

SESSION TWELVE

HABAKKUK

The Prophet Who Questioned God

INTRODUCTION

The book of Habakkuk is unique for its bold questioning of God's ways by the prophet himself. Lest we condemn him too hastily, we would do well to remember that he lived in the midst of some very difficult years. These were "war years" . . . when the mighty Babylonian army was sweeping across the land and plundering nation after nation. For a moment, we see the human side of the prophet Habakkuk (as he struggles with questions and doubts), but by the end of the book we see that he has made a fresh spiritual pilgrimage back to a point of trusting and worshipping the LORD.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Prior to Habakkuk's generation, the Assyrians had been the dominant power of the Ancient Near East for two and a half centuries (ca. 885-612 BC). Following 650 BC, however, Assyria began weakening under the reign of Ashurbanipal (ca. 669-627 BC). By 626 BC, the Chaldean Nabu-apla-usur (= Nabopolassar) won independence for Babylon from the Assyrian king. This would have occurred during the reign of Josiah, who was king over Judah (640-609 BC). Several major defeats of Assyria during the years 616-614 BC set the stage for a combined attack upon the Assyrian stronghold of Nineveh by the Medes and Babylonians in 612 BC. Although a remnant of Assyria struggled on for three more years, the sacking of Nineveh marked the effective end of the once-mighty Assyrian Empire.

Assyria had been supported by her Egyptian allies, and in 609 BC the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco II attempted to march to the aid of the Assyrian remnant (led by Aššur-uballit II). They were too late in doing so, but in the process King Josiah was killed as he went out to intercept the Egyptian army at Megiddo in northern Israel. Somewhat by default, the Egyptians and Babylonians now became the contenders for supremacy in the power vacuum left by the Assyrians. In 605 BC, these two armies squared off to fight at the Battle of Carchemish. The Babylonian general Nebuchadnezzar (= Nebuchadnezzar) defeated the Egyptians, and as a result made an incursion into Syro-Palestine. This led to his siege of Jerusalem in 605 BC, at which time Judah became a vassal to Babylon.

THE OCCASION OF THE BOOK

We know very little about the person of Habakkuk (חַבְּקֻקַּי), and he does not even date his message by one of the kings. Internal observations, however, suggest a date of writing prior to the Babylonian invasion of 605 BC. According to Hab 1:6, the LORD was about to raise up the *Chaldeans*, i.e., the neo-Babylonian empire. As to when in the chain of events Habakkuk's experience occurs is difficult to pinpoint. All that we can safely say is that Habakkuk must be dated sometime between 626 BC (when Babylon won its independence) and 605 BC (when the Babylonians invaded Judah). Habakkuk

alludes to conditions of his day in Judah in 1:2-4 when violence and iniquity were prevalent. God's people were ignoring the Law of Moses:

*Therefore, the law is ignored and justice is never upheld.
For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted.*

During Josiah's reign, he attempted to carry out a reform movement and cleanse the land of impurity. However, we also know that the reform movement was somewhat superficial (see notes on Jeremiah). Thus, Habakkuk's observations could be true of any time during Josiah's reign. Perhaps they would be even more appropriate after Josiah was killed in 609 BC when Judah became subject to Egypt, but of this we cannot be certain.¹

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

For a helpful overview of the literary structure of this book, see the book chart in the supplement to this section. A brief overview is provided there. The book has two main sections: chapters one and two describe a dialogue between Habakkuk and God, whereas chapter three records a poetic prayer written by Habakkuk.

<i>Habakkuk's Dialogue With God</i>		<i>Habakkuk's Poetic Prayer to God</i>
Cycle One	Cycle Two	
Complaint	Complaint	
Divine Response	Divine Response	
1:2-11	1:12—2:20	3:1-19

DEVELOPMENT OF THE BOOK

I. HABAKKUK'S FIRST COMPLAINT AND GOD'S RESPONSE (1:2-11)

The book opens with the prophet disturbed about conditions in the land of Judah. In response to his question, the Lord assures him that He is aware and doing something about it.

