

Habakkuk: An Introduction

This week, we begin with the OT Book of Habakkuk. So, why this short, three-chapter OT book at this time? Well, my plans are to move to Hebrews very soon, which will take a bit of time. So, I wanted to move back to the OT, even if for brief period. Also, this is a fitting book for our day. In it we find a true prophet of God, living in a very difficult period in the history of the nation of Israel. And though we live in a different time, in a different historical context, in a different nation, as regards the fundamental truths that every person faces, there is nothing new under the sun. With this in mind, this book will be very helpful to us in the coming days. So, here is my plan for this introduction: 1) Author & Date; 2) Setting; 3) Theology; 3) Applications

1. Author and Date. The author is obviously a man named Habakkuk as v. 1 says, “**The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.**” Really, nothing concrete is known about the life of Habakkuk. Some say he was a musician or sang in the Temple Choir because of the last verse of the book which says, “**to the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.**” One legend even places him in the Lion’s Den with Daniel. But, we have no facts that give evidence for such claims. At the end of the day, Habakkuk is the “voice” of God, as his desire is for his readers to see God, not himself. I am reminded of the words of the Apostle Peter who says, “**No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit**” (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

Now, concerning the date, I believe the evidence points toward to the end of the 7th Century. Look at 1:6. Habakkuk references the Chaldeans, saying God will raise them up as a powerful nation to judge Israel. The Chaldeans are the the rising “Babylonians” of the east. And we know they will conquer Jerusalem, and the Southern Kingdom will ultimately fall in 587 B.C. So, this means Habakkuk is prophesying in the days that God is “raising up” this nation. They (the Babylonians) haven’t reached their zenith of power yet. It is also important to mention that Habakkuk, along with Nahum and Zephaniah all prophesied during the 7th century and are very similar in their prophecies.

2. Setting. There was a time when Israel was the dominant power of the world. This culminated in the Kingship of Solomon, the son of David. But, after Solomon died, there was a revolution where the Kingdom split into the northern and southern kingdoms, ten tribes in the north and two tribes in the south. The Northern Kingdom, often called “Israel,” never really produced any good kings and was conquered and carried into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The southern kingdom, often called “Judah” was centered in Jerusalem, and experienced both good kings and bad kings. When there is a good king, worship and devotion to God is better. When there is a bad king, worship and devotion are not so good. And it seems to me that as the years go on from David and Solomon, there is generally more and more idol worship and unfaithfulness. And through the years there is great decline in immorality. I picture the history of Judah like a person going down an escalator while playing with a yoyo. Israel is the yoyo, sometimes up, sometimes down, but always on a steady decline to the destruction that will come in 587 when the Babylonians take all their power away and carry the people into captivity.

At the turn of the 8th century, the King was Hezekiah; a good king who reigned 29 years. The next king was a bad king named Manasseh. He reigned for 55 years and was very evil. He allowed religious prostitution and human sacrifice. When he died in 642, there was another evil King named Amon who reigned for only 2 years. In 640, the great King Josiah (a good king with many reforms), reigned for 31 years until 609 B.C. Now, we know from history that Jerusalem is conquered and destroyed in 587 B.C. Its inhabitants are carried away to Babylon. From 609 to 587 there were only 4 kings remaining, all of them evil. And these were the years Habakkuk lived and prophesied.

When we read the history of Israel, it seems that everything happens so fast. We can read a couple pages in 2 Kings and move 40 or 50 years from one king to the next. But, for Habakkuk (and other prophets), time moved as slow or as fast as it does for us; 40 years is a long time to live through such decline in morality and decline in power and influence in the world, to become really a “nobody” in the world. And then in 597 Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and conquered it, carrying away all their treasures and all the sacred pieces of the Temple, also taking the king and his family and many of the leaders to Babylon. And he left a “puppet” king, Zedekiah as his representative. They lasted 10 more years until they rebelled and Nebuchadnezzar finally destroyed the city, its walls, and the Temple itself (587). It was during these times Habakkuk prophesied these few words we have from him.

3. Main Theological Themes.

i. The Justice of God. Look at vv. 1-4: **“O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.”** Brothers and sisters, the timing of God’s justice is often a mystery beyond our wisdom. But the message is clear. Eventually He will judge with justice every work into judgment whether it be good or evil. This message is SO needed today. Everyone these days is concerned with “justice,” with very little or no understanding. With Israel of Habakkuk’s time, many of them still felt they were favored by God and He would continue to bless them, even in their sins.

Brothers and sisters, I do not believe we are a “Christian” nation “deserving” of God’s continued favor on us. In fact, I see that we are really in the middle of a “moral” revolution. Our sins as a nation are ever before us. And as Christians we see them. Abortion is everywhere. We cry “justice” for all. But, what is “just” about taking life from those who cannot choose, those who are the most vulnerable, those who should receive our protection? We speak of the right of the woman to choose. Well, what about baby? Where is his/her right (not to mention the Father). This is not “just.”

