confidence in the goodness, wisdom, and justice of God’s providence, his assurance that everything works for good for those who love God and are called by him, regardless of present circumstances. And it is our confidence as well. In an often perplexing, confusing, painful, seemingly senseless, random world, do you want to know that God is just? Look to the crucified and risen Christ. Do you want to know that God is wise? Look to the crucified and risen Christ. Do you want to know that God is faithful? Do you want to know that God is good? Do you want to know that God is loving? Look to the crucified and risen Christ. Rather than interpreting God through the lens of our present circumstances, faith holds fast to what we know is true about him from his revelation and interprets our circumstances through the lens of the atonement. In Jesus, God has given us a clear demonstration of his goodness, his justice, his faithfulness, and his love, regardless of how our current circumstances might appear.” (Allred 2017: 180)

- **2:1: I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.**

Habakkuk as a watchman

In **v. 1** Habakkuk waits, looking for God’s answer to his complaint. The image of a watchman and watchtower are often used by the prophets to show an attitude of expectation (**Isa 21:8, 11; Jer 6:17; Ezek 3:17**). The imagery of “*stand[ing] at my watchpost and station[ing] myself on the tower, and look[ing] out to see*” is typically applied to “sentries or watchmen on city walls (2 Sam 18:24-27; 2 Kings 9:17-18, 20), who were to warn the citizens of danger or other happenings outside (Isa 21:6; 52:8; Ezek 33:2-6). The verb is applied figuratively to the prophets, who as Israel’s watchmen were to see the Lord’s purposes and communicate them to the people (Hos 9:8; cf. Isa 56:10-11; Jer 6:17; Ezek 3:17; Mic 7:4, 7).” (Armerding 1985: 509)

This imagery implies at least three aspects of what “waiting on the Lord” entails. First, waiting and watching requires patience, perseverance, and obedience. The text does not tell us how long Habakkuk had to wait before God responded to him. It may have been a considerable time (we will talk about this in more detail later). A sentry or watchman is not free to leave his post if the wait is a long one or he is uncomfortable. Persevering means to remain faithful all the way to the end, in hard times as well as good times, as a number of Jesus’ parables stress (see **Matt 24:42-51; 25:14-30; Luke 12:35-48; 19:12-27**). As we will see, in **Hab 2:4b**, persevering in faith is the core of what God is telling Habakkuk and us.

Second, standing at a watchpost on the tower gives a watchman a perspective that someone on the ground does not have. This also relates to hard times and perseverance. **Rom 5:3-5** and **Jas 1:2-4** speak of the depth of character that persevering in faith through trials and tribulations brings. Paul developed that perspective when he was able to say, in **Rom 8:18**, “*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth*

comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Asaph developed “the other side of the coin” of that perspective beginning in **Ps 73:17** when he saw that all the wealth of the ungodly is nothing compared to the end they will face. We will see in **chapter 3** that Habakkuk’s own perspective did radically change.

Third, to “wait on the Lord” implies waiting on “the Lord,” not on the things he may give us. This, again, relates to hard times. Satan’s accusation against Job was, “*Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.*” (**Job 1:9-11**) That is a question everyone who claims to love or follow the Lord must face: Do I love God for who he is in himself or for what I expect him to give me? Hard times reveal whether we are serving the Lord because we love him or are really expecting him to serve us. On the other hand, hard times also give us the opportunity to turn a false, exploitative, selfish relationship into a true love relationship. The amazing thing is that if we faithfully wait on and serve the Lord our whole lives now, in **Luke 12:37** Jesus actually promises to serve us for all eternity: “*Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.*”

There are three other aspects of Habakkuk’s waiting and watching we need to consider. First, by waiting and watching, Habakkuk was implicitly admitting that he did not know everything. The same is true of us. “There is more to the picture than what any of us see. We don’t have all the pieces of the puzzle. Based on the limited information I possess, I am hardly competent to accurately judge the wisdom, goodness, or justice of God’s plans or the instruments and methods he uses to accomplish those plans based upon present circumstances alone. While we can’t deny that God allows sin and employs aspects of the curse to bring about his sovereign plan – and that human pain and suffering are often part of that plan – this doesn’t serve to refute the ultimate goodness or wisdom of God.” (Allred 2017: 180)

Second, the fact that Habakkuk was looking “*to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint*” shows us that he was expecting that God *would* answer him. He was still in communication and relationship with God. Although the translation ends **v. 1** by saying that Habakkuk was looking for “*what I will answer concerning my complaint,*” the Hebrew actually says “*what I will return against my reproof.*” Does “my reproof” refer to Habakkuk’s reproof of Yahweh or Yahweh’s reproof of Habakkuk? “The Hebrew supports either reading, which may be intentional. Verses 12-17 could certainly constitute a reproof of Yahweh by the prophet. Likewise, given the intensity of Habakkuk’s consternation and indignation in verses 12-17, the prophet could reasonably expect a divine reproof in response.” (Moseman 2017: 268) That he is literally not looking to respond “to” but “against” divine reproof highlights the full significance of **v. 1**: “That Habakkuk expects an answer from Yahweh allows Habakkuk to continue to affirm God’s faithfulness and sovereignty and what he has essentially always understood and believed about God. That Habakkuk expects to be reproofed for challenging Yahweh likewise affirms his understanding of God as righteous and holy. Finally, that Habakkuk intends to respond ‘against’ God’s correction reflects Habakkuk’s personal struggle and outrage, as revealed in verses 2-4 and 12-17 in particular.” (Ibid.: 269)

Third, beginning in **v. 2**, we know that God did answer Habakkuk but, as stated earlier, the text does not tell us how long Habakkuk had to wait before God responded to him. Similarly with respect to the question which opened the book—*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?*—the text does not tell us “How long” Habakkuk had to keep crying for help. If we look to history, we know that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conducted more than one operation against Jerusalem, beginning in 598 BC and ending with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC and the carrying away of the Judeans to exile in Babylon. They were finally permitted to return by the Decree of Cyrus in 538 BC. Thus, depending on when Habakkuk wrote his book, the situation about which he complained existed for approximately 70 years. However, if we go back to the beginning of Manasseh’s reign in Judah (697 BC), the total time period of injustice, violence, and evil until the return from exile in Babylon lasted approximately 160 years.

Our situation compared to Habakkuk’s

This should tell us that, when we are faced with very difficult circumstances and cry out to the Lord for relief or at least for some insight or answer, there may be no apparent answer for a very long time. We may have to keep praying and crying out to the Lord for *decades*. In fact, it is possible that we may *never*, at least in this lifetime, receive a specific answer from the Lord. If we do receive a specific answer, it may not be the answer we were hoping for (as was the case with Habakkuk). That was the case with the apostle Paul. He wrote, “⁷ *A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.*”

⁸ *Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.* ⁹ *But he said to me, ‘My grace is*

sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor 12:7-10)

No one likes “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.” Yet everyone experiences them. Paul learned to be content in them and could even boast of them, because in doing so the power of Christ rested upon him. Indeed, even from the very beginning of his conversion to Christ, God said, “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). In 2 Cor 11:23-33, Paul recounts the many hardships—both external and internal—that he suffered. Yet, again, he could conclude, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” (2 Cor 11:30). These are hard lessons. They go against our natural desires and inclinations. They are contrary to the mindset of much of the world and even a certain theology, which says that life is all about maximizing one’s health, wealth, and happiness. Yet these lessons are biblical. “Weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” happen to everybody—not to the same extent or degree—but they happen to everybody.

What is most important is how we *respond* when we are the subjects of such suffering, evil, and injustice or when we see others being subjected to such suffering, evil, and injustice. As we stated earlier, when iniquity is around us and we finally notice it, that is for a reason. God is causing it to register with us so that we will do something about it. We are to be God’s agents of redemption, not just passively lament the iniquity surrounds us (or the iniquity that we experience ourselves). A key to properly responding to suffering, evil, and injustice to ask ourselves: Are these circumstances driving me away from God or closer to him? Am I letting God use these circumstances to mature me and make me more like Christ so that I can comfort others who are also suffering? That is one of the reasons why God sends “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” into our lives—so that we can relate to fellow sufferers with the love of Christ. Paul himself indicated that when he said, “³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.” (2 Cor 1:3-6)

- **2:2-3:**² *And the LORD answered me: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. ³ For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”*

At some point God did answer Habakkuk. He commanded that the vision be written down so that it would be preserved for others, including future generations (see Rom 15:4).⁹ God had done this in the past with other prophets (see, e.g., Exod 17:14; 34:27; Isa 8:1; 30:8; Jer 30:2; 36:2, 28; Ezek 43:11). The specific reason for writing the vision is given in v. 3: God’s answer to Habakkuk would take place in the future, so it needed to be preserved to be available for those people alive when it actually came to pass. Verse 3 indicates that God has a plan that he will certainly bring to completion at the “appointed time.” However, his timing is not necessarily our timing; hence, it may seem to us to be delayed and slow in coming, but “it will surely come.” Therefore, we can run the race marked out for us with confidence and perseverance. Because we are not able to see the entire course of the race, we “must lay hold of the future that God has revealed, waiting for it with an eager faith and hope that surpass the apparent obstacles to its realization” (Armerding 1985: 512).

As to the “vision” itself, Sweeney believes that vv. 2-4 form the vision itself, with v. 4 as its core; he believes that vv. 5-20 constitute Habakkuk’s own explanation of the meaning of God’s response (Sweeney 1991: 71-72). “A better view regards the first two stanzas [vv. 2-3, 4-5] as constituting the introduction to the vision, which is the series of five woes in the following five stanzas (vv. 6-20). . . . According to v. 3 the vision is about the (eschatological) future, about an event that is coming. Verses 4 and 5 do not deal with the future. But the five woes do deal with the future.” (Clendenen 2014: 506)¹⁰

⁹ The meaning of “so he may run who reads it” is unclear. L. E. H. Stephens-Hodge says this is a Hebrew idiom meaning “that he may read it quickly (whoever sees it).” (Stephens-Hodge 1970: 770). Armerding maintains that “such reading might plausibly be done by a herald, whose role would then be to ‘run’ with the message” (Armerding 1985: 511). Youssouf Dembele suggests, “The vision must be written down so clearly on clay or wooden tablets that those who read it will recognize that they need to run for their lives.” (Dembele 2006: 1065).

¹⁰ On the other hand, Andersen thinks it is unclear whether the vision is **Habakkuk 3** or the “woe” oracles of **chapter 2**. He

Writing and preserving the vision suggest the importance of the vision. That certainly proved to be true; the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians and the carrying away of Israel to exile in Babylon were of crucial importance in the history of Israel, but its importance extended far beyond the nation of Israel. Although the Jews in exile had been permitted to return to Israel in 538 BC, the vast majority of them did not return. This “diaspora” (the dispersed Jews outside of Israel) proved to be important in salvation history. “Early Christianity first spread in those areas where there was a Jewish presence. That is, it spreads in Egypt, it spreads in Syria, it spreads in Asia Minor, it spreads in Greece and Italy. These are precisely areas where we know there were Jewish communities, there were Jewish synagogues and there were Jews in number scattered throughout all these areas.” (Cohen 1995-2014: “The Jewish Diaspora”) The primary reason for the rapid spread of Christianity in these areas was that these diaspora Jewish communities introduced pagans around the Roman Empire to the Bible and the biblical God. Many pagans were attracted to this, having experienced the spiritual emptiness of paganism. These pagan “god-fearers” are the people who then went on to find their true spiritual rest in Christ and Christianity. The reason why these “god-fearing” pagans so readily converted to Christianity is that “because they were already in some sense familiar with Jewish scriptural traditions through their contact with the synagogue, they could understand the significance of terms like ‘messiah’ or ‘David’ or ‘Jerusalem’ or ‘Kingdom’ that articulated the gospel message. Their synagogue context enabled them to listen, to understand, and to respond.” (Fredriksen 2018: 153) The diaspora Jews were able to introduce the Greek-speaking, Gentile pagans to the Bible and the biblical God because they could relate to the Gentiles, since they were largely “Hellenized” Jews, i.e., Jews who spoke Greek and had adopted many Greek ideas and aspects of Greek culture (see “Spread of Christianity” 2020: Missionary activity).¹¹ While many of the early Christians were Jews, it was the “god-fearing” pagans who formed the bulk of the early converts to Christ. None of that could have been foreseeable by Habakkuk. Indeed, the important role played by these “Hellenized,” diaspora Jews in being the link between pagans and Christ did not take place until over 600 years after Habakkuk wrote.

This tells us that we cannot legitimately judge God by our own time frame. God knows “*the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’*” (Isa 46:10). In his eyes, “*one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*” (2 Pet 3:8; see also Ps 90:4). Recall that, as we discussed with respect to 2:1, above, even God’s “direct” answer to Habakkuk’s two complaints took anywhere from approximately 70-160 years to be fulfilled. Here, we see that an important aspect of the reason why God acted as he did, i.e., to “fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord” (2:14), ultimately was related to the coming into the world of Jesus Christ and the coming to faith of people “*from every tribe and language and people and nation*” (Rev 5:9; 7:9), which didn’t begin until 600 years after Habakkuk wrote. As we will discuss in connection with 2:5-19 and chapter 3, God’s responses to Habakkuk ultimately are eschatological, involving all people and the restoration of the entire world. Therefore, while Habakkuk’s complaints were legitimate, his frame of reference was too small. The same tends to be true of us. Our concerns and complaints to God may be legitimate, but our frames of reference are very limited, and we do not have the insight of the “big picture” of what is really happening, why it is happening, and what God is intending and is doing through it.

- **2:4: Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.**

This verse is not the whole of God’s second answer to Habakkuk but forms its core. In v. 4a, the “*puffed up*” one whose soul “*is not upright within him*” appears to relate back to the wicked man of 1:12-17. “In the context of the preceding material, v. 4a refers to the Chaldeans and v. 4b refers to Judah.” (Sweeney 1991: 76) Specifically, however, the “righteous” could not be Judah *per se*, since it was the violence, sin, and injustice within Judah itself that occasioned Habakkuk’s crying out to God. Hence, “In the context of v. 3, ‘the righteous one’ is part of a believing remnant who believes the vision, who is waiting on God’s deliverance from the wicked” (Clendenen 2014: 508). The characteristics of the “puffed up” or arrogant man are described in v. 5, which provides the background for the five “woe” oracles that begin in v. 6.

states, “The best we can do is to identify the visionary component of the book (Habakkuk 3) as the vision and the oracular component (the ‘woe oracles’) as the message” (Andersen 2001: 207).

¹¹ They were called “Hellenists” from a word meaning “Greek” or “Greek-speaking.” To “Hellenize” is to adopt Greek culture and ideas. Hellenistic Jews consisted of those who were scattered among the Gentiles, spoke the Greek language, and used the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. They are mentioned in Acts 6:1 and 9:29.

Overview of **Hab 2:4b**

The importance of **v. 4b** (“*the righteous shall live by his faith*”) was recognized in Judaism. The *Babylonian Talmud*, compiled from the third to the fifth centuries AD, is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and theology. Tractate Makkot 24a says, “R[abbi] Simlai when preaching said: Six hundred and thirteen precepts were communicated to Moses. . . . Isaiah came and reduced them to six [principles], as it is written, [i] He that walketh righteously, and [ii] speaketh uprightly, [iii] He that despiseth the gain of oppressions, [iv] that shaketh his hand from holding of bribes, [v] that stoppeth his ear from hearing of blood, [vi] and shutteth his eyes from looking upon evil; he shall dwell on high. . . . Micah came and reduced them to three [principles], as it is written, It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: [i] only to do justly, and [ii] to love mercy and [iii] to walk humbly before thy God. . . . Again came Isaiah and reduced them to two [principles], as it is said, Thus saith the Lord, [i] Keep ye justice and [ii] do righteousness [etc.]. Amos came and reduced them to one [principle], as it is said, For thus saith the Lord unto the house of Israel, Seek ye Me and live. . . . But it is Habakkuk who came and based them all on one [principle], as it is said, But the righteous shall live by his faith.”¹²

When **v. 4b** says that the righteous shall “live” by his faith, the issue is what does the word “live” mean in this context? Debbie Hunn states, “In the 279 uses of the verb [*hāyāh*] in the Old Testament outside Hab. 2.4, there are no examples where it means ‘to behave’ or ‘to conduct life in a given manner’ The context of Habakkuk also supports the meaning ‘be alive’ rather than ‘conduct life’ because the prophet’s concern was that the righteous were being slain (Hab.1.13-17).” (Hunn 2009: 229) The next issue regarding “live” is: “Live how long?” or “Live when?” In historical context, Habakkuk was concerned that the Babylonians would continue their slaughter indefinitely (**1:17**); but the Lord assures him that there will be survivors (**2:4b**). Thus, for the righteous to “live” implies life after the Babylonian invasion. The vision itself promises more than just surviving the invasion only to die in exile. Consequently, “Most scholars understand Habakkuk to speak of eschatological life. . . . Habakkuk’s use of apocalyptic metaphors and ideas points in the direction of the eschaton. In 2.14 he speaks of the earth being filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. In 3.3-15 he depicts the Lord’s coming with bold images: Yahweh’s radiance is like the sunlight (3.4); pestilence goes before him and plague after him (3.5); mountains are shattered and hills collapse (3.6); he cleaves the earth with rivers (3.9) and tramples nations (3.12). . . . Habakkuk himself will walk on high places [3.19] *after* God delivers him and the rest of his people from their enemies (3.13-14). In other words, the one who was to wait for the vision, would see it fulfilled. If, as 2.1-4 suggests, the people were to wait for the vision, it is because they, like Habakkuk, would see it fulfilled. . . . Aside from the improbable event that they were all quite young when they heard the prediction of 2.3, some of the righteous would have died before 539 BCE; and since they were to live to see the fulfillment of the vision, the life they would live must be resurrection life. The text thus speaks of the eschaton.” (Ibid.: 230, 231; see also Clendenen 2014: 506-07, 509) Hence, although Judah was destroyed and exiled by Babylon, and some of the people lived to see the destruction of Babylon by the Medo-Persians and return from exile, the ultimate fulfillment of the vision extends far beyond Judah and Babylon.

There also has been some dispute as to the meaning of “faith” in **v. 4b**. Clendenen states, “In its 49 uses, the semantic range of *’ēmūnā* [the Hebrew word translated as “faith”] has three foci: faithfulness or trustworthiness, integrity or honesty, and reliability or truthfulness. About half of the uses describe Yahweh and his Torah.” (Clendenen 2014: 509) Consequently, “several modern English translations render *’ēmūnā* in Hab 2:4 as ‘faithful(ness), fidelity’ (NJPSV, REB, TEV, GW, NLT, NIV [2011], NET) or ‘honestly’ (CEB). Some scholars interpret Habakkuk as even saying the opposite of what Paul says, that righteousness comes through keeping the law. Other scholars interpret Habakkuk as saying that the righteous shall live because of God’s (or the vision’s) faithfulness.” (Ibid.: 505-06)

Hab 2:4b in the NT

Verse 4b became a central tenet of Christianity, being quoted in **Rom 1:17**; **Gal 3:11**; and **Heb 10:38** as “*the righteous shall live by faith*.”¹³ Some commentators think that Paul did not correctly interpret **v. 4b** and that Paul’s meaning has been “read into” the interpretation of Habakkuk. However, the distinction between

¹² It was Rabbi Nahman bar Yitzhak who substituted Habakkuk for Amos, saying, “There is no proof that the verse in Amos is establishing all the mitzvot [i.e., commandments by God to be performed as a religious duty] upon one; say that Amos is saying: Seek Me throughout the entire Torah, as the verse does not specify the manner in which one should seek the Lord. Rather, say: Habakkuk came and established the 613 mitzvot upon one, as it is stated: ‘But the righteous person shall live by his faith.’” (Makkot 24a, *The William Davidson Talmud*, n.d.: 27)

¹³ In Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews the pronoun “his” before the word “faith” is omitted. Hebrews also reverses the order of **Hab 2:4a** and **4b** and adds the word “my” (i.e., “*My righteous one shall live by faith*”).

“faith” and “faithfulness” is more apparent than real. If we take seriously the doctrine of progressive revelation and the fact that the NT properly interprets the OT, then “faith” is the correct interpretation. The context in all three NT quotations of **Hab 2:4b** makes that clear:

- In **Romans 1** faith is not a human virtue but is revealed by God.¹⁴ In other words, people cannot work themselves into a state of righteousness by faithfully obeying the requirements of the law. **Gen 15:6** records that Abram “*believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness*” (see also **Gal 3:6**). **Hab 2:4b** appears to be dealing with the same thought—the nature of true, saving faith: “The prophet [Habakkuk] was exhorting the people of Judah to follow in the footsteps of Abraham, whose faith was not a momentary act, but rather a whole life of persevering obedience (see esp. Gen. 22, which is the basis for James 2:21-24). Faith involves waiting for fulfillment and thus is always in danger of being shaken; therefore, steadiness and constancy are of its essence. In other words, for Habakkuk there was no such distinction between faith and faithfulness as we often assume.” (Silva 2007: 802) In **Romans 4** Paul elaborates the significance of Abraham’s faith. Thus, “Far from manipulating the Habakkuk citation as a convenient proof-text for a view that contradicted the prophet, Paul was genuinely indebted to that text as a source for his teaching; moreover, his own theological formulations strengthened and advanced the prophetic message.” (Ibid.)
- In **Galatians 3** faith is contrasted with the Law by which “*no one is justified*” (**Gal 3:11**) and which “*is not of faith*” (**Gal 3:12**); Paul adds that righteousness does not come through the law, and the law does not impart life (**Gal 2:21; 3:21**). That is even suggested by Habakkuk’s first complaint in **Hab 1:2-4** which indicates that the law failed to bring about righteousness. The reason why the law does not bring righteousness or impart life is not because the law was paralyzed, perverted, or not fully kept by everyone. A person could steadfastly obey the law yet not have life because he or she did not possess faith. “It was when Peter started *keeping* the dietary laws that Paul said he was out of sync with the gospel and transgressing the law [**Gal 2:11-16**]. It was when the Judaizers wanted to *keep* the command to circumcise Titus in 2:3 that Paul said the truth of the gospel was about to be compromised. The problem with the Judaizers is not their failure to follow the detailed statutes of the law; the problem was that they missed the larger lesson of the law, namely, that without a new heart (Deut. 30:6, 7) and without the enablement of God (Deut. 4:30, 31; 5:29; 29:4) and without faith (Ex. 14:31; Num. 14:11; 20:21; Deut. 1:32) all efforts to obey the law would simply be legalistic strivings of the flesh.” (Piper 1983: n.p.)
- In **Hebrews 10** the context is maintaining one’s faith that God’s kingdom and the rewards he has for his people will surely come when Christ returns. “Faith” is “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (**Heb 11:1**). **Hebrews 11** goes on to give multiple OT examples of people who were looking forward, through faith, to the fulfillment of God’s promises. They were “*commended through their faith*” even though they “*did not receive what was promised*” (**Heb 11:39**). Similarly, we are to look for the sure coming of Christ, live out our faith, and not fall back. The same was true in Habakkuk. “The single application of faithfulness demanded in the context [of **Hab 2:4b**] is the command to Habakkuk to ‘wait’ . . . for the vision. And when v. 2 speaks of others reading the words of the vision, it is evident that the Lord does not intend the vision for Habakkuk alone. Others are to hear the message, and the righteous, like Habakkuk, are to exercise [*’ēmūnâ*] by waiting for the fulfillment. Now people who wait for the vision wait because they believe it will come, and people who believe God’s vision of freedom will wait expectantly for it. In this context, [*’ēmūnâ*] does not require action because Yahweh himself will bring salvation. It only requires faith in the certainty of the vision.” (Hunn 2009: 227; see also Clendenen 2014: 511) Thus, Andersen concludes, “The oracle [in Habakkuk] is addressed to God’s people and will evoke disbelief or trust. Only those who have faith (or who trust in the reliability of God or of his word) will live. To that extent, the Greek versions, including Heb 10:38, have the gist of it.” (Andersen 2001: 215)

The NT’s quoting **Hab 2:4b** in **Rom 1:17**, **Gal 3:11** and **Heb 10:38** reflects the fact that God’s revelation was given progressively and also the fact that the events of OT Israel were “types” and “shadows” that were pointing forward to future, New Covenant, spiritual realities (**Gal 4:21-31; Col 2:16-17; Heb 8:5; 9:15-10:22; 12:18-24**).¹⁵ “In Habakkuk, the content of faith is the vision of destruction of the wicked and deliverance of the righteous. Chapter 3 fills in some particulars, most notably that it is Yahweh himself who comes to rescue his people. Paul, however, recognizes the death of Christ as necessary to rescue God’s people from the present evil age (Gal. 1.4). But although the death of Christ precedes Yahweh’s coming, it does not

¹⁴ This is reflected in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which was completed over a hundred years before Christ came into the world. It substitutes the word “my” for “his” immediately before the word “faith” (i.e., “*the righteous one will live by my faith*”).

