

Habakkuk

Habakkuk 1:1-3:19

By Phil Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2020-02-09

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I. Background to Habakkuk

Not very much is known about Habakkuk. His name means “embrace,” and since the last letter of his name is doubled (a Hebrew way of indicating intensification) some have argued that his name means “full embrace.” Though Habakkuk didn’t understand God’s ways, it didn’t keep him from fully embracing God and trusting God. Indeed, trust (while waiting) is at the very heart of this book as well as in the conclusion to this book.

We know from the last verse that he was a musician and we know from the first verse that he was a prophet. We know that he lived toward the end of the kingdom of Judah, and was probably a contemporary of Jeremiah, though some place him a little bit earlier. It is clear from this book that the Babylonians are prophesied to destroy Judah in the near future. So I agree with those scholars who place Habakkuk under the reign of wicked king Zedekiah.

He had likely seen the last revival that happened under Josiah, but that was a short lived revival. The last 23 years of Judah’s existence after Josiah’s death saw an astonishing quick slide into immorality. Some people are astonished at how quickly America has become perverted. Gross things that were illegal in every state of the union when I was a teenager are now celebrated as good today. Well, a similar slide into darkness had happened in Israel in less than 23 years. It really is amazing. Not only was there homosexuality and other sexual perversions, but there was also the murder of children that many liken to our modern abortions. And the church was almost as bad as the culture. The church had heretical doctrine, false prophets, corrupted priests, and church people also engaged in the murder of infants. There was a centralization of power in the state, and state sanctioned murder, usury, abuse of police powers, multiplication of bad laws... Is this sounding very familiar? The state treated good prophets like Jeremiah as if they were guilty of hate speech and treason. Individuals were lawless and guilty of idolatry, Sabbath breaking, divorce, and fornication. Those were not great times to

live in. But when I read through the list of sins that Jeremiah and Ezekiel documented in the last 23 years of Judah's existence, I realized that almost all of those sins are prevalent in America today. It's easy to shake our heads at the sins back then, but if we are to have Habakkuk's heart, we must also be burdened (as he was burdened) over the sins of our day. And that's where we are going to begin our overview of this book.

II. Overview of the book

The book of Habakkuk starts by saying, "The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw." When God revealed the true state of affairs from God's perspective, it made Habakkuk feel a heavy burden. Though that is a technical phrase for an oracle, it also has the heaviness of spirit that accompanied it. And it is my prayer that the modern church would regain the burden and weeping of the prophets of old. Habakkuk by inspiration reacts to the evils in Judah by crying out the puzzlement that most righteous people feel in the face of pervasive evil. Beginning to read at verse 2:

2 O LORD, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save. 3 Why do You show me iniquity, And cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; There is strife, and contention arises.

As God made him realize the magnitude of the sin in his nation, he was burdened, and he wondered how God could stand it. He is saying, "Why are you putting this burden of sin on me and not doing anything about it? The evil just seems to keep going on." Continuing in verse 4:

4 Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds.

Habakkuk did not question God's goodness, justice, power, sovereignty, wrath, or any other attribute. He was an orthodox believer and a true prophet who loved God's Word. His question was, "How on earth can You put up with this evil? I can't stand it and you are much more holy than I am." As he says in verse 13:

You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, And hold Your tongue when the wicked devours A person more righteous than he?

And God's answer is basically, "Don't interpret my patience as indifference.

I am about to bring such judgment upon Judah for her sins that you will have a hard time comprehending it.” As He says in verse 5, “Be utterly astounded.” He goes on to say that He will use wicked Babylon as His rod of discipline against Judah. So He says, “I am about to do something about it.”

But that brings up an even further puzzle in Habakkuk’s mind. I can almost imagine Habakkuk say, “What?!! You are going to use wicked Babylon to judge wicked Judah?” And the answer is yes. In the third section (chapter 1:12-17), Habakkuk is shocked that God would use Babylon to discipline Judah when Babylon is much more wicked than Judah. Why not simply judge both nations rather than sparing Babylon and judging Judah?

And down through history God’s people have (if they are honest) wondered the same thing from time to time. Why is it that some nations seem to get judged and other nations seem to go on with impunity? Why is God so slow to judge? God’s people have had those questions. This is why God has placed these questions in the mind of the prophet - so as to capture the feelings of many in the church. It’s not that Habakkuk doubts God. He simply doesn’t understand how all of this works.

