

Habakkuk ~ Sermon/Commentary

In looking at the books of the major and minor prophets, you see very much the same message in all of them. With one exception: Habakkuk. The Oxford Bible Commentary says this: “Habakkuk is different from *all* the other prophetic books in subject matter and in its choice of forms of literature,” in other words, in how it is written.

It’s different in another way as well. Look at how virtually all of the books of prophecy open. Jeremiah 1:2 says, “the word of the Lord came to him in the 13th year of the reign of Josiah.” Hosea starts with this, “The word of the Lord came to Hosea.” Joel: “The word of the Lord that came to Joel.” Obadiah: “This is what the sovereign Lord says...” Jonah: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah.” The same in Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, and so on. But not Habakkuk.

The book opens with Habakkuk asking the Lord questions. Almost complaining to the Lord.

Habakkuk lived in Judah toward the end of the reign of King Josiah, one of the good kings of Judah. At this point, Israel—the northern kingdom—had already been conquered and the people taken into exile. It was just a matter of time before the same fate befell Judah. Although Josiah was walking in the Lord’s ways, Jehoiakim came into power shortly thereafter and in 2 Kings 23:37, we read that, “he did evil in the eyes of the Lord.”

Habakkuk sees what’s going on. He is outraged at the violence and injustice. He’s been praying about it, apparently for quite a while. Here’s what he records in Chapter 1, verses 2-4:

² How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save?

³ Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice *never* prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

Does this sound like our world today? Injustice. Conflict. Violence. Wars. God’s law paralyzed. I think it does. So we can relate to him. These scriptures aren’t just for the people of Judah in 620 B.C., but also for us today.

Some Christians think that men of faith never question God. They just sit and wait faithfully and patiently for God to act. But actually that’s not true. Habakkuk questions God. Jeremiah questioned God in Chapter 12 and again in Chapter 20. Abraham questioned God about the destruction of Sodom back in Genesis 18. Job questioned God. Asaph questioned God in Psalm 73. I question God. You probably do. Those who trust in God can and do question God.

There's a fine line between questioning God and complaining to God and we should keep that in mind. Questioning God is okay. Complaining to God is *not*. Back in Numbers 11:1-4 we read, And the people *complained* in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. In the New Testament too, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:10, And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

So Habakkuk asks the Lord, “why are you letting all this violence and injustice prevail?” And the Lord answers, “Ha. You think that's bad. That's nothing. Here's what's going to happen next.” Well those aren't his exact words. What the Lord says is recorded in verses 5 to 11.

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.

⁶I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people who sweep across the whole earth, to seize dwellings not their own.

⁷They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. ⁸Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops headlong; their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle swooping to devour; ⁹they all come intent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand. ¹⁰They mock kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities; by building earthen ramps they capture them. ¹¹Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—guilty people, whose own strength is their god.” (We'll see more about that in Chapter 2.)

Now this is the same prophesy that both Jeremiah and Zephaniah had warned of. They said that the Lord was going to punish the backsliding people of Judah by having the Babylonians conquer Judah and take the people captive. We read in Jeremiah 25:11, “This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon.”

Habakkuk had heard these prophecies and now he hears the same thing directly from the Lord. And he says, “What?! No! How can you do this, Lord?” Interestingly, though, he begins in verse 12 by saying that God is eternal or everlasting. The idea here is that God does not change and that's important because it means God keeps His promises. Way back in the days of Abraham and later with Moses, God made promises—made a covenant—with Israel. Habakkuk knows that God will not totally destroy Israel because of these promises. That is why he says in verse 12, “We will not die.”

We find this same promise repeated over and over. Psalm 118:18 reads, “The Lord has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.” We find this idea again in Malachi, Jeremiah, Romans.

So we see that Habakkuk believes God and trusts God, but he still doesn't fully understand God's answer. Does that sometimes sound like us? It sure resonates with me: I believe God. I trust God. I know he answers prayers. But I frequently don't understand his answer.

In Verse 12 Habakkuk says, "You, Lord, have appointed these Babylonians to execute judgment; you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish. He seems to accept the Lord's answer, but again, he starts questioning the Lord. He says, ¹³ Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?"

He goes on and says the Jews are like fish that get swept up in the Babylonian nets and then the Babylonians worship those nets. So the nets, their tools of conquest, are their idols.

This is the second time in this chapter that Habakkuk questions God. What can we learn from this? In verses 2 to 4 and again in 12 to 17, we see that questioning God is okay. God didn't strike him dead or even get angry.

A chaplain on the Internet said, "Not only is it okay to question God, it may be necessary for healing and growth." For example, when you are talking with someone who has just experienced a tragedy, don't just tell them "God is good. He loves you and He will work things out for the best and quote Romans 8:28 – And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." That's true, but it's not what a hurting person needs to hear. I think it's okay, maybe even necessary to cry with them, hurt with them, question with them. Help them work through the pain, not ignore it. Of course you don't want to stay with the pity and resignation and questioning indefinitely, but it is part of the process of healing and faith. People have feelings and questions. You can either suppress them or express them.

Back to Habakkuk. How does God answer his second set of questions? Basically God says: Don't worry about the Babylonians, they'll get theirs too.

Not only that, God tells Habakkuk in 2:2 to write this down. What is about to happen is so certain, he should go ahead and record it. Verse 3 says it may seem delayed but it *will* happen. I love this verse. It was one of my earliest memory verses. This version I memorized and that I like best is the Contemporary English Version that goes, "At the time I have decided, my words will come true. You can trust what I say about the future. It may take a long time, but keep on waiting—it will happen!"

