

THE PROPHET OF FAITH

Habakkuk

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Today we look at the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. A short book of three chapters.

Habakkuk is the eighth prophet after Daniel. He was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah and Zephaniah. His time of ministry can be dated around 600 B.C. He prophesied in a time when his nation of Judah had fallen away from the revival under the good king Josiah. It is perched on the brink of destruction for God is raising up the Babylonians (also called the Chaldeans) against Habakkuk's country. The country is to be overrun.

It is this which the prophet sees and what this book is about. Theologians call the problem which is raised by Habakkuk a "theodicy," which describes the kind of struggle which Job wrestled with, which this prophet wrestles with, and which the child of God today wrestles with, that is, "Why it is from time to time we see the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering?" Job wrestles with this problem on a personal level. Habakkuk wrestles with it on the national level. Why is it that so many within the country of Judah that are righteous will suffer where the wicked will prosper?

The book is divided really into three parts. Habakkuk's first complaint and the Lord's response to that complaint, 1:1–11. Then Habakkuk's second complaint to the Lord, 1:12–2:20. Then in chapter 3 a prayer which the prophet makes to the Lord.

This is an enormously important and exciting book.

I. Habakkuk's first complaint and God's response

Habakkuk's complaint to the Lord, he begins by saying, "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you

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make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted” (Habakkuk 1:2–4, NIV).

You see his response to God: “God, you’re not doing anything about the problem of evil. Are your eyes blind that you cannot see the fact that the righteous are suffering and the wicked are prospering?” Here he’s referring to his own fellow countrymen, many of whom have fallen away from God after the time of revival under King Josiah. A few that were left, still clinging in their faith to the Lord, are having it badly go against them. Justice is perverted. Evidently their lands, their property, their successes, their inheritance are being stripped from them and the wheels of justice are not doing anything about the situation. And God seems powerless in the heavens.

So strong is Habakkuk’s cry to the Lord that he in verse 2 in the Hebrew uses two words for the word “cry.”. In English it’s the same word but the first “How long shall I cry for help?” is simply a cry for help. A cry that says, “I’m in need. Do something.” The second cry which the prophet refers to is the word which is the cry of complaint and lament that God is not doing anything.

This prophet is having a terrible time, because he is evidently, like many people, been brought up to believe that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. Habakkuk’s problem is the problem of a righteous man who is in despair when he finds that the practical experiences of life contradict his faith. He had believed that everything which would happen for the righteous would be for good. That had been his understanding and his faith and his commitment. But now experience is teaching him another matter. He cries to God for an answer.

We learn from this prophet and the Book of Job and other parts of Scripture that it is all right to come to God with our questions. Sometimes we are taught it is wrong to ask questions. We derive this from Thomas who was the Doubter. Yet we find that the Lord never even cut Thomas

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off because he had questions. Rather the Lord allowed him to bring his questions to Him. We should not try to make up something that isn't there and pretend that there is an easy and glib answer to the searching questions which we have from time to time in life. God does not say to the prophet for asking the question, "You have no right to question me. Who are you to interrogate me?" The prophet's interrogation of God is not "God, you've got to prove yourself to me in order for me to believe you," but it's just an honest "Why?" I've had to learn from Scripture that it is all right. God is not going to chastise us for coming to him with an honest "Why?"

The Lord gives the prophet an answer. It is not an answer that Habakkuk expected to receive from God. God's answer in verses 5–11 is simply this: "I'm going to take care of the problem of evil in Judah, the problem of rebellion and backsliding which has occurred. Here's how I'm going to do it. I am raising up the Chaldeans (the Babylonians) and they are going to bring the land into captivity." The Lord in his message describes how terrible the Chaldeans are. When I looked at the prophet Nahum I described the violence of the Assyrians who did atrocities of war. Babylon is the power that comes into being after Assyria. If Assyria was bad it doesn't hold a candle to Babylon. In fact so devastating was the Babylonian war machine that when they conquered Nineveh, this great city, they so obliterated even its foundations that a few years later no one could even find the place. When the prophet is given the word from the Lord, "I'm raising up the Babylonians and using them as instruments of mine and they are going to take care of the evil in the land," Habakkuk is astounded because he recognizes that not only will the evil be captive, but also the good people in the land. The remnant will suffer as well.

While God has answered his question it has only arisen in him a second response to God and a second question. And a more deep question. If Habakkuk was astounded as to why God wasn't

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doing something about the problem of evil, he is shattered by God's answer that the way he's going to take care of the problem of evil is to raise up the Babylonians.