¹⁵ This is discussed in detail in Menn 2018: 4-6, 26-93.

pre-empt it; rather, is necessary for it (1 Cor. 15). Yahweh will yet come in the person of Christ to deliver his people. Paul does not replace Habakkuk’s vision but supplies detail from later revelation.” (Hunn 2009: 228)

The “righteous,” “faith,” and “faithfulness”

The coming of Christ clarifies and reveals the ultimate meaning of, and relationship between, the “righteous,” “faith,” and “faithfulness.” The crucial thing to realize is that, on a person’s own, “*None is righteous, no, not one*” (Rom 3:10). On the other hand, God is perfectly holy and cannot abide in the presence of sin (see Ps 5:4-6; Hab 1:13; Rom 1:18). The standard to make a person “righteous” is, “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” (Matt 5:48). We cannot achieve this righteousness or perfection on our own (see Isa 64:6). That is why Christ came and did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He, and he alone, lived a perfectly sinless life. That qualified him to “step into our shoes” and, on the cross, pay the penalty for our sins that otherwise we would have to pay. Our sins were imputed to him. At the same time, his righteousness is imputed to us when we have faith in him. This is the doctrine of “imputed righteousness,” i.e., “When we place our faith in Christ, God ascribes the perfect righteousness of Christ to our account so that we become perfect in His sight. . . . By having the righteousness of Christ imputed, or attributed, to us, we can be seen as sinless, as Jesus is sinless. We are not righteous in ourselves; rather, we possess Christ’s righteousness applied to our account. It is not our perfection, but Christ’s that God sees when He brings us into fellowship with Himself. We are still sinners *in practice*, but the grace of God has declared us to have righteous standing before the law.” (“Why does Christ’s righteousness” 2002-2020: n.p.; see 2 Cor 5:21). The doctrine of imputed righteousness goes all the way back to Abraham (Gen 15:6).¹⁶ This is the key lesson Martin Luther learned, specifically, “A person becomes *righteous* only by having *faith*, an implicit trust in God. It was through this *faith*, and through *faith* alone, that Luther learned that he was ‘declared’ to be *righteous* by God, and that, as a result, enabled him to *live*, to live an eternal life.” (Morledge 2016: n.p.).

What, then, is the relationship between faith and faithfulness (i.e., living out our faith)? Patterson summarizes this: “To the Hebrew mind no dichotomy existed between faith and faithfulness. The truly righteous person is the one whose faith is demonstrated in faithful deeds.” (Patterson 1979: 670) In other words, “For man to be faithful in righteousness entails dependent trust in relation to God. . . . And ‘faith’ (*pistis*) implies obedient commitment no less than trust.” (Armerding 1985: 513) The apostle James put it this way: “*Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works*” (Jas 2:18). It is the faithfulness of our lives—our not falling back into sin and unbelief, but maintaining our belief and trust in God and demonstrating that belief and trust by the nature of how we live and what we do—that demonstrates that our faith is real, not simply “lip-service.”¹⁷

The principle that “*the righteous shall live by (his) faith*” was particularly important in Habakkuk’s context of being in the presence of evil, injustice, and oppression and living in the fearful prospect of being invaded by an even more evil and oppressive people. Walter Rast says, “The declaration ‘but the righteous one will live through his steadfast faith’ must consequently be seen as a new kind of challenge to holding on before the vision was fulfilled and the oppressor dealt with. This holding on would be the most genuine expression of

¹⁶ Gen 15:6 says, “*And he [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*” Abraham was a “type” or “shadow” pointing forward to the New Covenant realities that find their fulfillment in Christ and the church.

¹⁷ The *order* of faith and faithfulness has profound practical implications. Timothy Keller points out, “Religion [i.e., any religion except Christianity] operates on the principle ‘I obey—therefore I am accepted by God.’ But the operating principle of the gospel is ‘I am accepted by God through what Christ has done—therefore I obey.’” (Keller 2008: 179-80) While we cannot work our way to heaven but are saved only by God’s grace through faith in Christ (John 3:16-18; 6:28-29; Rom 2:16-17; 10:8-13; Eph 2:8-9; Gal 3:1-14); nevertheless, we are saved for a *purpose*: “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them*” (Eph 2:10). Faith in Christ does not leave us on our own to do the “good works” he has prepared for us. Just as we are “in Christ,” so he is in us. When one comes to Christ, he or she receives a new heart (Ezek 36:26; 2 Cor 3:3), the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16), and the Spirit from Christ (Ezek 36:26; John 14:17). He actively works in us in us and through us to change our values, priorities, attitude, and will to make us just like himself (Rom 8:29). Consequently, Paul can tell us to “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Phil 2:12-13). The works we do after we receive Christ by faith “are an index of the spiritual condition of a person’s heart. . . . The judgment is not a balancing of good works over bad works. Rather, works are seen as unmistakable evidence of the loyalty of the heart; they express belief or unbelief, faithfulness or unfaithfulness. The judgment will reveal whether or not people’s loyalties have been with God and the Lamb or with God’s enemies.” (Ngundu 2006: 1576; see Matt 6:19-21; 24:45-51; 25:31-46; Luke 12:42-48; Phil 2:12-13; 1 Tim 6:18-19; Heb 6:10-12; 1 John 4:7-21) Thus, lack of faithfulness amounts to *disbelief* in Jesus Christ.

the righteous one's life" (Rast 1983: 173)¹⁸ "Holding on" to faith and continuing to live out one's faith in the face of great stress, evil, anxiety, and injustice are just as important and necessary for believers in any time and place.

In short, while Habakkuk's prophecy arose out of a specific historical situation, it depicts universal principles that extend far beyond Judah and Babylon. The "wicked" as depicted by Habakkuk included both Jews (1:2-4) and Gentiles (the Chaldeans, 1:6-17). Because the vision depicts universal and eschatological realities, the wicked, while encompassing both Jews and Gentiles, have become generalized beyond the Judeans and Chaldeans of Habakkuk's time.

The same is true for the "righteous." In **Hab 1:5** God told Habakkuk to "Look among *the nations*." **Hab 1:13** speaks of the wicked swallowing up "those more righteous than they"; in **vv. 14-16** the fishing analogy (another metaphor for "swallowing up") encompasses people generally, not merely Jews; **v. 17** explicitly speaks of the wicked "emptying his net and mercilessly killing *nations*"; that is confirmed in **2:5** which speaks of the wicked person who "gathers for himself *all nations* and collects as his own *all peoples*." In other words, the righteous include Gentiles as well as Jews. The context of Paul's quoting **Hab 2:4b** in **Rom 1:17** and **Gal 3:11** makes this explicit (see **Rom 1:16**; **Gal 3:28**; see also **Acts 10:34-35**; **Rev 5:9**; **7:9**). "Paul then sees the eschaton in Habakkuk, because whether or not Habakkuk saw it, that is what follows from his prophecy. . . . In line with this, the Lord does not say that the righteous will not die. Rather, he promises Habakkuk that they, too, will live by their faith in the Lord's salvation, that is, by waiting for the vision. When Paul, therefore, applies Hab. 2.4 to both Jews and Gentiles because they receive eternal life by faith apart from the law, he remains squarely within the framework of Habakkuk." (Hunn 2009: 232, 239)

• **2:5-19:**⁵ *Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples.*⁶ *Shall not all these take up their taunt against him, with scoffing and riddles for him, and say, "Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own—for how long?—and loads himself with pledges!"*⁷ *Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them.*⁸ *Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.*⁹ *Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm!*¹⁰ *You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life.*¹¹ *For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond.*¹² *Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity!*¹³ *Behold, is it not from the LORD of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing?*¹⁴ *For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*¹⁵ *Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink—you pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness!*¹⁶ *You will have your fill of shame instead of glory. Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision! The cup in the LORD's right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory!*¹⁷ *The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.*¹⁸ *What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols!*¹⁹ *Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it.*

In this passage, **v. 5** picks up the reference in **v. 4a** to the "puffed up" man and expands on it; **v. 5** then provides the basis for the taunt against him (**v. 6**) and the five "woes" (**vv. 6, 9, 12, 15, 19**). In context, the person being spoken against is Babylon. However, as we saw above, the description in these verses is general enough to encompass God's judgment against all evildoers, not just Babylon.

The "wine" metaphor

The reference to "wine" in **v. 5** seems to be out of place, but it is appropriate in this context. In a parallel prophecy of the destruction of Babylon, Jeremiah compares Babylon to wine: "*Babylon was a golden cup in the LORD's hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine; therefore the nations went mad*" (**Jer 51:7**). Additionally, in the Bible, wine is frequently a metaphor for God's judgment (see **Ps 75:8**; **Isa**

¹⁸ Rast finds the translation "steadfast faith" an "excellent solution" to the problem of "trying to find a term encompassing both faith and faithfulness" (Rast 1983: 169n.1).

51:17, 21-22; 63:1-6; Jer 13:12-14; 25:17-29; Lam 1:15; Rev 14:9-10, 17-20; 16:19; 19:15). Since God was using Babylon as his instrument to judge Judah, wine is an excellent metaphor here.

This section also is telling us that God will judge Babylon. **Hab 2:5a** “effectively characterizes the Chaldean as one who is drunk with his own power” and, although “the imagery in 2:5c-f recognizes the force of Habakkuk’s description in 1:14-16, it re-interprets that description by the effective use of a number of conventional wisdom motifs, to show that the very power and greed of the Chaldean will be his undoing.” (Janzen 1982: 407). **Verses 15-16** use the metaphor of drinking for God’s judgment against it. When **vv. 15-16** say “*Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink—you pour out your wrath and make them drunk. . . . Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision! The cup in the LORD’s right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory!*” God is saying, as he said in response to Habakkuk’s first complaint in **chapter 1**, that he will judge and repay them “according to their deeds”: an eye for an eye; what a person or nation sows, it will reap; by its own standard, it will be measured back to them. “*The cup in the LORD’s right hand*” came around to Babylon literally, because Babylon was overthrown when the its king and his leaders and concubines were drinking wine out of the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem (**Dan 5:1-31**). The warning against idolatry in **vv. 18-19** also was brought home to Babylon when it was overthrown. Daniel the prophet spoke to king Belshazzar and the Babylonian leaders the night Babylon was overthrown. One of the things he said was, “*You have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.*” (**Dan 5:23**)

Earlier we saw that God’s responses to Habakkuk ultimately are universal and eschatological and that he measures back to people and nations by the standard they themselves have used. The wording of **v. 16** (“*You will have your fill of shame instead of glory. Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision! The cup in the LORD’s right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory!*”) shows an ironic application of this. Twice in this verse God is telling the Babylonians—and all people—that, although they seek glory, they will instead receive shame. It is through Jesus Christ that “*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD*” (**v. 14**). It was Christ who, “*though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant. . . .⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*” (**Phil 2:6-8**) It was Christ who “*for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame*” (**Heb 12:2**).¹⁹ In other words, the gospel turns everything upside down. Humanity seeks glory and glorifies itself but ends up only with shame and death. Christ took our shame onto himself so that, when we come to him, we will receive the glory (“*the glory of the LORD*”) that belongs to him. As Christ said, “*Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it*” (**Matt 16:25**; see also **Matt 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25**)

The “woe” oracles

With respect to the “woes” of **vv. 6-19**, “woe” is commonly used by the prophets to indicate a judicial indictment (e.g., **Isa 3:9; 5:8, 11, 18, 20-22; Jer 22:13; 23:1; Amos 6:1**). Jesus used the same language of “woe” when condemning the lack of repentance and belief, hypocrites, and those who hinder others from coming to faith (e.g., **Matt 11:21; 18:7; 23:13-16, 23, 25, 27, 29; 26:24**).

¹⁹ Jerome Neyrey points out, “In the cultural world of the New Testament, Jesus’ death by crucifixion was acknowledged as a most shameful experience. . . . But the gospel, while it records these actions and gestures of shame, tells quite a different story. In the evangelist’s eyes, Jesus’ shame and humiliation is truly the account of his glory: ‘Ought not the Christ suffer and so enter into his glory’ (Luke 24:26; see Acts 14:22; Heb 2:10). Indeed, in the Fourth Gospel, his death is regularly described as glory and glorification (John 7:39; 12:28; 17:5; see 21:19). Or, to paraphrase Paul, foolishness, weakness and shame in human eyes are wisdom, strength and honor in God’s eyes (1 Cor 1:20, 25). Thus the story of Jesus’ shame is ironically understood by his disciples as his ‘lifting up,’ his exaltation, his enthronement, in short, his honor. The issue might be rephrased: Who gets to judge whether the crucifixion is honor or shame? If the public verdict rests with the Judeans, then Jesus is shamed. But if God gives a riposte or if Jesus demonstrates power by his death, then the community of believers renders Jesus a verdict of honor.” (Neyrey 1994: 115, 118-19) What Christ accomplished on the cross is doubly ironic in that **Hab 2:16** was referring to the Babylonians, yet in fact it was the Judeans themselves who demanded that Christ—a fellow Jew!—be crucified. In doing that, they “showed their own uncircumcision” and demonstrated that they, like everyone, were as corrupt and idolatrous at heart as were the Babylonians.

In Habakkuk, Marvin Sweeney notes, “Various statements in the woe oracles indicate that an international situation is presupposed, including references to peoples and nations (vv. 6a, 8a, 10b, 13b), the earth, humankind, and the sea (vv. 8b, 14, 17b), and the violence of Lebanon (v. 17a). With regard to the last point, Nebuchadnezzar reports taking Lebanon and transporting its wood back to Babylon to build a palace. This act corresponds to the concerns raised in Habakkuk’s woe oracles which speak of extortion and plunder of nations (vv. 6b-8), unjust gain used for protecting one’s house (vv. 9-11), bloodshed to build a city (vv. 12-14), and the ravaging of a land (vv. 15-17). Finally, the prophet’s assertion that the reason for the oppressor’s crimes is its idolatry (vv. 18-20) corresponds to the portrayal of the Chaldeans in i 11, 16 (cf. ii 13a).” (Sweeney 1991: 77-78)

Just as God repeated Habakkuk’s own words in his response to Habakkuk’s first complaint, he does the same thing in answer to Habakkuk’s second complaint. “The first woe [v. 6] takes up the twice-uttered question of Habakkuk (1:2, 17) and, in the mouth of the nations, turns it mockingly upon the head of the Chaldean—‘for how long?’ The placement of this mocking question upon the lips of the erstwhile victims effectively gives the lie to the pretended everlastingness of arrogant power.” (Janzen 1982: 407) Additionally, vv. 7-8 say, “*Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.*” That is exactly what happened to Babylon; it fell to its former victims (its “debtors”), the Medes and the Persians (**Isa 13:17-19; Jer 51:11; Dan 5:28-31**).²⁰ Finally, “The Chaldean thought his power was divine [**1:11**]. 2:13 establishes Yahweh as God, in relation to whom the labor of the Chaldean (and all the nations) is seen to lead only to the fire of judgment and to futility (*rîq*) and weariness (*yā’ap*). These last two terms answer Habakkuk’s earlier charges concerning the weakness of God’s *tôrâ* [law]/*mispāt* [justice].” (Ibid.)

“The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord”

Verse 14 states God’s underlying purpose behind the “woes” and the judgment they entail: “*For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*” “God’s abiding intent is that his ‘glory’ should fill the whole earth as it has filled his house (cf. Num 14:21; Pss 57:5, 11; 72:19; Exod 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:11), and that man should know it fully—a ‘knowledge’ . . . that will be as the ‘sea’ in its length, breadth, and depth” (Armerding 1985: 517-18). John Piper points out that the term “glory of God” generally “refers to the visible splendor or moral beauty of God’s manifold perfections. It is an attempt to put into words what cannot be contained in words—what God is like in His magnificence and excellence.” (Piper 2003: 308) The centrality of the glory of God is seen throughout the Bible:

- God created us for his glory (**Isa 43:6-7**)
- He chose his people for his glory (**Eph 1:4-6**)
- Jesus suffered and died for the glory of God (**John 12:27-28**)
- Jesus receives us into his fellowship for the glory of God (**Rom 15:7**)
- Everything we do is to be for the glory of God (**1 Cor 10:31**)
- In the New Jerusalem, the glory of God replaces the sun (**Rev 21:23**)

That “*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*” (**2:14**) reveals an eschatological purpose of the vision. This is further indicated in the Septuagint’s (LXX) translation of **2:3**. While the Masoretic (Hebrew) text reads, “*For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay,*” the Septuagint changes the last portion of that verse to read “*though he should tarry, wait for him; for he will surely come, and will not tarry.*” In other words, it is not just that the vision will surely come, but that the deliverer will surely come. That gives the vision a distinctly messianic connotation. In the NT, “he who is coming” is applied to Jesus, the Messiah (see **Matt 3:11; 11:3; 21:9; Luke 7:19; 19:38; John 1:15, 27; Rev 1:4**). Indeed, the LXX version of **Hab 2:3** was quoted in **Heb 10:37**. The context there was enduring in one’s faith as we wait for the second coming of Christ. As applied in Hebrews, the quotation from Habakkuk weds Christology, Christian living, and eschatology.

Idolatry

Verses 18-19 are the “other side of the coin” of v. 14. Whereas v. 14 says that God’s purpose is that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God, vv. 18-19 indicate the reason why God has

²⁰ **Verse 8** (“*Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you*”) is yet another instance of God’s applying the principle of “what you have sown, so shall you reap.”

pronounced the “woes” and is bringing judgment: the root of all the greed, violence, and oppression against which the “woes” are pronounced is *idolatry*. In fact, the passage began in **v. 5** by talking about the Babylonians’ arrogance and insatiable greed. Yet arrogance amounts to self-deification which is idolatry, and greed is explicitly defined to be idolatry in **Eph 5:5** and **Col 3:5**. Thus, from beginning to end, the source of the evil was idolatry. While idolatry characterized the Chaldeans, Moseman points out that the idolatry referred to cuts both broader and deeper than that: “The final oracle, the oracle against idolatry, is significant. . . . Given its placement at the end and the fact that its form, no doubt a rhetorical device, is different than the others in this series, the oracle seeks to attract the audience’s attention. Does it suffice to interpret this oracle as condemning only the idolatrous Babylonians, or should one also perceive the accusation of idolatry against the Judeans as well? In light of (1) the previous discussion, (2) Habakkuk’s initial complaint against his fellow Judeans, and (3) pervasive support of Judean idolatry elsewhere in the Old Testament, one is hard pressed to see the difference between the idolatry of the Judeans and that of the Babylonians. Also worth remembering is that the oracles are issued in Yahweh’s dialogue with Habakkuk. Generally, interpreters tend to skim over them as not pertaining to Habakkuk himself but as words that he is to deliver to others. But they are part of the divine response to Habakkuk’s complaint. Is Habakkuk above the accusation of idolatry? Admittedly, he does not physically fashion idols. Nonetheless, Habakkuk’s ‘Where are you, God?’ and ‘Who are you, God?’ and his bold reproof of God do reveal that Yahweh does not fit the mental image of Yahweh that he has fashioned.” (Moseman 2017: 271)

The idolatry talked about here indeed applied to Judah as well as to Babylon. That is confirmed in that Isaiah and Jeremiah also prophesied the destruction of both Judah and Babylon. In both cases, they are compared to Sodom and Gomorrah (Babylon—**Isa 13:19**, **Jer 50:40**; Judah—**Jer 23:14**; **Lam 4:6**). In **Ezek 16:49-50**, God compared Judah to Sodom and defined what Sodom’s great sin was: “*Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it.*” It is those very things that characterized both Babylon and Judah.

Moseman’s point is broader than he stated. As we have already seen, the book appears to be designed for all people in all times and all places. In our discussion of **Hab 2:4b**, the “wicked” included both Jews (**1:2-4**) and Gentiles (the Chaldeans, **1:6-17**). Because the vision depicts universal and eschatological realities, the wicked, including both Jews and Gentiles, have become generalized beyond the Judeans and Chaldeans of Habakkuk’s time to become universal. This implicates the issue of idolatry because it may be said that idolatry is the root of *all* sin. It is therefore no surprise that in the Ten Commandments the first commandment is specifically directed against *idolatry*, i.e., elevating anything or anyone over God (**Exod 20:1-6**; **Deut 5:7**).²¹ Martin Luther explained, “All those who do not at all times trust God and do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [the first] Commandment, and practise real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence of all the saints combined. For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere sham, show and pretense, with nothing back of them.” (Luther 1520: X) Timothy Keller puts it like this, “According to the Bible, the primary way to define sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into *ultimate* things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship to God.” (Keller 2008: 162)

What Luther and Keller are saying implicates Habakkuk himself and us: none of us is above the accusation of idolatry, because we all tend to make good things into *ultimate* things; at various times in our lives we place certain people or family or career or success or money or other things—most especially ourselves—above our love, trust, obedience, and devotion to God. That is idolatry. **Ezek 14:1-8** speaks of this when it speaks of “*idols in the heart.*” In other words, idolatry is first and foremost an internal problem in our hearts, the worship of ourselves and other things. The greed, violence, injustice, oppression, and other sins lamented by Habakkuk are simply the outward, visible signs of a previous, internal defection from love, devotion, and

²¹ Elevating anything or anyone over God (idolatry) is another way of saying that a person is not seeking the “glory of God” but instead is seeking his or her own glory or is finding glory in someone or something else (see **Rom 1:21-23**). The equivalence between idolatry and not seeking the glory of God was noted in the *Life Application Bible, New International Version*: “Such is the essence of idolatry – asking the gods we make to help us get all we want. The essence of Christianity is asking the God *who made us* to help us give all we can in service to him. The goal of idolatry is self-glory; the aim of Christianity is God’s glory.” (*Life Application Bible, New International Version* 1991: 1589n.1:11) Not seeking the glory of God makes faith impossible (**John 5:44**). This is a universal problem, since “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (**Rom 3:23**). As a result, all are under God’s judgment.

worship of God (see Powlison 1995: 35-36). As Jesus said, “*It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person. . . . But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.*” (**Matt 15:11, 18**) “The Bible, then, does not consider idolatry to be one sin among many (and a rare sin found only among primitive people). Rather, all our failures to trust God wholly or to live rightly are at root idolatry—something we make more important than God. There is always a reason for a sin. Under our sins are idolatrous desires.” (Keller 2007: n.p.) The problem of idolatry is universal.

Summary

To summarize, in his answer to Habakkuk’s complaints, God is saying: First, because of Judah’s own sin, he will punish Judah by raising up a foreign power, as Moses had warned the people would happen even before they entered the land and as God had done in the past. Second, God did not break the covenant he made with the people (**Exod 24:1-8**), but because Judah was not “righteous” and did not “*live by faith*” (compare **Hab 1:2-4** and **2:4b**), Judah itself broke the covenant; therefore, God properly administered justice in condemning Judah. Third, since the Chaldeans were, indeed, “less righteous” than Judah (see **Hab 1:13**), they also would be judged and punished for their sins and evil; as they have sown, so shall they reap. In short, God “equitably judges all offenders of whatever degree, whether they are his chosen people or not” (Scott 1985: 340).

- **2:20: *But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.***

This is the capstone of God’s answer to Habakkuk. The word “But” draws a contrast with the events taking place on the earth, as narrated in **vv. 5-19**. It is telling Habakkuk and us that, despite what we may see occurring in the world, God is on the throne and is sovereignly ruling the world, testing the righteous and the wicked (see **Ps 11:4-7**). God has a plan and even now he is implementing that plan. God knows “*the end from the beginning . . . and I will accomplish all my purpose*” (**Isa 46:10**). One day, “*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*” (**Hab 2:14**).

God had already said that “*the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay*” (**Hab 2:2**). “In 2:5-17 assurance is given that the wicked will not ultimately prosper, tyranny will fail, and idols will be revealed as nothing. God’s justice will be made apparent. But Habakkuk himself must accept this by faith, given the lack of visible justice in his situation.” (Whitehead 2016: 275) The same is true for us as we observe and confront injustice, evil, and oppression in this world. “One day the justice, purity, wisdom, and goodness of God and his purposes will be plain and clear” (Allred 2017: 181). That day is not now. Until that day comes, “the times when God’s justice, purity, faithfulness, wisdom, goodness, and love are not evident to us can feel like an oppressively dark valley through which to walk. But there is a way for the righteous to navigate the fog. Habakkuk teaches us that we can deal honestly with God and give voice to our perplexity. We can hold fast to what we know is true of God and view our circumstances through the lens of the cross and resurrection. Anchored by God’s love for us in Christ Jesus, we can humbly wait upon the LORD as we acknowledge all we don’t yet know, see, or understand. And we can live in hope for the promise of the future in which the love, wisdom, justice, and goodness of our Heavenly Father’s providential dealings are no longer cloaked in mystery but shine forth clearly for all to see to the praise of his glory.” (Ibid.: 182)

That perspective shows us the necessity and wisdom of the last half of **v. 20**: “*let all the earth keep silence before him*” (see also **Zeph 1:7**; **Zech 2:13**). The truth of that was brought home to Job, who faced tests as great or greater than those faced by Habakkuk and by us. After God appeared to him and questioned him, Job said, “*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . . Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . . Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.*” (**Job 42:1-6**)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you respond to people who say something like “I could never believe in a god who allows such evil, injustice, and suffering to occur”?
2. In the face of great evil, injustice, and suffering, how do we *know* that God, nevertheless, is holy, just, good, faithful, loving, and sovereign?
3. How can we reach out to people who had professed to be Christians but left their faith because terrible things

happened to them or to people they loved?

