

Habakkuk

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As we continue our trek through the minor prophets, skipping only the books that I don't think I can get an entire sermon out of, we come to the book of Habakkuk. We know nothing about this prophet other than what appears in this three-chapter segment of prophecy and praise, and within it, Habakkuk doesn't even do anything so basic as list the kings in whose reign he prophesied. Our best guess is that he wrote in the late seventh century B.C.

However, despite the obscurity of its author, the book has much to tell us. Most of the minor prophets were kind of like human typewriters. They wrote what God wanted them to write; they did what He wanted them to do. The big exception to this, of course, is Jonah, who, as soon as the word of the Lord came to him, took off running in the opposite direction. Like most of the prophets, Habakkuk doesn't like what he sees around him. However, he's similar to Jonah in that he doesn't like what God tells him He is going to do about it, either. Habakkuk, though, doesn't opt out of God's will by fleeing to Tarshish. Instead, he starts asking God questions, not because he's rebelling, but because he's troubled and wants to understand God's will, almost like Job does in the book of Job. However, for whatever reason, Habakkuk gets better answers than Job ever got, and this dialogue between Habakkuk and God, as well as Habakkuk's response once he finally grasps the extent of God's will, makes up the content of the book.

In this exploration, Habakkuk touches on many issues that still concern us today. We still want to know why God tolerates the wicked, why His instruments of punishment are often more wicked than those He is punishing, and what will happen to the righteous when the world seems to be falling down all around them. Habakkuk's central answer is also a central answer of our faith. Habakkuk 2:4, in fact, is one of the most widely quoted Old Testament passages in the Bible. Let's consider these things and more as we ponder the book of Habakkuk.

The First Dialogue.

Let's begin by looking at the first dialogue between Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk opens this dialogue with his question in Habakkuk 1:2-4. As always, we get some idea of what the prophet is like from the concerns he addresses. Habakkuk doesn't appear concerned with corrupt officials nor even with sins like idolatry. Instead, his words paint the picture of a land that has become lawless. All kinds of people in Judah have all kinds of bloody plans, and the law is either incapable of restraining the wicked or perverted by the wicked so that it serves their ends instead. Habakkuk sees all of these things and is struck by how unconcerned the Lord appears. Doesn't He care that all this evil is done by His people?

God's reply appears in Habakkuk 1:5-6. He tells Habakkuk about a group of people that is very familiar to us, but of whom Habakkuk would not have heard yet. They are the Chaldeans, whom we also call the Babylonians. God says that He is raising them up suddenly, and that's exactly what happened. The Chaldeans spent a couple of centuries under the thumb of the Assyrians, until they got a capable warrior king named Nabopolassar. When Habakkuk was writing this book, this king was in the midst of conquering the Assyrians and destroying Nineveh, and it wasn't going to be very much longer before the Babylonians started their march down the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, destroying every nation they came across. The people of Judah didn't realize it yet, but the steamroller was coming already.

If we ever feel oppressed by the wickedness that we see around us, we can take heart from the notion that it won't endure forever. Historically, every great nation on earth has remained great for only as long as it remained morally upright. Once those nations became corrupt, God said, "Enough! No more!" and took their dominion away from them. Through the centuries, it's happened everywhere from Rome to China. There's no reason to think that any of the nations of our day would be exempt, including our own. In a world ruled by God, evil will not long prosper.

The Second Dialogue.

However, this answer only inspires Habakkuk to begin his second dialogue with God. He files his question in Habakkuk 1:12-13. Habakkuk understands God's answer, all right. He recognizes that the Chaldeans are going to stomp a mudhole into wicked Judah. However, that doesn't do anything to resolve the injustice that Habakkuk sees. The Jews are wicked, yes, and they deserve to be punished. The problem is that the Chaldeans, God's chosen instrument of judgment, are even more wicked. How can a pure and righteous God use the more evil to punish the less evil? To put Habakkuk's reaction in perspective, it would be like if a prophet told us today that the U.S. was going to be destroyed by drug dealers and terrorists. We'd say, "Yeah, we're bad, but those guys are even worse. What about them?"

However, even though we see Habakkuk questioning God's decision, his attitude is of confusion, not rebellion. This comes across plainly in Habakkuk 2:1. Habakkuk doesn't think God is making a mistake. He just doesn't understand why God is doing what He's doing, and when God speaks, he expects to be corrected by God's words.

