

The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: How Long, O Lord? The Prophet's Complaint

Habakkuk 1:1-17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson handles the honest complaint of a believing prophet, and what is doctrinally at stake is the nature of faithful lament and the sovereignty of God over history. Habakkuk asks hard questions, why God seems silent, why injustice goes unaddressed, and how a holy God can use a wicked nation as His instrument. The key teaching point is that these questions are raised from within faith, not against it. Habakkuk never lets go of God's holiness or justice even while he wrestles. Help your students distinguish faithful wrestling, which brings its questions to God and waits for Him, from faithless complaining, which uses its questions as an exit. Also help them grasp God's sovereignty: He governs even the rise of pagan empires for His purposes, without Himself being the author of their evil.

The lesson is also aiming directly at spiritual formation, and this is one of the most pastorally useful passages in the prophets for that purpose. Many believers carry unspoken 'how long?' prayers and have been taught, wrongly, that bringing them to God is faithlessness. This lesson gives them permission and a pattern: to be honest with God, to keep a firm grip on His character while their circumstances confuse them, and to wait for Him. The aim is to form people who neither suppress their real grief nor let it curdle into resentment, but who take it to the Lord and trust Him in the dark.

Keep the tone tender and personal. Many in the room are quietly hurting. Let Habakkuk be their permission to be honest, and let the God who welcomed his questions be their comfort. Point ahead to the resolution coming in chapters 2 and 3, where wrestling turns to worship.

Question 1

Student Question:

Habakkuk begins not with praise but with a raw complaint: "O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear!" (Habakkuk 1:2). What does it tell us about God that He preserved this honest cry in Scripture, and what does it teach us about the kind of relationship He invites us into?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by letting the rawness of verse 2 stand: 'O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear!' This is not polite, formal prayer. It is the cry of a man at the end of his patience, and God put it in the Bible. That fact alone preaches.

Help students see what kind of God this reveals. He is not fragile, not offended by honesty, not requiring His children to pretend. He invites a relationship real enough to hold hard questions. The Psalms are full of such cries; lament is a major biblical genre, not a lapse of faith.

Distinguish the lament from grumbling. The Israelites in the wilderness grumbled about God to each other; Habakkuk brings his complaint to God. The difference is direction. Faithful lament is addressed to the One we still trust; faithless grumbling talks about Him behind His back.

Apply it pastorally. Many of your students have been taught to bury their questions. Give them permission to pray honestly, and assure them that a relationship which can hold honesty is deeper than one that requires performance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Lament as a biblical form of faith, not a failure of it.
- God's willingness to hold our honest questions and grief.
- The difference between lament addressed to God and grumbling about God.
- A relationship deep enough for honesty rather than performance.
- The Psalms as our God-given school of honest prayer.

Discussion Prompts

- What were you taught about whether it is acceptable to question God?
- What is the difference between crying out to God and complaining about Him?
- What honest prayer have you been afraid to pray?

Question 2

Student Question:

Habakkuk was deeply troubled by the injustice he saw around him and could not stay silent about it. How spiritually sensitive are you to the wrong in the world and in yourself, and is there a danger of growing numb to what should still grieve us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question grows out of Habakkuk's acute sensitivity to wrong. He could not look at the violence and injustice around him and feel nothing. His complaint is evidence of a tender conscience and a heart aligned with God's concerns.

Raise the danger of numbness. We are exposed to so much wrong, in the news, in entertainment, in our own repeated sins, that we can grow calloused. What once grieved us becomes background noise. A heart that no longer aches over evil has drifted from God's heart.

At the same time, guard against a sensitivity that becomes mere anxiety or outrage with no prayer behind it. Habakkuk's sensitivity drove him to God. The goal is not to feel more upset but to let our grief over evil become intercession.

Invite honest self-assessment. Where have your students grown numb, to a habitual sin, to a chronic injustice, to suffering they have stopped noticing? Encourage them to ask God to restore a tender heart that grieves what He grieves and prays accordingly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A tender conscience as a mark of alignment with God's heart.
- The danger of numbness and calloused familiarity with evil.
- Turning grief over evil into intercession rather than mere outrage.
- Asking God to restore sensitivity where we have grown numb.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you grown numb to something that should still grieve you?
- How can grief over evil become prayer rather than just anxiety?
- What would it look like to ask God for a tender heart again?

