

August 3, 2003 by Steve Brandon



Does Your God Do This? (Part 1)

Habakkuk 1

1. "God, where are You?" (1:1-4)
2. "I am Raising Up the Wicked." (1:5-11)
3. "God, how can You?" (1:12-17)

Please open your Bibles to the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk is the forth book from the end of the Old Testament. The last book is Malachi. Before that comes Zechariah. Before that, Haggai. Then, Zephaniah. Then, Habakkuk. We will be spending the next several weeks looking at this book. The reasons are simple: For the past three weeks, we have devoted our attention to this issue of the Sovereignty of God and the Responsibility of Man. The book of Habakkuk is a great book that brings these things to the forefront of our attention. Chapter three is all about the sovereignty of God. It describes how great, how powerful, and how wrathful God is. Chapter two is all about the responsibility of man. It describes how God will punish the wicked. Chapter one is all about the marvel of how they fit together. It describes how God uses wicked men, who are responsible for their actions, to accomplish His own sovereign purpose.

My aim in these messages will be for us to continue to gain a Biblical perspective of how the Sovereignty of God and the Responsibility of Man meet together. There are many who think upon these things and jump into philosophy for their answers. I want us to think on these things and jump into the Bible for our answers. I have specifically chosen Habakkuk as a book for us to study over these next few weeks, because it deals with many of these hard questions that we have been raising. In my research into this book, I found one writer who called Habakkuk a "freethinking prophet who is not afraid to wrestle with issues that test his faith" (Bruce Wilkinson & Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru The Bible*, p. 275).

The book of Habakkuk is a struggle. It is a struggle between Habakkuk and God. The book records a dialogue or conversation between God and a prophet named Habakkuk. The conversation begins with Habakkuk speaking, and then God speaks, then Habakkuk speaks again, followed once more by God speaking, and finally the dialog ends with Habakkuk speaking one last time. We know practically nothing about this prophet Habakkuk. He is mentioned only twice in the Bible (Hab 1:1; 3:1) where he is simply identified as a prophet. However, because of the historical clues given to us within the book of Habakkuk, we know about when he lived. He lived during the decline of the nation of Judah, somewhere around the 7th century B. C.

When Habakkuk lived, things were already getting pretty bad in the land. Chaos and disorder reigned (1:3). The legal processes were abandoned (1:4). Justice was non-existent (1:4). There were wicked people in the land who were taking advantage of the righteous, and the ruling authorities were silent regarding these matters. In some ways, it was "every man for himself" (1:2). It was "survival of the fittest." These things are what prompted this dialogue between Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk was a righteous man. As he saw the wrong being done, his spirit welled up within him. He desired to see justice prevail in the land. In some ways, he was powerless to accomplish this task. He was a preacher, not a politician. But Habakkuk knew that God could accomplish the task. Furthermore, he knew that God was a righteous God who would be sympathetic to his prayers for justice to prevail in the land. So, Habakkuk prayed fervently for justice to be established. He prayed, and he prayed, and he prayed, and he prayed, and he prayed. But God was silent. Our first point this morning is the crux of Habakkuk's question to God,

1. "God, where are You?" (1:1-4)

Let's begin with verse 2,

"How long, O LORD, will I call for help, And You will not hear?" (Hab 1:2a)

Habakkuk was a man in anguish, longing and praying for God to hear his continual cries for help. He longed and prayed for God to come and save him and his nation from the distress that they were in. This wasn't a prayer that he started praying yesterday. This wasn't a prayer that he started praying last week. I believe that this was a prayer that Habakkuk had been praying for months or even years as things in Judah grew worse and worse. He argues his case in verse two,

"I cry out to You, 'Violence!' Yet You do not save." (Hab 1:2b)

I looked at ten different translations to see how they translated this word, "Violence." The following translations used the same word, "violence": NASB, NIV, ASV, NKJV, KJV, MKJV, ESV, AMP, RSV, TEV. It describes a wrong-doing, injustice. It describes an anarchy. The Hebrew word for this is, ("hamas"). Have you heard that before? It is the name that that a certain organization in Palestinian chose

for itself. This organization has set itself against Israel are responsible for many of the suicide bombings that have taken place in recent months in Israel. Could you imagine trying to negotiate peace with such a group whose name is "Violence"? This should help give you a bit of

the difficulties that the Israeli government faces as it seeks to establish peace with them. This also helps you to understand what was taking place in the days of Habakkuk. You might even understand this word to describe "terrorism," which was also happening in the land of Judah in Habakkuk's time.

