

The Great Commission
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Hab 1:4

(BHS)	(ESV)
עַל־כֵּן תִּפּוּג תּוֹרָה	So the law is paralyzed ,
וְלֹא־יֵצֵא לְנֶצַח מִשְׁפָּט	and justice never goes forth .
כִּי רָשָׁע מְקִתִּיר אֶת־הַצְּדִיק	For the wicked surround the righteous ;
עַל־כֵּן יֵצֵא מִשְׁפָּט מְעֻקָּל:	so justice goes forth perverted.

You will readily recognize *torah* of course. You may remember that *mishpat* is “justice,” and that *yatsa*’ is “to go out.” Both of these occur twice here. Justice does not “go out”—and when it does, it goes out “perverted.” This word is a *hapax*, but has some cognates meaning: twisting, writhing, crooked.

The Law is *pūg* (say, “poog”). This is a relatively rare word. Jacob’s heart *became numb* (Gen 45:26). “I am *feeble* and crushed” (Psa 38:8). I like ESV’s gloss, “paralyzed.” The prophet laments that the Law is “ineffective” (HCSB). I am drawing on Marshall Johnson (1985) and Robert Vashkolz (1992) for my musings. Email me for the full bibliography.

God tells Habakkuk that Babylon will take out the evildoers. What evildoers? Although the theory that they are the rich Judean aristocracy who corrupted the courts is credible, Vashkolz persuasively argues that the prophet’s original complaint is about the uber-violent Assyrians. Habakkuk is one third of the Minor Prophets’ Assyrian collection, and dovetails very nicely with Nahum. (See [Learning to Read](#) and [God’s Silence](#).) Habakkuk’s original complaint is picked up in 1:12 – 17 (compare with v13b). There, the villain clearly is a world power, not an economic class.

Johnson notes that Habakkuk does not complain that Torah was being disobeyed, but that it was “twisted.” He interprets this to mean that certain promised blessings could not emerge under Assyrian oppression. Josiah’s reforms had not brought greater peace and security, but the opposite.

Vashkolz compares our text with Micah and Isaiah. Mic 4:2b, “The law will **go out** from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” Isa 51:4b, “for a law will **go out** from me, and I will set my **justice** for a light to the peoples.” The Law “going out” signifies Israel being a light to the nations—who were supposed to go up to Zion and learn about Yahweh, giving up their warring ways (Mic 4:2 – 3). But under Assyrian domination, Israel’s great mission was failing. *This* is what distressed Habakkuk. To rectify this, God said that he will raise up an even tougher bunch—Babylon—to deal with Assyria (1:5 – 11).

This was an unbelievable and disturbing move. Habakkuk had great difficulty coming to terms with it. Israel would suffer even *more* under Babylon. I wonder what he would have thought of the ultimate plan of God—to use the Roman Empire in conjunction with corrupt Jewish leaders to crucify the Messiah as part of his plan to save the world. That plan of salvation was bolder and more counterintuitive than even the book of Habakkuk explores.

But I also wonder if what so troubled the prophet also troubles us. When we hear of police brutality, rioting, the witness of the church ineffective and unheeded—what is our response? If we are to learn from Habakkuk, the chief prayer on the lips of the saints should be that the gospel would not be paralyzed or constricted, and Jesus would be proclaimed effectively.

The Haidian Christian Church in the university district of Beijing had 8 services on Sundays, one of which was in English. The gospel was going out effectively. But the Chinese government recently shut down the English one, because it was giving too many young people access to non-Chinese Christian leadership. Habakkuk models how this is the sort of thing that should distress us and move us to prayer.

We prayed for Andrew Brunson because we felt for him and his family. We wanted his suffering to end. But even more than this, we prayed that he would be a light to the world, that his witness in Turkey would go forth effectively. We wanted to see the promises of the gospel realized in Turkey.

Is the law paralyzed in America? Does justice go forth perverted? We need to be on the alert for how to best represent Christ in our response to the present distress. That the gospel is clearly articulated and put into action.

What in your life holds back your witness? Above anything else, pray that your testimony to Jesus is not diminished. Pray that our congregations won't get distracted and lose sight of what we are all about—the Great Commission.

Our whole lives we continue to strive to keep our hearts and minds set on Jesus. But he will someday return for us, and then the time of distress will be over. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!