Question 3

Student Question:

God's answer is startling: He is raising up the Chaldeans (Babylonians) to discipline Judah (Habakkuk 1:5-6). What does it reveal about God's sovereignty that He can use even a pagan, violent nation to accomplish His purposes, and how does this stretch our understanding of how God works in history?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God's answer in verses 5-11 is genuinely shocking: 'I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation.' God Himself is bringing Babylon to discipline Judah. This stretches our categories, because God uses a pagan, violent empire as an instrument of His purpose.

Teach the doctrine of God's sovereignty carefully here. Scripture consistently affirms that God governs the nations, even using ones that do not know Him (Isaiah 10:5-15, where Assyria is the rod of God's anger; Isaiah 45:1, where Cyrus is God's anointed). God's rule is not limited to those who acknowledge Him.

Guard the crucial distinction: God's sovereign use of Babylon does not make Him the author of Babylon's sin. Babylon acts out of its own pride and cruelty and will itself be held accountable (which becomes the theme of chapter 2). God overrules evil for His purposes without becoming evil. This is the same principle as Joseph's words to his brothers: 'ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good' (Genesis 50:20).

Apply it to how God works in our lives. He often works through means and circumstances we would never have chosen, even painful ones, to accomplish good we cannot yet see. Sovereignty means no circumstance is outside His governance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereignty over all nations, even those that do not know Him (Isaiah 10:5-15; 45:1).
- The distinction between God using evil and God authoring evil (Genesis 50:20).
- Human responsibility preserved: Babylon will answer for its own pride.
- God working through means and circumstances we would not choose.
- Comfort: no event lies outside God's governance.

Discussion Prompts

- How does it stretch you to think God can use even ungodly people and events for His purposes?
- How do we hold together God's sovereignty and human responsibility for evil?
- Where might God be working through a circumstance you would never have chosen?

Question 4

Student Question:

Habakkuk brought his confusion directly to God rather than abandoning his faith or hiding his doubt. When you do not understand what God is doing, what is your default response, and how can you learn to take your questions to God rather than away from Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns on Habakkuk's response to confusion: he goes back to God. Verse 12 begins a second prayer. When the answer disturbed him, he did not storm off; he took his new questions to the Lord.

Help students name their own default response to confusion about God's ways. Some withdraw and go quiet on God. Some distract themselves. Some let resentment build. Some pretend they are fine. Habakkuk models a better way: turning toward God with the very thing that troubles them.

Make the practical point that where we take our confusion determines what it becomes. Taken to God, confusion can deepen faith; taken away from God, it tends to erode it. The same doubt can be a doorway or a dead end depending on its direction.

Encourage a concrete habit. When students next hit something they cannot understand about God or His providence, the practice is to pray it, perhaps even to write it as a prayer, rather than to brood on it alone. Faith is not the absence of questions but the decision about where to bring them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Taking our questions to God rather than away from Him.
- How the direction of our doubt shapes whether it deepens or erodes faith.
- Common evasions: withdrawal, distraction, resentment, pretending.
- Building the habit of praying our confusion.

Discussion Prompts

- What is your default response when God's ways confuse you?
- How might your doubts grow your faith if you took them to God?
- What is one confusing thing you could turn into a prayer this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Habakkuk protests, "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:13). How does the prophet hold onto the holiness of God even while he wrestles with God's ways, and why is keeping a firm grip on God's character essential when His actions confuse us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In verse 13 Habakkuk anchors himself to a fixed point even as he wrestles: 'Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity.' He does not resolve his confusion by lowering his view of God. He holds God's holiness firmly and lets the tension stand.

Teach why this is the key to faithful wrestling. When God's actions confuse us, we will be tempted to 'solve' the problem by editing God, deciding He must not really be holy, or just, or in control. Habakkuk refuses that shortcut. He keeps a firm grip on God's character and brings his confusion to that fixed God.

Show how holding God's character steady actually intensifies the question (how can a pure God use Babylon?) but also makes the question safe to ask. Because God is holy and just, Habakkuk can trust that there is an answer worthy of God, even if he cannot yet see it.

Apply it to your students' trials. The temptation in suffering is to conclude that God is not good or not in control. The path of faith is to hold what we know of God's character firmly while we wait for understanding. We interpret our circumstances by God's revealed character, not God's character by our circumstances.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holding firmly to God's revealed character while wrestling with His ways.
- Refusing to 'solve' confusion by lowering our view of God.