I think that is one of the most important lessons from this entire book: the Lord is *eternal* and he is *just* and when he says something will happen, it *will* happen. It may not happen when you expect. It may take a while, but keep on

waiting, it will happen. There's a related verse from Psalm 37 by David that goes, "Don't be impatient for the Lord to act! Travel steadily along his path. He will honor you, and give you the land. You will see the wicked destroyed." [NLT] I'd love to see the final results today, but what does the verse say? Don't be impatient. Walk in the Lord's ways. Wait for him.

When justice is delayed, we have the feeling that it will never come, but God promises that it will. It is faith in God which makes us believe there is light at the end of the tunnel. And it's "the light at the end of the tunnel" that helps us make it through. It's when there is no faith and no hope that people give up. That's when people commit suicide, literally and figuratively.

Many commentators say that Verse 2:4 is the central idea of the book. In this verse, God says *the righteous will live by faith*. Some translations have "faithfulness." Actually, both ideas are involved and you really can't separate them. Faith is what you believe. Faithfulness is acting according to what you believe. Paul quotes this verse twice: in his letter to the Romans [1:17] and to the Galatians [3:11]. Remember back in Deuteronomy, God laid out the relationship he wanted with his people. He said, "I want you to fear me (that is, trust me, respect me, view me with awe), worship me, love me, walk in my ways, and obey my commands." That's the spectrum of faith and faithfulness that God wants and expects from us.

Remember in verse 3, the Lord says, "it will happen." The people of Judah will be delivered. But when? All the Lord tells Habakkuk is that it will be at his "appointed time." This actually means 70 years, which is spelled out in Jeremiah 25:12. After promising that the people of Judah will be delivered, God then goes on to elaborate what's in store for Babylon. First, he says that those who are proud and arrogant and greedy will be taunted by the very same people that were taken captive.

Next, we find what some commentators call the "Woe" oracles that describe six evils of Babylon. Interestingly he doesn't mention Babylon in these descriptions. Why not? Because the Lord intended them not just for the people of Judah, but for *all* people as universal descriptions of evil—and the progression of evil in the mind: being tempted, thinking about it and then taking action—the slippery slope you might say.

Look at the way that one evil leads to the next. In verses 2:4-5, the progression starts with being proud, self-centered, me first. That then leads to greed (2:6-8). You want more, you think you deserve more. How do you satisfy that desire? First by being dishonest (2:9-11) and if that doesn't work, by violence (2:12-14). The fifth evil is sexual immorality and debauchery (2:15-17). And it all finally culminates with the ultimate evil, the worship of idols (2:18-19).

Do you think these evils and this progression was unique to Babylon? Uh, uh. This applies to us today just as it has to everyone throughout history from Adam on.

Where are we? In chapter one Habakkuk was pretty depressed. He hated seeing all the evil around him. And he questioned God. In chapter two, he's pleased to hear that God will deliver the faithful and punish the evil, even though he doesn't know exactly how or when. But God's answer is basically reassuring. He's encouraged. His faith is restored.

Then, in chapter three, Habakkuk moves from questioning God to waiting and listening to God and finally to praising God with a wonderful poetic psalm. He basically expresses his total faith in God, even though he doesn't fully understand what God is doing. The psalm recalls God's greatness in the Creation and in the history of his people. It concludes with the assurance the God will be the joy (vs 18) and the strength (vs 19) of the people in every situation. He closes with this great phrase that God "enables me to go on the heights" [NIV] or "helps me walk on my high places" [ASV]. What a great declaration of faith!

So we see that the book is not only a prophecy but it is also the tale of Habakkuk's own steady spiritual progression upwards towards God. Warren Wiersbe entitles his book on Habakkuk, *From Worry to Worship*. Martyn Lloyd-Jones calls his book, *From Fear to Faith*. So here's Habakkuk who in Chapter 1 begins by wondering and worrying about the world around him and God's seeming indifference. In Chapter 2, he says he will wait for God's answer which turns out to be reassuring and which, in turn strengthens his faith. Finally, in Chapter 3, he ends with one of the greatest declarations of faith in the entire Bible. What an example to all of us!

There are some important lessons or principles in Habakkuk.

- (1) It is okay to question God,. Ask questions, yes; complain, no. Our questions should be asked with respect and reverence. But remember, you may not get the answer you expect. None of the prophets did, why should we?
- (2) Sometimes it is not evident to us what is going on. Evil people are prospering while believers are suffering and barely getting by. God seems to be inactive, but we must remember that he is involved in ways that we may not understand. In this book, for example, the Babylonians were under God's control, and He was using them to achieve His purposes.
- (3) God is holy. He will not tolerate evil. He will judge and punish the wicked and he is concerned for the righteous.
- (4) God hears and answers prayers. But he answers them on his time schedule, not ours. We need to be still, have faith, and know and believe that he is at work.
- (5) God sometimes gives unexpected answers to our prayers. When we pray, we usually have in our minds the way we want God to answer. When He answers differently, we might think He hasn't answered at all. When God says, "wait," we should not interpret that as "no."
- (6) Although things may not turn out as we expect, we should rejoice in the Lord and be thankful to him anyway.
- (7) Believe that God is good, God is just, and God keeps his promises. That means truly trusting in him all the time, through joy and sorrow, and living by faith and faithfulness. Fear God, worship God, love God, walk in his ways, obey him.

In summary, take an example from Habakkuk. Ask God questions. Be willing to wait for his answer. Don't be surprised if it is not what you expect. Trust in God. Don't waver in your faith. What a great example for all of us!

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March 2011