4. How do people tend to react when things go from bad to worse, even though they have prayed about the situation? How should we react in those circumstances?

5. Have you faced a situation in which you have prayed or cried out to the Lord for something for a very long period of time (weeks, months, years, decades) but received no answer?

- How have you dealt with that situation?
- How should we deal with that situation?
- How should we counsel others who are going through that situation?

6. Paul could boast in his weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities “so that the power of Christ may rest upon me . . . for when I am weak then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). This goes against our natural inclinations.

- How do you see other Christians and the church as a whole reacting when they face weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities?
- How do you react when you face weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities?
- How can the church as a body help its members face weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities like Paul did?
- How can the ministry of helping others deal with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities be strengthened?

7. How can the church teach and equip its members to be God’s agents of redemption in the face of suffering, evil, and injustice, instead of just passively bemoaning the suffering, evil, and injustice that surrounds us?

8. What does “waiting on the Lord” involve?

9. Reflect on the fact that: (A) in Hab 2:1, by waiting for God’s answer, Habakkuk essentially was admitting that he does not know everything; and (B) the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians led to the phenomenon of Hellenistic diaspora Jews being instrumental in leading to the rapid spread of Christianity over 600 years later. What do these facts suggest to you concerning such things as: (A) our relationship with God; (B) our trust in God; and (C) our response when we are praying for something and don’t get the answer we want?

10. Discuss the meaning of “the righteous shall live by faith.” What is the relationship between “faith” and “faithfulness”?

11. What is “the glory of God”?

12. Everything we do is to be for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). How can we do everything for the glory of God?

13. What is idolatry?

14. Discuss the idea that the root of *all* sin is *idolatry*. Are we all idolaters at heart?

15. How can we have faith in God’s goodness and justice when evil and injustice are so rampant in the world?

C. Habakkuk’s Prayer (3:1-19)

“The third chapter . . . is the climax of the book, the result of the prophet’s dialogue with his Lord, and his understanding of that revelation. Chapter 3 is titled a prayer (3:1), yet packaged and apparently presented to the people for use as a psalm in public worship (see 3:19c). The intended audience was not limited to the doomed residents of Judah, but included any who would face similar, stark circumstances from the hand of the Lord.” (Bissett 2016: 17)²² This is also indicated by the use of the term “Selah” (**vv. 3, 9, 13**). “Selah” is found

²² A psalm is a sacred song or hymn or a sacred poem meant to be sung. Bissett, Sweeney, and others have characterized **Habakkuk 3** as a psalm.

71 times in 39 of the Psalms, the only other book where it appears in the Bible. “Some scholars believe that *Selah* was a musical notation possibly meaning ‘silence’ or ‘pause;’ others, ‘end,’ ‘a louder strain,’ ‘piano,’ etc. Still others think it is similar to a musical interlude, ‘a pause in the voices singing, while the instruments perform alone.’” (Noyes 2019: *Selah* Definition) **Habakkuk 3** was read during the Feast of Weeks when the giving of the Torah was celebrated (Fishbane 2002-2020: n.p.).

Structurally, **chapter 3** is linked, sometimes by contrast, with **chapter 1** and with the rest of the book.²³ As Michael Thompson says, “Chapter 3 may be regarded as the expression of faith for which 2:2-5 has led the way. It is to be observed that 3:2 specifically links up with 2:2-5, and that chapter 3 provides the development and resolution of Habakkuk’s struggle expressed in chapters 1 and 2.” (Thompson 1993: 41-42)

- **3:1: A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.**

As he did in **Hab 1:1**, Habakkuk identifies himself as “*Habakkuk the prophet.*” **Hab 3:1** states that **chapter 3** is “*a prayer . . . according to Shigionoth.*” A “shigionoth” has been variously described as: “a musical term that relates to how a psalm should be performed” (Mansfield 2017: *Shigionoth*); “indicating the musical setting for the prayer” (*Africa Study Bible*, Hab 3:1, note); and “a highly emotional poetic form” (*New American Standard Bible*, Hab 3:1, note). Further, **Hab 3:19** concludes by stating that it is “*for the choir director, on my stringed instruments.*” This “indicates that he owned instruments: only a Levite was authorized to use an instrument to accompany his songs in the Temple” (Hirsch 2002-2011: *Habakkuk*).

Sweeney adds, “The *tēpillā*, ‘prayer’, is a typical title for psalms of lament which petition God for deliverance [see **Pss 17:1; 86:1; 90:1; 102:1; 142:1**]. The Hebrew term *siggāyon* likewise refers to lamentation as indicated by its appearance in Ps. vii, a song of lament, and the cognate Akkadian term *segu*, ‘song of lament’. These terms correspond to the general situation of distress presupposed throughout the psalm.” (Sweeney 1991: 78)

- **3:2: O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.**

This is Habakkuk’s invocation (i.e., a petition for God’s help). He begins by looking back to God’s deeds in the past as the basis for his appeal for God’s help in the present.²⁴ This is in keeping with what God himself had instructed Joshua to do when Israel crossed the Jordan river and entered the land God had promised to them (**Josh 4:1-7**; see also **Exod 32:13; Ps 44:1-26; 77:1-20; 90:1-17**). He ends the invocation by saying “*in wrath remember mercy.*” This is the counterpart to his question in **Hab 1:17**, “*Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?*” It is also in keeping with God’s own character (see **Exod 34:6-7; Ps 86:1-5, 14-15; Jonah 4:2**). The invocation prefigures the entire prayer: vv. **3-15** focus on God’s power, wrath, and his magnificent and fearsome deeds; vv. **16-19** end with Habakkuk recognizing his own smallness in relation to the greatness of God, yet at the same time rejoicing in God who is his strength.

- **3:3-15:**³ *God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.*⁴ *His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power.*⁵ *Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels.*⁶ *He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways.*⁷ *I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.*

⁸ *Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD? Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation?*⁹ *You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows. Selah You split the earth with rivers.*¹⁰ *The mountains saw you and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice; it lifted its hands on high.*¹¹ *The sun and moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear.*¹² *You marched through the earth in fury; you threshed the nations in anger.*¹³ *You went*

²³ This is similar to the book of Revelation, which completes the entire Bible. The last two chapters of Revelation clearly are linked, often by contrast, with the first three chapters of Genesis (see Menn 2017: 79-80).

²⁴ “Presumably the intended reference is to past acts of deliverance, in particular the ‘exodus events’. On the grounds that this is what he has done in the past, the prophet prays that in his own day Yahweh will revive such works. ‘In the midst of the years’ is intended presumably in the sense ‘in our own time’.” (Thompson 1993: 42)

out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. Selah ¹⁴ *You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.* ¹⁵ *You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters.*

Overview

This section describes a theophany (i.e., a manifestation or appearance of God in the world to people). This theophany likely occurred to Habakkuk in a vision. Theophanies often involve awesome displays of God’s power and magnificence, such as thunder, lightning, fire, smoke, clouds, earthquakes, etc. (e.g., **Exod 19:16-24; Deut 33:2; Judg 5:4-5; Isa 30:27-30**). The language Habakkuk uses in **vv. 6, 9, 10, 11, and 15** also is like that of other OT prophets who frequently described political crises and regime changes—including events involving Judah and Babylon—metaphorically as cosmic upheavals or the overthrowing of creation itself, e.g., **Isa 13:10, 13** (the Medes’ defeat of Babylon); **Isa 34:4** (judgment against Edom); **Jer 4:23-28** (judgment against Judah by Babylon); **Ezek 32:7-8** (Babylon’s defeat of Egypt); **Amos 5:20; 8:9** (Israel’s defeat by Assyria); **Zeph 1:15** (Babylon’s destruction of Jerusalem). Similar figurative language of physical or cosmic destruction is found at **Ps 18:7-15; 114:3-6; 144:5-7; Isa 5:25; 64:3; Mic 1:4-6; Hag 2:6-7, 21-22**. “This is simply the way regular Jewish imagery is able to refer to major socio-political events and bring out their full significance” (Wright 1996: 361). Similar language is used with respect to the greatest theophany of all, namely, the second coming of Christ (see **Matt 24:29; Mark 13:24-25; Luke 21:25-26; Rev 6:12-17; 8:5, 10-12; 11:13-19; 16:8-21**).²⁵

This section links itself with God’s response to Habakkuk’s first complaint in **Hab 1:5-11**. Both are highly militaristic in their descriptions. Both accounts use some of the same words to describe the advance of the human/divine army: “come” (**1:8; 3:3**); “march” (**1:6; 3:12**); “horses” (**1:8; 3:8, 15**). Both refer to the Babylonians’ desire to “devour” their enemies (**1:8; 3:14**). Both specify the geographical origin of the invading army: “*their horsemen come from afar*” (**1:8**); “*God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran*” (**3:3**). Nevertheless, “The two descriptions also stand in intentional and instructive contrast, with the forces of Yahweh purposely depicted as more powerful. The Babylonian force is described first, and it seems formidable; it overwhelms dwellings, kings, and fortified cities. But Yahweh’s power is portrayed as vastly superior. Yahweh overwhelms the heavens, earth, mountains, hills, sea, nations—and the forces of Babylon! This contrast is partially accomplished by designing the description of Yahweh’s terrifying approach to be twice as long as the description of the approaching Babylonian army.” (Dorsey 1999: 307)

Throughout the prayer the past tense is used. This also has been called the “prophetic perfect” tense. “In the Hebrew and Aramaic idiom in which the Bible [OT] was written, when something was absolutely going to happen in the future, it is often spoken of as if it had already occurred in the past.” (“The Prophetic Perfect” 2013: n.p.) Other examples of this include **Gen 6:18; 15:18; 18:26; 41:30; Job 19:27; Isa 5:13; 11:1-2**. Most translations translate the verbs in the future tense, but in the Hebrew they are in the past or perfect tense.²⁶

Structure and imagery

Linguistically, this section is in two parts: **vv. 3-7** and **vv. 8-15**. **Verses 3-7** are framed by the only geographical references in **chapter 3** (two in **v. 3** and two in **v. 7**), and in this unit God is not addressed directly. **Verses 8-15** do not include specific geographical references but do include images of water (“rivers”; “sea”; “raging waters”; “the deep”; “mighty waters”) and military imagery (“horses”; “chariot”; “sheath”; “bow”; “arrows”; “glittering spear”; “march”; “warriors”) which were absent in **vv. 3-7**; also, in **vv. 8-15**, unlike **vv. 3-7**, God is addressed directly as “You.”

Much of the imagery of Habakkuk’s prayer is derived from God’s powerful work at the time of the exodus and Mount Sinai. That the events of the exodus and Sinai form the background of this theophany are likely inasmuch as Habakkuk in **v. 2** was looking back to God’s great, historic work (“*I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear*”). The use of the past tense throughout this section suggests this. God’s great, historic work in the exodus and at Sinai would have reminded Habakkuk of God’s covenantal relationship with Israel and his promise not to cut off his people forever (e.g., **Jer 5:10-18; 30:1-22; 31:35-37; Amos 9:8-12**). Consequently, Habakkuk could pray in **v. 2** that God would “revive” his work. In **v. 3**, the reference to

²⁵ With respect to the second coming of Christ, although the description of the signs in the sky and earth may be figurative, it is likely that they are literal. For example, D. A. Carson concludes that the signs which accompany the second coming “are probably meant to be taken literally, because of the climactic nature of the Son of Man’s final self-disclosure” (Carson 1984: 505).

²⁶ *Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* correctly gives the proper tenses. It is available online: <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Youngs-Literal-Translation-YLT-Bible/>.

God's coming from Teman and Mount Paran clearly alludes to **Deut 33:2**, which was Moses's final blessing to the people at the end of the exodus, just before they entered the promised land.²⁷ God's "*splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise*" corresponds to **2:14** which says that "*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*" The Hebrew word in **v. 3** translated as "splendor" is similar to "glory" and refers to "weight, power, splendor, majesty" (Koehler and Baumgartner 2001: *hōhd*, 1:241). This splendor, coupled with the reference in **v. 4** to God's "brightness," "light," and the "rays" which "*flashed from his hand*" portray the Lord as "illuminating the world . . . with the awe-inspiring radiance that characterized his descent on Mount Sinai—a light as brilliant as the lightning that accompanied that event, incandescent with his glory" (Armerding 1985: 526). "Pestilence" and "plague" as signs of God's judgment (**v. 5**) certainly would connote the plagues by which God judged Egypt at the time of the exodus.

Habakkuk's changed perspective and question to God

This prayer reveals that Habakkuk's perspective has changed. He has had a theophanic vision; his eyes have been opened to God's awesome presence and power. In **chapters 1 and 2** the emphasis was on the human agents whom God uses in the outworking of his plan; in **chapter 3** the emphasis is on God himself. In **chapter 1** Habakkuk's perspective was grounded in the specific situation that confronted Judah. God's answer to Habakkuk, particularly in **2:5-19**, assured him that Babylon would be judged. But God's perspective extended beyond that to be universal and eschatological. Now, in his prayer, Habakkuk himself has a universal and eschatological perspective. Thus, **vv. 6-7** make clear that God's judgment is not against only one nation (either Egypt at the time of the exodus or Babylon now) but is against the entire earth; it is the "earth" which he measured and the "nations" which he "shook" (**v. 6**). That is confirmed in the statement "*then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways.*" Habakkuk is seeing that God is not just dealing with Judah and Babylon but is seeing something of God's "everlasting" nature and ways. Further, **v. 6** is using language that anticipates the eschatological second coming of Christ which brings with it the judgment, destruction, and renewal of the earth, i.e., **Rev 6:14** ("*every mountain and island were moved out of their places*"), **16:20** ("*every island fled away, and the mountains were not found*"), and **20:11** ("*earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them*").

Verse 8 is the third instance of Habakkuk questioning God. The first set of questions is in **1:2-3**: "*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?*" The second instance of questioning is in **1:12**: "*Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One?*" In both of those instances, Habakkuk essentially was questioning God's character. Now in **v. 8**, his question is of a different nature. To ask "*Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD? Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation?*" essentially is to ask "*What was the purpose of it all?*" The answer, already hinted at by the reference to "*your chariot of salvation,*" is found in **v. 13**: "*You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck.*" God's twin purposes are the salvation of his people and judgment of the unrighteous. The result of the sweeping away of the wicked and the salvation of God's people is that "*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*" (**Hab 2:14**).

Although we may not see how the events transpiring in the world contribute to these ends, they do. God has a plan, and everything he does is designed to effectuate that plan (**Rom 8:28**).

God's universal plan of judgment and salvation

That God has a comprehensive plan is corroborated by the multiple references to the "sun," "moon," "earth," "mountains," "rivers," "sea," "raging waters," and "mighty waters" in **vv. 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 15**. This reveals God's sovereignty and power over the entire created order. These references evoke God's questions to Job in **Job 38-39**. That God is actively working to effectuate his plan is indicated by the military imagery pertaining to God ("horses"; "chariot"; "sheath"; "bow"; "arrows"; "glittering spear"; "march") in **vv. 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, and 15**. This imagery reveals God to be the Lord of Hosts ("hosts" is a translation of the Hebrew word *sabaoth*, meaning "armies"). In **1 Sam 17:45**, just before his battle with Goliath, David invokes this name of God. In doing so, David was claiming that God is the universal, omnipotent ruler over every force in the universe, whether in heaven or on earth.

²⁷ Teman was located in Edom (Seir) south and east of the Dead Sea. Paran refers to main desert in the eastern Sinai peninsula. Some scholars view Mount Paran as "synonymous with Mt. Sinai, while others look for a separate Mt. Paran at a site called Jebel Fārān, a place mentioned by some travelers, but not located by others." ("Paran" 2008: n.p.)

“Splitting the earth” (v. 9) and the mountains “writhing” (v. 10) suggest massive earthquakes, which are a sign of a theophany (**Isa 64:1; Mic 1:3-4**) and of God’s eschatological judgment and the second coming of Christ (see **Zech 14:4; Rev 8:5; 11:19; 16:18-20**). Just as the sun and the moon stood still to give Joshua and Israel victory over the Amorites at Gibeon (**Josh 10:12-13**), so the sun and moon standing still (v. 11) indicates an interruption of the cosmic order which also is a sign of God’s eschatological judgment and the vindication of his people at the second coming of Christ (see **Isa 13:10; 24:23; Matt 24:29; Mark 13:24-25; Luke 21:25-26; Rev 6:12-14; 8:10-12**). Verse 12 (“*You marched through the earth in fury; you threshed the nations in anger*”) reiterates what had been said in v. 6 and again shows the comprehensiveness of God’s judgment by including both the “earth” and the “nations.” That also is consistent with God’s eschatological judgment at the second coming of Christ, which entails the judgment of all people, believers and unbelievers alike (see **Matt 7:21-23; 10:32-33 (Mark 8:38); Matt 13:24-30, 36-51; 16:27; 24:42-51; 25:10-13, 14-30, 31-46; Luke 12:35-48; 17:22-37; 19:12-27; 21:26-28; John 5:25-29; Acts 17:31; Rom 2:5-16; 14:10-12; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Thess 1:6-10; 2 Tim 4:1; Heb 6:2; Jas 5:7-9; 2 Pet 3:7-13; Rev 11:18; 14:14-20; 19:11-21; 20:11-15; 22:12**) and the destruction or cleansing of the present world and the restoration of creation (see **Ps 96: 11-13a; Acts 3:19-21; Rom 8:17-25; 2 Pet 3:3-13; Rev 11:17-18; 20:11-15**).

The recurrent imagery of “rivers,” “sea,” “raging waters,” “the deep,” and “mighty waters” may also be symbolic of judgment. For example, Isaiah prophesied the destruction of Israel by the Assyrians, conflating “the River” (i.e., the Euphrates) with the Assyrians themselves: “⁶*Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoice over Rezin and the son of Remaliah,* ⁷*therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks,* ⁸*and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.*” (**Isa 8:6-8**) In the book of Revelation, the sea and rivers (including, specifically, the Euphrates) are depicted as the recipients and/or instruments of God’s eschatological judgment (see **Rev 8:8-10; 9:14; 12:15; 16:3-4, 12**).

The Euphrates was central to Babylon. Isaiah and Jeremiah had prophesied that judgment on Babylon would include the drying up of the Euphrates (**Isa 11:15; 44:27-28; Jer 50:38; 51:36**). The prophecies were fulfilled by Cyrus’s diversion of the water (see **Isa 44:27-28**). That allowed Cyrus’s army to enter Babylon unexpectedly and defeat it (Beale 1999: 827). The drying up of the Euphrates and God’s judgment of Babylon followed the pattern of the drying up of the Red Sea and the Jordan River at and following the exodus (see **Exod 14:21-22; Josh 3:16; 4:23**). This same pattern is followed in **Rev 16:12** regarding God’s eschatological judgment where the sixth angel poured out its bowl of God’s wrath on the Euphrates to dry it up. Greg Beale discusses this, “As at the exodus and especially at the fall of historical Babylon, the drying up of the Euphrates again marks the prelude to the destruction of latter-day Babylon. And just as Babylon has been universalized and become symbolic, so the Euphrates cannot be a literal geographical reference to the Euphrates in modern Iraq, Syria, and Turkey but must be figurative and universal, despite those who contend that the reference is literal. This is indicated by [Rev] 17:1, where the Babylonian harlot ‘sits on many waters,’ which is another way of referring to ‘the Euphrates and its water’ (16:12) The ‘many waters’ of 17:1 are figuratively interpreted as ‘peoples and multitudes . . . and nations and tongues’ in 17:15. . . . Therefore, the drying up of the Euphrates’ waters is a picture of how the multitudes of Babylon’s religious adherents throughout the world become disloyal to Babylon [see **Rev 17:15-18**].” (Ibid.: 828) William Milligan concludes that, in Revelation, the Euphrates “is simply a symbol of judgment; and the four angels which had been bound at it, but were now loosed, are a token—four being the number of the world—that the judgment referred to . . . reaches men over the whole surface of the globe.” (Milligan 1896: 151) Given the universal and eschatological aspects of Habakkuk, it appears that the river and water imagery is anticipating similar imagery in Revelation.

Additionally, the statement in v. 8 about “*your indignation against the sea*” and v. 15, “*You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters,*” reinforce the theme of judgment and, again, anticipate similar imagery in Revelation. The OT portrays the sea as the abode of chaos and evil (**Job 38:8-11; Ps 74:12-15; 89:9-10; 104:5-9; Prov 8:27-29; Isa 27:1; 51:9-10; Ezek 32:2**). Ungodly and rebellious people are also compared to the sea (**Isa 17:12-13; 57:20; Jer 6:23; 50:41-42; Jude 13; Rev 17:15**). Just as the beasts of **Dan 7:2-8** (great, non-believing empires) arose out of the sea, so the beast of **Rev 13:1** (the worldwide, anti-Christian culture and society) arose out of the sea. Yet God will “*trample the sea*” (**Hab 3:15**). The completeness of God’s ultimate triumph over the forces of chaos, evil, unbelief, and rebellion is indicated by **Rev 21:1** which says that, in the new heavens and new earth “*there is no longer any sea.*” “The sea as the source of satanic evil opposing God’s throne has been eliminated and replaced by the river of redemption, which has its source in the throne [**Rev 22:1**]” (Beale 1999: 328). Habakkuk’s prayer is reiterating and reinforcing, in symbolic, universal, and even eschatological terms, God’s promises of judgment and salvation that he gave to Habakkuk in **2:5-19**

and anticipating the events symbolically revealed in Revelation.

Verse 13 (“*You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed*”) shows the other side of the coin of judgment of the wicked, namely, salvation of the righteous. God does not just go forth in anger, but in righteous anger: he “*crushed the head of the house of the wicked*” (v. 13) in order to save his people. Again, the imagery recalls the events of the exodus. Habakkuk had complained that God was silent in the face of evil and even was using a more evil power to destroy Judah. However, this verse reveals that “Yahweh—far from ignoring wrongdoing (1:2-4) or allowing corruption to go unpunished (1:12-17)—comes to save (ys) his people, that is, rescue them from their present evil plight, deliver them from their present imprisoning circumstances (13a).” (Thompson 1993: 43) In context here, “*your anointed*” appears to be parallel to “*your people*,” i.e., Yahweh’s covenant people, in the first part of the verse.²⁸ The term similarly appears to be used in the collective sense in **Pss 28:8; 84:9; 89:38, 51; 105:15; 132:10-12**.

On the other hand, the word for “anointed” (*mashiach* = messiah) typically is used of an anointed individual. Consequently, many see this as referring to the leaders God used—Moses and Joshua at the time of the exodus, or the Davidic king, the representative of the people in Habakkuk’s time—and, ultimately, the prophesied Messiah. That may be indicated in the Hebrew, since the word (מָשִׁיחַ *’ēth*), which may be translated “with,” occurs immediately before “*your anointed*” but not before “*your people*.” Matthew Henry picks up on this by stating that God’s saving of his people at the time of and after the exodus was “a type and figure of the redemption of the world by Jesus Christ. It is *for salvation with thy anointed*, with Joshua, who led the armies of Israel and was a figure of him whose name he bore, even Jesus our Joshua.²⁹ What God did for his Israel of old was done with an eye to his anointed, for the sake of the Mediator, who was both the founder and foundation of the covenant made with them. It was for salvation *with him*, for in all the salvations wrought for them, *God looked upon the face of the anointed*, and did them by him.” (Henry 1991: 1556; see also Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown 1961: 832 who are of the same opinion) If this is the intended reference, it again reveals the eschatological perspective of this prayer. It also reveals God’s ironic answer to Habakkuk’s prayer in v. 2, “*in wrath remember mercy*”: God’s wrath was poured out on Christ so that we would receive his mercy.