In verse three, Habakkuk asks,

"Why do You make me see iniquity, And cause [me] to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises. " (Hab 1:3)

Look at the words to describe the situation of his day: iniquity; wickedness; destruction; violence; strife; contention. Those words are found in verse three. Wickedness abounded in Habakkuk's day. If you don't think that this is applicable to us, I would simply like for you to take out today's newspaper. On almost every page, you will see, iniquity, wickedness, destruction, violence, strife, and contention. You can watch the evening news tonight (or listen to the news on the radio) and you experience much the same thing. It doesn't matter what day. All days are alike. They are all filled in our country with immense violence and injustice. We see murders; we see child abductions; we see rapes; we see family abuse; we see drunk drivers; we see embezzling executives; we see corrupt politicians. There are many things that take place that we don't see on the news: the abortions; the undetected family abuse; the devastations that come from drug abuse. These aren't unfamiliar to us. We see it all of the time in our society! It was worse in Habakkuk's day. Let me ask you, "How do you respond to the iniquity, wickedness, destruction, violence, strife, and contention that exists in our society?" Is there a holy longing in your heart for God to set the matter straight? Do you storm the gates of heaven with your passionate prayers for purity to reign, rather than wickedness? Whenever you watch the news, read it in the paper, listen to it on the radio, the wickedness that abounds all around us ought to drive you to your knees when you hear of it and seek the Lord's favor upon us. We ought not to view sin with indifference. We ought to view it and cry to God with a holy passion that desires for Him to rule and reign, rather than the wickedness that comes in the land. As bad as it is in our day, it was far worse in Habakkuk's day.

The theme continues on in verse four,

"Therefore, the law is ignored And justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore, justice comes out perverted." (Hab 1:4)

Habakkuk lived in a day when the government was corrupt and justice was non-existent. A fair trial was impossible. Some think that Habakkuk lived during the reign of Manasseh, one of the most wicked kings that ever ruled in Judah. For 55 long years, he systematically removed all remembrances of the God of Israel. During this time, the Bible was driven out of society and was not found and read again until his grandson's reign where a copy was found in the temple. Manasseh, himself, sacrificed some of his own children upon the altar of Molech (2 Chron. 33:6), burning them to death. "He practiced witchcraft [and] used divination" (2 Chron. 33:6). Whether Habakkuk lived in Manasseh's day or later, Manasseh's wicked influence was certainly still felt by Manasseh.

Evil ruled in the land. If you want a modern day parallel, you simply need to look to the persecuted church. At this church, we are reminded of this every month, as we pray for the persecuted church. We hear about governments who issue laws against the practice of Christianity. We hear of Christians who are jailed and tortured without a cause. We hear of Christians whose property is seized, and homes are bulldozed. This type of activity was happening in Habakkuk's day. He was in the midst of it. He was forced to see it. Verse three says, "Why do You make me see iniquity?" (Hab 1:3). Habakkuk felt that God had His sovereign hand upon his head, forcing him to look at the wickedness of the land. It is one thing to hear about the violence that is done to others. It is one thing if you happen to watch it on television, but it is entirely another thing when you actually see it happen to one you love. Somehow, in some way, it was hitting home to him. He was seeing it, and he was beholding it. His heart was stirred within him to cry out to God, for Him to arise and to do something about it. But God was nowhere to be found. Habakkuk was crying out, "God, where are you?" But, God wasn't responding. This was his continual prayer, but God appeared distant and uncaring.