Like Habakkuk, we also need to make sure that we stay on the right side of the line between seeking clarification and expressing rebellion. I think all of us would say that God's word isn't exactly the way that we would have written it. Maybe we don't understand why He prohibited musical instruments in His worship. Maybe we struggle with the harshness of His laws about marriage, divorce, and remarriage. However, we should never assume that just because we don't see the reason, that there isn't a reason, and we especially should never start tossing out the commandments we don't like. Once we start rewriting God's law to suit ourselves, all that remains is chaos. Instead, we must recognize that God's law is God's law, regardless of whether we understand it. We don't have to understand. We just have to obey.

However, when Habakkuk comes to God with this honest questioning, God gives him a surprisingly complete answer. It has three main sections, and the first section appears in Habakkuk 2:2-4. Here, God is doing nothing less than setting out a general rule for what is going to happen with mankind. The proud, whoever they may be, whether they hail from Judah, Babylon, or nations not yet born, the proud are always going to be destroyed by their own inherent weaknesses. On the other hand, no matter what storms sweep across the world, the just are going to live by their faith.

This is reassuring news in a physical sense, because it reaffirms God's promise to take care of us, but it's even more important spiritually. In fact, this text is one of the primary Old Testament passages that the New Testament uses to explain our covenant with God. It is quoted no less than three times, in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. It gives us hope not just for today, but for eternity. There are three elements to this promise. First, we have to satisfy the condition of being just. We have to be seeking the righteousness of God in our lives. Second, we must believe in God and in His power to save us when we cannot save ourselves. If we have both of these things, we will live. We will endure through the trials of this life, and we will also pass unscathed through the judgment that will destroy so many.

The second prong of God's answer to Habakkuk is that, in accordance with the principle He's already laid out, the Chaldeans will also be destroyed. Consider Habakkuk 2:6-8. God's point is that the wheel always turns. Just as the Chaldeans were rising up to destroy Judah and a whole host of other nations, so too the time would come when the Chaldeans would in turn be destroyed. When the Jews were led away into captivity in 586 BC, it would probably have seemed impossible to them that so powerful an enemy would crumble too. As it turned out, though, it was only 70 years from that day before the Persians under Cyrus overthrew the Chaldeans and returned the Israelites to their homeland.

The reasons for this tremendous reversal of fortune are given in the third prong of God's answer, in Habakkuk 2:18-20. All of the idols of the world are useless and powerless, but God is anything but. He is the true ruler of the world, and His reign is eternal. When we see a God who is both so powerful and so good, it only stands to reason that both the wicked nations of the world and the wicked people of the world will eventually be brought to judgment. This will happen even when it seems impossible to us. Who would have thought in 1940, as Nazi tanks were rolling through the streets of Paris, that it would only be five years before Hitler and his empire were brought low? Who could have imagined in the 1950s that the Communist tide that seemed poised to engulf the world would in 50 years have ebbed completely? In days to come, it is certain that there will be other evil empires, other tyrants who seem invincible, but we can rest assured that they can only go as far as God allows them. As is true for nations, so too it is true for us.

Habakkuk's Prayer.

After this three-part answer, Habakkuk has no more questions for God. Instead, he gives voice to a prayer that expresses his new understanding. We see the first theme of this prayer begun in Habakkuk 3:2-3. Habakkuk now understands that God is in control and that His will determines the fate of all men. Habakkuk also knows that his people will be crushed by the Chaldeans, and there's nothing he can do to avert that. His response, then, is to call upon the mercy of God to soften the blow that is going to land and to recognize that through it all, God will be glorified.

This too, which is something of a theme through the minor prophets, is something that we need to embrace about God. God is going to do what He is going to do. We cannot hope to deflect His power, but we can take shelter in His mercy. We need to fit ourselves into an understanding of the world that grasps that, above all, He will triumph.

We see how clearly Habakkuk understands this from his closing remarks in Habakkuk 3:16-18. Clearly, Habakkuk is not thrilled about the coming judgment. In fact, he's scared to death. However, he knows that an attempt to stir up resistance or flee would be futile. His best strategy is to wait quietly for the salvation of God.

His next words reveal just how committed Habakkuk is to that course. In just one verse, he paints a picture of a Judah that has lost everything, even what they need to eat. He says that even if there are no figs, no grapes, no olives, no grain, no sheep, and no cattle, that's not going to destroy his faith. Even in the midst of complete devastation, he is still going to rejoice in God and trust in God, both because it's his only hope and because that's just who God is.

That, friends, is the kind of faith and perseverance that will get us to heaven. Some people are situational Christians. They trust in God when it's easy, when they aren't enduring any difficult times, when there aren't any sins that particularly appeal. Of course, once serving God becomes hard, they find something else to do. If we wish to lay hold of our reward, though, we must continue on no matter what, and must never cease to rejoice in the God of our salvation.