A Habakkuk’s 1st complaint = How long must I wait for justice (1:1-4)

B God’s answer – Judah’s injustice to be punished by Babylon’s army (1:5-11)

C Habakkuk’s 2nd complaint = Babylon is more wicked than Israel (1:12-17)

D God’s main exhortation – while waiting for justice live by faith (2:1-5)

C Habakkuk’s 2nd complaint answered with woes against Babylon ((2:5-20)

B God’s answer – Babylon’s injustice to be punished by God’s army (3:1-15)

A Habakkuk’s 1st complaint resolved = I will wait & trust as long as it takes (3:16-19)

If you look at the outline of the book, you will once again notice that it is written in the form of a chiasm - a chiasm recognized by many scholars. We have already been through the first A, B, and C sections. But if you look at the second C you will see that it really is an extension of the first C - Habakkuk’s second complaint. The first C complains that Babylon is more wicked than Judah and the second C pronounces emotional woes against the horrible evils of Babylon. It goes from chapter 2:5 through verse 20. In that section he condemns Babylon for drunkenness, pride, greed, and unjust expansionism in verse 5. In verse 6 he documents more evil and says, “how long?” How long will you put up with the evils of Babylon? He goes on to document Babylon’s greed, murder, covetousness, arrogance, genocide, slave labor, idolatry, and other evils. Habakkuk is filled with a holy anger at

the evils of Babylon and says in verse 20, “But the LORD is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him.” The entire earth stands condemned before God’s awesome courtroom. So the whole section is demonstrating that Babylon is indeed much more evil than Judah.

And what makes all this evil such a horrible burden for Habakkuk is that it stands in such stark contrast to God’s glorious goal for planet earth that is expressed in verse 14: “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” He quotes that from Isaiah 11:9. That is a short-hand way of referring to all the millennial glories that Isaiah 11 describes. And what Isaiah 11 promises and what he sees on earth are quite different. He knows God has the ability to produce such incredible victory in the earth. He does not at all doubt that it will eventually happen. The millennial glories of the future Messiah are guaranteed by Isaiah 11 to happen in history. He does not doubt that God loves such a vision of a Christian world. It will happen. But that makes the evil of both Babylon and Judah all the more astonishing. How on earth can God put up with it so patiently?

And God’s answer is given in the second B of the chiasm - chapter 3:1-15. God puts a prayer into Habakkuk’s mouth since God has ordained that progress in His goals for earth will only be achieved through the prayers and efforts of the saints. He is not going to bring the kingdom like a flash out of heaven as Premillennialists expect any more than He conquered the land of Canaan with a flash from heaven. It took prayer and hard work. Without prayer, nothing will happen.

Now, this section is primarily dealing with God’s heavenly armies taking out Babylon and taking out all future enemies. And so there is a connection between the prayer of Habakkuk and the armies of heaven. There always has been that connection. God has ordained that the angels of heaven fight as the saints on earth pray. This was true in the Old Testament and it continues to be true in the New Testament. And so it is a motivation for us to pray. I am very encouraged by that section.

Of course, without God stirring up prayer, no prayer will happen. Even prayer comes by grace. It was God who gave that inspired prayer to Habakkuk, right? He stirs up prayer. But that just leads to a further question of why God doesn’t stir up prayer and revival much sooner. It does not solve the burning question of “How long? When, O Lord will you bring the

revival that our hearts so desperately long for?” Even on God’s slowness to stir up revival, Habakkuk is puzzled. Verse 2 says,

O LORD, I have heard Your speech and was afraid; O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years! In the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.

That is a God-honoring prayer. And God immediately answered the prayer. I believe that God brought revival precisely through the judgment. It was a revival in Babylon.

But in any case, let me explain why this is such a God-honoring prayer. First, it expresses fear and reverence. He does not casually or flippantly approach God’s throne. Habakkuk know his place. He says, “O LORD, I have heard Your speech and was afraid.” That first clause expresses godly fear.

The second clause asks for revival in history. It doesn’t just pray for a God-glorifying planet earth in eternity. Obviously that will happen, but this is asking for more. It has the faith to pray for a God-glorifying culture in the midst of the years - that is, in history. This is God’s goal, to cause Christ’s kingdom to grow and dominate the earth in history.