Have you ever found God to be unresponsive to your prayers? The Psalmists often did. As we have read through the Psalms this summer, I have been amazed at the number of times the Psalmist will say, "How Long, O LORD?" It counted at least 10 times in the English Bible where this phrase is used (Ps. 6:3; 13:1; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 82:2; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3). I know that I have often found Him to be this way. There are issues that I have prayed again, again, and again to the Lord, but He has appeared as silent. It is tempting for us to think in these circumstances that God isn't doing anything, that God doesn't care, that God is too weak to do anything, that God is far from us.

We need to realize that God answers prayer in one of four ways:

- 1. Yes.** You pray about something, and God answers it just like you requested.
- 2. No.** You pray about something, and God doesn't answer it. Often, God does the exact opposite of what you pray. When this takes place, the answer to your prayers is...
- 3. What?** The Bible is full of scripture that says that God doesn't hear the prayer of the wicked. Prov. 15:29 says, "The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous." Psalm 66:18 says, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the LORD will not hear." (If you are interested in this further, you might examine Ps. 18:41; Prov. 1:28; Prov. 15:8; Is. 1:15; 1 Peter 3:7, which all teach the same thing).
- 4. Wait.** You pray about something, and nothing happens. You continue to pray about it, and nothing happens. God's answer is "wait." When the answer is "wait," it can often be a discouraging time.. Doubt creeps into your mind. Confusion stirs your soul. Frustration feeds your doubts and confusion. Often, you might come to God with an open and shut case like Habakkuk did. He knew that God was a just God. God saw the injustice taking place all around Him. He was praying for God to act according to His character, and deal with the injustice that Habakkuk saw.

Fortunately for us and for Habakkuk, God answers Habakkuk's prayer in this dialogue. This comes in verses 5-11. His answer to Habakkuk's prayer might be a bit surprising to you. Verse 5 tells us that it might be difficult for us to believe what God is doing,

"Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days--You would not believe if you were told." (Hab. 1:5)

Don't look at verse 6 yet. God has just told Habakkuk that "I am doing something in your days--you would not believe if you were told." He is about to tell Habakkuk what He is going to do. He has admitted that it is difficult to believe that God would do this. This answer isn't going to be what Habakkuk expected. One commentator said that "God dropped a bombshell" in verse 6 (J. Ronald Blue, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 1509). Unless you are familiar with the book of Habakkuk, the answer will probably be surprising to you as well. I have been confronted as well with my own view of God. Verse 6 is my purpose in coming to Habakkuk. For the past two weeks, we have been examining Romans 9. My burden in these messages was to press upon your hearts whether the God of Romans 9 is your God. When you think of God, do you think of a God, who is totally sovereign in the salvation of the souls of men? If you look at your bulletin, I have entitled my sermon this morning, "Does Your God Do This?" My burden with these messages on Habakkuk is to communicate to you what God does. As we go through, I want to ask you if your God does this? When you think of God, do you think of a God who acts like He did with Habakkuk. The fifth question to the larger catechism of the Westminster Confession of faith asks, "What do the scriptures principally teach?" The answer is, "The scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man." It comes home to us right now, as we prepare to read verse 6 and see what God does. Let me ask you if you will resolve in your heart right now to believe what God says to Habakkuk, and to believe that God acts this way. Perhaps you would like to take a moment and pray to God right now to be receptive to His word of revelation to us, regardless of what you might think.