A. Habakkuk's First Complaint (1:2-4)

In verses 2-4, Habakkuk expresses his concerns about the spiritual condition of Judah. He points out the violence, iniquity, destruction, wickedness, and strife among people. The bottom

¹The description of the political upheaval given in 2 Kings 23:31-37 certainly could explain the conditions in the land as mentioned by Habakkuk. With the passing of Josiah in 609 BC ("And before him there was no king like him who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses"), Judah went through a very turbulent time. Josiah's son Jehoahaz ruled briefly, but he was an evil king (2 Kgs 23:32). The Egyptians deposed him and made his brother Eliakim (= Jehoiakim) king in his place. However, he also "did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done" (2 Kgs 23:37).

line is given in vs 4: the Mosaic Law is ignored, justice is not upheld, and the wicked among the people are dominating society. The prophet is more than concerned about these matters, however. He speaks as though God were partly to blame: "How long, O LORD, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear?" (vs 2). In other words, Habakkuk is raising the issue that God is being complacent. There are righteous people in the land crying out for God's intervention, yet God *does not seem* to be doing anything.

Although we do not know how old Habakkuk was at the time, we can probably assume that he had lived through the reform movement of Josiah. There was an earnest attempt, led by the king, to turn the nation back to God's Word. Perhaps Habakkuk was feeling that the LORD ought to be doing more in response to the cries of the righteous, by purging the land of wickedness.

B. God's Response to Habakkuk's Complaint (1:5-11)

Of course, God is not complacent as Habakkuk thinks. In fact, God is on the verge of taking some serious action against Judah. God's plan is to discipline His people severely by sending an invading army, namely, the Babylonians ("Chaldeans" in vs 6 is the ancient name for Babylon). God notes that they are fierce and dreaded by many, and they will come "swooping down to devour" like an eagle. God is certainly aware that they are not a moral or compassionate people, and according to vs 7 their sense of "right" originates with themselves rather than by God's standards. In making this disclosure of His plan to Habakkuk, God also acknowledges that their guilt does not escape Him ("they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god"—vs 11), which anticipates the next complaint.

II. HABAKKUK'S SECOND COMPLAINT AND GOD'S RESPONSE (1:12–2:20)

Habakkuk is not satisfied with God's plan for dealing with Judah's sin problem, and thus he ventures to speak out again.

A. Habakkuk's Second Complaint (1:12–2:1)

Habakkuk recognizes that God's plan to use Babylon against Judah is an expression of God's discipline upon the nation, and that is perfectly in keeping with God's revelation (recall the curse section of Deut 28–29). His only question is the appropriateness of such a choice. Does it make sense to use Babylon to discipline Judah? Habakkuk does not think so.

He begins in vs 12 by acknowledging the eternity of God: "Art Thou not from everlasting?" He then deduces, "We will not die." Habakkuk is speaking in light of his biblical understanding about Judah's covenant relationship with God. Throughout the Old Testament, God had affirmed time and again His commitment to His covenant people. Because God is eternal, the nation will never cease to be a people (and Habakkuk is exactly right about this). In the latter part of vs 12, Habakkuk acknowledges that Babylon has been appointed as the *rod of discipline* for Judah ("Thou, O LORD, hast appointed them to judge"). But then in vs 13, the prophet raises a theological objection. He states, "Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor." In other words, Habakkuk is reminding God that He has revealed Himself as a perfectly moral God. It doesn't make sense that a *moral God* would "team up" with someone so immoral as Babylon. Furthermore, Judah may be bad (as Habakkuk himself bemoaned), but they are not as bad as wicked Babylon. So, how can "more wicked" Babylon be used against "wicked" Judah? Habakkuk seems to think that for God to use another nation to discipline Judah, He ought to at least use one that was relatively better than Judah.

In verses 14-17, Habakkuk turns to offer an illustration by way of a metaphor. He draws on the analogy of a fishing net used for harvesting fish from the sea. In this case, the one who directs the net is Babylon, and the fish are the vulnerable peoples who are defenseless against Babylon. Habakkuk seems to be grappling for a sense of justice in the affairs of the world. Babylon prevails because Babylon is mighty, not because she is righteous. Why does God allow the world to operate like this? That would lead to the conclusion that one ought to join up with the "big boys" (irregardless of their moral character), rather than attempting to live life morally according to God's Law. Furthermore, all that Babylon does is "offer a sacrifice to their net" (vs 16). In other words, they give no credit for their victorious ways to the true God of heaven. Babylon credits herself, and she credits idols. So God does not seem to be glorified by allowing Babylon to carry on like this. Hab 2:1 draws this unit to a close. The prophet seems to realize that he (a mortal man) has overstepped his bounds by daring to question God's ways. He is expecting to be reproved.