And finally, it is a prayer that does not deny God’s right to send wrath upon nations any time He chooses. Just as in the book of Nahum, God is glorified by both salvation and judgment. He is sovereign. But Habakkuk humbly asks, “In wrath, remember mercy.” He in effect says that we know that You have the right to wrathful vengeance, but also remember your attribute of mercy on our behalf. He is basing his prayer upon the attributes of God and the promises of Scripture. That’s what it means to pray according to God’s will. It’s not second guessing what God’s secret will is. It is basing our prayers upon the Scripture. That is a great prayer. If we are to have the kind of revival that Habakkuk prays for, the church needs to develop the kind of prayer that Habakkuk displays.

And then comes his amazing poem in the remainder of his prayer. Verse 3 says, “God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran.” God’s answer is not the answer of Amils and Premils - that the only hope for planet earth is the Second Coming. Yes, He comes in judgment and salvation, but it isn’t a coming at the end of time. It is a coming in history and from the earth - in this case from mount Paran. Actually, this is an allusion to Deuteronomy

33:2 where God says, “The Lord came from Sinai... He shone forth from Mount Paran.” God has been coming and will continue to come until His purposes for earth are accomplished. As you read through this poem he progresses from the illustrations (and they are just illustrations) of Sinai, to the wilderness, and then to the conquest of Canaan. Using a prophetic past tense (which shows the certainty of God’s victories in the future), his prayer asks that just as He sent His angelic armies to conquer Egypt in the Exodus, and to conquer other enemies in the wilderness, and to conquer the Canaanites in the land of Canaan, He will conquer Babylon with His armies as a symbol of the conquest that He will achieve in the New Covenant times. That’s a big mouthful, I know. I don’t have the time to unpack it. But He is just laying out that this is the way God acts and He asks God to continue to act in that way.

So in this poem He alludes to God’s redemption of His people Israel out of Egypt and in effect says that He will achieve another Exodus. He will not abandon His people. Nor will He abandon His purposes. Indeed, the discipline of His people is for the very purpose of sanctifying and purifying the church to make it strong. And just as God miraculously brought about an Exodus and guarded and protected His people and gave them the law and conquered the land of Canaan, He will once again do what was prefigured topologically in those ancient actions. This is how the world will be filled with the knowledge and glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea beds. How deeply does water cover the sea? Pretty deeply - miles deeply. And that is the goal for planet earth that is set before our eyes. No matter how much evil and no matter how powerful the enemies might be, the church must never forget the victory promised in history and that our prayers and efforts contribute to that victory.

So the final A section (chapter 3:16-19) forms a fitting conclusion to the whole book. It’s not up to us to know the times and seasons. Habakkuk resolves himself to patiently wait and trust however long it takes. This is precisely what Jesus told the apostles when they eagerly wanted the full kingdom glories right away. He said in Acts 1,

It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

It’s not for us to know the when. It’s for us to have faith to live as He

instructs and to leave the results in His hands. And He promises that when we do live by faith, He will empower us with the Holy Spirit to supernaturally fulfill our responsibilities.

Of course, that is the heart of the book of Habakkuk as well. You come to this same conclusion whether you read the book in a linear fashion (as some do - from the doubts of chapter 1 to the hope of chapter 3) or whether you notice the chiasm (as Dorsey and others do). The faith and patience called for at the end of the book are also the focus of the heart of the book. So turn back to chapter 2:1-5, which we skipped over earlier.

Some people see Habakkuk as arrogantly challenging God in these verses - as in, "I'm going to sit here till you give me a satisfactory answer; you owe me an answer." No - I don't see it that way. He has already said that he fears the Lord. Habakkuk knows that he probably needs to have correction, so the last clause of verse 1 says, "And what I will answer when [not if, but when] I am corrected." He's open to correction. He knows he will probably need correction. That shows humility. God dictates, we stand corrected. And when God calls upon us, we have an obligation to answer. So the first part of verse 1 is simply a statement that he will humbly stand at attention to see what the Lord will say to him. This is not arrogance; this is humility.