Verse 6 says,

"For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, That fierce and impetuous people Who march throughout the earth To seize dwelling places which are not theirs." (Hab. 1:6)

God told Habakkuk that he was raising up the Chaldeans. These people are also known as the Babylonians, which is how the NIV translates the term in this verse. These Chaldeans would rise and conquer Israel in a few short years (2:3). They are described in verse 6 as "that fierce and impetuous people." They are ruthless, no-nonsense warriors, who come to conquer and reign and rule--no questions asked. They are a wicked nation! Verse 6 says the Chaldeans were going to come and stop the injustices done in Judah by conquering them! It is at this point that we can understand the dialogue that takes place between Habakkuk and God which is my second point this morning:

2. "I am Raising Up the Wicked." (1:5-11)

Habakkuk cried out "God, where are You?" God tells Habakkuk, "I am raising up the wicked." (1:5-11) Habakkuk was praying. Since no answer was coming, he thought that God wasn't paying attention. He trusted that God was powerful enough to make things right, but He thought that God was remaining passive. In reality, God had been working. God was working to prosper the Babylonian empire. Is this not what verse 6 says? "I am raising up the Chaldeans"? God was raising up a wicked nation to accomplish His purpose. God was raising them up to bring about the "day of distress" (3:16), when the Chaldeans would invade and conquer Judah.

God knew full well of their wicked character. Look at how God describes these people. In verse 6, God described them as fierce and impetuous.

In verse 7, God speaks of their reputation, "They are dreaded and feared." Nations feared the Chaldeans. They were known as those who would come and conquer with no regard to those whom they conquered.

In verse 7, God continues to describe their entire lack of ethical standards, "Their justice and authority originate with themselves." They wholeheartedly rejected God. When it came to deciding right and wrong, it all depended upon what was best for themselves. They had a relative morality. There was no higher authority in their minds than themselves. They had no Biblical standard outside of themselves to which they might turn.

Verse 8 gives us a picture of their military power: "Their horses are swifter than leopards And keener than wolves in the evening. Their horsemen come galloping, Their horsemen come from afar; They fly like an eagle swooping down to devour." Today, America boasts that our F-16's are the fastest and most effective fighter jets in the world. Our stealth bomber can come into enemy territory entirely undetected. Our military is known for the sheer numbers of our missiles, the range of our Tomahawk cruise missiles, and the unsurpassed bombing power of B-52 bombers. In the Ancient Near East, the only difference was the technology. Psalm 20:7, "Some boast in chariots, and some in horses." The Chaldeans had the fastest horses in the world (swifter than leopards). Their horses could come and attack undetected (keener than wolves in the evening). You might say that they had "stealth horses." The sheer numbers of horsemen (that come galloping, even from afar) was frightening, as was their power to destroy (as an eagle upon his prey). They had the most powerful military in the world.

Verse 9 gives a picture of their ruthless character: "All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces moves forward. They collect captives like sand." They had the most powerful military in the world. When they attack, they attack to dominate. They come with overwhelming numbers. They conquer in mass like sand on the seashore.

Verse 10 speaks of their arrogance: "They mock at kings, and rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress, And heap up rubble to capture it." They are so powerful, that no nation can withstand them. There is not a fortress that they cannot conquer. Thus, they make fun of kings, by mocking them and taunting them laughing at them. It is the epitome of poor sportsmanship today to sing, "Nah, Nah, Nah, Nah, ... Nah, Nah, Nah, Nah, ... Hey, Hey, Hey, ... Goodbye" to a team that you are beating in a competition you are going to inevitably win. If the Chaldeans lived in our day, they would love to sing that song.

Verse 11 speaks of how insignificant the conquered nations are: "Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their God." They go through conquered nations as if they are nothing. They sweep through like the wind. They ravage your towns and your villages. They kill whom they want to kill. They take what they want to take. They continue on to the next city or next country as if nothing happened. They don't trust in the LORD. Rather, they trust in their own strength which is mighty, and is their god (1:11).

When you step back from these verses, you will realize how surprising this is. God will use this clearly wicked nation to accomplish His purpose, which is to exile His people to Babylon. God knew of the wicked character of the Chaldeans. That is what verses 6-11 are all about. God also knew of the plight of His people, Judah. He knew of all of the evil that was taking place. And God chose to use the Chaldeans in punishing His own people. This is how God was going to answer Habakkuk's prayer. I told you earlier that God answers prayer in 4 ways: (1) Yes. (2) No. (3) What? (4) Wait. I would like to add a fifth: (5) Not what you think. God answered Habakkuk's prayer in this fifth category. This wasn't at all what Habakkuk expected. Habakkuk was certainly wanting, expecting, and hoping for revival! Habakkuk certainly wanted the Lord to grant repentance to Judah, so that holiness would replace iniquity, righteousness would replace wickedness, helpfulness would replace destruction, peace would replace violence, and good will would replace strife. But, God had another plan, which Habakkuk wouldn't believe, unless he were told (verse 5). It was a "Not what you think" answer to prayer.

