

SESSION #42

HABAKKUK

Have you ever questioned God? Ever felt like grabbing hold of Him and wrestling with Him over some issues you can't understand? ...or wonder why He is silent, seemingly distant & uncaring? Well, here's an Old Testament prophet who felt like this.

1. Setting

Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah as you can see on the timeline chart. By this time in the history of the people of Judah, the Babylonians are now the threatening power in the Middle East. The Babylonian army is on the move and the threat of invasion into Judah is a very real fear on a daily basis.

2. Message

We could note a comparison between three of the prophets. Obadiah's message, as you may remember, was directed against Edom. Nahum's message was against Assyria.

Habakkuk's message centers on a third major power, Babylonia with its capital city of Babylon. But in his case, it's not really a message which God gives to Habakkuk to pass on to Babylon. The message here is also not directed against Israel because they have disappeared as a result of the Assyrian conquest. It's not directed to Habakkuk's own people of Judah, nor to the people of Babylon. So, it is an absolutely unique book of OT prophecy. It is actually a dialogue between the prophet Habakkuk and God.

3. Overall Structure

First of all, let's get an overall view of the structure of the book. Chapter 1 is a burden upon Habakkuk himself as his faith is severely tested. And in that testing of his faith, Habakkuk responds by complaining to God.

Chapter 2 is a vision. He stops complaining and God gives him a two-fold vision. And now his faith is taught by God and instead of complaining, Habakkuk listens to what God has to tell him.

Chapter 3, like Jonah's chapter 2, is a prayer. In Habakkuk's case, it's a prayer expressing triumphant faith. It could also be called an ode describing a theophany, a visible coming of God to earth.

4. Habakkuk's process and journey

Habakkuk's name means "to embrace" in the sense of wrestling. And he lived up to the meaning of his name as he wrestled with God! His book reveals a significant process which Habakkuk experienced: churning, turning, learning and eventually returning praise.

Let's start with his "churning" in chapter 1. His complaining is expressed by three questions.

The first is "*How long?*" Verse 2: "*O LORD, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear?*" A famous preacher of yesteryear was known for his poise and patience, but one day a friend saw him pacing the floor like a caged lion. He asked, "*What is the trouble, Dr. Brooks?*" The preacher replied, "*The trouble is that I'm in a hurry, but God isn't!*" Sound familiar? Some of us could echo Dr. Brooks' complaint. Waiting is tough and Habakkuk felt it too.

His second question is "*Why?*" Verse 3: "*Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble?*" He first accused God of being indifferent. Now he accuses God of being inactive. Habakkuk is a godly man living in Jerusalem at a time when God's people are not godly. He sees idolatry, violence, a growing crime rate, iniquity, misery, destruction, injustice...and it all raises great questions in Habakkuk's mind about God – "*Why does God allow this? Why doesn't He step in and judge them, discipline them, stop all this wicked behavior? Why doesn't God do something?*" Habakkuk verbalizes these complaints to God. And God has an answer for him in 1:5-11.

God basically says here, "*You're worried about that? You think I don't notice the problem? Ah, I have an answer for the problem. I am not indifferent nor inactive. I am going to punish the people of Jerusalem and this is how I'm going to do it: I'm going to*

use the wicked Babylonians to do it. How do you like that, Habakkuk?" Well, Habakkuk doesn't. In fact, he is utterly astonished!

Which brings us to his third question: *"How can this be?"* Verse 13: *"Why do you look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?"* In other words, *"Lord, this is being inconsistent! How can you do this?"*

Isaiah declared a related and important truth in Isa. 45:9 – *"Does the pot argue with its maker? Does the clay dispute with him who forms it, saying, 'Stop, you're doing it wrong!' ...Jehovah, the Holy One of Israel, Israel's Creator, says: What right have you to question what I do? Who are you to command me concerning the work of my hands?"*

You see, God is not accountable to us; He owes us no explanations. But He IS at work; He is NOT inactive ...and His work is amazing/unbelievable. Verse 5: *"Look among the nations and watch – be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you."*

Like Habakkuk, in the testing of our faith God does not EXPLAIN everything to us either. We could not understand; and even if we could, we would not believe. The STORMS of life will come and at such times our life with God is like a vine that clings tightly to the trunk of a great tree. Sometimes the tree shields the vine from the driving wind and rain; at other times, the storms blow hard against the vine ...but they simply press the vine closer to the great tree.

What is our response when life seems unfair and our hearts are churning with worry and these age-old questions: *"How long? ...Why? ...How can this be?"* Difficulties will test what we believe about God; and our response to these tests will reveal what we believe.

So how did Habakkuk respond? The second phase of his process is "turning": 2:1 – *"I will climb my watchtower now and wait to see what answer God will give to my complaint."* He expressed his doubts and questions to God, which is good. But then he stops complaining and does a very wise thing: he took time to wait on God.

He goes up physically into a little watchtower, a place where vineyard managers would go up where they could watch the grapes as they ripened. When the grapes reached a certain point in this process, the man on the watchtower platform would call for the harvesters to come into the vineyard and harvest the grapes at exactly the right time.

So Habakkuk uses this watchtower to get away into a quiet solitary place, away from all the busyness of life so he can hear God and concentrate on listening.