And I'm sure in the counsels of Babylon no one had the foggiest idea that the reason why they were being raised up as a power was because God was behind the scenes of history doing the raising. An intriguing theme throughout all of scripture. This occurs in the Book of Revelation as well, even with the last great end-time power. It thinks it has raised itself up. It thinks that it is great in its own mind. But it is God, who is in control of history, who is the power behind all powers.

II. Habakkuk's second complaint and God's response

Habakkuk, in 1:12, raises a complaint to God when he learns that God is going to use the Babylonians. He starts off first of all with a confession of faith before he gives his complaint. He sets a lesson for us here, that when we bring to God our questions it is well to preface them by a statement of our commitment to the Lord. I recognize that in serving the Lord my commitment to Him can somehow survive the questions I have. The commitment and the relationship is more foundational than the perplexities which I go through. In going through the perplexities whatever they are, I must not lose a grip on the relationship. I must reaffirm that relationship to the Lord. So the prophet says to God, "O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die" (Habakkuk 1:12, NIV). That's his great statement of faith. Whatever happens I know that you're going to carry us through. "O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish" (NIV). Lord, I'm willing to accept that this is what You're going to do. Then he begins suddenly to raise to the Lord his complaint. "Lord, you have purer eyes than to look upon evil. How since you cannot look on wrong, can you use these Chaldeans? These terrible people. These people whose military machine is so

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great.” Habakkuk compares their military machine to a net that is cast out into the sea to catch fish. It’s kind of a figure for war. They wind up building worship objects to their nets, to their seines. That is to say, they build objects of worship to their military machine. So atrocious is their military machine that when they’re done taking all the nations they still keep on going just for the spirit of conquest alone, mercilessly slaying nations wherever. Lord, are you going to close your ears and eyes to this people? Are you not going to do anything about the Chaldeans? You’re raising them up to judge Judah. They deserve to be judged. They’re worse than the worst people in Judah. How could you possibly use them?

Then when he asks these questions, in chapter 2:1, he does something very significant. He waits for an answer. It’s one thing to keep asking God questions. But it is well to get oneself in to a quiet place and listen for God to speak. His prayer and communion with God is meant to be more than a one-way dialogue. It is meant to be a place of listening to the Lord. We sometimes read the prophet and we sometimes think that God, when He replied, always spoke audibly. I’m not so sure God spoke audibly. I’m not so sure that God spoke to the prophets many times in the same way he speaks to us—that quiet, overwhelming conviction in the inner man that God has given you a word, a word that is so certain, a word that has not come audibly but a word which is in your spirit which you know to be true. This prophet decides that he will wait for the Lord to answer. He says, “I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts [an overlook probably on the city wall]” (Habakkuk 2:1, NIV). He wants to get a high place where he can kind of look down on the situation, get a perspective on everything. That’s good. Instead of crawling into the cellar he gets up on the tower where he gets some perspective in his life. “I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint” (NIV).

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He believed that there was an answer to his problem because he believed God. He sought a place of seclusion, a place where he could wait. It is most difficult to wait.

As he waits the Lord answers him. The Lord's answer in verses 2–19 is profound. It consists of at least three answers to the prophet's complaint. And to the prophet's wrestling with the whole question of evil.

The Lord's first answer found in verses 2–3 is simply this, that the Lord's activity stands long lengths of time. If you want to see immediate answers to difficult questions you will not see immediate answers because often it will take the span of years or decades or even generations to see how God works in the flow of human history. And how ultimately He evens the score.

“Then the LORD replied: ‘Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it [a large-print Bible, so big that the guy who's running down the street may grab the headlines]. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay’” (Habakkuk 2:2–3, NIV). What the prophet is saying, if God gives him the answer there's not always an immediate answer to the question but if you will wait the answer will come.

It seems the Lord is telling the prophet there are some questions that are put in abeyance. You don't get an immediate answer. But while waiting, don't lose your faith. The answer will come and it will be plain and it will not lie.

There are some principles which may not be vindicated in one lifetime. There are some questions even which may not be answered in the course of a whole lifetime. Good men may die under a cloud and bad persons may live out their days in the sunshine. But what the prophet is being told by the Lord is, justice will be done.

The first answer is there is not always an immediate answer but it will all be plain if you wait.