On another front, a couple weeks ago, Abigail went to have her ears pierced. She is almost 17 years old and the store called and had Kristen come down to give consent, with the signing of papers, etc. Yet, young ladies can receive abortions without their parents’ consent. And it is being proposed that a young child can “decide” without parental consent if they are “male” or “female.” I think when we consider such immorality in our country and the world, we think as Habakkuk: **“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help . . . Why do you make me see iniquity . . . and we may think, “the law if paralyzed and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.”**

ii. The Judgment of God. This truth follows God’s justice. Look at vv. 5-6. God answers Habakkuk, saying: **“Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans . . .”** Though difficult as it may be, God tells Habakkuk He will bring judgment upon Judah. And this is judgment will come from the great power of the world, the Babylonians. As God brought judgment upon the northern kingdom through Assyria, so God will do the same with Judah. Well, here you might say, *“Wait a minute! Weren’t the Babylonians worse than Judah? Is that just! Is that fair!”* As we go through the book, we will see how Habakkuk deals with such thoughts. But for now, know that God will always do what is right. He will bring judgment upon all evil, upon all sin. **“And there are none righteous, no not one”** (Rom. 3:23). And later in the book, we see that God will also judge the Babylonians for their sins. In cp. 2 we have 5 “Woes.”

In 2:6: **“Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own—for how long?—and loads himself with pledges.”** In 2:9: **“Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach or harm!”** In 2:12: **“Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity.”** In 2:15: **“Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink—you pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness!”** In 2:19 **“Woe to him who says to a wooden think, Awake!”** We must remember: God will always do what is right!

iii. The Covenant of God. Now, we do not see the word “covenant” in Habakkuk. But, the entire context of the Book reminds God’s people that God will not forsake them. God will not cast off his people, but will fulfill all his promises to them. Remember Abraham. God entered into a covenant with him saying, **“I will bless you, I will give you land, I will give you a multitude of children.”** Did Abraham see these things? No! He saw the beginnings, but he died short of fulfillment. But, how did he live? He lived by faith in the God who made these promises. Now look at 2:4: **“but the righteous shall live by his faith.”** He was saying to Habakkuk and others of faith. In the midst of complete ruin, trust me. Live by faith. I will not break my covenant with you.

iv. The Salvation of God. Both judgment and salvation are linked together in Habakkuk. The book begins with judgment upon Judah. Then, judgment comes to Babylon. But, in the middle of these judgments, Habakkuk (and those with faith) know that God will save them. Look at vv. 17-19: **“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I**

will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places."

4. Applications. Why do we need this book? What will we learn?

First, let me say that these words are always timely for the people of God, especially now, and in the days to come. We do not know the plan of God, but we know God will always tell us the truth. And, the Book of Habakkuk reminds us of the words of Paul in Rom. 8:28: **"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."**

Application: This book tells us to be patient and wait for the Lord. Look at 2:1. Habakkuk says, **"I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint."** No matter how difficult the days of this life, we must "stand strong as we wait for God to answer." We are always a people who wait. Look at 2:2-3: **"And the LORD answered me: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay."** But, as we wait, our eyes are fixed on the Word of God as He tells us what is true.

Application: This book teaches us about humility as we wait answers from God. Let me first say that we often don't get the answers we want, and often we don't get any specific reasons for the ways God works in history. We certainly don't know all the details. When something tragic or bad happens we often hear or say, "God has a purpose." And we are often thinking of his purpose right now. But it has been my experience that we don't usually get these "purposes" in this lifetime. But, the Word tells us the end result and the end purpose of God. How we wait reveals the "faith" of our hearts. How do you wait? Is it with great anger that continues? Or, is it with a patient and humble faith in God to bring about his purposes? Sometimes, the answers of God are not what we want, but we must trust in God's sovereignty.

Application: Sometimes Christians have a life of misery because of their circumstances. This is simply the truth. But, the "righteous will live by faith." I think of Heb. 11 where the writer speaks about the "faith" of God's people. I think of the end of the chapter: We read in v. 36 ff. **"Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the**

sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised.” And back in v. 13 we read: **“These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”** Brothers and sisters, we must learn to accept the providence of God in EVERY situation and every context, even through difficult times.

Applications: Christians can “complain” to God. But, the key is “how” we “complain.” But this is a “complaint” (word-game) that comes from faith, a faith that expects to hear from God a clear answer; which we often know ahead of time already.

What about the gospel? Is it here? Of course! We see God’s ultimate justice, judgment, salvation, in Christ, the author of a new covenant. We read this book through the lens of Christ! Habakkuk did not live to see the promise of the new covenant. But, we did! We have Christ! (gospel)

In the end, this book will help us live in this world, in this country, with this people.