Perhaps some of the prayers that you have prayed for again and again and again, have actually been answered by a "not what you think" answer. Perhaps you actually missed God's answer to your prayer, because He answered differently than you expected. Perhaps you are continuing in your prayers for something that God has already answered. It is because we know that God is sovereign in all things that He answers prayer. That's why Habakkuk prayed to God in the first place (i.e. because he trusted in God's Sovereignty). Perhaps God has brought that difficult circumstance in your life for His purposes as an answer to your prayer. Perhaps it's because you don't like it that you keep praying for something else. Perhaps you need to resign yourself that God has a greater purpose with your trials than you know (or want to admit). Let me ask you, "Would you rather have God answer your prayers in the way that you want? Or in the way that God wants?"

Let's move on to the third stage of this dialogue between Habakkuk and God. God has just responded to Habakkuk. Now, Habakkuk responds to God's answer with, ...

3. "God, how can You?" (1:12-2:1)

Habakkuk has been told what God will do. But, he can't believe it. The prophecy of verse 5 has been fulfilled in Habakkuk ("You would not believe if you were told"). He can't believe that God would use sinful people to accomplish His own purpose.

Down through the years, this has been a constant topic of discussion for theologians and philosophers seeking to understand. It has been called, "The Problem of Evil." How can an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-sovereign God, who is perfectly good at all times, allow evil to exist in the world? Often, one's belief in the existence of God hinges on this very question. If God wants to stop evil and suffering, but cannot, then, He is no longer all-sovereign. If God has all power to stop evil and suffering, but doesn't, then, He isn't perfectly good. Thus, some people's reasoning causes them to conclude that God, at least how we comprehend Him to be, doesn't exist.

I remember once having a conversation with a former high school classmate on this subject. I had just graduated from seminary. He had just graduated from his undergraduate studies with a major in philosophy. His study of philosophy had caused him to drift from his Christian upbringings. He presented to me this exact same argument. He asked me, "Steve, you believe that God is all-powerful, right?" I said, "Yes." He said, "As an all-powerful God, He can do whatever He wants to do, right?" I said, "Yes." Then, he continued, "And God is also perfectly good, right?" I said, "Yes." He finished, "Well, then, how do you explain the evil that is in the world? It is all around us." I gave him what I thought was a satisfactory reply. But, he didn't accept it. I wish that I would have taken him right here to Habakkuk, because it is the very issue that Habakkuk is dealing with. How can an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-sovereign God, who is perfectly good at all times, allow evil to exist in the world? In the case of Habakkuk, we might even take it one step further: How can such a God actually use evil to accomplish His purposes, which doesn't seem to be too righteous of a thing to do? God was raising up the Chaldeans to destroy His people.

Look at how Habakkuk argues against God (for that is what he does in verses 12-17). Verse 12 says,

"Are you not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One?" (Hab. 1:12)

He starts by reminding God that He has been around this universe forever. He reminds God that God is a holy God, which means that He is absolutely pure and clean and set-apart from us. Then, Habakkuk says, "We will not die." He affirms the covenant that God had made with Judah. Messiah must come from the line of David who was from the line of Judah. Thus, the line of Judah will never be wiped away. Then, Habakkuk affirms what God told him earlier in verse 6,

"You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge; And You, O Rock, have established them to correct." (Hab 1:12)

At this point, if God would have given Habakkuk any feedback, He surely could have said something like, "Habakkuk, you have learned very well. That is exactly who I am, and what I am going to do." After stating the facts, Habakkuk continued by presenting His difficulty before God in verse 13.

