

Week of April 21, 2013
Habakkuk: A Message of Faith

Passage Outline:

1. Habakkuk's Honest Questions - Habakkuk 1:1-3,13; 2:1
2. God's Divine Responses - Habakkuk 1:5-6; 2:4-6
3. Habakkuk's Renewed Faith - Habakkuk 3:2,17-19b

What's our study about and what can we learn?

Our study is about believing that our God is in control and all-powerful, even though we witness the prosperity of our enemies and experience difficulties ourselves. This study will challenge us to believe and rest in God, who is sufficient in the midst of difficult circumstances.

1. Habakkuk's Honest Questions - Habakkuk 1:1-3,13; 2:1

¹The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received. ²How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? ³Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds....¹³ Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? ... ¹I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what He will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

Setting the Historical Stage for this Reading

After the death of Ashurbanipal (c. 627 B.C.), the Assyrian Empire began to decline and lose control of its vassal states. King Josiah (640-609 B.C.) threw off Judah's vassal status, implemented religious reforms, and exercised increasing amounts of political freedom (2 Kings 22-23; 2 Chron. 34-35). But the revival was cut short in 609 when Josiah died trying to stop the Egyptian army from helping the Assyrians fight the Babylonians (2 Kings 23:29). After a brief rule by Jehoahaz, the Egyptians put Jehoiakim (609-597 B.C.) on the throne, but he did evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Kings 23:37). When the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians and Egyptians at the Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C., they moved to subdue Judah and the surrounding nations.

Please read the articles "Habakkuk: His Life and Times" and "The Chaldeans" contained in the Heavy Duty Preparation Packet.

Habakkuk seeks God's answers for two perplexing, difficult questions.

First, Habakkuk boldly challenged what appeared to be God's tolerance for sin among His people (1:2-3). Essentially, Habakkuk asked, "Why do You allow evil to go unpunished in Judah?" Habakkuk is complaining about social injustice in his day. Such complaints concerned other Old Testament prophets.

Notice how blunt Habakkuk is in his questions to God: "How long, Lord, must I call for help, while You appear not listen? That God appeared oblivious or unconcerned about the ongoing wickedness in Judah disturbed Habakkuk.

Habakkuk asked God, Why do You tolerate wrongdoing? Habakkuk used six words to describe the sinful condition in the Nation of Judah, the evils he complained God was forcing him to see.

- "Injustice" refers to trouble, sorrow, or wickedness.
- "Wrongdoing" conveys the meaning of trouble through unjust toil.
- "Oppression" points to violent acts of the wicked oppressing the downtrodden.

- “Violence” (used six times in the book), emphasizes its prevalence.
- “Strife” referring to a quarrel, or lawsuit against the poor and hurting.
- “Conflict” meaning contention or quarrel.

The answer to these questions comes in the next section, where Habakkuk learned that God planned on using the Babylonians to punish Judah.

This astonished Habakkuk. Judah had sinned and deserved punishment. Why would God use a more evil nation as the agent of judgment against Judah? God is holy. God’s eyes are too pure to look on evil. God cannot tolerate (look on) wrongdoing! So why would God tolerate (look on) those who are treacherous? In Habakkuk’s eyes the treacherous ones were perhaps the Babylonians—no better than the Assyrians.

Habakkuk asked why holy God would keep silent while a wicked one swallows up one who is more righteous than himself. Habakkuk had in mind the wicked Babylonians destroying the more righteous Judeans. Judah was bad, but not as horrendous as the sins of Babylon.

Habakkuk believed God would respond, so he would take his post on a watchtower to wait patiently for the message to come. He wanted to hear God’s answer. Habakkuk had questioned God concerning why He allowed evil people to prosper and righteous people to suffer, and why He apparently did not do anything to right these wrongs.

God does not mind that we ask tough questions. But when we take such concerns to the Lord, we must do so in faith and trust, waiting patiently for God to answer. Difficult circumstances may stretch our faith beyond what we thought we could take, but we must continue to trust God, not lose hope, and wait for answers.

2. God’s Divine Responses -Habakkuk 1:5-6; 2:4-6

⁵ "Look at the nations and watch-- and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. ⁶ I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. ... ⁴ "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright-- but the righteous will live by his faith-- ⁵ indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples. ⁶ "Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying, "Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion! How long must this go on?"

Read the article “The Divine Dialogue in the Book of Habakkuk” contained in the Heavy Duty Preparation Packet.

The answer to the first complaint would come in pondering current world events. In looking and observing the nations, God wanted to refocus Judah’s attention. Judah needed to understand what God was doing in the world with Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. God has control over the entire world, not just Judah. Habakkuk, like many believers, are too “self-focused” and miss God working in the world around them.

When Judah and Habakkuk would see what God is doing, they will be utterly astounded! The Hebrew text actually carries the idea that they would be shocked and stunned.