And in verses 2-5 God gives His answer. He says, "Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it." This book is not just about Habakkuk getting his questions answered. This book addresses the concerns of all the elect in every age. We all have things we face that make us wonder, "Why?" "Why me?" "Why now?" "How long?" And sometimes those tough questions paralyze God's people. Well, according to this verse God gave this little book to give us the ability to run even when we don't feel like it. "Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it." If you interpret Habakkuk correctly it will give you faith, hope, and a determination to throw off apathy and cynicism and to serve God faithfully no matter what happens to your crops, your health, or anything else. Sadly, too many interpretations of Habakkuk leave you depressed, hopeless and passively waiting to be bailed out by the Second Coming. That's is so grossly unbiblical.

And though the principles apply to every age, God is especially writing this book for the New Covenant people of God. He says in verse 3,

For the vision is yet for an appointed time; But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; Because it will surely come, It will not tarry.

God won't be late by one second. He is not denying that it might take a long time, but He won't be late by one second. He keeps His schedule. His appointed time is guaranteed for all events in history. Interestingly, both the Greek LXX translation of the Hebrew and the book of Hebrews (which quotes this paragraph) both apply the "it" to a Person (the Messiah), thus personifying the vision. Jesus is after all, the Word. The vision will be fulfilled, but it can only be fulfilled because of a "He" who is yet for an appointed time, and He will speak and will not lie, and though He tarries, wait for Him, because He will surely come and He will not tarry. And of course Christ has come, and in Him all the promises of Scripture (the vision) are Yes and Amen. He is the vision and the giver of the vision. Every jot of Scripture is fulfilled in Him. So the book of Hebrews is not stretching the Scripture by applying this to Jesus.

Verse 4 insists that proud people cannot connect with this because they are not upright in soul, "But the just shall live by his faith." This clause is quoted three times in the New Testament. Paul quotes this verse twice to teach justification by faith (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11). Hebrews 10:38 quotes it to prove that the Christian life that was begun by faith must continue to be lived by faith or God will have no pleasure in us. The just are constantly called to live and walk by faith in Christ and in Christ alone. That being the case, it is no wonder that the faith of verse 4b is contrasted with the pride of verse 4a. A prideful man depends on self and trusts in self and boasts in self. But the man of faith takes his eyes off of himself and begins His walk by trusting in Christ's imputed righteousness (we call that justification) and continues His walk by trusting in Christ's imparted righteousness (we call that sanctification and dominion). The man of faith finds meaning and identity in Christ because His whole life is characterized by faith. As Charles Spurgeon said,

The faith which saves is not one single act done and ended on a certain day: it is an act continued and persevered in throughout the entire life of man. The just not only commences to live by his faith, but he continues to live by his faith: he does not begin in the spirit and end in the flesh, nor go so far by grace, and the rest of the way by works of the law... Faith is essential all along; every day and all the day, in all things. Our natural life begins by breathing, and it must be continued by breathing; what the breath is to the

body, that is faith to the soul.¹

The just shall live by faith.

Well, since this message is the heart of the book (the very center of the chiasm), it is no wonder that Habakkuk also ends the book by singing a song with the same theme - a song that we will shortly be singing. No matter how bad life might be, Habakkuk was determined to trust God, rejoice in God, follow God, and seek to please God. It's pretty self-explanatory, so let me simply read it. Habakkuk 3:17-19.

17 Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls— 18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. 19 The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills.

This is a statement that we need to repeatedly make. When life begins to turn bad on us, Satan will tempt us to doubt God, doubt ourselves, and doubt the possibility of growth. But Habakkuk preaches to us and says, “Don't do that. Don't think that way. No matter how bad things go, determine to rejoice in the Lord. Though Satan may be able to take a lot of things from you, He can't take away the Lord. And the Lord is your strength. The Lord can give you light in the darkness and joy in the midst of sorrow.”

He ends the book by saying,

To the Chief Musician. With my stringed instruments.

That last phrase indicates that God does not simply want Habakkuk to sing this. He gives it to the chief musician to teach it to the congregation. He calls upon all the elect in every age to express the same determination to trust, follow, rejoice in, and serve the living God no matter how difficult life may seem. With Job, Habakkuk is willing to say, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.” May his faith be our faith today and forevermore. Amen.

¹Charles Spurgeon, “A Luther Sermon at the Tabernacle,” p. 715, as quoted by Elizabeth Rice Achtemeier, *Nahum–Malachi, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1986), 46.