The next statement in v. 13, “*You crushed the head of the house of the wicked*,” would have similar applications as does “*your anointed*.” Given the apparent historical references to the exodus, the “*head of the house of the wicked*” would connote the Pharaoh of Egypt. Given the specific context of God’s plan to destroy Babylon, the “*head of the house of the wicked*” would suggest the head of the Babylonians. But the universal and eschatological aspect of this prayer and God’s answers to Habakkuk indicates that the ultimate “*head of the house of the wicked*” is Satan himself. This takes us all the way back to **Gen 3:15** where God made the first announcement of his plan for the salvation of the world: “*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.*” **Gen 3:15** has been called “the *protoevangelium* (the ‘first gospel’) because it was the original proclamation of the promise of God’s plan for the whole world.” (Kaiser 1995: 37) According to this prophecy, an individual from among the woman’s seed (subsequently identified as Christ) will deal a death blow to Satan at the cross, while Satan will bruise Christ’s heel, or cause Him to suffer.

That is exactly what happened. Satan’s fall described in **Rev 12:10** (“*now . . . the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down*”) corresponds to **John 12:31** (“*now the ruler of this world will be cast out*”). In **John 12**, Jesus says that his being “lifted up” on the cross means that “the inaugurated judgment of the devil is to be executed decisively” (Beale 1999: 660). The result for believers is an important change in status and security, even though it may not appear so to the naked eye. External hardships are no indication of God’s disfavor or of spiritual insecurity. “Satan’s defeat in heaven signifies that his power has been broken in the affairs of man in history, so that even if he does intensify his efforts to control the nations and destroy the work of God, the extent of his influence is limited (he has for example no power over the Church), and his days are numbered (vv. 13ff.)” (Beasley-Murray 1974: 202). As Beale concludes, “the devil’s fall means that the salvation of Jesus’ followers is secure from Satanic threat, and their power over demons is an initial indication of the devil’s defeat and their salvific security” (Beale 1999: 660).

²⁸ That is particularly evident in the Septuagint’s (LXX) translation of v. 13a: “*Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, to save thine anointed.*”

²⁹ In the Bible, Joshua is a “type” of Christ. In Hebrew, “Joshua” is “Yehoshua” or “Yeshua”; the same name in English is “Jesus.” Further, **Heb 4:4, 8** use the same Greek word, *Iēsous*, for both Joshua and Jesus. Just as Joshua led the people to victory over their enemies and entered the promised land, on the cross, Jesus defeated the greatest enemies of all—sin, death, and Satan—and led his people to the promised land of salvation and eternal life; when he comes again, Jesus will bring with him the ultimate promised land of the new heaven and new earth.

In v. 14, “*You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors*” returns to the fact that God’s judgment is fair and righteous altogether: the instruments of evil used by the Babylonians and all the wicked are turned against them or, “what you have sown, so shall you reap.” Consequently, the unrighteous can have no just complaint against their own judgment. By repeating the words “*the sea*” and “*your horses*,” v. 15 is echoing the words of v. 8, thus linguistically showing vv. 8-15 to be a unit.

- **3:16-19:** ¹⁶ *I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.* ¹⁷ *Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,* ¹⁸ *yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.* ¹⁹ *GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.*
To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.

Overview

As with the other parts of **Habakkuk 3**, this final section links with what came earlier in the book. This final section of Habakkuk’s prayer links itself with Habakkuk’s first complaint (**Hab 1:2-4**). Both feature first-person (“I” . . . “me”) discourse. In **1:2** he asks God, “*How long shall I cry for help . . . and you will not save?*” Now, in **3:16-18**, he finds resolution to this question: “*I will quietly wait. . . . Though the fig tree should not blossom . . . yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.*” Further, “The two verbs by which Habakkuk expresses his distress to God, ‘I call out for help’ and ‘I cry out to you,’ which occur in his opening complaint (1:2), are balanced in the closing unit by two opposite verbs expressing his joy toward God: ‘I will be joyful in Yahweh, I will rejoice in God my Savior’ (3:18)” (Dorsey 1999: 307). Finally, the verb “hear” appears in the introductory lines of both units (**1:2; 3:16**) but plays significantly different roles. “In the opening unit Habakkuk complains that Yahweh does not hear his cries for help (1:2)—and Habakkuk is very disturbed by this. In the closing unit we have the other side of the coin: Habakkuk hears the thunderous, mighty sound of Yahweh arriving to save his people, and as a result his inner struggle is resolved.” (Ibid.)

In v. 16, Habakkuk’s fear evidently is his anticipation of the coming invasion by the “*dreaded and fearsome*” nation who all “*come for violence*” (**1:7, 9**). He knows Judah will not be spared, and there is nothing he or anyone else can do about it. Yet, because of what God revealed to him in **chapter 2**, he also knows that the Chaldeans, in turn, will be destroyed. Therefore, he can “*quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.*” **Verse 17** identifies the bases of Judah’s agricultural economy. Its prosperity depended on its obedience to the covenant God had established (**Lev 26:3-13; Deut 28:1-14**). However, as Habakkuk himself knew (**1:2-4**), Judah had violated the covenant and therefore rightly faced God’s judgment. That judgment involved being invaded by an ungodly, pitiless people which would probably entail agricultural breakdown, economic devastation, famine, and poverty.

In keeping with the eschatological nature of God’s perspective, which Habakkuk has now developed, the reference in v. 17 to “*Though the fig tree should not blossom*” may have eschatological significance. Specifically, it may point forward to Christ’s cursing the fig tree in **Matt 21:19; Mark 11:13-14**. That was an acted out parable of judgment on Israel which had rejected its Messiah. Gary DeMar points out that, not only the fig tree in this parable, but “every instance of a leaves-only tree in the gospels is a sign of Israel’s judgment, a judgment that came in A.D. 70” (DeMar 1999: 402). Jesus underscored his rejection of the nation of Israel as his vehicle for spreading the gospel in the parable of the landowner and the vine-growers when he said, “*The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits*” (**Matt 21:43**).³⁰ Thus, ultimately, the issues of most importance to God, of which Habakkuk may at least have had a glimmer, are not economic or military, but are spiritual.

A new focus

These final verses reveal a changed focus or perspective, which results in transformation of Habakkuk.

³⁰ Interestingly, when Jesus cursed the fig tree, he stated, “*May no fruit ever come from you again!*” (**Matt 21:19**). He likewise spoke of the kingdom being given to a people “*producing its fruit*” (**Matt 21:43**). The reason may be that, although Habakkuk says “*though the fig tree should not blossom*” (**Hab 3:17**), technically, fig trees do not “blossom”: “The fruit is the blossom — and it’s actually an inverted flower. At maturity, the interior of the fig contains only the remains of the flower, including the small, gritty structures we usually refer to as seeds.” (Marks 2016: n.p.) God is interested in our fruitfulness, i.e., our faithfulness (see the discussion of faith and faithfulness in connection with **Hab 2:4b** at n.17, above, and accompanying text).

This whole book had dealt with people—both Jews and Gentiles—who had not sought the glory of the Lord, but only their own glory. Now, Habakkuk looks, not to other people or the evil circumstances that surround him, but to the Lord himself. He is “*the God of my salvation*” (3:18b). It is God—not Habakkuk’s circumstances or the situation facing the nation—who “*is my strength*” and raises him up (v. 19; see Ps 42:1; Isa 40:29-31).

Therefore, despite the coming invasion and likely economic devastation, Habakkuk nevertheless can “*rejoice in the Lord*” (v. 18a). Even the word translated that he will “*quietly wait*” for the day of trouble to come (v. 16) really has the meaning of being at “rest” and having a “secure repose” (Koehler and Baumgartner 2001: *nooagh*, 1:679). This may be one reason why Habakkuk’s prayer is filled with imagery derived from God’s historic work in the exodus and at Sinai. By getting these things deeply into his heart and mind, Habakkuk is able to trust God because he knows the Lord is trustworthy; he is reminded of God’s covenantal relationship with his people and now knows that the Lord’s salvation will establish righteousness and will fill the entire world with his glory. This enables Habakkuk to rest and rejoice in the Lord *at the same time* he is trembling and dreading the coming invasion. This represents a complete turnaround in Habakkuk’s perspective and attitude from when he began the book in 1:2-4. “These final words provide a fitting conclusion, for they celebrate Yahweh who has brought Habakkuk to this point, the same God who is using the Chaldeans to punish the Judeans, Chaldeans for whom Habakkuk now quietly waits.” (Moseman 2017: 273)

“Though the book concludes with this resounding note of faith, it is a faith mixed with fear. One could certainly attribute Habakkuk’s fear to the imminent invasion. Perhaps, however, his fear has more to do with his new understanding of God and would best be understood as awe. In 3:2 and 3:16, Habakkuk confesses his fear, which is preceded in both cases by the claim that he has heard. In the first instance, he has heard the report about/of Yahweh. In the second, it is noteworthy that he has just experienced a theophany. Both occurrences point to Yahweh as the source of fear. And likewise, Yahweh is the source and object of faith. Significantly in the second, Habakkuk no longer asks God to do anything. He simply affirms that he will wait quietly. . . . Thus, Habakkuk has arrived at a more complete understanding of and appreciation of who Yahweh is. As he has always done, Habakkuk can still affirm the righteousness, sovereignty, and faithfulness of Yahweh, but he now understands these in a new way.” (Ibid.)

Our situation compared to Habakkuk’s

Habakkuk was drawing on the imagery of the exodus to give him the reassurance he needed to face the coming invasion. Christians are actually in a better position than Habakkuk to be able to have an inner peace and “*rejoice in the Lord always*” (Phil 4:4), even during times of great stress, injustice, suffering, and evil. Although the exodus was a real historical event, and the most important event in Israel’s history, in many respects it was simply a type or shadow pointing to Jesus Christ. Hebrews describes how Christ is like Moses but is infinitely greater than Moses (Heb 3:1-6): Christ “*is worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house*” (Heb 3:3). Moses led his people out of physical slavery in Egypt; Jesus leads his people out of the far greater slavery to sin, Satan, and death. Moses and the old Covenant could never give his people eternal life; Jesus and the New Covenant give his people eternal life. Luke even reports that on the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were discussing Jesus’ own “*exodus*” (the Greek term translated as “departure” in Luke 9:30-31).

In Christ we have been given a new heart (Ezek 36:26; 2 Cor 3:3), the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16), and the Spirit from Christ (Ezek 36:26; John 14:17). He actively works in us in us (Phil 2:12-13) and will never leave us or forsake us (Matt 28:20; Rom 8:31-39; Heb 13:5). He also gives us his peace: “*Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.*” (John 14:27) His peace “*surpasses all understanding*” (Phil 4:7). If we are in Christ we can “*rejoice that your names are written in heaven*” (Luke 10:20) because, like Habakkuk, we are rejoicing “*in the LORD . . . in the God of my salvation*” (Hab 3:18). Our circumstances change; so if our focus is on our circumstances, when they get bad we will not be able to rest or rejoice. But Christ does not change (Heb 13:8); so the focus of our lives should be on him. We *know* that Christ is trustworthy, because he gave up everything for us—even to the point of being forsaken by the Father—so that we will never be forsaken, and he did it all for us. When Christ and these truths of the gospel become a part of us and remain our focus even during times of great stress, anxiety, and suffering, we will be able to face even the worst situations with a peace and joy that are unavailable anywhere else.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Habakkuk (and other OT prophets) used symbolic language for such events as military

takeovers, regime changes, and God’s appearances (theophanies)?

2. Why do you think that the imagery in chapter 3 probably is derived from what happened at the exodus and Mount Sinai?
3. What is the “prophetic perfect” tense? Why is its use important in Habakkuk 3?
4. How has Habakkuk’s perspective changed in chapter 3 compared to chapters 1 and 2? What, if anything, does that say to us?
5. How is Habakkuk’s question to God in 3:8 different from his questions in 1:2-3 and 1:12? What, if anything, does that say to us?
6. What is God’s answer to Habakkuk’s question in 3:8? What does that tell us?
7. Discuss the significance of the different types of imagery used in chapter 3.
8. In 3:16-19 Habakkuk clearly is afraid of the invasion he knows is coming and the terrible devastation he knows it will cause. Nevertheless, he is able to “rejoice.”
 - Have you ever faced a fearful event yet been able to rejoice?
 - How can we develop our faith (and that of our people) to be able to face fearful events and respond as Habakkuk does in these verses?
9. How do God’s answers to Habakkuk and Habakkuk’s prayer point to Jesus Christ?
10. How does the book of Habakkuk deal with the “problem of evil”?

III. Conclusion

We began by observing that the subject matter of Habakkuk is the problem of evil and the issue of theodicy: how can God, who is good and just, allow evil, unjust people to prosper and “righteous” people to suffer? The same issue was raised in **Psalm 73**. Michael Thompson notes that the psalmist (Asaph) “failed to come to a satisfying intellectual solution to the problem (Ps. 73:16). But the great turning moment in that psalm comes in verse 17 when the psalmist ‘went into the sanctuary of God’: in the setting of worship, in ‘the place of the nearness of God’, there came to him a new realisation that he was held in Yahweh’s care, and thus he came to a sense of peace.” (Thompson 1993: 52) Job confronted a similar situation: “Argumentation and the propounding of doctrine, however sound, as articulated by Job’s friends fails to satisfy the sufferer. Satisfaction and peace come through the revelation of Yahweh in the speeches of the Lord (Job 38:1–40:2; 40:6–41:34).” (Ibid.) So here, “there is no intellectual solution, any more than there is in Psalm 73 or the book of Job or elsewhere. Nevertheless Habakkuk, like Job, can continue to pray to Yahweh in the reality of a relationship with God.” (Ibid.: 53) Habakkuk raises the issue of the “problem of evil,” but it does not purport to give a detailed philosophical theodicy. Instead, God answers Habakkuk’s complaints essentially by saying, “I have a comprehensive plan; I know exactly what is going on; I am a God of justice, and what I do will be seen to be just; all people and nations will be held to account; evil will be punished, the righteous will be vindicated, and my glory will fill the earth.” Since this may not occur in our lifetime, the answer to the “problem of evil” and the issue of theodicy ultimately come down to one’s personal faith. “Does Habakkuk receive an answer to his initial questions of ‘how long’ and ‘why’? Not directly. . . . However, the book of Habakkuk may be read as reorienting the question toward the future, and thus allowing for a ‘deferred’ theodicy. On such a view, evil and suffering are not wholly inscrutable, but serve a divine purpose. However, since the purpose may not be known (or necessarily knowable) to the believer, the justice of God in doing so must be accepted by faith.” (Whitehead 2016: 279-80)

In short, Habakkuk has seen, as did Asaph in **Ps 73:17**, that the doom of the corrupt, the violent, the unjust has already been sealed. “Yet the righteous will live by their faithfulness and steadfastness, and to them Yahweh’s vindication—which cannot adequately be expressed apart from in terms of the language of worship and cult—will eventually be known. In that day it will be made plain to them that Yahweh in his saving presence is with them. Thereby will they be given strength for even greater and more fundamental problems and sufferings. That at least is the experience to which Habakkuk himself comes. It may be significant that whereas

earlier Habakkuk has spoken on behalf of his people, his closing expression of confidence is personal, expressed in the singular, ‘yet I will rejoice in the Lord...’ (3:17-19).” (Thompson 1993: 52-53)

David Dorsey puts it similarly. The structure of Habakkuk, “beginning with the negative and closing with the positive, suggests that the purpose of the book is to take the audience from confusion and despair to clarification and hope. . . . The matching of the two vivid descriptions of the approaching forces of Babylon and Yahweh [**Hab 1:5-11; 3:3-15**] invites the audience to compare the two. The similarities are striking; but the contrast between the two forces is even more striking. Yahweh is vastly superior to Babylon; and he will destroy it. The point is clear. There are powerful human forces out there, and Yahweh may use some of these forces to do his destructive work of punishment. But do not fear them. Rather, place your trust in Yahweh, whose power is vastly superior to any human force. Faith in almighty Yahweh is well-placed faith.” (Dorsey 1999: 309)

APPENDIX 1— THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY, HUMANITY’S RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE EXISTENCE OF SIN AND EVIL

In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume stated the classic “problem of evil” concerning God: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?” (Hume 1779: part 10, 186) Or, to put it in the form of a logical syllogism: “[1] If God exists, then he is omnipotent and perfectly good; a perfectly good being would eliminate evil as far as it could; there is no limit to what an omnipotent being can do; therefore, if God exists, there would be no evil in the world; [2] there is evil in the world; [3] therefore, God does not exist.” (Sherry 2017: “The problem”; see also Erlandson 1991: “The Anti-theist Cannot Generate”)³¹ This leads to the issue of theodicy or “justifying God,” i.e., explaining how God can be perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent and yet ordain and permit evil.³²

We have seen that the book of Habakkuk raises the issue of the problem of evil but does not, directly at least, provide a comprehensive theodicy. What the book shows is that God knows exactly what is going on. He

³¹ This is what is known as the logical problem of evil. Leading atheist spokesman William Rowe admits, however, that “no one, I think, has succeeded in establishing such an extravagant claim. Indeed, . . . there is a fairly compelling argument for the view that the existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of the theistic God.” (Rowe 1996: 10n.1) Other prominent atheists agree: Draper 1996: 26n.1 (“I agree with most philosophers of religion that theists face no serious logical problem of evil”); Gale 1996: 206 (“Almost everyone now believes that adequate defenses have now been devised to neutralize this challenge”); Mackie 1982: 150 (“There is no explicit contradiction between the statements that there is an omnipotent and wholly good god and that there is evil”), 154 (“The problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another”). Patrick Sherry notes that the logical argument against God “does not recognize cases in which eliminating one evil causes another to arise or in which the existence of a particular evil entails some good state of affairs that morally outweighs it. Moreover, there may be logical limits to what an omnipotent being can or cannot do. Most skeptics, therefore, have taken the reality of evil as evidence that God’s existence is unlikely rather than impossible.” (Sherry 2021: “The problem”) This latter view, known as the “inductive” or “evidential” problem of evil, claims that the existence of evil, while not logically incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and good God, is evidence that God “probably” does not exist. “It is now acknowledged on (almost) all sides that the logical argument is bankrupt, but the inductive argument is still very much alive and kicking” (Alston 1996: 97).

³² Technically, “a theodicy purports to offer the actual reason God has for allowing evil in our world. A defense is much less pretentious, for it claims to offer only a possible reason God might have for not removing evil. As long as that possible explanation does remove the alleged inconsistency internal to the theist’s system, the theist meets the demands of the logical form of the problem of evil.” (Feinberg 1994: 19) “Most Christian thinkers and philosophers . . . have increasingly (and to my mind, rightly) recommended that believers not try to formulate theodicies but rather simply mount a *defense*. . . . A defense simply seeks to prove that the argument against God from evil fails, that the skeptics have failed to make their case.” (Keller 2013: 95) In such a case, the heaviest burden of proof is on the atheist, since he or she began the debate by attacking and trying to prove something about theism; on the other hand, if the theist attempts to prove a full theodicy, he or she will bear a heavier burden than simply mounting a defense (Feinberg 1994: 205, 283-84; Keller 2013: 95-96). It should be noted that some writers use the term “theodicy” to refer both to full theodicies and to defenses.

From a biblical standpoint, however, the entire “problem of evil” is actually backwards. The real issue is not “How can God’s allowing sin and evil be justified to people?” but “How can sinful, evil people be justified to a holy God?” God’s holiness is foundational. Sin is incompatible with his holiness. Indeed, “God is not indifferent to our immoral thoughts and behaviour. On the contrary, his holy nature is deeply offended by such things. As a perfect God, he cannot ignore anything evil. The smallest lie is an offense to the One who is truth. The tiniest feeling of animosity towards another person is repulsive to the One who is love. Due to his holy and perfect nature God cannot turn a blind eye to perverse human behaviour as if it does not matter.” (Alexander 2008: 130) Consequently, God will judge all evil and evildoers (see **Rom 2:16; 2 Cor 5:10; Heb 9:27; Rev 20:10-15**)

has a comprehensive plan. He is using everyone, all nations, the choices we make and actions we take—whether righteous or evil—to accomplish his plan. Whether we see it or not, everything is contributing to “*the earth [being] filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*” (**Hab 2:14**).

Further, he is a God of justice, and every individual and nation will be held accountable for what we do. Not only will all evil be judged, but through everything God is working “*for the salvation of your people, for [or with] the salvation of your anointed*” (**Hab 3:13**). In fact, he himself came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and personally experienced injustice, suffering, and evil. Although we may think that he is silent or doesn’t care or is not doing anything, all of those perceptions or conclusions of ours are false.

God is sovereign over all of creation; he is omniscient and infinitely wise. Therefore, he knows infinitely more than we do about how everything is fitting together. Since he is eternal and his plan takes everything into account, his timeframe and scope of reference are vastly greater than ours. Consequently, the book of Habakkuk deals with the problem of evil from a somewhat different starting point and direction than do nonbelieving philosophers who deal with the issue. They start with the fact of rampant evil and ask, “How can God—if there is a God—ordain or allow this?” Even raising the “problem of evil” indicates that the person has abandoned orthodox Christian beliefs for an essentially secular worldview. Indeed, “the argument from evil never had anything like popular appeal and broad attraction until some time after the Enlightenment. . . . When people inside the [secular and naturalistic worldview] consider evil and God, the skeptical conclusion is already largely inherent in the premises.” (Keller 2013: 86-87; see also Erlandson 1991: Countering Objections: [“The only way in which evil provides counter-evidence to the God of the Bible is through prior acceptance of anti-theistic presuppositions.”])

Habakkuk asked the same questions nonbelieving philosophers ask, but he did not add the clause “if there is a God.” Instead, Habakkuk began from a position of faith. He knew that God exists, and he knew that God is good, wise, glorious, the creator and sustainer of all things, and has a comprehensive plan for the world. By putting God first—and by putting *what we know to be true about God* as our starting point—we (like Habakkuk in the end) can understand, by faith-based-on-fact, that God’s existence, omnipotence, omniscience, wisdom, and goodness are all still intact and are not affected by the existence of widespread evil, suffering, and injustice. That being said, let us deal with the problem of evil and the issue of theodicy in somewhat more detail, since these are profoundly important issues.

I. A good, omnipotent God is necessary to even talk coherently about good and evil

God is holy, just, righteous, and good (**Gen 18:25; Exod 34:6-7; Lev 11:44; Job 34:10-12; Ps 5:4; 136:1; 145:17; Hab 1:13; Rom 1:18; Jas 1:13**), yet sin and evil exist. Many people find it difficult to reconcile how God can be entirely good and absolutely sovereign yet reign over a world containing sin and evil. However, the argument against God assumes that some things are, in fact, objectively evil: “To say something is evil is to make a moral judgment, and moral judgments make no sense outside of the context of a moral standard. . . . Evil can’t be real if morals are relative. Evil is real, though. That’s why people object to it. Therefore, objective moral standards must exist as well.” (Koukl 2013: “The presence of evil”) With respect to the different possible *sources* of moral standards, good and evil, “a morally perfect God is the only adequate standard . . . that makes sense of the existence of evil to begin with” (Koukl 2009: 138; see also Koukl 2013: “One remaining Answer”; Lewis 1996: 45-46; Craig 1997: 9-12). In other words, there needs to be an adequate standard for determining whether something is good or evil, right or wrong, moral or immoral—and the only adequate ground and standard is God.³³

Even atheist, Marxist, existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre recognized this: “The existentialist . . . finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good *a priori* [i.e., a general truth valid in the mind independent of observation or experience], since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that ‘the good’ exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote: ‘If God did not exist, everything would be permitted’ . . . Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For . . . one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature. . . . Nor, on

³³ On the other hand, prolific author and atheist professor Richard Dawkins frankly states that “nature is not cruel, only pitilessly indifferent. This is one of the hardest lessons for humans to learn. We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous—indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose.” He adds, “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.” (Dawkins 1995: 96, 133)

the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimise our behaviour. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse.” (Sartre 1946: n.p.) Non-Christian philosopher and ethicist Richard Taylor similarly admits, “The modern age, more or less repudiating the idea of a divine lawgiver, has nevertheless tried to retain the ideas of moral right and wrong, without noticing that, in casting God aside, they have also abolished the conditions of meaningfulness for moral right and wrong as well. . . . The concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God.” (Taylor 1985: 2-3, 84)

The consequences of this are twofold: (1) By casting aside God and his Word, i.e., the only adequate basis for right and wrong and moral obligation, we have brought sin and evil on ourselves, and God rightly holds us accountable for it. (2) The “problem of evil” is a far greater problem for atheists and other unbelievers in the God of the Bible than it is for Christians. Nonbelievers have no rational, adequate, and coherent [i.e., internally consistent; not self-contradictory] basis to claim that *any* human law or action is truly, objectively, or universally unjust, wrong, or evil—however much they oppose it and however harmful, exploitative, selfish, or deadly such a law or action may be. Greg Bahnsen puts it like this: “On the one hand, he [an unbeliever] believes and speaks as though some activity (e.g., child abuse) is wrong in itself, but on the other hand he believes and speaks as though that activity is wrong only if the individual (or culture) chooses some value which is inconsistent with it (e.g., pleasure, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, freedom). When the unbeliever professes that people determine ethical values for themselves, the unbeliever implicitly holds that those who commit evil are not really doing anything evil, given the values which they have chosen for themselves. In this way, the unbeliever who is indignant over wickedness supplies the very premises which philosophically condone and permit such behavior, even though at the same time the unbeliever wishes to insist that such behavior is not permitted – is ‘evil.’