- Interpreting circumstances by God's character, not the reverse.
- God's holiness as the very thing that makes the question both sharp and safe.

Discussion Prompts

- When God confuses you, are you tempted to shrink your view of Him?
- What truths about God's character do you most need to hold onto right now?
- How does trusting God's holiness make it safe to bring Him hard questions?

Question 6

Student Question:

The Babylonians are described as trusting in their own might, sacrificing to their net, treating their own strength as their god (Habakkuk 1:11, 1:16). Where are you tempted to 'sacrifice to your own net,' to credit your achievements to your own ability rather than to God, and what would genuine humility look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 11 and 16 expose Babylon's root sin: 'imputing this his power unto his god,' and sacrificing to his net, because 'by them their portion is fat.' Babylon worshiped its own strength. Its army and its success had become its god.

This self-examining question turns that mirror on us. We may not literally bow to a fishing net, but we 'sacrifice to our net' whenever we credit our achievements to our own ability, intelligence, or effort and forget the God who gave us breath and opportunity. Self-made is a myth that competes with God for glory.

Help students see how subtle this idol is. It hides inside legitimate competence and hard work. The danger is not in working hard but in the quiet conviction that our success is fundamentally our own doing (Deuteronomy 8:17-18 warns precisely against saying 'my power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth').

Move toward gratitude as the antidote. Humility is not pretending we did nothing; it is recognizing that every ability and opportunity is a gift. Invite each person to name one area of success they have been quietly taking credit for and to return that credit to God in thanks.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worshiping our own strength: 'sacrificing to our net.'
- The myth of the self-made person (Deuteronomy 8:17-18).
- How the idol of self-reliance hides inside legitimate competence.
- Gratitude as the antidote to self-glory.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to credit your success to yourself rather than God?
- What is the difference between working hard and trusting in your own strength?
- How can gratitude reshape the way you view your achievements?

Question 7

Student Question:

Habakkuk's questions assume that God is just and that His ways should make moral sense, even when they do not yet. Why is it actually an act of faith, not unbelief, to expect that God will ultimately do right (Genesis 18:25), and how does this anchor us when life seems unfair?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Habakkuk's entire complaint rests on an assumption worth naming: that God is just and that His governance of the world ought to make moral sense. Habakkuk would not be troubled by injustice if he did not believe deeply that God is righteous. His protest is built on faith.

Connect this to Abraham's great question in Genesis 18:25, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' Abraham, like Habakkuk, presses God on the basis of God's own character. This is the logic of faith, not unbelief: we expect God to do right because we know who He is.

Help students see the difference between the cynic and the wrestler. The cynic concludes from injustice that there is no just God. The believer concludes from injustice that the just God must not yet be finished. Same evidence, opposite conclusion, because of a prior trust in God's character.

Apply it to the experience of unfairness. When life seems unjust, faith does not deny the unfairness; it refuses to draw the cynic's conclusion. It holds that the Judge of all the earth will do right, and it waits for the verdict that has not yet been rendered.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Expecting God to do right as an act of faith grounded in His character (Genesis 18:25).
- The difference between the cynic's and the believer's response to injustice.
- Faith that refuses the conclusion 'therefore there is no just God.'
- Waiting for a verdict not yet fully rendered.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is expecting God to do right actually an expression of faith?
- From the same evidence of injustice, why do the cynic and the believer reach opposite conclusions?
- Where do you most need to trust that the Judge of all the earth will do right?

Question 8

Student Question:

Habakkuk does not get an instant, comfortable answer; he is called to wait and to keep trusting. Where in your life is God asking you to wait without full understanding, and what helps you keep trusting Him in the waiting rather than demanding immediate answers?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question anticipates the resolution of the book. Habakkuk does not receive an instant, satisfying answer. He is told (in chapter 2) to wait, for the vision is for an appointed time. Much of faith is lived in the waiting.

Help students identify their own waiting places: an unanswered prayer, an unresolved relationship, a delayed healing, a calling not yet opened. Waiting is hard precisely because we cannot see the end, and our culture trains us to demand immediate results.

Teach what active, faithful waiting looks like. It is not passive resignation but trust in motion: continuing to obey, to pray, to serve, while leaving the timing to God. The farmer waits, but he also tends the field (James 5:7-8).

