

HABAKKUK

The Prophet who Questioned God

Historical context. Habakkuk prophesied shortly after Nahum and immediately before the exile 608-598BC. The Babylonians have defeated the Assyrians and are now threatening to destroy Judah where Habakkuk preaches. Habakkuk is a contemporary of Jeremiah.

Focus. As Habakkuk ponders the impending attack on Judah by the Babylonians and the violence that comes with it; he puts God “on trial.” He begins to ask the age-old questions: Why do the wicked prevail over the just? How can God allow such a situation to exist? Is God just? Is it possible that the actions of the Babylonians (called the Chaldeans in this book) are beyond the control of the God of Israel? Habakkuk asks the kinds of questions people in every age ask of God and his ways in the world.

The Collegeville Bible Commentary states: “*Several major religious motifs thread their way through Habakkuk’s prophecy: God’s absolute trustworthiness; God’s control of the universe; our inability to understand adequately the mysterious ways of God; our failure to fathom the mysteries of the universe and the colossal struggles of nature and politics; God’s determination not to tolerate violence, begotten by pride*” (p. 530).

DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

- Dialogue between God and the prophet (Chapters 1-2)
- Habakkuk’s prayer of faith (Chapter 3)

COMMENTARY

CHAPTERS 1-2: The Prophet questions God’s answers

“How long, O Lord? I cry for help but you do not listen. I cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not intervene.”(1:2)

“For see, I am raising up Chaldea, that bitter and unruly people....” (1:6)

1:1-5—Habakkuk’s questions. The book begins with Habakkuk engaged in prayer and asking God questions—questions to which there are no good answers. Habakkuk asks: *God, why all the violence and why do you not intervene?* Habakkuk’s situation

is one all of us can identify with. We look around and see violence and wonder why God isn’t doing something about it. We question and wonder about God’s lack of action. Often we are told we need only ask and God will answer. But that is often not what people experience. They ask but they feel that they are speaking to a God who is deaf to their concerns. It takes courage to say to God: *What’s up? I don’t understand your lack of action!*

In verse 4, Habakkuk raises another question: *Where’s justice?* With God-given laws and a divinely ordained system of justice, one might expect a society to function properly. But as Habakkuk looks around he sees no justice. *“The law becomes slack and justice never prevails”* (v. 4 RSV translation). Why does God, the creator of all mankind, permit things to become the way they are? Habakkuk is raising for us a question that emerges when our faith can make no sense of what is going on around us.

1:5-11—God’s first response. God’s response is not what Habakkuk is expecting. God says that he is raising up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians who will punish the wicked leaders of Judah for their sins. Back in the book of Judges, God frequently used neighboring nations to punish the Israelites for their infidelity to their covenant with God. God is at work even if Habakkuk does not see the big picture and even if God’s action is unacceptable to Habakkuk. In our prayer to God, his response may sometimes be totally different from what we expect, which can be challenging for us to accept.

1:12-17—God’s response is unacceptable to Habakkuk. How could an all-holy God use an unholy nation to judge a less evil people? God’s response seems to be out of harmony with how Habakkuk perceives God. Granted his people are bad, but the Babylonians are even worse. While Habakkuk acknowledges God’s need to punish his people, he cannot accept God’s *manner* of doing it. In Habakkuk’s preoccupation with God’s use of the Babylonians as God’s instrument of judgment for Jerusalem, there is the danger that he becomes oblivious to the judgment that his people deserve.

Pause: On 9/11, was God using terrorists to punish America for her sins? Looking back at that event, what meaning does it have for you? What message might God have been trying to communicate to us through that event?

2:1-5—God’s second response. The Lord tells Habakkuk:

“...Write down the vision clearly upon tablets so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses onto fulfillment and will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late. But the just man, because of his faith, shall live.” (2:2-4)

God responds that he has a plan or vision which in his time will evolve. Habakkuk must learn to be patient with God’s timing. God’s vision or plan is so important that the prophet is told to write it down so that it can be read to future generations.

2:4 stresses that faith in God is the key to righteous living. Faith is what enables us to keep a relationship with God even when his ways are incomprehensible and maddening to us.

2:5-20—Five Woes. Scholars are not sure whom the five woes are directed at. Is he referring to the Babylonian king or to the wicked in Judah? It really doesn’t matter since the behavior of both is similar—the wicked devouring the just. The lesson, however, is clear. Even though justice is not apparent in the world, one should trust in the Lord and be patient. All five woes are a condemnation of sinful behavior, especially the abuse of the poor and the just by the rich.

Pause: “Wait for the vision; it will surely come.” Have you often wondered what God’s vision is for you or your family? What helps you to be patient?

CHAPTER 3: Habakkuk’s Theophany

“O Lord, I have heard your renown and feared, O Lord, your work. In the course of the years revive it; in the course of the years make it known; in your wrath remember compassion!”(v.2)

“God, my Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet swift as those of hinds and enables me to go upon the heights.”(v.19)

This canticle of Habakkuk is found in *The Liturgy of the Hours, Morning Prayer*.

It seems that the prophet has had a theophany (vision of God) and here seeks to communicate it to us. These poetic verses vividly describe the effect of God’s presence in both the world of nature and the

nations. The theophany begins with reminiscences of God’s former appearances and action on behalf of his people. “O Lord, I have heard your renown...”(v.2).

Verses 3-15 allude to Israel’s experience of God in the Exodus, at Mount Sinai, and during the period of wilderness wandering. Habakkuk’s hope is that the God who acted in the past to defeat Israel’s enemies would once again act in the future. Habakkuk is resolved to wait patiently for “the day of distress that will come upon the people who attack us” (v.16).

Verses 17-19—Joy. Commenting on these final verses of the book, Peter Craigie writes:

A book that began with tortured questions from one tormented by experience concludes with a statement of rejoicing and joy (vv. 17-19). The expression of joy is notable for the context in which it is set; it is described not as a consequence of happy circumstances, but despite the failure of all those things that might normally be a source of joy (v. 17). In the midst of disappointment and in the absence of every standard sign of God’s blessing, Habakkuk can rejoice, for God “makes my feet like hinds’ feet, he makes me tread upon my high places” (v. 19). Again, it is the vision of God that has enabled the prophet to transcend his circumstances and give voice to praise. Where there is no vision, the people perish, but Habakkuk affirms that where there is vision, the people may flourish. (The Daily Study Bible Series – Twelve Prophets, Vol 2, p.104)

Concluding word: God’s actions in the world may seem very strange to us. Like Habakkuk, we may wonder why God uses one evil nation to punish another evil nation. But Habakkuk also understands that all evil must be judged. Faith is what helps us to accept God’s action in the world and in our lives, whether we like the action or not. We trust that God knows what he is doing. He has a plan and it is being executed even if not on our own timetable. With God’s grace we can always be joyful because we know God is in charge.

Pause: Have you ever found yourself questioning God and his ways? If so, what helps you move through such times?

Resources

- The Collegeville Bible Commentary
- The Collegeville Bible Handbook
- The Daily Study Bible Series –Twelve Prophets 2