What we find, then, is that the unbeliever must secretly rely upon the Christian worldview in order to make sense of his argument from the existence of evil which is urged against the Christian worldview! Antitheism presupposes theism to make its case. The problem of evil is thus a logical problem for the unbeliever, rather than the believer. As a Christian, I can make perfectly good sense out of my moral revulsion and condemnation of child abuse. The non-Christian cannot. This does not mean that I can explain why God does whatever He does in planning misery and wickedness in this world. It simply means that moral outrage is consistent with the Christian’s worldview, his basic presuppositions about reality, knowledge, and ethics. The non-Christian’s worldview (of whatever variety) eventually cannot account for such moral outrage. It cannot explain the objective and unchanging nature of moral notions like good or evil. Thus the problem of evil is precisely a philosophical problem for unbelief.” (Bahnsen 1991: 15-16)³⁴

Paradoxically, therefore, the existence of evil actually is an argument for the existence of God. In a debate with an atheist, William Lane Craig put this in the form of a logical syllogism: “1. If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist. 2. Objective moral values do exist. 3. Therefore, God exists.” (Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong 2004: 19) Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga summarizes, “A naturalistic way of looking at the world . . . has no place for genuine moral obligation of any sort; a fortiori, then, it has no place for such a category as horrifying wickedness. . . . Accordingly, if you think there really is such a thing as horrifying wickedness (that our sense that there is, is not a mere illusion of some sort), and if you also think the main options are theism and naturalism, then you have a powerful theistic argument from evil [i.e., that God exists].” (Plantinga 1993: 73)

C. S. Lewis recognized that this issue goes far beyond atheism’s inability to account for the existence of

³⁴ C. S. Lewis pointed out that even dualism, i.e., two equal, uncreated powers, one good and the other bad, does not provide an adequate ground for objective right and wrong, good and evil, and moral obligation. “The moral difficulty is that Dualism gives evil a positive, substantive, self-consistent nature, like that of good. . . . In what sense can the one party be said to be right and the other wrong? If evil has the same kind of reality as good, the same autonomy and completeness, our allegiance to good becomes the arbitrarily chosen loyalty of a partisan. A sound theory of value demands something different. It demands that good should be original and evil a mere perversion . . . that good should be able to exist on its own while evil requires the good on which it is parasitic in order to continue its parasitic existence. . . . The difference between the Christian and the Dualist is that the Christian thinks one stage further and sees that if Michael is really in the right and Satan in the wrong this must mean that they stand in two different relations to somebody or something further back, to the ultimate ground of reality itself.” (Lewis 1970a: 22-24) W. Gary Crampton adds, “In actuality, the philosophic system called dualism is absurd. If there were two co-eternal and co-equal deities, we could not say that one was good and one evil. That is, without a superior standard to determine what is good and evil, good and evil cannot be predicated of anything. But if there is such a superior standard (that is, something above the two deities), then there is no ultimate dualism.” (Crampton 1999: 2n.6) Only Christian monotheism provides an adequate basis for good and evil.

right and wrong, good and evil, and moral obligations but strikes at the very heart of atheism itself. In *Mere Christianity* Lewis (himself a former atheist) wrote, “My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of *just* and *unjust*? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. . . . Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies.” (Lewis 1996: 45-46) Thus, atheism is self-refuting.

If there is no supernatural existence, i.e., if the physical universe is all there is and we are merely products of physical and chemical reactions (usually called naturalism, materialism, or physicalism)³⁵—which atheism inherently entails—then this view of existence “breaks down at the problem of knowledge. If thought is the undesigned and irrelevant product of cerebral motions, what reason have we to trust it?” (Lewis 1970a: 21) He elaborated that elsewhere: “If naturalism were true then all thoughts whatever would be wholly the result of irrational causes. Therefore, all thoughts would be equally worthless. If it is true, then we can know no truths. It cuts its own throat.” (Lewis 1970b: 137; see also Lewis 1960: 12-24) Similar views have been expressed by others, including notable Christian and non-Christian scientists and philosophers (see Lucas 1970: 114-16 [see 116n.1 for others who have articulated the same point]; Moreland 1987: 77-103; Nagel 2012: 71-95; Polanyi 1964: 389-90; Reppert 2003: *passim*; Willard n.d.: n.p.).

II. The invalidity of the atheistic arguments from the existence of evil

The Christian can have confidence that the existence of evil is not evidence against either God’s existence *or his goodness*, because God has a morally sufficient reason for ordaining and permitting every act of evil even though he may not have revealed that reason to us. Greg Bahnsen states, “If the Christian *presupposes* that God is perfectly and completely good – as Scripture requires us to do – then he is committed to evaluating everything within his experience in the light of that presupposition. Accordingly, when the Christian observes evil events or things in the world, he can and should retain consistency with his presupposition about God’s goodness by now *inferring* that God has a *morally good reason* for the evil that exists. God certainly must be all-powerful in order to be God; He is not to be thought of as overwhelmed or stymied by evil in the universe. And God is surely good, the Christian will profess – so any evil we find must be compatible with God’s goodness. This is just to say that God has planned evil events for reasons which are morally commendable and good.” (Bahnsen 1991: 19, *emph. in orig.*) Or, as Doug Erlandson puts it, “A being is not morally culpable in allowing preventable evil if he has a ‘morally sufficient reason’ for so doing” (Erlandson 1991: “The Anti-theist Cannot Generate”). Thus, the answer to David Hume’s and similar logical syllogisms is: (1) A totally good God will prevent all the evil he can *unless he has a morally sufficient reason* for permitting its existence; (2) Evil exists; (3) Therefore, God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting the existence of evil. Abraham had this view when he said, “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*” (**Gen 18:25**, KJV) Paul had the same view when he said “*Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar*” (**Rom 3:4**).

In light of this and in light of certain defenses that various Christians have proposed, we have already seen (see n.31 above) that even atheists admit that “the existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of the theistic God” (Rowe 1996: 10n.1; see also Draper 1996: 26n.1; Gale 1996: 206; Mackie 1982: 150, 154). This admission is also fatal to the so-called inductive or evidential problem of evil. John Feinberg observes, “Theists and atheists alike agree that evil’s existence is *consistent* with God’s existence. Since theists have offered reasons God might have for including evil in the world, reasons that remove the alleged *inconsistency* between God’s and evil’s existence, how likely is it that evil can be compelling evidence that God’s existence is improbable? . . . Moreover, when an atheist admits that a theist’s defense can link without contradiction the existence of God and the existence of evil; i.e., it shows that God and evil can fit together, it seems that a stronger inferential case can be made for the view that an omnipotent, all-loving God who has a morally sufficient reason for evil exists than for the view that there is no God. Having admitted that evil *can* fit with God, how can the atheist hope to show that evil *does not* fit with God and thus is evidence that makes His existence improbable?” (Feinberg 1994: 164, 290)

Atheists typically point to the great quantity of evil in the world, the intensity of much evil (e.g., torture; extremely painful diseases), the apparent gratuitousness (pointlessness) of much evil (e.g., a fawn dying in a forest fire; the rape and murder of a child), and/or natural evils (floods; earthquakes; diseases) in making their

³⁵ J. P. Moreland defines naturalism as follows: “The three major components to naturalism are 1) scientism — the belief that scientific knowledge is either the only form of knowledge or a vastly superior form of knowledge; 2) the belief that the atomic theory of matter and the theory of evolution explain all events; and 3) the belief that non-physical things don’t exist and that the world isn’t here for any purpose.” (Moreland 2004: n.p.)

inductive or evidential arguments for the improbability of God’s existence. The problem, however, is that the atheists’ arguments are based on the hidden premise that God does not have a morally sufficient reason for allowing these sorts of evil, but that is just an assertion that cannot be proven. Further, there is “another implicit assumption *inside* the first hidden premise. The assumption is—‘if I can’t see any reasons God might have for permitting that evil . . . then probably he doesn’t have any.’ But that premise is obviously false. . . . A God who is infinitely more powerful than us would also be infinitely more knowledgeable than us. So the rejoinder to the skeptic is ‘If God is infinitely knowledgeable—*why* couldn’t he have morally sufficient reasons for allowing evil *that you can’t think of?*’ To insist that we know as much about life and history as all-powerful God is a logical fallacy.” (Keller 2013: 97-98) Since atheists are unable to prove that God has *no* morally sufficient reasons for allowing various evils, their inductive or evidential “probability” arguments of necessity must fail. A multitude of other reasons show that these inductive or evidential arguments cannot get off the ground:

- In making any inductive argument or judgment as to the probability of something (i.e., the existence of God), “one must base it [the argument or judgment] on total evidence relevant to the theory” (Feinberg 1994: 290). Indeed, “it is impossible to calculate the probability of a given hypothesis without incorporating background information” (Ibid.: 164). This is crucial since “what may be improbable on one piece or set of evidence may be probable on another” (Ibid.: 213). In other words, “anyone who uses an inductive argument . . . against theism, must offer good reasons *apart from evil’s existence* that God doesn’t exist. . . . Without it, appeal to evil’s existence alone accomplishes nothing more than reinforcing a foregone conclusion.” (Ibid.: 182, *emph. added*) This fact essentially renders the atheist’s argument from evil invalid, because atheists do *not* incorporate background information or evidence relevant to God’s existence. Instead, their argument “appeals to only one kind of evidence [the existence of evil itself] in making its assessment” (Ibid.: 290).

The background information or evidence that is needed in order to make a valid argument or probability judgment concerning God’s existence, would include but not be limited to: the uniqueness of the Bible; the implausibility of the universe coming into existence by itself; the implausibility of life coming from non-living matter; the implausibility of mind and consciousness coming from non-sentient beings; the inability of non-sentient forces to account for abstract universals like logic, truth, values, right and wrong; evidence of design throughout the universe; fulfilled prophecy; the resurrection of Jesus Christ; evidence of miracles; and experiences of divine and supernatural encounters. Feinberg concludes, “It may well turn out that something in that background information makes the probability that theism is correct so high that the fact of evil cannot make it improbable” (Ibid.: 164). However, the atheists’ failure to factor in any of this evidence and background information makes it impossible to even begin an argument concerning the probability of the existence of God. The fact of evil, standing alone, has no evidential value whatsoever in trying to assess the probability of God’s existence.

The importance of considering background evidence concerning God’s existence in answering the problem of evil is relevant for another important reason. John Feinberg points out that “when the atheist charges that evil is evidence against the probability that God exists, the theist should ask, ‘Evidence against which God?’ Until the atheist specifies which conception of God is under attack, and until the theist specifies which God he is defending, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to assess the success of either the attack or the defense.” (Feinberg 1994: 285) In answering the atheist’s attack, it is therefore legitimate to look to the Bible and the data contained in the Bible concerning both God and evil. This is particularly true since the atheist’s contention has its source, at least in part, in biblical revelation (i.e., the concept of an omnipotent, omniscient, and good God). K. Scott Oliphint states, “Since the objector presents the problem as one intrinsic to Christianity, there is no fallacy or logical breach if one answers the objection from the same source in which the alleged problem itself, including the characteristics of God, is found” (Oliphint 2013: 174-75).³⁶ The objector’s own beliefs about what he or she thinks God is like and what he or she thinks God would or should do about evil are completely irrelevant (Feinberg 1994: 18; Oliphint 2013: 175).

- The atheist’s argument is also invalid for a related reason: it is nothing but an assertion of what God would or should do, or, to put it another way, it postulates that, if God exists, reality would or should be

³⁶ It is for that reason that K. Scott Oliphint proposes the proposition, “Adam responsibly and freely chose to disobey God, to eat the forbidden fruit, after which time he and all of creation fell,” to resolve the alleged incompatibility between the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, good God and the existence of evil, instead of the more generic proposition, “God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing evil” (Oliphint 2013: 172). The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of Adam’s ability to freely choose as follows: “Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it.” (Westminster 1647: 9.2)

considerably different from what it is. None of that is based on any empirical or observed data at all. Although we can observe many different kinds, amounts, and intensities of evil in the world, “our common experience does not include information about all the interconnections of the evil in question to other evils or goods. . . . Empirically, we can observe many evils, but we cannot observe the evaluation of them, nor can we observe God’s relation to them, whatever it is. Hence, if we proceed solely from empirical data, it appears that the most we can conclude by this sort of inductive argument is that there will likely be more instances of evil. But clearly, that inductive generalization proves nothing about God and/or His relation to evil in our world. . . . The only empirical data appealed to are instances of evil. Those instances in themselves do not contain empirical evidence of how they should be evaluated (too much, gratuitous, etc.) or how they relate to God.” (Feinberg 1994: 269, 288) The atheist’s position amounts to the assumption that “one knows what God should and would think and do, just because one thinks she knows what she would think and do if she were God” (Feinberg 1994: 178). As Bruce Reichenbach puts it, “The atheologian’s argument seems to proceed along the illicit lines that since *we* could have prevented the suffering, *God* could have prevented the suffering” (Reichenbach 1982: 37-38). The arrogance of such a claim is astounding, particularly since “they cannot provide the evidence needed to show that God could have prevented the suffering without losing a greater good.” (Ibid.: 37). In short, the entire atheistic argument amounts to a hypothesis of what the atheist thinks God would or should do and various auxiliary assumptions the atheist assumes to be true (e.g., there is too much evil; there is pointless or gratuitous evil; God should remove evil; God could remove evil without forfeiting a greater good or causing greater harm). The atheist’s hypothesis and auxiliary assumptions are all inherently subjective and inferential and none of them is based on any empirical facts or known truths at all!

- The fact is, God has *infinitely* greater knowledge than we have, has an *infinitely* greater vision and frame of reference, and is *infinitely* wiser than we are. Stephen Wykstra analogized our understanding of God’s reasons for allowing evil and suffering to the likelihood of a one-month-old infant trying to understand his parents’ purposes in allowing him to experience pain, which is to say it is not likely at all. The gap between our abilities and understanding compared to God’s is actually infinitely greater than that between a one-month-old infant and his or her parents. Wykstra’s point is that “the disparity between our cognitive limits and the vision needed to create a universe gives us reason to think that if our universe is created by God it is expectable that . . . if there are God-purposed goods [connected to evil and suffering], they would often be beyond our ken” (Wykstra 1996: 139-40; see also Plantinga 1996: 75-76 [“An evil is *inscrutable* if it is such that we can’t think of any reason God (if there is such a person) could have for permitting it. . . . If theism is true we would expect that there would be inscrutable evil. Indeed, a little reflection shows there is no reason to think we could so much as grasp God’s plans here, even if he proposed to divulge them to us. But then the fact that there is inscrutable evil does not make it improbable that God exists.”]). Biblically, this is certainly true inasmuch as “*the secret things belong to the Lord our God*” (**Deut 29:29**), now “*we walk by faith, not by sight*” (**2 Cor 5:7**), and “*now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known*” (**1 Cor 13:12**).

William Alston elaborates this; after discussing many possible reasons why God might allow evil and suffering, he states, “Even if we were fully entitled to dismiss all the alleged reasons for permitting suffering that have been suggested, we would still have to consider whether there are further possibilities that are undreamt of in our theodicies. Why should we suppose that the theodicies thus far excogitated, however brilliant and learned their authors, exhaust the field? . . . Since it is in principle impossible for us to be justified in supposing that God does not have sufficient reasons for permitting E [evil] that are unknown to us, and perhaps unknowable by us, no one can be justified in holding that God could have no reasons for permitting the Bambi [William Rowe’s postulated fawn who dies in a fire] and Sue [the rape, beating, and murder of a five-year-old girl] cases, or any other particular cases of suffering. . . . Even if . . . my opponent could definitively rule out all the specific suggestions I have put forward, she would still face the insurmountable task of showing herself to be justified in supposing that there are no further possibilities for sufficient divine reasons. That point by itself would be decisive.” (Alston 1996: 119) Timothy Keller observes, “If an all-powerful and all-wise God were directing all of history with its infinite number of interactive events toward good ends, it would be folly to think we could look at any particular occurrence and understand a millionth of what it will bring about” (Keller 2013: 101). In short, “theists need not have any hypothesis about why God would permit evil in order to be rational. They can say that God has a reason but it is beyond us. That would be consistent with Christianity’s belief that God’s knowledge is far beyond ours. It is not irrational thinking either, because we often rationally continue to believe something without knowing how to explain it. For example, one may reasonably trust the laws of chemistry, even if a particular

experiment went awry and one cannot explain why.” (Feinberg 1994: 220)

Even David Hume, the originator of the modern “problem of evil,” admitted that it is likely we would *not* know God’s reasons for allowing evil and suffering: “such a limited intelligence must be sensible of his own blindness and ignorance, and must allow, that there may be many solutions of those phenomena [evil and suffering], which will for ever escape his comprehension” (Hume 1779: part 11, 200). The book of Job alone should tell us that “it is both futile and inappropriate to assume that any human mind could comprehend all the reasons God might have for any instance of pain and sorrow, let alone for all evil” (Keller 2013: 95). Since that is the case, it is impossible for an atheist to make a valid argument that the existence, quantity, intensity, and apparent gratuitousness of evil renders God’s existence improbable.

- Concerning natural evils (e.g., earthquakes, floods, genetic malfunctions, diseases), ultimately the natural order went awry because of humanity’s fall into sin (**Gen 3:17-19; Rom 8:20-22**). John Frame states, “Natural evil is a curse brought upon the world because of moral evil. It functions as punishment to the wicked and as a means of discipline for those who are righteous by God’s grace. It also reminds us of the cosmic dimensions of sin and redemption [see **Col 1:20**].” (Frame 2008: 142) In other words, neither human beings nor the natural order are in the “very good” state in which God made them (**Gen 1:31**) but are corrupted and disordered because of humanity’s disobedience to God. It is, therefore, disingenuous to blame God for natural evils and disasters.

Beyond that, God created a world in which human beings and other creatures can live and function adequately. The world is run by various natural processes that fit the creatures God placed in it. Sometimes these natural processes produce harmful effects. However, “it is foolish to jettison processes that work well most of the time for the sake of the relatively few times they malfunction and result in evil, especially when we have no idea of what we might get in their place” (Feinberg 1994: 149). Richard Swinburne also points out, “There must be naturally occurring evils (i.e. evils not deliberately caused by men) if men are to know how to cause evils themselves or are to prevent evil occurring. And there have to be *many* such evils, if men are to have knowledge, for as we saw, sure knowledge of what will happen in future comes only by induction from many past instances. . . . Suppose that men are to have the choice of building cities along earthquake belts, and so risking the destruction of whole cities and their populations hundreds of years later, or of avoiding doing so. How can such a choice be available to them unless they know where earthquakes are likely to occur and what their probable consequences are? And how are they to come to know this, unless earthquakes have happened due to natural and unpredicted causes, like the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755? . . . The evils which have naturally befallen animals provide a huge reservoir of information for men to acquire knowledge of the choices open to them, a reservoir which men have often tapped—seeing the fate of sheep, men have learnt of the presence of dangerous tigers; seeing the cows sink into a bog, they have learnt not to cross that bog, and so on.” (Swinburne 1979: 207, 208, 209)

Further, the very thing that is beneficial about natural phenomena can also be detrimental, e.g., water is necessary for life but one can drown in it; gravity is necessary but can result in injury or death when someone falls or avalanches occur. The beneficial aspects are so essential to life as we know it that to change these phenomena and processes would fundamentally change life and the world itself. Bruce Reichenbach notes, “What would it entail to alter the natural laws regarding digestion so that arsenic or other poisons would not negatively affect the human constitution? Would not either arsenic or the human physiological composition or both have to be altered such that they would, in effect, be different from the present objects which we now call arsenic or human digestive organs? To change the actual world sufficiently to eliminate natural evils, and therefore to instantiate a possible world with different natural laws, would necessarily entail a change in existing objects themselves. They would have to be different in some essential respects, such that with different essential properties they would become different things altogether. Fire would no longer burn or else many things would have to be by nature non-combustible; lightning would have to have a lower voltage or else a consistent repulsion from objects; wood would have to be penetrable so that limbs or trees would not injure. . . . The introduction of different natural laws affecting human beings in order to prevent the frequent instances of natural evil would entail the alteration of human beings themselves.” (Reichenbach 1982: 110-11)

- Concerning the apparent gratuitousness or pointlessness of much evil (e.g., Rowe’s Bambi and Sue examples), Reichenbach observes, “The atheologian’s argument claims that instances of suffering which are seemingly or apparently pointless are in fact or likely pointless, for we do not know of any higher good to which they are a means. But this constitutes an appeal to ignorance; that we know of no higher good does not entail that there is no higher good or that one is unlikely. . . . He argues that even if the fawn’s suffering is not really pointless, it is not reasonable to hold this to be the case in all instances of apparently pointless

suffering. But this begs the question; what needs to be shown is that there are such cases.” (Reichenbach 1982: 38; see also Trau 1986: 485-89) Feinberg adds, “One must first show that there are *any* cases of *genuinely* pointless suffering before we can believe that some of the many instances of *apparently* pointless suffering are really pointless. . . . That will be a hard challenge to meet, especially because of our limited knowledge. Atheists will not likely do better than produce some evidence that a specific evil is probably genuinely pointless, but ‘probably pointless’ is not enough to answer Reichenbach’s objection about question begging.” (Feinberg 1994: 180)³⁷

Timothy Keller notes, “In the field of chaos theory, scientists have learned that large, macroscopic systems—such as weather—can be sensitive to the tiniest changes. The classic example is the claim that a butterfly’s fluttering in China would be magnified through a ripple effect so as to determine the path of a hurricane in the South Pacific. Yet no one would be able to calculate and predict the actual effects of the butterfly’s flight. . . . If even the effects of a butterfly’s flight . . . are too complex to calculate, how much less could any human being look at the tragic, seemingly ‘senseless’ death of a young person and have any idea of what the effects in history will be?” (Keller 2013: 100-01) Even atheist William Rowe admits, “It would seem to require something like omniscience on our part before we should lay claim to knowing that there is no greater good connected to the fawn’s suffering in such a manner that an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have achieved that good without permitting that suffering or some evil equally bad or worse” (Rowe 1996: 4).

- Concerning the quantity of evil, “Judgments of how much evil is too much for a good God to allow depend on personal value judgments, not on demonstrative proof. Thus, it is impossible to prove there is too much gratuitous evil. Those predisposed against theism will think there is too much, whereas theists will think the amount acceptable. None of this, however, proves there is too much evil, nor can it. Hence, the opinions that there is too much or just enough cannot count as *evidence* against or for theism. If so, they present no problem for theism.” (Feinberg 1994: 265)³⁸ As with the assertion that some evils are “pointless,” given our cognitive finiteness (especially compared to God), the assertion that there is “too much” evil is just that—an assertion, not evidence, that permits no inference against the existence of a justifying reason that God may have. Hence, it is no evidence against the probability that God exists. From our perspective, less evil might seem possible and preferable, but from God’s perspective and with his knowledge and wisdom of “how evil fits into God’s overall plans and purposes and of how it interconnects with goods and other evils, we cannot be sure we would create any different world than the one we have. . . . If judgments are made about too much evil in ignorance of why things are as they are, it is dubious that we can make a convincing case that there really is too much evil.” (Ibid.: 308) Further, different instances of evil of the same kind might be justified in entirely different ways. “We should not assume for two similar evils that God’s purpose in allowing them is identical. . . . The consequence of it is that evils we think are surplus or too much may not at all be, because they may have a different purpose and explanation than we think.” (Ibid.: 308-09)

- Finally, “God was not required to actualize any world at all, for His own existence is the highest good. . . . [A theist] does not need to show that our world is better than others or the best. . . . He merely explains that ours is one of those good possible worlds God could have created.” (Feinberg 1994: 36, 142) Michael Peterson states, “Let us ponder for a moment whether our moral structures can condemn the very being who makes it possible for us even to exist, to be able to apprehend moral values in the first place, and to have the

³⁷ Keith Yandell states, “That there are evils whose morally sufficient points, ends, or purposes, if any, are not apparent does not entail that they have no such point, end, or purpose, because it is false that if they have such ends that fact would be apparent to us. It does not entail that they probably have no such point, for it is not the case that if they had a point, that fact probably would be apparent to us. It does not follow that it is reasonable to believe that they do not have a point, because it is false that it is reasonable to believe that they have no point because it is the case that it is not apparent to us that they have one.” (Yandell 1989: 19-20)

³⁸ There is a related point concerning the quantity and intensity of pain and suffering. “While in imagination we may attempt to add up all the pains of the animal and human populations in the world, in all places and at all times, such a sum of suffering does not and cannot exist. Pain is not accumulable . . . for that composite pain cannot be found in anyone’s consciousness. There is no such thing as ‘a sum of suffering’ for the simple reason that no one suffers it.” (Boyd 1999: 98-99) The only one who suffers the sum of the anguish of this world “is God Himself; for He knows each of His children and all of His creatures with an immediacy more instant and acute than their own consciousness of themselves, and feels their suffering more deeply than they do in their own person. . . . If there is a sum of suffering, it is not made by a human mind, nor is it known in any human experience, but in the mind and heart of God. Only He can know the pain of this world, and only He can bear it. Yet it is we who complain of it! We hold it against Him as a reason for unbelief while all the time it is He who carries it in love and redeems it by an infinite compassion.” (Ibid.: 99; see **Isa 53:3-12**)

significance of life which is lived within their ambit. Of course, we morally condemn those who lie, steal, and murder, but it is not at all clear that we must likewise condemn God for creating the context in which such evils can happen. Surely it accords with the very spirit of morality for God to create a moral context and a plurality of finite beings living within it.” (Peterson 1982: 127) When moral or natural evils occur, “it is because we live in a sinful, fallen world. . . . His grace, which keeps more evil from happening than does, evidences His goodness since that grace is not owed.” (Feinberg 1994: 148) We must remember, “God’s power and love do not obligate Him to do every good thing that is possible. They only necessitate that whatever He does must be good and that if He fails to do something good that He apparently should do [e.g., remove evil], He must have a morally sufficient reason for not doing it.” (Ibid.: 178) However, God is under no obligation, moral or otherwise, to tell us why he decides to do or not do something.