Offer practical helps for the wait: remembering God's past faithfulness, staying in community, feeding on Scripture, and renewing trust daily rather than demanding the whole answer at once. Invite each person to name one area of waiting and one practice that will help them trust God in it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithful waiting as active trust, not passive resignation (James 5:7-8).
- Our cultural impatience and demand for immediate answers.
- Practices that sustain trust in the waiting: memory, community, Scripture, prayer.
- Leaving the timing of the answer to God.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is God asking you to wait without full understanding?
- What is the difference between giving up and faithfully waiting?
- What practice would help you keep trusting God in the waiting?

Question 9**Student Question:**

Habakkuk wrestles with the problem of evil and the suffering of the relatively righteous at the hands of the more wicked, a question the whole Bible takes seriously. How does the rest of Scripture, and ultimately the cross of Christ, speak to the problem of a holy God permitting evil for a time (Romans 8:18-28)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson: the problem of evil, the ancient and weighty question of how a holy, sovereign, good God can permit evil and allow the relatively righteous to suffer at the hands of the more wicked. Habakkuk raises it honestly, and the whole Bible takes it seriously.

First, affirm what Scripture does not do: it does not give a tidy formula that dissolves the mystery. When God finally answered Job, He gave Job Himself rather than an explanation. Habakkuk likewise is given a vision and a call to faith, not a philosophical solution. Be honest with your class that some of this remains mystery this side of glory.

Then offer what Scripture does give. It affirms that God is sovereign and that He is good, and that evil is real and accountable. It promises that present suffering is temporary and is being woven by God toward good for His people (Romans 8:18, 28). It assures us that justice delayed is not justice denied; a day of reckoning is coming (which Habakkuk 2 will declare).

Bring it to the cross, the deepest answer Scripture gives. At Calvary the worst evil ever done, the murder of the sinless Son of God, became the means of the greatest good, the salvation of the world. The cross does not explain every evil, but it proves decisively that God can bring supreme good out of supreme evil, and that He does not stand aloof from suffering but entered it Himself. We trust the God who suffered for us even where we cannot trace His hand.

Keep it consistent with sound doctrine: God permits evil for a time, but He is not its author; human beings are genuinely responsible; and God's final setting-right of all things is certain in Christ. The believer lives by faith in that God in the meantime.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality of the problem of evil, taken seriously by Scripture rather than explained away.
- God giving us Himself, and a call to faith, rather than a tidy formula (Job 38-42).
- God sovereign and good, evil real and accountable, suffering temporary (Romans 8:18, 28).
- Justice delayed is not justice denied; a day of reckoning is coming.
- The cross as the supreme proof that God brings good out of evil and does not stand aloof from suffering.
- God permits evil without authoring it; humans remain responsible.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it important that Scripture takes the problem of evil seriously rather than dismissing it?
- How does the cross speak to the question of God permitting evil?
- How can we trust God's goodness even when we cannot explain a particular evil?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over Habakkuk's honest wrestling with God. Name one specific way the Lord is inviting you, through this passage, to bring your real questions and griefs to Him in trust, and to become more like Christ, who in His own deepest anguish still prayed, 'not my will, but thine, be done.'

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to look back over Habakkuk's wrestling and respond personally. The aim is formation: not merely to understand lament as a category, but to actually bring their real questions and griefs to God in trust.

Help students name where they are in the journey. Some need permission to be honest with God for the first time. Some need to move from honest complaint toward trustful waiting. Some need to grip God's character more firmly in the dark. Meet them where they are.

Point them to Christ as the perfect model. In Gethsemane, Jesus brought His deepest anguish to the Father with total honesty, 'let this cup pass from me,' and yet surrendered in trust, 'nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done' (Luke 22:42). That is the shape of faithful wrestling: honesty and surrender together. To become like Christ is to learn to pray that way.

Invite a concrete response: one 'how long?' to bring honestly to God, one area of waiting to entrust to Him, one truth about His character to hold onto. Encourage each person to write it down and to begin praying it this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Bringing real questions and griefs to God in trust as the goal of formation.
- Christ in Gethsemane as the model of honesty and surrender together (Luke 22:42).
- Becoming like Christ: praying 'nevertheless not my will, but thine.'
- Faith as the decision about where to bring our questions.

Discussion Prompts

- What 'how long?' do you most need to bring honestly to God?
- How does Jesus in Gethsemane show you the way to wrestle faithfully?
- What is one way you will trust God in the waiting this week?