God offers two explanations for this shocking news. First, what is happening is so wild that even if you heard about it, you wouldn’t believe it. The second statement further explains the first. Habakkuk and Judah would be astonished because God was raising up the Babylonians, a bitter and blood-thirsty nation. Two kings Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar, who rose to power, established the Neo-Babylonian Empire after 625 B.C. After the Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C., when the Assyrians were defeated, Nebuchadnezzar marched south to attack Palestine and eventually Egypt. The Babylonians were just as evil as the Assyrians, and certainly

worse than the wicked in Judah who Habakkuk had complained about.

News of the Babylonians coming gave rise to Habakkuk's second question: Would God use a pagan nation to punish Judah? Comparatively speaking, Judah was more righteous than the Babylonians. Judah was after all the covenant people, God's own special possession (Ex. 19:5). What was God thinking?

The answer to the second complaint came in two parts: one addressed to the righteous and the other to the Babylonians and wickedness in general. The Babylonians, like the wicked, possessed an inflated ego and lacked integrity. They were arrogant; their appetite was just like Death, the Babylonians were never satisfied. As is inevitably the case with the proud and arrogant, they too will fall.

God's message to the righteous was simple (only three words in Hebrew!): But the righteous one will live by his faith. This cornerstone text of the Bible illustrates God's intent for both salvation and victorious Christian living—by ... faith! Paul quoted this verse (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11) to emphasize justification by faith, not by works, in obtaining eternal life. Hebrews 10:38 cites this verse to encourage believers to continue to live by faith during suffering and persecution.

Here, God used this statement to contrast the righteous and the wicked. The egotistical wicked rely on their own might and power. Doing so, they will perish. On the other hand, the righteous one trusts God who controls all peoples and nations. Consequently, the righteous is exercising faith and will live.

Have you ever been shocked by God in this way? Has it ever happened that God makes things worse before they get better? How do you handle that? Habakkuk's answer from God is "faith!"

3. Habakkuk's Renewed Faith - Habakkuk 3:2,17-19b

² LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; [even] in wrath remember mercy. ... ¹⁷ Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. ¹⁹ The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

It is unusual to find a psalm in a prophetic book, but this hymn is closely related to the overall theme and purpose of the book. A national crisis, an imminent invasion, gives rise to the occasion for the anthem.

Habakkuk begins this prayer with the right attitude of humility and reverence. He called on the name of the Lord, addressing his petition to the sovereign God of Israel. In addition, Habakkuk had heard about God's fame in doing wondrous acts and mighty deeds on behalf of His people. This is why Habakkuk also declares: Lord, I stand in awe of Your deeds. The report of the Lord's mighty works filled Habakkuk with awe and hope.

What God did in the past, He could do again. So Habakkuk pleaded with God to renew His works in his day and time. Habakkuk desired to see God work in his lifetime. We desire that too. I have often expressed that God was so mighty and strong throughout so many Old Testament stories, why does He not show His might and strength again today?

Habakkuk also recognizes that God's punishment would come on wicked Judah at the hands of the Babylonian invasion. He did not ask God to not send it, but rather even in wrath to show mercy. The Lord would not let Judah's rebellion and transgressions go unpunished. But Habakkuk also knew that God was full of compassion and loving-kindness (Ex. 34:6). God would show mercy to the faithful. Habakkuk submitted to God's sovereign plan. As believers we should do the same.

When the Babylonians invaded, the people of Judah faced dire circumstances. In a siege no one can tend the crops or take care of the livestock. Habakkuk unhappily described the coming famine and hardship facing Judah. The fig tree does not bud ... no fruit is on the vines, the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food. Sadly, there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls. Such horrific circumstances would tempt Judah to disbelief. It would be human nature to look at the surrounding conditions, not at God.

Read the article “The Fig Tree” contained in the Heavy Duty Preparation Packet.

Even though such dire circumstances loomed on the horizon, Habakkuk resolved ahead of time to trust God. As for me, Habakkuk says, I will triumph in the Lord; I will rejoice in the God of my salvation! Therefore, Habakkuk could rest safe and secure in the Lord. He would trust God even in the direst of circumstances; he chose to be a righteous one who lived by faith. We often struggle to submit to God’s sovereign plan, to wait patiently for God to respond, and so forth. Yet as difficult as it is at times to apply these principles, how liberating it is when we do.

Biblical Truths of This Lesson in Focus

1. When we’re tempted to question God, we need to pour out our hearts to Him; in the end we need to resolve to be patient and live by faith.
2. Accept that life is filled with mysteries, but trust that God is just and will act fairly and faithfully.
3. Often we want a quick response and don’t like to wait, but we need to be patient and wait for God to act according to His timetable and plan.
4. Rejoice in the promise that God will be our strength and our salvation.

If you are presently dealing with an answer to prayer that you didn’t expect or want, reaffirm your faith and confidence in God, resting in His sufficiency no matter the situation. If you do not find yourself in such a situation right now, reaffirm your intention to trust God whenever you find yourself in such a situation, and ask Him to develop in you a stronger trust and rest in Him.