"Your eyes are too pure to approve [i.e. look on] evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor." (Hab 1:13)

Now, I have heard this verse used many times before to describe the absolute purity and holiness of God. I have heard many preachers describe God's holiness by this verse, "God is so pure, that He can't even look at evil." Then, they go on to describe the state of a sinner

before God. When I was in seminary, I took my first theology class and learned this verse. It was a proof of God's holiness, "God is so pure, that He can't even look at evil." I looked in several of my systematic theology text books. They also put forth this same idea: "God is so pure, that He can't even look at evil." Now, until a few weeks ago, when I really started meditating on the book of Habakkuk, I would have thought all of this to be true. But, Habakkuk is actually saying the exact opposite! Habakkuk's problem was that **God was looking at evil**, and he was looking at it with favor. In fact, God was "raising up the Chaldeans" (a wicked nation) to destroy those in Judah! Look at how verse 13 ends,

"Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?" (Hab 1:13)

Verses 14-17 go on to describe how **wicked** the Chaldeans were:

"Why have You made men like the fish of the sea, Like creeping things without a ruler over them? The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook, Drag them away with their net, And gather them together in their fishing net. Therefore, they rejoice and are glad" (Hab 1:14-15)

Habakkuk was informing God that, "We are like fish and like deer to be hunted, for this is what the Chaldeans do. They fish and hunt. They fish and hunt for people." There is historical evidence that in celebrating victories, the Chaldeans used to hook men by their jaws and march them back home, much like fishermen hook their fish on a line for all to see their catch (see J. G. Harris, "The Laments of Habakkuk's Prophecy" in The Evangelical Quarterly, Jan-Mar 1973, pp. 21-29). They were a cruel people, who hunted and fished for others. Habakkuk continues in describing how **arrogant** the Chaldeans were:

"Therefore, they offer a sacrifice to their net. And burn incense to their fishing net; Because through these things their catch is large, And their food is plentiful. Will they therefore empty their net And continually slay nations without sparing?" (Hab 1:16-17)

They were so powerful, that they even acknowledged that their instruments of war were their gods. They could catch anyone they wanted. They could catch as much as they wanted. Habakkuk complained that they would never stop doing these things.

Habakkuk wasn't telling God anything that God didn't know. In verses 10-11, God already described how **arrogant** they were: "They mock and kings, And rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress" (1:10). "They whose strength is their god" (1:11). In verses 6 and 9, God already described how **wicked** they were. "That fierce and impetuous people who ... seize dwelling places which are not theirs" (1:6). "All of them come for violence" (1:9).

It all gets back to verse 13, where Habakkuk is stating his case before God, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor. Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?" There are clear verbal links between the first half of verse 13 and the second half of verse 13. The very thing that Habakkuk is claiming that God cannot do (i.e. look on wickedness with favor), God is doing! He is being favorable to the Chaldeans in raising them up and prospering them (1:6).

This is the dilemma of Habakkuk. This is the dilemma that I want you to deal with. **I have entitled my sermon, "Does Your God Do This?"** Here is the question that I want you to ask from chapter 1: **"Does your God use evil to accomplish His purpose?"** Now, I certainly believe that God is good and sinless and righteous in all of His ways. In 1 John 1:5, we read, "God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." Yet, the Bible is full of examples of God using evil to accomplish His purpose. God used the evil scheming of Joseph's brothers to save Israel and His descendants from the famine that God, Himself, brought upon the land (Gen. 41:32; 50:20). God hardened Pharaoh's heart for His own purpose of demonstrating His power (Rom. 9:17). God used Cyrus, the pagan king of Assyria, to accomplish His own purpose (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1) of bringing His people back from exile. God "put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of ... prophets" to accomplish the downfall of Ahab (2 Chron. 18:21). Perhaps most important, God used the wicked actions of sinful men to crucify Jesus, so that we might obtain our pardon, through faith in Him. Isaiah 53:10 puts the cause of the crucifixion squarely in the LORD's hands, "But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief, if He would render Himself as a guilt offering."