The Bible indicates that one day God will create a world in which there is no longer any pain, suffering, evil, death, or curse (**Rev 21:1, 4; 22:3**). So why didn’t he start with that world since that world would be better than ours? Feinberg answers: “But better for what purpose? Presumably, God had many things He wanted to accomplish when He decided to create a world. There is no way for us to know that this other world would have accomplished those goals better than our world. Moreover, even if we think God’s only purpose is to bring Himself glory, we do not know that dispensing with our world in favor of that future world would bring God more glory than He receives from this world plus the next.” (Ibid.: 142) Since God evidently intended to create a world populated by non-glorified human beings (not superhumans or subhumans or “glorified” humans) and put them in a world where they could function, to prevent moral evil would probably require vast changes in the nature of human beings, and to prevent natural evil would probably entail significant changes in the natural order, such that God’s plan of creating human beings like us in a natural world such as ours would be thwarted (see Feinberg 1994: 130-36, 149-54, 309-10). “Was God wrong to have these other goals? Only if they are evil themselves, and they are not.” (Ibid.: 142) Therefore, “if God cannot conjointly remove evil and accomplish His other goal(s) for our world (i.e., it is logically impossible to do both), then He is not obligated to do both [i.e., he is not obligated to remove evil]” (Ibid.: 125). John Hick concludes that, by focusing on the amount of evil in the world, “Such critics as Hume are confusing what heaven ought to be, as an environment for perfected finite beings, with what this world ought to be, as an environment for beings who are in process of becoming perfected” (Hick 1977: 293-94).

III. The relationship between a good God and the existence of sin and evil

There are several facets to God’s relationship with sin and evil which must be borne in mind when we consider that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and totally good, yet has ordained and permitted sin and evil to exist.

A. God is sovereign over everything, and is actively at work accomplishing his plan

The Bible depicts God as sovereign over everything and actively involved in all aspects of the life of the world; his plan is absolute and comprehensive, and he decrees and acts to bring that plan to completion (see **1 Chron 29:11-12; Job 12:13-25; Ps 103:19; Isa 40:21-26; 46:9-11; Dan 4:35; Acts 4:27-28; Rom 9:14-24; Eph 1:11; Rev 17:14-17**). This is known as the doctrine of God’s *providence*, i.e., “that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end” (Berkhof 1949: 181). For example, He creates mountains, creates wind, and makes dawn into darkness (**Amos 4:13**); He makes wind blow and water flow (**Ps 147:18**); He governs the sun, moon, and stars, and stirs up the sea (**Jer 31:35**); He governs the growth of plants (**Isa 41:19-20**); He governs the animals (**Job 39**). God is also sovereign over and active in the affairs of people. For example, He is ultimately in charge of life and death, including birth defects, sickness, and death, including death of the “innocent” (**Gen 20:17-18; Exod 4:11; 2 Sam 12:15; Neh 9:6; Job 12:9-10; Isa 44:24; Ezek 24:15-18**); He raises some up and puts others down (**1 Sam 2:7**); He rules over the nations (**2 Chron 20:6; Ps 33:10-11; Isa 40:23-25**); He stirs up people’s spirits, puts thoughts in their minds, and turns their hearts (**Ezra 6:22; Neh 2:12; 7:5; Ps 105:25; Isa 44:28; Hag 1:14**). His sovereignty includes sovereignty even over the sinful decisions of people (**Gen 45:5-8; Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23-24; 4:27-28; 13:27; Rev 17:17**). Consequently, the Bible tells us, “*Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and in the earth*” (**Ps 135:6**). God states that he “*declare[s] the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established and I will accomplish my good pleasure. . . . Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.’*” (**Isa 46:10-11**)

B. God's sovereignty over events includes His sovereignty over sin and evil but not in a way that makes Him sinful or evil

Many people try to shield God from *any* involvement with sin or evil (they attribute all evil either to Satan or to individual sin). However, the Bible presents a more nuanced and complex picture. On one hand, "Moral evil is not something God created when he created other things. It is not a substance at all. God created substances, including the world and the people in it. God intended that we could act, for he made us able to act. But he neither made our actions nor does he perform them. Hence, we cannot say that God intended there to be moral evil because we have it in our world. God intended to create and did create agents who can act; he did not make their acts (good or evil)." (Feinberg 2001: 788; see also Adams 1991: 59 ["He has decreed the existence of sin in such a way that men themselves freely (i.e., uncoerced and in accord with their own natures) become the authors of their sin"]; Koukl 2012: n.p.) In other words, God respects people's integrity *as human beings*. He does not control people as if they were puppets or program them as if they were robots. People are able to think their own thoughts and make real choices.

As mentioned above, "God's relationship with the world is comprehensive in scope: God is present and active wherever there is world. God does not create the world and then leave it, but God creates the world and enters into it, lives within it, *as God*. . . . God is present on every occasion and active in every event. From the macrocosmic to the microcosmic, there is no getting beyond the presence of God. God cannot be evicted from the world or from any creature's life. At the same time, God's presence does not mean either divine micromanagement or a divine will that is irresistible.³⁹ . . . The world retains its integrity as creature even while filled with the presence of the Creator. . . . God—who is other than the world—works relationally from within the world, and not on the world from without. . . . That is, both God and the creatures have an important role in the creative enterprise, and their spheres of activity are interrelated in terms of function and effect. . . . But, even more, God gives human beings powers and responsibilities in a way that *commits God* to a certain kind of relationship with them. This commitment entails a divine constraint and restraint in the exercise of power within the creation. For example, God will not do the procreating of animals or the bearing of fruit seeds in any unmediated way. More ominously, human beings have been given the freedom to destroy themselves, though this stands against the will of God for them. This commitment to give power and responsibility over to the creature results in an ongoing divine dependence upon creatures⁴⁰ in and through whom God will work in the life of the world." (Fretheim 2005: 23-24, 26, 27; see also Berkhof 1949: 188-90) In keeping with this dual explanation of events, Paul tells Christians to "*work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*" (Phil 2:12-13).

Given God's comprehensive sovereignty, plan, and his active involvement in the world while at the same time humans retain their integrity as human beings, the Bible repeatedly presents a *dual explanation* for events: God is sovereign and has ordained all events (that, in one sense, is a full explanation for all events); yet that is compatible with and does not in any way diminish people's responsibility for the choices they make and the things they do (that, in another sense, is also a full explanation for all events).⁴¹ This is known as the doctrine of *concurrency*, i.e., "the co-operation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do" (Berkhof 1949: 187). This doctrine implies two things: "(1) That the powers of nature do not work by themselves, that is, simply by their own inherent power, but that God is immediately operative in every act of the creature. This must be maintained in opposition to the deistic position. (2) That second causes are real, and not to be regarded simply as the operative power of God. . . . This should be stressed over against the pantheistic idea that God is the only

³⁹ There are different senses to the meaning of God's "will." His revealed or preceptive will may, indeed, be resisted by people; however, his secret or decretive will cannot be resisted (see paragraphs III. B.-E.).

⁴⁰ When Fretheim speaks of God's "dependence" on creatures, it must be understood that he is referring only to the fact that God acts *through* his creatures, not immediately and directly: "There is no absolute principle of self-activity in the creature, to which God simply joins His activity. In every instance the impulse to action and movement proceeds from God. There must be an influence of divine energy before the creature can work. . . . God causes everything in nature to work and to move in the direction of a pre-determined end. So God also enables and prompts His rational creatures, as second causes, to function, and that not merely by endowing them with energy in a general way, but by energizing them to certain specific acts." (Berkhof 1949: 189)

⁴¹ K. Scott Oliphint remarks, "It is difficult to see how one thing, like God's condescending providence, could bring together both the decree of God and the free act of Adam as a part of that decree. But surely, in a world in which God, in Christ, takes on a human nature all the while remaining God, it is no conceptual stretch to assert such a thing of God and his providence. That is, just as the person of Christ combines the divine and human without losing the essential properties of each, so also providence combines the divine (decree) and human (decision) in such a way that no essential properties are lost in each of them." (Oliphint 2006: 301)

agent working in the world.” (Ibid.)⁴²

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) summarizes the situation this way: “3.1. God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. . . . 5.2. Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently. . . . 5.4. The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.” (Westminster 1647: 3.1; 5.2, 4)

Let us explain this. Given this relationship that God has with people and the world, the Bible’s writers “do not shy away from making Yahweh himself in some mysterious way (the mysteriousness of which safeguards him from being himself charged with evil) the ‘ultimate’ cause of many evils. . . . God does not stand behind evil action in precisely the same way that he stands behind good action. . . . A certain distance is preserved between God and his people when they sin. . . . In short, although we may lack the categories needed for full exposition of the problem, *nevertheless we must insist that divine ultimacy stands behind good and evil asymmetrically.*” (Carson 1994: 28, 36-37) This interdependent divine-human interrelationship entails at least two things: (1) “This is a relationship of unequals; it is an asymmetrical relationship. God is God and we’re not.” (Fretheim 2005: 16) This means there is a difference in metaphysical level and status between God as creator and us as creatures. This difference between levels might be analogized to the difference between a playwright and a character in a play. In “Macbeth,” Macbeth killed Duncan. “Shakespeare wrote the murder into his play. But the murder took place in the world of the play. . . . We sense the rightness of Macbeth paying for his crime. But we would certainly consider it very unjust if Shakespeare were tried and put to death for killing Duncan. . . . Indeed, there is reason for us to praise Shakespeare for raising up this character, Macbeth, to show us the consequences of sin.” (Frame 2008: 162-63) Because of the different levels of reality between God and us, God’s prerogatives as “playwrite” (e.g., creator, sustainer, lawgiver, judge, savior) are far greater than ours. While this analogy is not exact (we, after all, are real while Macbeth is not), this metaphysical difference in levels between God and us suggests a moral difference, which “may explain why the biblical writers, who do not hesitate to say that God brings about sin and evil, do not accuse him of wrongdoing” (Ibid.: 163).⁴³ (2) It is a paradox that defies complete definition or understanding. Nevertheless, given the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God who has a plan for the world, is sovereign, and is actualizing His plan, and given creatures who have the ability to make real choices and take real actions for which they are responsible, the relationship between God and His creatures as described above *could not be otherwise*.

God ultimately is responsible for evil in that He is sovereign over everything, declares “*the end from the beginning*” (**Isa 46:10**), and has ordained an all-comprehensive plan for the whole of creation, including the evil, that He is accomplishing (**Prov 16:4; Isa 46:8-11**). However, God’s “asymmetric” relationship behind good and evil means that “God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet the evil is not morally chargeable to him: it is always chargeable to secondary agents, to secondary causes. On the other hand, God stands behind good in such a way that it not only takes place within the bounds of his sovereignty, but it is always chargeable to him, and only derivatively to secondary agents.” (Carson 1990: 213) In other words, God is not responsible for evil in such a way that He is the author of the *evilness* of the evil or the *sinfulness* of sin. Thus, Dennis Johnson states that “although the destructive judgments revealed in the trumpet cycle [of Revelation] come from the heavenly altar by the purpose of God [**Rev 8:1-19**], the blame for the earth’s destruction falls not on the holy Creator but on those who seduce human beings into resisting him and his Christ, sowing seeds of avarice, suspicion, competition, and hostility that violate the world and its inhabitants [**Rev 8:20-21**]” (Johnson 2001: 154n.13; see also **Gen 4:1-7; Isa 10:5-16; Hab 1:1-11; Hag 1:5-11; Acts 2:22-24**).

Berkhof puts it like this, “There is not a single moment that the creature works independently of the will

⁴² Appendix 2 is a table showing multiple examples from the Bible of the same events being attributed both to God and to secondary agents.

⁴³ In light of the fundamental metaphysical difference in *levels* between God and us, and therefore the fundamentally different *roles* God and we play in the drama of existence, Keith Yandell states, “What God can allow compatible with his goodness is not what we can allow compatible with ours” (Yandell 1989: 30).

and the power of God. It is in Him that we live *and move* and have our being, Acts 17:28. This divine activity accompanies the action of man at every point, but without robbing man in any way of his freedom. The action remains the free act of man, an act for which he is held responsible. This simultaneous concurrence does not result in an identification of the *causa prima* [primary cause] and the *causa secunda* [secondary cause]. In a very real sense the operation is the product of both causes. Man is and remains the real subject of the action. Bavinck illustrates this by pointing to the fact that wood burns, that God only causes it to burn, but that formally this burning cannot be ascribed to God but only to the wood as subject.” (Berkhof 1949: 189)

James 1 describes how sin arises. **Jas 1:2, 12** commend people who encounter and persevere in various “trials.” **Jas 1:13-15** then states, “*Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.*” The words “trial” and “tempt” are cognates, i.e., the noun and verb forms of the same root Greek word (*peirasmos* [trial] and *peirazō* [tempt]). The context provides the distinction: God places us in circumstances to test or try us—including circumstances where we may be tempted to sin and circumstances where he knows we will, in fact, sin—*yet he does not induce us to sin*. Rather, the temptation to sin comes from within man or from a secondary source such as Satan, and the willing to sin comes from within man: “Morally evil deeds stem from human desires. Desires in and of themselves are not evil nor do they perform the evil . . . but when they are aroused so as to lead us to disobey God’s prescribed moral norms, then we have sinned. Desires are not the only culprit, however, for will, reason, and emotion, for example, enter into the process. But James says temptation and sinful deeds start with our desires.” (Feinberg 2001: 789)

We see this when we consider how sin and evil entered the world. God created the world without sin or evil in a state that was “*very good*” (**Gen 1:31**). God created human beings “*in the image of God*” (**Gen 1:26-27**). He gave them the ability to reason and have emotions, desires, intentions, the ability to choose, and the capacity for bodily movement, all of which we may use for good (or evil). He blessed the man and woman (**Gen 1:28**), spoke to them, had fellowship with them (**Gen 1:28-30; 2:16-17, 19; 3:8-9**), and placed them in an ideal environment (**Gen 2:8-15**). God specifically told Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and even warned him of the consequences if he did (**Gen 2:16-17**). Sin entered the world when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and rebelled against him by eating the fruit (**Gen 3:1-6**). **Gen 3:6** recounts how sin sprang from Adam’s and Eve’s desire: “*When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband with her, and he ate.*” This is known as “the Fall” of mankind.⁴⁴ Since Adam and Eve represented and had been placed in charge of the entire creation, the Fall affected not only them but the rest of humanity and the created order (**Gen 3:14-19; Rom 5:12-19; 8:20-22**). “Suffering and death in general is a natural consequence and just judgment of God on our sin” (Keller 2013: 115). In short, the original design for creation has been broken and is now abnormal. Despite the Fall, people still have the capacities for reason, choice, etc. that God created humanity with, although now we are predisposed and inclined to sin and rebel against God (see **Rom 3:9-18**). “The Christian doctrine of the Fall and its consequences on mankind and our world means that all of us are ultimately responsible through our sin for these [moral and natural] sorts of evils. God is not guilty, for He does not do the evil.” (Feinberg 1994: 148)

God permits and ordains sin, not for the evilness or sinfulness of the sin itself, but for “wise, holy, and most excellent ends and purposes” (Edwards 1984, *Freedom*, §IX: 76; see also Piper 2000: 107-31). In this regard, Randy Alcorn states that God “intended from the beginning to permit evil, then to turn evil on its head, to take what evil angels and people intended for evil and use it for good. . . . It is possible to plan for something you know is coming without forcing that thing to happen. God didn’t *force* Adam and Eve to do evil, but he did create them with freedom and permitted Satan’s presence in the garden, fully knowing they would choose evil and knowing that what he would do in his redemptive plan would serve a greater good.” (Alcorn 2009: 226-27)

Indeed, people may have one motive for what they do (e.g., to bring about evil), but God may have another motive for ordaining the very same event (e.g., to bring about good). God is able to work in and through his creatures without forcing them to act against their own will or desires (even when his own desire or motive is different from theirs) and without himself sinning (even when his creatures do, in fact, sin) (see **Prov 16:2**). The selling of Joseph into slavery (**Gen 45:4-8; 50:20; Ps 105:17**), the defeat of Judah by Israel (**2 Chron 28:1-15**), the invasion of Israel by Assyria (**2 Kgs 19:20-31; Isa 10:5-16**), the destruction of Judah by Babylon (**Ezek**

⁴⁴ The Bible clearly implies that Satan “fell” before the sin of Adam and Eve, since Satan is the one who tempted Adam and Eve and lied to them about the nature and consequences of eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil (compare **Gen 2:16-17** and **Gen 3:1-4**).

11:5-12; Hab 1:5-11), the betrayal of Jesus by Judas (**Matt 26:20-24; John 6:64**), the conspiracy by Caiaphas, the chief priests, and the Pharisees to kill Jesus (**John 11:47-53**), and the crucifixion of Jesus by Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel (**Isa 53:3-10; Acts 2:22-23; 4:27-28**) are examples of this.

This is a mystery that cannot be fully understood by us, because God’s relationship—as infinite, omniscient, omnipotent creator—with finite creatures is unique (i.e., there is nothing else like it) and is not the same as one creature’s relationship with another creature (Talbot 2005: audio message).⁴⁵ Further, God exhaustively knows the entire future—including its end and all the short-term and long-term, direct and indirect, effects of every word, deed, and other events. Everything is part of God’s overall plan. He is therefore uniquely qualified to know when to ordain or permit evil and suffering and when not to. Consequently, he alone can be good in allowing evil and suffering that a good human being (who does not have God’s exhaustive knowledge) would try to prevent.

C. Although sin and evil are part of God’s overall plan, he stands against sin and evil

Perhaps of greatest importance is that, although the existence of sin and evil are part of God’s plan, God stands *against* sin and evil. This stems from his nature as holy, just, righteous, and good. **Hab 1:13** says that God is “*too pure to approve evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor.*” We may think that sin is a relatively trivial matter and that the punishment and consequences (diseases, suffering, death) far outweigh the crime. “But that only underscores how far we are from God’s perspective on these things. . . . From the perspective of an absolutely perfect God, who has nothing to do with sin, it must be atrocious.” (Feinberg 1994: 331) We see this in **John 11:1-44** concerning the death of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the tomb. Death, of course, entered the world as a result of sin (**Gen 2:17; Rom 5:12-14**). **1 Cor 15:26** calls death “*the last enemy.*” When Jesus approached Lazarus’s tomb, **John 11:38** says that he was “*deeply moved*” (or “*groaning in Himself,*” NKJV). Timothy Keller points out that “these translations are too weak. The Greek word used by the gospel writer John means ‘to bellow with anger.’ It is a startling term.” (Keller 2013: 136; see Zodhiates 1993: “*embrimaomai,*” 574 [“to roar, storm with anger”]) Keller continues, “So Jesus is furious at evil, death, and

⁴⁵ Philosophically, the term that describes the God-human relationship is “compatibilism”: God is absolutely sovereign, but His sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is minimized or eliminated (i.e., human beings are not turned into robots or puppets); likewise, human beings are morally responsible creatures who can make real choices and actions, including rebelling against the revealed will of God, and are rightly held accountable for such choices and actions, but this never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent. In other words, God is able to foreordain all things with certainty; human beings do what they want and choose to do (i.e., God does not force them to act against their desires and wills), but they do not have the *absolute* power to act contrary to God’s foreordained plan (see Carson 1994: 163-67, 201-22; Carson 1990: 199-227; Feinberg 2001: 625-796; Alcorn 2009: 258-69). As Feinberg states, “Each person, though causally determined to do what she does, still has the ability and opportunity to choose otherwise than she has. And when she chooses evil, she does so in accord with her wishes. Compatibilistic freedom is still freedom; it is not compulsion.” (Feinberg 1994: 138)

Some philosophers and theologians have proposed a defense to the problem of evil called the “free will defense,” which is based on another view of free will called libertarian or incompatibilistic free will. The leading proponent of this is Alvin Plantinga. Although the free will defense does counter the logical problem of evil, the notion of incompatibilistic free will is not biblical. Plantinga defines free will as follows: “If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won’t. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it. . . . Now God can create free creatures, but He can’t *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right.” (Plantinga 1974: 29) This means that “in order for libertarian freedom to be affirmed, a full-orbed sovereignty must be denied with respect to God” (Oliphint 2006: 275). That is unbiblical, since “Scripture seems to represent God as determining the choices of human creatures, and yet holding them fully responsible for their choices, good and bad (cf. Ge 50:20; Isa 10:5-15; Lk 22:22; Ac 2:23, 4:27-28; 13:48; Php 2:12-13; 1 Ki 8:58, 61; Ex 4:21, 7:3, 10:20, 10:27). In other words, it doesn’t seem that Scripture shares the distinctive assumption of the FWD.” (Erlandson 1991: n.10) Indeed, in **Rom 9:19-21** Paul appeals to the difference between God as the potter and us as the clay to counter the problem of evil. John Frame points out, “This answer to the problem of evil turns entirely on God’s sovereignty. It is as far as could be imagined from a free will defense.” (Frame 2008: 164) Related to this is another issue: “If an omniscient God foreknows what I shall do – and surely, it seems, He must – then I cannot act other than I do and, consequently, I do not act freely [in the libertarian sense]. Hence, the insistence that God is omniscient seems logically incompatible with the free will defense against the problem of evil.” (Runzo 1981: 131) Feinberg concludes, “If compatibilism is correct, then, any theology incorporating the free will defense with its incompatibilism should be rejected” (Feinberg 1994: 65). Other problems also exist with the idea of libertarian freedom and the free will defense from a biblical standpoint, but we need not address them here (see Keller 2013: 90-93; Feinberg 1980: 149-50; Frame 2002: 135-45; “Compatibilism” 2018: Resources).

suffering and, even though he is God, he is not mad at himself. This means that evil is the enemy of God’s good creation, and of God himself. And Jesus’ entire mission was to take evil on and end it.” (Keller 2013: 137) D. A. Carson adds that God “stands over against it [sin; evil; moral wickedness], so much so that the *logos* becomes the lamb of God who takes away the world’s sin, and the wrath of God is manifest against it ([John] 1.29; 3.36)” (Carson 1994: 160-61). Ronald Rittgers points out the importance of both sides of God’s relationship to suffering and evil: “A God who has no causal relationship to suffering is no God at all, certainly not the God of the Bible, who both suffers with humanity—supremely on the cross—and yet is in some sense also sovereign over suffering. Both beliefs were (and are) essential to the traditional Christian assertion that suffering ultimately has some meaning and that the triune God is able to provide deliverance from it.” (Rittgers 2012: 261)

This is probably the greatest mystery regarding evil, suffering, and death—that God chose to come into the world and personally be subject to evil, suffering, and death in the person of Jesus Christ. Not only is it a mystery but it was a radical plan to himself bear evil in order to turn evil on its head, create a new people to stand against evil, and ultimately end evil without destroying the very people who commit evil. The reason for this radical program is that “evil is so deeply rooted in the human heart that if Christ had come in power to destroy it everywhere he found it, he would have had to destroy us too” (Keller 2013: 137). Yet God in Christ “takes on the rebellion that is not his, and he makes it his, so that those whose rebellion it is will not suffer eternally because of it, but will be counted as righteous before him (2 Cor. 5:21)” (Oliphint 2006: 340). John Stott summarizes, “The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.” (Stott 1986: 160)

The depth of our sin and what it cost God to forgive us (i.e., “*His only begotten Son,*” **John 3:16**) is revealed by Jesus on the cross. “In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says that no physical destruction can be compared with the spiritual destruction of hell, of losing the presence of God. But this is exactly what happened to Jesus on the cross—he was forsaken by the Father (Matthew 27:46). . . . When he cried out that his God had forsaken him he was experiencing hell itself. But consider—if our debt for sin is so great that it is never paid off there, but our hell stretches on for eternity, then what are we to conclude from the fact that Jesus said the payment was ‘finished’ (John 19:30) after only three hours? We learn that what he felt on the cross was far worse and deeper than all of our deserved hells put together. . . . When Jesus was cut off from God he went into the deepest pit and most powerful furnace, beyond all imagining. He experienced the full wrath of the Father. And he did it voluntarily, for us.” (Keller 2009: sec.4) In short, while atheists who raise the problem of evil may talk about the amount and intensity of pain and suffering, the suffering that Christ endured—on our behalf—is unfathomable; the worst suffering ever endured by any creature, whether human or animal, is infinitesimal compared to the suffering endured by Christ.