In doing so, Habakkuk gives us a great example of what to do when we have complaints. We can't just keep on spitting out complaint after complaint. There has to come a time when we stop complaining even if we don't have the answer yet. And go to some quiet place away from life's noisy routines. It may be a small room in our house, a park somewhere, a place of quietness for our minds and hearts. A 'watchtower' where we can listen to what God has to say. This is a key principle throughout Scripture.

And for Habakkuk, this was the major turning point. If he hadn't done this, he wouldn't have heard God's real answer to the problem.

And what was the resolution he found as he waited on God? Well, this brings us to the third element in the process: learning. God followed the testing of his faith with the teaching of his faith in chapter 2. God gives him a double vision for the double problem which Habakkuk expressed in chapter 1. Verse 4 is the first part of this double vision: *"Here is my first answer to that problem which plagues you, Habakkuk: the just shall live by his faith."* This is one of the most important verses in the OT because of Paul's later use of it in the Book of Romans, and Luther's use of it in the Reformation. Even in Habakkuk's day it was so important that God told him to put it up on a billboard!

For Habakkuk it was an important revelation because one of his concerns was, *"If God brings those Babylonians and their fierce army down on Judah and Jerusalem, who could possibly survive? These guys will kill us all off! So how can we live?"* There are two aspects to God's teaching here.

First, Habakkuk needed to believe that the righteous WILL LIVE -- that, in spite of appearances to the contrary in the short term, in the end the person who trusts God and remains loyal to Him will LIVE – God will bring justice to all in the end.

And secondly, in the meantime, in the midst of life's hard struggles, he will live not by SIGHT, but by FAITH. Not by EXPLANATIONS, but by trusting in the promises of God...or perhaps, more accurately, in the GOD of the promises.

Like all of us, Habakkuk was living “between the times” – between PROMISE and FULFILLMENT. The valley in between may sometimes be dark, the sunrise of fulfillment may seem far away, but it will come – and we are called to live faithfully in the meantime, our eyes turned to our faithful God. We noted earlier that in chapter 2 God gave Habakkuk a double vision. The second part of that vision is the promise stated in 2:14 – *“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”* This was the glorious future Habakkuk could look forward to. And you and I have the same promise of hope.

As Habakkuk grasps the importance of looking up and trusting God, then we see him moving from churning, turning and learning, to returning praise in chapter 3. Verse 19 says, *“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.”* He has gone from the valley of perplexity to the tower of prayer and now to walking and running on the mountaintop of praise!

The picture here is like that of sure-footed deer or like Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep. The Amplified Version of verse 19 reads, *“the Lord...will make me to walk (not to stand still in terror, but to walk) and make spiritual progress upon my high places of trouble, suffering or responsibility.”* What a contrast with Asaph’s cry in Psalm 73:2 – *“My feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.”* The confidence which Habakkuk expresses by the end of his book makes some of his statements here among the strongest expressions of faith seen anywhere in the OT.

5. Concluding Lessons

As we have followed Habakkuk’s journey through these three chapters, we see him going from dark doubts and complaints, through prayer and then up to triumphant faith by the end.

But his situation hasn't changed at all! He's still in Jerusalem. The Babylonians are still coming. There is going to be famine, there will be tragedies and great suffering. Nothing has changed in Habakkuk's situation.

But what has changed is Habakkuk's heart attitude. That is what made this statement of faith in 3:19 possible. But go back to verses 17 and 18: *"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 – Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation."*

The process that Habakkuk went through to come to this conclusion of faith is a very instructive one. He told his doubts to God; he didn't bottle them up, suppress them or try to deny them. He had these questions, he had these complaints. And he told God. It didn't shock God, didn't scare Him. But it was a most helpful therapy for Habakkuk's own heart, to get these out. If you have a complaint or question with God, let Him hear it. He doesn't mind. And it will do you some good to get them off your chest.

Then he resolved to wait on God and found a place to do that.

Then after hearing God speak, ah! his attitude changed. And then he could respond with faith, he could respond with singing.

Like Habakkuk, we too will find confidence to sing and rejoice, not because everything is going well, and not because we understand what is happening, but because we "live by faith", trusting in a strong God who gives us a sure foothold in a slippery world.

Many years ago in England, a 32 yr. old man named Wm. Cowper passed through a great personal crisis. As a result, he tried to end his life by taking poison. But it didn't work. So he hired a horse-drawn cabbie to take him to the Thames River intending to throw himself in. It was a foggy London night and they couldn't find the River. William became disgusted and got out to walk there but he quickly discovered they had gone in a great circle and had ended up back at his own doorstep!

The next morning he fell upon a knife, but the blade broke and his life was spared. He then tried to hang himself, but a friend happened to come along just then and cut him

down unconscious just in time. A short time later, William took out his Bible and read some verses. In a marvelous way, this time with God gave him strength to believe again and rejoice in the forgiving power of God.

Thinking later of God's dealings with him during this time, Cowper wrote one of the great hymns of the Christian faith:

God moves in a mysterious way

His wonders to perform;

He plants His footsteps in the sea,

And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,

The clouds ye so much dread

Are big with mercy, and shall break

In blessings on your head.

In our next session we take on the great weeping prophet, Jeremiah.