Church history is filled with testimonies of wicked events being the instrument of much good. It was the stoning of Stephen that scattered the church outside of Jerusalem (Acts 7) and sent the gospel throughout the world. It was through the martyrdom of many of the early Christians that the early church prospered. Philip Schaff, the great church historian said,

"In spite of ... extraordinary difficulties Christianity made a progress which furnished striking evidence of its divine origin and adaptation to the deeper wants of man. ... The very hindrances became, in the hands of Providence, means of promotion. Persecution led to martyrdom, and martyrdom had not terrors alone, but also attractions, and stimulated the noblest and most unselfish form of ambition. Every genuine martyr was a living proof of the truth and holiness of the Christian religion. Tertullian could exclaim to the heathen: 'All your ingenious cruelties can accomplish nothing; they are only a lure to this sect. Our number increases the more you destroy us. The blood of the Christians is their seed'" (History of the Christian Church, Vol. II, pp. 14-15).

I don't believe that Christian martyrdoms are accidental. In Revelation 6 we are told of the martyrs who cried out to the Lord, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10). "They were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until [the number of] their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also" (Rev. 6:11). God has His martyrs out there and will use them to accomplish His purpose. One of those

martyrs was Jim Elliot, an unknown missionary in an obscure place, until he was speared to death on a beach in Ecuador. His life and death became the catalyst for an untold number of Christians to go to the mission field to impact the world for Christ. I don't believe that it is any accident that the churches with the highest growth rates in the world are those in persecuted countries. Steve Belonger (who recently visited Vietnam) told me that in one group of house churches in Vietnam, they had 600 converts each month! They are desperately trying to keep pace with what God is doing. In China today, thousands are converted every day! In these countries, God is using the evil to build His church.

September 11th was a wicked plot of terrorism against the United States of America. There were many heroes on that day. But one stands out above them all. Who is it? Todd Beamer. I do not believe that it was an accident that he had a strong, Christian testimony which has been told to countless millions through Lisa Beamer's book. I do not believe that God was "fortunate" to have a Christian man on the flight across Pennsylvania to be the hero of our nation on September 11th. I believe that God, in His sovereignty, had planned it all along. Amos 3:6 says, "If a calamity occurs in a city, has not the LORD done it?" Who flew the planes into the World Trade Centers? "has not the LORD done it?"

God uses evil to accomplish His purpose. Is this your God? **When you think of God, do you think of Him as using evil to accomplish His purpose?** This is more than God sitting back and attempting to steer things straight when they go wrong. Rather, it is God providentially, actively using evil for His means. God was active in the scheming of Joseph's brothers. God was active in hardening Pharaoh's heart. God was active in the death of Christ. I believe that God is active in the death of His martyrs. Perhaps you find this difficult to believe. God warned us in verse 5 that it may be hard for us to believe.

Please don't get me wrong. I don't believe that God is sinning in these things. The Scriptural testimony to God's moral purity abounds: "There is no injustice with God!" (Rom. 9:14). "All His works are true and His ways just" (Dan. 4:37). He is the Holy, Holy, Holy God (Isaiah 6:1-3). He "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16). "The LORD is righteous in all His ways" (Ps. 145:17). **But, I do believe that God is active in using evil without sinning.** I don't know how He does it. This is an issue that theologians grapple with just like the issue of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. How God does it remains a mystery. But the evidence of Scripture is that He does. When you think of God, do you see Him as actively using evil to accomplish His purpose?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on August 3, 2003 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

If you are interested in further investigating this issue, here are a few more verses for you to examine and study for yourself. The first is from Lamentations 3:38, which says, "Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?" Secondly, listen to Isaiah 45:6, 7, "... I am the LORD, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing peace and creating [i.e. Gen 1:1 creating] calamity; I am the LORD who does all these." May the LORD guide you in your study.