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The second answer that the Lord makes to Habakkuk in verses 4–5 is that the soul who is righteous shall live by his faith, whereas the person who simply imbibes wine and walks in arrogance will come to a place of death. But that great phrase is given in 2:4, “But the righteous will live by his faith” (NIV).

What is the Lord saying to the prophet? Simply this: the righteous man is caught in the dilemma because he has this huge question, “God, what are you doing about evil? Why are you allowing this to happen?” The Lord first of all is saying it may take some time for you to realize the answer. But secondly he’s saying, while you are waiting for the answer, the righteous man will live by faith. By faith in the God who has the answer. By faith in the God who will reveal himself. And in the interim of wrestling with the problem all the righteous man has is his faith because the circumstances of life often contradict his faith. Often lead to another conclusion. Often bounce against us with hardness. But the righteous shall live by faith. By trusting God and a fidelity to the Lord.

This becomes probably the most important verse quoted in the New Testament. Paul quotes it in Romans where he says in the beginning of Romans, “The just shall live by his faith” (1:17). He quotes again in Galatians when he’s wrestling with those who want to make Christianity a mishmash of rules and regulations. He says, “The just shall live by faith” (Galatians 3:11). The writer of Hebrews when he describes the terrible persecution that has come upon the church of the living God where he describes the great suffering that is going on says to Christian believers “The just shall live by his faith” (Hebrews 10:38). Incredible answer. An answer we must grab hold of ourselves. God is the unchanging one in the midst of the change and the circumstances of life. Our faith is in a God who reveals himself in total fairness and love. That in the times when we have the “Why’s” we also know that the answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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A third answer which the Lord gives to the prophet in verses 6–19, in regard to Babylon, is that wickedness carries with it the seed of self-destruction. The Babylonians will get theirs as well. It'll take time to see it but it will come because what one sows one reaps. Therefore in this particular section, verses 6–19, the prophet receives an answer from the Lord in regard to five woes that are pronounced against Chaldea, or Babylon. There is a woe upon the plunderer for he himself shall be plundered. There is a woe upon the person who thinks only of individual gain for he will forfeit his own life as he pursues material things, verses 7–11. There is a woe to those who oppress others, verses 12–14, for those who build cities by violence will find those same cities destroyed by violence. Verses 15–17, woe to him who reduces a people to helplessness for that person who makes helpless another individual by his violence shall also have violence come upon him. A fifth woe in verses 18–19 is a woe to those who resort to idols. For those who put their trust in idols will find the idols are helpless to save them.

What the prophet is saying is so foundational. It is kind of the law of return on life. What you give is what you get. If you dish something out to people it gets ultimately dished back to you. How true we see this in so many phases of life. Parents who neglect their children, in their old age find their children neglect them. Persons who are mean to their employees find that the employees respond in like kind to the employer. And vice versa. Persons who sow selfishness in turn do not reap love. This inevitable law of seeding and harvest, God is saying, is built into the fabric of human life. It's part of God's answer to the problem of evil that evil reaps a harvest of evil on its own.

The Lord having answered the prophet in these ways, the prophet then looks up and sees God above the storms of life. He cries out in an expression of faith, “But the LORD is in his holy

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temple; let all the earth keep silence before him” (Habakkuk 2:20, NIV). In that phrase the prophet is saying, “I’ve run to the end of my questions.”

I’m not so sure that God has answered every question which the prophet had. But he had given the prophet sufficient answer that the prophet was now willing to say that he had found God in the midst of his dilemma. He had found a sure friend upon whom he could rely. God has thrown light upon his problem but his ultimate healing of his soul was not so much specific details and answers but it was in fact that he had gotten a hold of the hand of God and the ways of God and he had come into experience of His loving presence. The just will live by His faith. He had understood a truth, which few before him had seen. He had understood that in every crisis God could be trusted. The Lord is in his holy temple.

III. Habakkuk’s prayer of praise

In chapter 3, Habakkuk, having come into that place of confidence and trust in the Lord, breathes out a prayer to God. He had begun by upbraiding God. He ends by worshipping the Lord. He has gone through a process which we go through in regard to the mystery of faith. He has started his work by being bewildered and confused because he has simply seen circumstances. But when he has seen circumstances he has gone on to the second phase. He has spoken to the Lord about the circumstances.