In light of the cross, Randy Alcorn reminds us, “One thing we must never say about God—that he doesn’t understand what it means to be abandoned utterly, suffer terribly, and die miserably. . . . Some people can’t believe God would create a world in which people would suffer so much. Isn’t it more remarkable that God would create a world in which no one would suffer more than he?” (Alcorn 2009: 214-15)⁴⁶ Non-Christian Albert Camus recognized the unique answer to the “problem of evil” in what Christ accomplished on the cross: “Christ came to solve two major problems, evil and death, which are precisely the problems that preoccupy the rebel. His solution consisted, first, in experiencing them. The man-god suffers, too—with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to Him since He suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadow, the divinity abandoned its traditional privileges and drank to the last drop, despair included, the agony of death. . . . Only the sacrifice of an innocent god could justify the endless and universal torture of innocence. Only the most abject suffering by God could assuage man’s agony.” (Camus 1956: 32, 34) To put it another way, “If God is the co-sufferer of each and every victim, then quite clearly the justice of his ways with men and women cannot be in dispute: what is meted out to them is no less

⁴⁶ The crucifixion of Christ also perfectly illustrates that compatibilism has to be true if God is both sovereign and good and people are justly responsible for their actions. D. A. Carson explains: “If the initiative had been entirely with the conspirators, and God simply came in at the last minute to wrest triumph from the jaws of impending defeat, then the cross was not his plan, his purpose, the very reason why he sent his Son into the world—and that is unthinkable. If on the other hand God was so orchestrating events that all the human agents were nonresponsible puppets, then it is foolish to talk of conspiracy, or even of sin—in which case there is no sin for Christ to remove by his death, so why should he have to die? God was sovereignly at work in the death of Jesus; human beings were evil in putting Jesus to death, even as they accomplished the Father’s will; and God himself was entirely good.” (Carson 1990: 212)

than what God himself has to endure” (Surin 1986: 90). Since Christ bore the ultimate evil for us and used it for our forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life, can we not trust him in the remaining evils that we experience?

“Jesus did not come to earth the first time to bring justice but rather to bear it. . . . His death and resurrection created a people in the world who now have a unique and powerful ability to diminish the evil in their own hearts as well as a mandate to oppose and endure without flagging the evil they find in their communities and society. And it was all because the Son of God entered into human suffering to turn evil on its head and eventually end evil, sin, suffering, and death itself for good.” (Keller 2013: 124) That “unique and powerful ability to diminish the evil” stems from the nature of the gospel and Christian conversion. The gospel involves a personal encounter with what Christ did for us on the cross. Sebastian Moore states that the gospel “presents us with the vision of Jesus, the man without evil in him, destroyed simply because he *is* without evil. It invites us, under the pressure of a new force called the Holy Spirit, to discover ourselves in that classic murder . . . to experience our evil as never before, at last unmasked, to experience our decent death-wish as murder, and *in* that experience to feel for the first time the love that overpowers evil.” (Moore 1981: 14) Christian conversion then includes adoption into the family of God (**John 1:12; Rom 8:14-17, 23; 9:4; Gal 3:26; 4:5-7; Eph 1:5; 2:19; 1 John 3:1**), receipt of a new heart (**Ezek 36:26; 2 Cor 3:3**), the mind of Christ (**1 Cor 2:16**), and the Spirit from Christ (**Ezek 36:26; John 14:17**) who works in us and through us (**Phil 2:12-13**) to make us more like Christ himself (**Rom 8:29; Eph 4:11-16**). This is the authentically Christian response to the “problem of evil” and the only way to eradicate evil and thus solve the “problem” itself; “human beings are able to overcome sin only if they first receive from God to undergo a decisive transformation of self: without this prevenient grace [i.e., divine grace operating on the human will prior to its turning to God] creaturely beings cannot even begin their conquest of evil” (Surin 1986: 122).

That Christ’s radical plan made a difference in people’s lives was demonstrated historically: “Early Christian speakers and writers not only argued vigorously that Christianity’s teaching made more sense of suffering, they insisted that the actual lives of Christians proved it. Cyprian recounted how, during the terrible plagues, Christians did not abandon sick loved ones nor flee the cities, as most of the pagan residents did. Instead they stayed to tend the sick and faced their death with calmness. Other early Christian writings, like Ignatius of Antioch’s *To the Romans* and Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians*, pointed to the poise with which Christians faced torture and death for their faith. . . . Writers such as Cyprian, Ambrose, and later Augustine made the case that Christians *suffered and died better*—and this was empirical, visible evidence that Christianity was ‘the supreme philosophy.’ The differences between the pagan and Christian population in this regard were significant enough to give real credibility to Christian claims.” (Keller 2013: 41-42) Telford Work summarizes: “Jesus’ career inaugurated a victory over natural corruption. His followers are not left wallowing in injustice until their Master’s return. His victory continues to unfold in their proleptic colony of the coming order, whose sanctification anticipates and prepares for Jesus’ return. Practices like evangelism, healing, mercy ministries, discipline and excommunication, almsgiving and redistribution of wealth, pacifism, obedience to governing authorities, and martyrdom presuppose affirmative answers to the questions posed by the problem of evil: Does God exist? Does God care about suffering? Is God going to act?” (Work 2000: 109-10)

Christ’s incarnation and crucifixion are not the end of the story of God’s dealing with the problem of sin and evil. Christ will return to the earth; at that time the dead will be raised and he will judge all evil and evildoers (**Rev 20:11-15**) and will inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth in which there will no longer be any natural evil (**Rom 8:21; 2 Pet 3:10**) or any moral evil, pain, suffering, death, or curse (**2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1, 4; 22:3**). Therefore, the issues of evil and suffering need to be viewed in the in the larger context of the total history of humanity which includes eternity, not just in the temporal context of this life on this earth. William Ferraiolo points out, “The most hideous embodied life that we can imagine is tantamount to no more than a pin prick by comparison with a postmortem eternity. No matter the severity or intensity of one’s terrestrial suffering, one’s subsequent eternal experience must, of mathematical necessity, dwarf the dissatisfaction accumulated from cradle to grave.” (Ferraiolo 2005: “Eternal Selves”) In light of this perspective, Jesus stated, “*Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell*” (**Matt 10:28**). John Hick adds, “the ‘good eschaton’ will not be a reward or compensation proportioned to each individual’s trials, but an infinite good that would render worth while any finite suffering endured in the course of attaining to it” (Hick 1977: 341).

More than that, the resurrection and the new heaven and new earth mean that, not only will evil and evildoers be judged and justice done, but evil will itself be undone. In the new heaven and new earth, people will have glorious, new, resurrection bodies (**1 Cor 15:20-22, 35-54**). “The resurrection of the body means that we do not merely received a consolation for the life we have lost but a restoration of it. We not only get the bodies and lives we had but the bodies and lives we wished for but had never before received. We get a glorious,

perfect, unimaginably rich life in a renewed material world.” (Keller 2013: 117) In fact, **1 Cor 15:54** says that, at Christ’s return, when all is renewed, “*then will come about the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’*” The language of “swallowing” suggests that death (and the sin and evil that occasioned it) will in some way be taken up into the new heaven and new earth and transformed, like food is swallowed and transformed to nourish the body. This suggests that “the eventual glory and joy we will know will be infinitely greater than it would have been had there been no evil. . . . If such is the case, that would truly mean the utter defeat of evil. Evil would not just be an obstacle to our beauty and bliss, but it will have only made it better. Evil would have accomplished the very opposite of what it intended.” (Ibid.) Thus, “human suffering will be transfigured by God at the consummation of history, a consummation that has already been inaugurated by the event of the cross” (Surin 1986: 135).

As with Christian conversion, the prospect of Judgment Day and the new heaven and new earth have practical importance in being able to deal with evil, injustice, and suffering now. The prospect of Judgment Day “enables us to live with both hope and grace. If we accept it, we get hope and incentive to work for justice. For no matter how little success we may have now, we know that justice *will* be established—fully and perfectly. All wrongs—what we have called moral evil—will be redressed. But it also enables us to be gracious, to forgive, and to refrain from vengefulness and violence. Why? . . . If we know that no one will get away with anything, and that all wrongs will be ultimately redressed, then we can live in peace.” (Keller 2013: 116) Miroslav Volf, a firsthand observer of the violence in his native Croatia, says, “The practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance” (Volf 1996: 304), and “The certainty of God’s just judgment at the end of history is the presupposition for the renunciation of violence in the middle of it” (Ibid.: 302).

The promise of God’s just judgment and a new world proved to be a powerful, living hope that gave Christians the ability to endure terrible torture and suffering with grace and even joy: “We know that the early Christians took their suffering with great poise and peace and they sang hymns as the beasts were tearing them apart and they forgave the people who were killing them. And so the more they were killed, the more the Christian movement grew.” (Keller 2013: 314) Howard Thurman adds that Christianity and its hope of Judgment Day and the new heaven and new earth served “to deepen the capacity of endurance and the absorption of suffering [of American slaves]. . . . What greater tribute could be paid to religious faith in general and to their religious faith in particular than this: It taught a people how to ride high in life, to look squarely in the face of those facts that argue most dramatically against all hope and to use those facts as raw material out of which they fashioned a hope that the environment, with all its cruelty, could not crush.” (Thurman 1998: 71) J. Christiaan Beker, who himself had been a slave of the Nazis, concludes, “A biblical theology of hope views the present power of death in terms of its empty future and in the knowledge of its, not God’s, sure defeat. It can tolerate, therefore, the agonizing presence of the power of death as ‘on the way out,’ and be confident that evil will not have the final say over God’s creation. And this confidence enables Christians to devise strategies of hope under the guidance of the Spirit, strategies which not only confront the idolatrous scheme of our world, but also seek to roll back the onslaught of the power of death in our midst.” (Beker 1987: 121-22)

In short, the gospel enables believers to answer Hume’s questions: “‘Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent.’ ‘No,’ answer the faithful, ‘he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.’ ‘Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent.’ ‘On the contrary, he is merciful *towards* the malevolent, and willing that all come to repentance.’ ‘Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?’ ‘Evil is everywhere, and nowhere more than on the cross, where God himself became its victim. He, more than anyone, bore the evil of his own justice and mercy. Yet it was on Calvary that evil was vanquished. We would have been vanquished along with it, if not for the time God has given for us (and you too?) to be numbered among the victors.’” (Work 2000: 110)

D. One can look at God’s ordaining that sin and evil occur as something like the sun’s relationship to darkness and cold

“There is a great difference between God being concerned thus, by his *permission*, in an event and act, which, in the inherent subject and agent of it, is sin, (though the event will certainly follow on his permission,) and his being concerned in it by *producing* it and exerting the act of sin; or between his being the *orderer* of its certain existence, by *not hindering* it, under certain circumstances, and his being the proper *actor* or *author* of it, by a *positive agency* or *efficiency*. . . . As there is a vast difference between the sun being the cause of the lightsomeness and warmth of the atmosphere, and the brightness of gold and diamonds, by its presence and positive influence; and its being the occasion of darkness and frost, in the night, by its motion, whereby it descends below the horizon. The motion of the sun is the occasion of the latter kind of events; but it is not the proper cause, efficient, or producer of them; though they are necessarily consequent on that motion, under such

circumstances: no more is any action of the Divine Being the cause of the evil of men's Wills. If the sun were the proper *cause* of cold and darkness, it would be the *fountain* of these things, as it is the fountain of light and heat: . . . and it might be justly inferred, that the sun itself is dark and cold, and that his beams are black and frosty. But from its being the cause no otherwise than by its departure, no such thing can be inferred, but the contrary; . . . and the more constantly and necessarily these effects are connected with and confined to its absence, the more strongly does it argue the sun to be the fountain of light and heat. So, inasmuch as sin is not the fruit of any positive agency or influence of the Most High, but, on the contrary, arises from the withholding of his action and energy, and, under certain circumstances, necessarily follows on the want of his influence; this is no argument that he is sinful, or his operation evil, or has any thing of the nature of evil; but, on the contrary, that he, and his agency, are altogether good and holy, and that he is the fountain of all holiness. It would be strange arguing, indeed, because men never commit sin, but only when God leaves them *to themselves*, and necessarily sin when he does so, that therefore their sin is not *from themselves*, but from God; and so, that God must be a sinful being: as strange as it would be to argue, because it is always dark when the sun is gone, and never dark when the sun is present, that therefore all darkness is from the sun, and that his disk and beams must needs be black." (Edwards 1984, *Freedom*, §IX: 77)

E. Because God can look at an event through both a “narrow lens” and a “wide-angle lens” at the same time, he may decree something by his secret (or “decretive”) will which his revealed (or “preceptive”) will forbids

Deut 29:29 says, “*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.*” While some passages state that God “*desires all men to be saved*” (**1 Tim 2:4**; see also **Ezek 18:23**; **2 Pet 3:9**), other passages affirm that *not all* people will be saved but God unconditionally elects only *some* (**Matt 11:27**; **John 1:12-13**; **6:37-39**, **44**, **65**; **10:25-29**; **Acts 13:48**; **Eph 1:4-5**, **11**; **2:8-9**). I. Howard Marshall says, “The fact that God wishes or wills that all people should be saved does not necessarily imply that all will respond to the gospel and be saved. *We must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what he actually does will to happen, and both of these things can be spoken of as God’s will.*” (Marshall 1989: 56, *emph. added*) John Piper adds, “Affirming the will of God to save *all*, while also affirming the unconditional election of *some*, implies that there are at least ‘two wills’ in God, or two ways of willing. It implies that God decrees one state of affairs while also willing and teaching that a different state of affairs should come to pass. This distinction in the way God wills has been expressed in various ways throughout the centuries. It is not a new contrivance. For example, theologians have spoken of sovereign will and moral will, efficient will and permissive will, secret will and revealed will, will of decree and will of command, decretive will and preceptive will.” (Piper 2000: 109)

Piper explains one aspect of this: “God has the capacity to look at the world through two lenses. He can look through a narrow lens or through a wide-angle lens. When God looks at a painful or wicked event through his narrow lens, he sees the tragedy or the sin for what it is in itself and he is angered and grieved. ‘I do not delight in the death of anyone, says the Lord God’ (Ezek. 18:32). But when God looks at a painful or wicked event through his wide-angle lens, he sees the tragedy or the sin in relation to everything leading up to it and everything flowing from it. He sees it in all the connections and effects that form a pattern or mosaic stretching into eternity. This mosaic, with all its (good and evil) parts he does delight in (Ps. 115:3).” (Piper 2000: 126)

Jonathan Edwards elaborates this and adds the important corollary that, because God can see the same thing through both the “narrow lens” and the “wide-angle lens,” he may forbid and punish the “evil *as evil*” that people do even though he had ordained the event for his own good reasons. “There is no inconsistency in supposing, that God may hate a thing as it is in itself, and considered simply as evil, and yet that it may be his Will it should come to pass, considering all consequences. . . . Men do *will* sin as sin, and so are the authors and actors of it: they love it as sin, and for evil ends and purposes. God does not will sin as sin, or for the sake of any thing evil; though it be his pleasure so to order things, that, he permitting, sin will come to pass, for the sake of the great good that by his disposal shall be the consequence. His willing to order things so that evil should come to pass, for the sake of the contrary good, is no argument that he does not hate evil, as evil: and if so, then it is no reason why he may not reasonably forbid evil as evil, and punish it as such.” (Edwards 1984, *Freedom*, §IX: 78-79; see also Piper 2000: 107-31; Edwards 1986, *Remarks*, ch. 3: 525-43) Examples of this include God’s using Assyria to punish Israel for its sin but then punishing Assyria for its arrogance (**Isa 10:5-19**); raising up Babylon to destroy Israel but then holding Babylon guilty for its godlessness (**Hab 1:5-11**); and ordaining the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ but then pronouncing woe on the man who betrayed him (**Matt 26:24**; **Mark 14:21**; **Luke 22:22**). Timothy Keller points out, “It is a remarkable balance. On the one hand, evil is taken seriously as a reality. And yet there is an assurance that in the end, it can never triumph.” (Keller 2013: 141)

A second important corollary is that God’s secret or unrevealed decrees and the existence of sin and evil

in the world do not in any way counteract God’s revealed will concerning how we should act. God’s “two wills” therefore counteract the idea of fatalism. Randy Alcorn states, “If God permits racism, slavery, and child sex trafficking, then why should we battle them? Here’s why: the Bible speaks much about God’s sovereignty, yet constantly calls upon people to take action, and to speak up for and help the poor and needy (see, for example, Proverbs 31:8-9)—this is the polar opposite of fatalism.” (Alcorn 2009: 263) In sum, for his own good reasons which in large part he has *not revealed* to us God has permitted and ordained that sin and evil will exist in this world until Christ returns to earth, but at the same time he *has revealed* to us “*what is good*” and what he requires of us: “*to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God*” (**Mic 6:8**; see also, e.g., **Deut 10:12-13; Matt 5:38-48; 6:14-15; 18:21-35; 22:36-40; 25:31-46; Mark 9:41-42; Luke 6:27-38; 12:33; Eph 4:25–5:21; 1 Tim 6:17-19; Jas 1:27**).

IV. Possible reasons why God has ordained the existence of sin and evil

A. Because God is the greatest good that could possibly be, sin and evil are necessary in order that all aspects of God’s nature and character are properly revealed

“God is utterly unique. He is the only being in the universe worthy of worship.” (Piper 2010: 51) He is the source of all perfections: love, goodness, truth, holiness, righteousness, justice, mercy, grace, etc. Consequently, his glory is greater than anything (see, e.g., **Isa 43:6-7; Hab 2:14; John 7:18; 14:13; Rom 11:36; 15:8-9; 9:22-23; 1 Cor 10:31; 1 Pet 4:11; Rev 21:23**). The “problem of evil” itself (along with many theodicies) is based on the implicit premise that humanity—our well-being and happiness—is central; that God created the world to bring about the best state possible for humanity. That assumption is incorrect. God did not create this world primarily for our benefit. Rather, the Bible states that “*by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, . . . all things have been created through Him and for Him*” (**Col 1:16**). Ultimately, everything that God has ordained—including sin and evil—is part of a great plan, designed before the foundation of the world, to manifest the glory of God, the glory of Christ, and the glory of the grace of God in Christ (see, e.g., **Ps 24:1-10; 148:1-13; John 11:1-4; 13:31-32; 17:1-5, 22-24; Rom 5:12-21; 8:28-29; 9:19-23; 11:32-36; Eph 1:3-6; Phil 2:6-11; 2 Tim 1:8-9; Heb 2:9-10; Rev 13:8; 15:3**). Charles Hodge states, “The knowledge of God is eternal life. It is for creatures the highest good. And the promotion of that knowledge, the manifestation of the manifold perfections of the infinite God, is the highest end of all his works. . . . The glory of God being the great end of all things, we are not obliged to assume that this is the best possible world for the production of happiness, or even for securing the greatest degree of holiness among rational creatures. It is wisely adapted for the end for which it was designed, namely, the manifestation of the manifold perfections of God.” (Hodge 1981: 435-36; see also Erlandson 1991: “A Biblical Perspective” [“God has ordained evil in order to display to all creation, and in particular to humanity, His glory in a way otherwise impossible. Namely, He has ordained man’s fall and the resulting evils to demonstrate His righteousness, justice, grace, and mercy as fully as possible.”])

A number of passages give examples of God’s ordaining sin and evil in order to demonstrate the different facets of his character:

- *Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”* (**John 9:3**)
- *Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”* (**John 9:39**)
- *For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.”* (**Rom 9:17**)
- *What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.* (**Rom 9:22-23**)
- *He predestined us to adoption as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace.* (**Eph 1:5-6a**)
- *In Him we also have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things in accordance with the plan of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in the Christ would be to the praise of His glory.* (**Eph 1:11-12**)
- *But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.* (**Gal 3:22**)
- *You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.* (**Jas 5:11**)

In commenting on the Romans verses, Hodge states, “The punishment of the wicked is not an arbitrary act, having no object but to make them miserable; it is designed to manifest the displeasure of God against sin, and to make known his true character. On the other hand, the salvation of the righteous is designed to display the riches of his grace.” (Hodge 1886: 319)

Jonathan Edwards discusses *why* the existence of sin and evil are necessary for all aspects of God’s full nature to be manifest: “It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God’s glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent [brilliant; radiant; splendid], that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all. . . . For the same reason it is not proper that one should be manifested exceedingly, and another but very little. . . . Thus it is necessary, that God’s awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed. . . . If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God’s holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God’s grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from. . . . And as it is necessary that there should be evil, because the display of the glory of God could not but be imperfect and incomplete without it, so evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; because the creature’s happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and sense of his love. And if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect.” (Edwards 1986, *Remarks*, ch. 3: 528; see also Piper 1998: “2.2 Why Does God Ordain”; Erlandson 1991: “A Biblical Perspective” [“Righteousness and justice are more fully displayed when not only is good rewarded but evil punished. Mercy and grace are more perfectly manifested when the recipients are utterly unworthy. . . . Grace and mercy are also more wondrously displayed in a world in which man’s fall resulted in spiritual *death*, not partial impairment. A spiritually *sick* person might claim a hand in restoring himself to God’s favor. Only a once-dead person who has been restored to divine favor will see the *extent* of Gods mercy.”]; Edwards 1984, *The End*: 94-121; Hodge 1981: 435 [“Sin, therefore, according to the Scriptures, is permitted, that the justice of God may be known in its punishment, and his grace in its forgiveness. And the universe, without the knowledge of these attributes, would be like the earth without the light of the sun.”]; Piper 2003: 17-50; Piper 2010: 39-54)

It also should be remembered that the drama of existence—including the role of sin and evil, suffering and death—is being enacted on a stage far greater than what we can perceive or even imagine. God’s glory and nature are demonstrated not just to people here on earth but throughout the universe, including the redeemed in heaven and the angels (see **2 Kgs 6:15-17; Ps 19:1; Matt 18:10; Luke 2:13-14; 15:7, 10; 1 Cor 4:9; Eph 3:8-10; Col 2:15; 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 1:12; Heb 12:1; Rev 1:1; 15:3-4; 17:1; 21:9**). And, as discussed earlier, these matters all have eternal, not merely temporal, implications.