When he is finished doing that he has gone on to the third phase. He has listened to the Lord’s answer. When that phase has been completed he is now ready in chapter 3 to sing in triumph over the circumstances and to realize that God cannot be measured by the circumstances at all. God is above and beyond the circumstances. Therefore what Habakkuk does in chapter 3 is what Paul does in Philippians 4, seeing Jesus Christ as greater than the circumstances and declaring with a confident affirmation of faith, “No matter what happens I will rejoice.” So writing the

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letter from a prison cell Paul is able to say, “In all circumstances I am convinced that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I will rejoice, and again I say, I will rejoice.”

In 3:1–2 at the beginning of his prayer Habakkuk asks God if he would revive his work in the midst of the years. Here’s an important prayer. Having received the answer that it may take years to see God’s ultimate answers to his question, he nevertheless does not wait for an end time to pray that God would work upon his people to bring them to repentance. But he says, “Lord, in the midst of the years, right now, revive your work.”

Chapter 3 is evidently meant to be sung in the worship of the temple. It was a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet according to a musical tune that was used in the chanting or the singing of this prayer. We see at the end of chapter 3 that it was dedicated to the choirmaster of stringed instruments.

He prays for renewal in verses 1–2. Then in verses 3–15 he gives an incredible praise to the Lord cast in poetic form, tremendous imagery. Seen God as shaking the nations, as shattering the mountains, as sinking the hills, describing in a symbolic form that when God moves upon the earth His presence is one of shaking. In these verses, 3–15, the prophet is recalling God’s deliverance for his people in the past, particularly in reference to the Exodus, God’s greatest manifestation of power in the Old Testament. It recalls how God has done something for His people. Because God has called His people to himself, he can remember and rejoice in the character of God. When he looks at the current circumstances, he must remember the God who has called his people.

So often again we need the perspective of this prophet, in looking at the storms of life we go through. One of the circumstances we often find ourselves in is we disassociate ourselves in the present from what God has done in the past. We forget that God has called us. That God has

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revealed himself in Jesus Christ, that the Lord has saved us. Because of that confidence we have we can rely on the treasure of experience that God has given us for the present moment.

He comes to a place after he has seen the revelation of God, verse 16, of trembling in his body and yet the trembling and holiness before the Lord and quiet rest. Coming to this place of quiet rest in verses 17–19 he expresses his deep trust in the Lord. He says, in essence, “Though the agricultural crops fail, the fig trees do not blossom, the fruit not be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, the fields yield no fruit, the flock be cut off from the fold, there be no herd in the stalls, both vegetable and animal life cut off so that there’s even no food. . . .” What he’s referring to is the possibility of famine. Even though here be famine, “yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.”

What he is saying is simply this, that his faith is not “I will take care of God and God will take care of me. If I do something for God then God will do something for me.” But rather, it is “No matter what happens, I have my faith in the Lord. I will trust in Him.” Because he has come to this basic standpoint of trust and rest he has joy in the Lord. He has found strength in the Lord and he has found elevation in the Lord for he describes himself as having feet like hinds’ feet, a reference to a mountain deer that can go lightly on his hoofs in the high places. Everyone knows that the mule is a plodder. He doesn’t run on the big high mountain tops because he’s not agile. So you put a burden on a mule and he’s going to plod, one step after another. The prophet is saying that as we come to faith in the Lord, as we understand what He is doing in the circumstances of life, we do not need to be so burdened down with a burden that we plod or don’t move at all. But God can literally give us a faith that soars. A faith that, like hinds’ feet on high places, skips and jumps in the joy of the Lord.

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As someone has stated, when the circumstances of life has swept our faith off its feet, we will find that in the Lord our faith has wings and we can fly. Another beautiful way of describing hinds' feet on high places.

This prophecy, as we look at it in its wholeness, gives us these comparisons: Habakkuk begins by wailing and he ends by singing. He begins by complaining but he ended contented. He began by looking about him and in looking about him he was distracted and perplexed. But he ended by looking and listening to God and he therefore is satisfied and rejoices.

May God through His Word inspire our hearts to have that like faith and trust in Him.

Closing Prayer

We think of the world's change and decay all around I see. Thou, O Lord, art the changeless one who abides forever and forever. We will not let go our confidence in a day of shaking but we will hold to Thee. We will find our joy, strength, and elevation in Thee. Let Your Word today be a word that is deeply engrafted in our hearts. We need Thy Word. We need the comfort that it brings. The wholeness, the answers that it provides. In the individual wrestlings of our life let us reach out to Thee and trust Thee no matter what. For to live for Thee, to live in Thee, to have thy great gift of eternal life is surely the greatest comfort we could have and the greatest joy we could ever humanly know. Thank you for loving us. In Jesus' name. Amen.