Finally, we earlier discussed the importance of the incarnation and the atonement for sin that Christ accomplished on the cross. The centrality of this is discussed throughout the NT:

- *Those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren. (Rom 8:29)*
- *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the boundless greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and made Him head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:18-23)*
- *Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:8-11)*
- *He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. (Col 1:18)*

W. Gary Crampton points out a probably little-thought of implication of this, “It is logically consistent that the Fall of mankind had to occur if God is to be ultimately glorified through the glorification of His Son. That is,

God's foreordination of the Fall, and His providentially bringing it to pass, are necessary. He has purposed it for His own glory. . . . If Adam had successfully passed his probation in the Garden . . . he would have been confirmed by God in positive righteousness. . . . Adam's righteousness, then, would have been imputed to all of his descendants (that is, the entire human race). And all mankind would have gratefully looked to him, not Christ, as Savior. For all eternity, God would then share His glory with His creature: Adam. Ironically, the obedience of Adam would have led to idolatry. Therefore, that alternative would be logically impossible. Only the actual world, in which the fall of man occurred, is logically possible and redounds to the glory of God alone. Had Adam obeyed, Jesus Christ would have been denied His role as 'the first-born among many brothers' and the Lord of His church. And the Father would not receive the glory for His work through the Son." (Crampton 1999: 5-6)

B. God cannot eliminate evil without at the same time eliminating human beings and the world as we know it

John Feinberg argues that, in his goodness and wisdom God chose to create a world populated by human beings. There are several characteristics that define what it means to be human. These characteristics make humans different from superhuman or subhuman beings. Although they vary from individual to individual, humans have the ability to reason, emotions, a will, desires, intentions (formed on the basis of their desires), and the capacity for bodily movement. Further, God "intended for us to use these capacities to live and function in a world that is suited to beings such as we are. Hence, he created our world, which is run according to natural laws [see, e.g., **Job 38:25-27; Matt 5:45**]. . . . Finally, God intended to make beings who are finite both metaphysically and morally (as to the moral aspect, our finitude doesn't necessitate doing evil, but only that we do not have God's infinite moral perfection). In sum, God intended to create non-glorified human beings, not subhuman or superhuman beings or even gods." (Feinberg 2001: 788)

God cannot actualize contradictions (e.g., make a square circle or create a rock too heavy for him to lift). Consequently, God cannot eliminate moral evil because "if God did what is necessary to rid our world of moral evil, he would either contradict his intentions to create human beings and the world as he has; cause us to wonder if he has one or more of the attributes ascribed to him; and/or do something we would not expect or desire him to do, because it would produce greater evil than there already is." (Ibid.: 789) Feinberg then details the many and constant ways in which God would have to constrain people's reason, emotions, will, desires or the objects of desire, intentions, and bodily movements, and/or interfere with the operation of natural laws, to prevent sin and evil from occurring (Ibid.: 789-95). Indeed, to bring even one person to the point of always and only freely choosing to do good would require significantly rearranging the lives of a host of others (Ibid.: 790). In short, there would no longer be a world as we know it or human beings as we know them. Further, "If there were not a stable, predictable natural order, deliberation and action would be tremendously hampered and possibly eliminated. In addition, God wants individuals to interact with one another, but such a social structure demands a natural order as the neutral context of common life." (Feinberg 1994: 265) Peter van Inwagen observes that, for God to miraculously or otherwise prevent cases of natural or moral evil would result in a world that is massively irregular. "And, of course, there is no sharp cut-off point between a world that is massively irregular and a world that is not. . . . There is, therefore, no minimum number of cases of intense suffering that God could allow without forfeiting the good of a world that is not massively irregular." (van Inwagen 1996: 173n.11) Again, to interfere with or change the natural laws and processes of the world would necessitate a different sort of world and thereby different sorts of creatures than human beings to populate that world.

Feinberg concludes, "Has God done something wrong in creating human beings? Not at all when we consider the great value man is and the great worth God places upon us. As an empirical fact, we can say that moral evil has come as a concomitant of a world populated by human beings. Still, it is one of those good possible worlds God could have created. God is a good God. Our world with human beings demonstrates His goodness." (Ibid.: 795) The point here is not that God uses evil for good (as in **Rom 8:28**) but that the existence of human beings in a world like this are "a value of the first order," i.e., a good in-an-of-itself, not a good that results from a pre-existing evil. Human beings are an antecedent good that is worth having despite the sin and evil we cause.

C. All the evil that God allows and ordains ultimately serves and brings about the greater good of creation itself

Paul said, "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose" (**Rom 8:28**). One of the reasons why God ordains evil is that *sometimes* evil brings about a greater good for individuals—either the sufferers or others—in *this present age*.

Feinberg points out, “In any given case, God may intend to accomplish a whole series of things, rather than just one. And not just in the life of the sufferer alone. In allowing affliction, God may intend to accomplish something in the sufferer’s life, something in the lives of those who know the sufferer, and something in regard to angelic and demonic forces.” (Feinberg 1994: 339-40) There are an almost infinite number of examples of this. Here are just a few examples:

- “The amputation of a limb is an evil; but if necessary to save life, it is a good. Wars are dreadful evils, yet the world is indebted to wars for the preservation of civil and religious liberty, for which they are a small price. . . . Thus, if sin be the necessary means of the greatest good, it ceases to be an evil, on the whole, and it is perfectly consistent with the benevolence of God to permit its occurrence.” (Hodge 1981: 432-33)
- Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers but later told them, “*you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive*” (**Gen 50:20**).
- In the Bible, God uses evil to test his servants (**Job; 1 Pet 1:7; Jas 1:3**); to discipline them (**1 Cor 11:31-32; Heb 12:4-11**); to preserve their lives (**Gen 50:20**); to teach them patience and perseverance, develop character, and instill hope (**Rom 5:3-5; Jas 1:2-4**); to redirect their attention to what is most important (**Psalms 37**); to deepen their faith in Christ (**Phil 3:7-11**); to enable them to comfort others (**2 Cor 1:3-7**); to enable them to bear powerful witness to the truth (**Acts 7**); to give them greater joy when suffering is replaced by glory (**1 Pet 4:13**); to judge the wicked in history (**Deut 28:15-68**) and in the life to come (**Matt 25:41-46**); to bring reward to persecuted believers (**Matt 5:10-12**); and to display the work of God (**Exod 9:16; John 9:3; Rom 9:17**).
- Further, “God mercifully *withholds* the eschatological violence [i.e., the judgment] until every chance at repentance and forgiveness has passed. And this causes frustration, suffering, and even death for innocent victims who must wait. To the martyrs who cry, ‘Sovereign Lord, how long?’ God answers: ‘A little longer! . . . until the number of your fellow servants and their brothers and sisters should be complete, who are to be killed as you yourselves have been’ (Rev. 6:10-11). . . . And God’s mercy is such that apparently even two thousand years’ worth of martyrs – and even Crusades and Holocausts! – are not enough to exhaust it. The result of God’s extraordinary mercy in withholding judgment is, of course, *the problem of evil*. Why does God wait while people wound and annihilate other people? Who could have thought he does it out of love? But God replies: ‘Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?’ (Jon. 4:11)” (Work 2000: 107; see also **Rom 2:4; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9; Rev 2:21**)
- Timothy Keller lists four categories of how God uses suffering: “First, suffering transforms our attitude toward ourselves. It humbles us and removes unrealistic self-regard and pride. . . . Suffering also leads us to examine ourselves and see weaknesses, because it brings out the worst in us. . . . Second, suffering will profoundly change our relationship to the good things in our lives. We will see that some things have become too important to us. . . . Third, and most of all, suffering can strengthen our relationship to God as nothing else can [see **2 Cor 4:7-18**]. C. S. Lewis’s famous dictum is true, that in prosperity God whispers to us but in adversity he shouts to us. . . . Finally, suffering is almost a prerequisite if we are going to be of much use to other people, especially when they go through their own trials. Adversity makes us far more compassionate than we would have been otherwise [see **2 Cor 1:3-5**].” (Keller 2013: 190-92)
- John Feinberg discusses ten categories of things God may be accomplishing through suffering: “First, God may allow affliction for the same end as in the case recorded in John 9:1-3. In that situation, affliction *provided an opportunity for God to manifest His power*. . . . Second, God may use affliction to *remove a cause for boasting*. . . . [Third,] God allowed Job’s afflictions at least in part to *demonstrate true or genuine faith to Satan*. . . . Fourth, at times God uses affliction as an opportunity to *demonstrate to believers and nonbelievers the body-of-Christ concept*. . . . [Fifth,] Scripture teaches a number of ways in which the affliction of the righteous *promote their sanctification*. . . . [Sixth,] sometimes God permits affliction into the life of the righteous because of the *ministry that is possible in suffering*. . . . [Seventh,] God also uses affliction to *prepare us for further trials*. . . . An eighth broad use of suffering in the life of the righteous is to *prepare them for judgment of their works for rewards* [see **1 Pet 1:7**]. . . . Ninth, God may use the afflictions of the righteous as a *basis for ultimately exalting them* [see **2 Cor 4:17**]. . . . Finally, God may use affliction as a *means to take a believer to be with Himself*.” (Feinberg 1994: 340-46)
- Richard Swinburne states, “For acts of courage, compassion, etc., to be acts open to men to perform, there have to be various evils. Evils give men the opportunity to perform those acts which show men at their best. A world without evils would be a world in which men could show no forgiveness, no compassion, no self-sacrifice. And men without that opportunity are deprived of the opportunity to show themselves at their noblest.” (Swinburne 1979: 214-15)

- John Hick likens the world to a “vale of soul-making.” He says, “If, then, God’s aim in making the world is ‘the bringing of many sons to glory’ [Heb 2:10], that aim will naturally determine the kind of world he has created. . . . Certainly we seek pleasure for our children; but we do not desire for them unalloyed pleasure at the expense of their growth in such even greater values as moral integrity, unselfishness, compassion, courage, humour, reverence for the truth, and perhaps above all the capacity for love. We do not act on the premise that pleasure is the supreme end of life. . . . Rather, this world must be a place of soul-making.” (Hick 1977:253, 256, 258, 259) He then quotes the poet John Keats who coined the phrase “vale of soul-making” and said, “Do you not see how necessary a World of pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?” (Ibid.: 259n.1)
- Some people reject God as a result of affliction and suffering. However, “Just as many people *find* God through affliction and suffering. They find that adversity moves them toward God rather than away. Troubled times awaken them out of their haunted sleep of spiritual self-sufficiency into a serious search for the divine. . . . In the darkness we have a choice that is not really there in better times. We can choose to serve God just because he is God.” (Keller 2013: 5, 248) Elie Wiesel, himself a survivor of Nazi extermination camps, captures the different responses people may have to similar afflictions: “‘And Auschwitz? What do you make of Auschwitz?’ . . . Gregor was angry. ‘After what happened to us, how can you believe in God?’ With an understanding smile on his lips the Rebbe answered, ‘How can you *not* believe in God after what has happened?’” (Wiesel 1966: 192)

The great good that God is working even through evil is beginning now and applies at the individual level. Thus, God is with us in our suffering now (see, e.g., **Deut 31:6, 8; Ps 22:24; 23:4; 34:18; 94:14; Isa 41:10, 17; 43:2; 53:4; 63:9; John 14:16-20; Rom 8:35-39; 2 Cor 1:3-7; 4:8-10; 12:7-10; Phil 4:12-13; Heb 13:5; 1 Pet 4:12-19**). He knows what we are going through and enables us to withstand and even be refined by our suffering (see, e.g., **Ps 119:71; Matt 5:10-12; Acts 5:40-42; 1 Cor 10:13; 2 Cor 1:3-4; 4:16-17; Phil 3:10; 4:6-7; Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 2:19-21; 5:10**). Christ so identifies with his people that he senses our sufferings as his own (**Acts 9:4-5**). In fact, God takes our grief and mourning and turns it into joy (**Ps 30:11; Jer 31:13; John 16:20**). But growth and transformation through the fire of affliction are not automatic. “We must recognize, depend on, speak with, and believe in God while in the fire. God himself says in Isaiah 43 that he will be *with* us, walking beside us in the fire. Knowing him personally while in our affliction is the key to becoming stronger rather than weaker in it.” (Keller 2013: 229)

The Bible does *not* promise that every sin and evil will result in some greater good or “happy ending” *in this life*. Timothy Keller says, “Unlike believers in karma, Christians believe that suffering is often unjust and disproportionate. Life is simply not fair. People who live well often do not do well. . . . Suffering is so often random and horrific, and it comes upon people who seem to have done nothing to warrant it.” (Ibid.: 29, 94) The problem with only looking to this life for the goodness, justice, and recompense we long for is that our perspective is too limited—because our lives do not end when we die. Instead, the Bible promises us new, resurrected bodies living on a new, redeemed earth, all guaranteed by the resurrection of Christ (**1 Cor 15:20-26, 50-58**). “*That* is our future, and that mean[s] that . . . our personalities will be sustained, beautified, and perfected after death. And so our ultimate future is one of perfect, unhindered love—love with God and others.” (Ibid.: 42-43) Then and for all eternity we will see that evil was not an obstacle to our everlasting bliss, “but it will only have made it better. Evil would have accomplished the very opposite of what it intended.” (Ibid.: 117) Ironically, all of this is brought about by the greatest sin ever committed: the betrayal and crucifixion of the only perfect, holy, sinless person who ever lived—Jesus Christ; yet it was only by his submitting to this gross sin and evil that Christ was able to bear our sins and the punishment for those sins that we deserved in order to destroy the power of sin and evil, reconcile mankind to God, and transform our lives.

All of the suffering of this world cannot compare to the great, everlasting glory that God will bring about in the consummation (**Rom 8:18-21; 2 Cor 4:16-18; Rev 21:1-4**). “When we live peacefully on the New Earth, where joy will permeate the very air we breathe, we will look back at this present world and affirm not by faith but by sight that all the evil and suffering was worth it—and that Christ’s incarnation and redemption have made the universe eternally better” (Alcorn 2009: 195; see also Willard 2002: n.p.). Indeed, for the redeemed, the eternal and therefore infinite experience of the new heaven and new earth not only will provide “a new perspective on the evaluation of life in the body” but will “dwarf the entirety of one’s earthly sorrows—however great they may have seemed during the embodied lifetime” (Ferraiolo 2005: “Time Heals All Wounds”). In the consummation, God’s justice, grace, mercy, and righteousness will be plain to everyone; no one will accuse him of wrongdoing. Rather, “*ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED*” (**Rev 15:4**).

We began this section with **Rom 8:28**, and that verse contains a key word which we need to bear in

mind. That word is “together.” **Rom 8:28** is saying that “all things—even bad ones—will ultimately *together* be overruled by God in such a way that the intended evil will, in the end, only accomplish the opposite of its designs—a greater good and glory than would otherwise have come to pass. Only God now has that eternal perspective and vantage point from which he can see all things working together for our good and for his glory—but eventually we will occupy that place and will see it too.” (Keller 2013: 301-302)

V. God’s sovereignty, humanity’s responsibility, and the existence of sin and evil: conclusion

People legitimately raise serious questions in the face of evil, particularly when evil they have not directly caused happens to them or to their loved ones and friends.⁴⁷ God has good and sufficient reasons for everything he has ordained and allows—including all the sin and evil—but he has not revealed all of those reasons to us and often does not reveal why any specific evil has occurred. **Deut 29:29** and the sufferings of Job demonstrate this. Feinberg observes, “From our perspective, there may appear to be no connection of certain evils to anything of value, but that does not necessarily prove there is none. Just as the child whose father won’t let him stay up for [a] party does not have enough information to judge whether his father’s refusal means his father does not love him, so we too are not in a position of knowing enough to make a judgment about whether there is just too much evil. . . . In the case of the child who wants to stay up for parties, we cannot assume that every time his father refuses, he does so for the same reason. One time he may refuse because the child has a cold, another time some guest may not want the child there, and another time he may refuse because the next morning the family must go somewhere and he wants his son have a good night’s sleep. Similarly . . . we should not assume for two similar evils that God’s purpose in allowing them is identical. They may serve different purposes.” (Feinberg 1994: 308-309)

While people rightly are troubled by the existence and pervasiveness of sin and evil in the world, so is God. There is a certain disingenuousness to the “problem of evil.” R. Maurice Boyd observes, “It is within our power to relieve many of the troubles we complain about, yet we choose not to. It is not God who does nothing, but we ourselves. God has placed in our own hands the means to assuage many of the evils we deplore. Yet for all the fierceness of our moral indignation, we are often unwilling to devote our time, or thought, or energy, or money to relieving the afflictions of others. It is easier to blame God for the distress of the world than to become an instrument of His goodness.” (Boyd 1999: 107) On the other hand, God will justly judge the perpetrators of sin and evil who, in fact, already stand condemned and under God’s judgment (**Gen 18:25; Num 14:18; Ps 7:8-16; John 3:18; 16:11; Acts 10:42; Rom 2:12-16**). All the accounts will be balanced, and justice and righteousness will prevail. As Timothy Keller stated earlier, knowing that God’s justice will prevail “enables us to live with both hope and grace. If we accept it, we get hope and incentive to work for justice. For no matter how little success we may have now, we know that justice *will* be established—fully and perfectly. All wrongs—what we have called moral evil—will be redressed. But it also enables us to be gracious, to forgive, and to refrain from vengefulness and violence.” (Keller 2013: 116)

But God has done more than just assure us that he will justly judge humanity for the sins, wrongs, and evils they have committed: God himself came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and was subject to sin and evil; he bore our sin and paid the price for our sin so that all those who turn to him will receive life instead of eternal death at the judgment. In light of all of this, Russian Christian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky concluded, “I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for. I believe that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man. I believe that at the world’s end, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that has been shed. I believe that it will not only be possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.” (Dostoevsky 1957: 217)

⁴⁷ Feinberg notes, “There is no such thing as *the* problem of evil. At best, the expression ‘the problem of evil’ stands for a series of different problems that confront theological systems.” (Feinberg 1994: 14) The issues we deal with when bad things happen to us, our loved ones, and our friends, are what Feinberg calls the “religious problem of evil.”

APPENDIX 2—BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF THE DOCTRINE OF CONCURRENCE

The following biblical examples show how both God and secondary causes are involved in the same phenomena, including events involving sin and evil:

EVENT	ATTRIBUTED TO GOD	ATTRIBUTED TO SECONDARY CAUSES
Creation of animals	Gen 1:25	Gen 1:24
Abram's defeat of four kings	Gen 14:20	Gen 14:14-16
Sarah's conception & birth of Isaac	Gen 21:1	Gen 21:2, 5
Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery	Gen 45:7-8; 50:20	Gen 37:25-28; 45:4-5
Joseph going to Egypt	Ps 105:17	Gen 37:28
Joseph's prospering while a slave	Gen 39:3, 23	Gen 39:3, 23
The return of money to Joseph's brothers	Gen 42:27-28	Gen 42:25
Israel's exodus from Egypt	Exod 3:7-8	Exod 3:10; Deut 6:18-19
The hardening of Pharaoh's heart	Exod 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27	Exod 7:14, 22-23; 8:15; 9:34
The golden calf & Israel's worship of idols	Exod 32:1-8; Acts 7:39-41	Acts 7:42
Israel's consecration & sanctification	Lev 20:8	Lev 20:7-8
Defeat of Sihon	Deut 2:30-31, 33, 36	Deut 2:32-36
Defeat of Bashan	Deut 3:2-3	Deut 3:1, 3-6
Ability of people to make wealth	Deut 8:18	Deut 8:18
Victories of Joshua	Deut 3:21-22	Deut 3:28
Israel's conquest of the promised land	Exod 23:23, 29-30; Deut 4:37-38; 7:1-2, 22-24; 9:3a	Exod 23:24, 31; Deut 7:2, 24; 9:3b
Defeat of Jericho	Josh 6:2	Josh 6:3-5
Defeat of Ai	Josh 8:1	Josh 8:2-22
Defeat of Makkedah	Josh 10:19b	Josh 10:19a, 20-21
Defeat of other kings	Josh 11:8a	Josh 11:8b-9
Gideon's defeat of Midian	Judg 7:7, 9, 14-15	Judg 7:16-22
Samson's marriage to a Philistine woman	Judg 14:4	Judg 14:1-3
Samson's killing 1000 Philistines	Judg 15:18	Judg 15:14-16
Defeat of Benjamin by Israel	Judg 20:28	Judg 20:29-48
Eli's sons do not listen to him	1 Sam 2:25	1 Sam 2:22-25
Saul defeats the Amalekites	1 Sam 15:2	1 Sam 15:3-6
Abigail's interceding for Nabal	1 Sam 25:32	1 Sam 25:14-31
Hushai's advice is accepted	2 Sam 17:14	2 Sam 17:5-14
David defeats his enemies	2 Sam 22:18-20, 40-42, 48-49	2 Sam 22:38-39, 43
David sins by numbering the people	2 Sam 24:1	2 Sam 24:10, 17; 1 Chron 21:1-4
The death of Joab	1 Kgs 2:32-33	1 Kgs 2:31, 34
The division of Israel and Judah	1 Kgs 12:22-24	1 Kgs 12:16-20
Ahab goes to war & defeats Aram	1 Kgs 20:13, 28	1 Kgs 20:14-21, 29-30
Ahab goes to war & is killed	1 Kgs 22:19-23	1 Kgs 22:29-37
Return of Rabshakeh to his own land and his death	2 Kgs 19:6-7	2 Kgs 19:7
Recovery of Hezekiah	2 Kgs 20:5-6	2 Kgs 20:7
The death of Saul	1 Chron 10:14	1 Chron 10:4
Invasion of Judah by Philistines & Arabs	2 Chron 21:12-16a	2 Chron 21:16b-17
The defeat of Judah & death of Amaziah	2 Chron 25:14-16	2 Chron 25:17-28
Preparation of the temple for restored worship	2 Chron 29:36	2 Chron 29:5-35
The defeat of Judah & death of Josiah	2 Chron 35:20-21	2 Kgs 23:29; 2 Chron 35:22-24
God speaks through his prophets	2 Chron 15-16	2 Chron 15-16
Destruction of Judah by Babylon	2 Chron 36:15-17; Jer 21:8-10; Ezek 5:7-11, 13	2 Kgs 25:8-21; 2 Chron 36:17-19; Jer 21:8-10; Ezek 5:12
Decree that the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple	Jer 16:15; 29:10-14; 2 Chron 36:22; Ezra 1:1; 6:14	2 Chron 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1; 6:14
Ezra granted favor	Ezra 7:6, 9-10, 27-28	Ezra 7:6, 9-10, 27-28
Nehemiah granted favor	Neh 2:8	Neh 2:7-9
The plans of the Jews' enemies are frustrated	Neh 4:15	Neh 4:11-14

Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem	Neh 6:16	Neh 3:1-32; 4:6, 21-22; 6:3, 15
The trials of Job	Job 1:12, 21-22; 2:6; 42:11	Job 1:13-19; 2:7
Creation of people	Job 10:8; 31:15; Ps 139:13-16	Gen 4:1; 5:3; Job 14:1; Ps 51:5
Defeat of David's enemies	Ps 18:17-19, 43a, 47-48	Ps 18:37
Growth of plants	Ps 104:14a-b	Ps 104:14c
Building a house or any venture	Ps 127:1a	Ps 127:1b
Guarding a city	Ps 127:1c	Ps 127:1d
People's plans, speech, and actions	Prov 16:1b, 9b	Prov 16:1a, 9a
People's decisions	Prov 16:33b	Prov 16:33a
The invasion of Judah by Assyria	Isa 7:17-20; 8:5-8	Isa 7:17-20; 8:5-8
The destruction of Israel	Isa 9:8-21	Isa 9:8-21
The destruction of Babylon	Isa 13:1-5	Isa 13:1-5
The destruction of Egypt	Isa 19:1, 2a, 4a	Isa 19:2b-3, 4b
Success of Cyrus	Isa 45:1-7	Isa 45:1-7
Death of the men of Anathoth	Jer 11:22a, 23	Jer 11:22b
Baruch & Jeremiah hide from the king	Jer 36:26	Jer 36:19
Gog's invasion of Israel	Ezek 38:1-6, 16	Ezek 38:7-16
Destruction of Edom	Obad 8-9	Obad 6-7
Casting Jonah into the sea	Jonah 2:3	Jonah 1:15
Drought in the land	Hag 1:9, 11	Hag 1:5-6, 10
Rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem	Hag 1:14	Hag 1:14
The writing & testimony of the Bible	Matt 19:4-5; John 5:37-38; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21	Gen 2:24; Luke 24:27; John 5:46-47; Acts 26:22
People coming to Christ for salvation	John 6:37, 44, 65; Acts 13:38	John 6:37, 44, 65; Acts 13:38
The betrayal of Jesus	Luke 22:22a	Luke 22:21, 22b; John 13:21-27
The crucifixion of Jesus	Isa 53:10; Acts 2:23; 4:28	Mark 14:43-15:39; Acts 2:23; 4:27
Salvation of believers	John 1:12-13; Eph 2:8-9	John 3:36; Rom 10:12-17
The righteous acts of believers	John 3:21; Eph 2:10; Phil 2:13	John 3:21; Eph 2:10; Phil 2:12
Salvation of people in Corinth	Acts 18:10b	Acts 18:9-10a
Saving Paul & sailors from a shipwreck	Acts 27:22-25, 34	Acts 27:30-32, 38-44
Preaching the gospel	1 Cor 2:4	1 Cor 2:4
The persecution of Christians	1 Cor 4:7-11; Rev 6:9-11	1 Cor 4:7-11; Rev 6:9-11
Paul's "thorn in the flesh"	2 Cor 12:7-9	2 Cor 12:7
The preservation of the saints	1 Thess 5:23-24	1 Thess 5:12-22
People who follow the "man of lawlessness"	2 Thess 2:11	2 Thess 2:9-10, 12
Where people go & everything they do	Jas 4:13-15	Jas 4:13-15
The actions of the "harlot," "ten kings," and "beast" of Revelation	Rev 17:17	Rev 17:1-16

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