B. God's Response to Habakkuk's Second Complaint (2:2-20)

God's response is composed of two basic parts. In vv 2-5, the righteous must learn to trust God, whereas in vv 6-20 God affirms that Babylon will not get away unpunished. God is omniscient enough and powerful enough to accomplish both goals: He will use Babylon for His purposes, but also preserve His moral character by holding Babylon accountable for their ways (they will not go unpunished!).

1. The Righteous Must Learn to Trust God (2:2-5)

God's answer comes by way of a vision, and this vision is to be recorded for the benefit of others. In the vision, God explains how He views Babylon and what is the fate that awaits them. In due time, He will also rise to fight in defense of His covenant people. But this vision is for the "appointed time" (2:3). Habakkuk does not need to worry about God accomplishing His Word ("it will not fail"—vs 3). However, Habakkuk must learn to wait for God to do things in His own timing.

Verses 4 and 5 seem to be stated in terms of proud greedy Babylon. Babylon is like a proud man whose lustful materialistic appetite cannot be satisfied. That is, Babylon conquers more and more people—wrecking their lives in order to make herself rich and prosperous. In contrast to proud Babylon stands the "righteous" man. God's design is that the righteous man live by his faith. He enters into relationship with God by faith and lives by faith—he trusts God in the outworking of the events of life. This statement is aimed at Habakkuk, for he is the *righteous man* who must learn to trust in a sovereign, wise and compassionate God. The LORD knows the best course of action, and He is mighty to accomplish all His purposes! Habakkuk may not understand how God operates, but it is more important that He learn to trust God. If there was a better way, God would be doing it.

2. Certain Judgment Awaits the Wicked (2:6-20)

This section contains a series of five "woe" messages aimed against Babylon (and those who emulate Babylon's ways). The series begins with a denunciation of those who pursue materialistic gain by violence and ends with condemnation of those who rely on idolatry. In contrast to worthless idols (who do nothing more than sit on their pedestal collecting dust), the LORD is in His holy temple. He is high above all earth's events and looks down from His heavenly throne. He is in charge, and He will accomplish His righteous purposes. Not even mighty Babylon can circumvent Him!

III. HABAKKUK'S PRAYER AND ADORATION OF GOD (3:1-19)

God's response to Habakkuk's second complaint silenced the questioning prophet. The righteous one must live by faith; thus it is time to express that trust in the LORD. Habakkuk does not merely utter a few feeble words of trust. Rather, he carefully composes his response—a prayer—in poetry, and turns it over to the "choir director" (note 3:19) to be used by God's people at the Temple.

A. Introductory Response (3:1-2)

Habakkuk realizes that God's plan will come to pass, and Judah will be invaded by Babylon in his own day. There is nothing that can be done to prevent that. However, he also knows that God is a merciful God, and therefore he prays, "In wrath remember mercy." As God's wrath falls on His covenant people of Judah, Habakkuk pleads that it may be tempered by God's mercy. The reference to "God's work" is a way of speaking about God's past acts of intervening on behalf of His covenant people. Just as God rose to intervene for His people in ancient days, so Habakkuk longs for God to do that in his own generation.

B. The Theophanic Vision of God as Warrior (3:3-15)

This section falls into two parts, namely vv 3-7 and vv 8-15. Notice the inclusios that bracket each. Verses 3-7 begin and end with geographical names, while verses 8-15 begin and end with references to the sea and waters.

These poetic lines are not easy to understand, but basically they are designed to depict God as a warrior who has descended on behalf of His covenant people. Verse 3 begins with the theophany of God (His appearance on earth), and seems to primarily have the Sinai event in mind when God descended with thunder, lightening and thick cloud. In Deut 33:2, Mount Paran is associated with Sinai. The reference to His "rays" probably speaks of His lightening bolts that His hand can heave upon earth (recall Ex 19:16; 20:18). There may also be allusion to other OT passages such as Jud 5:4. The cosmic disturbances that result from His coming provoke fear in the hearts of the earth's inhabitants (recall Ex 15:14).

Verses 8-15, on the other hand, are composed against the background of God's deliverance at the Red Sea and the victory at Gibeon. Habakkuk thinks in terms of God going forth as a warrior and captain of the heavenly hosts to fight in defense of His people, because that is precisely what he hopes God will do against Babylon (notice the references in vv 8-9 to horses, chariots, and bow). Verse 11 recalls God's miracle of halting the sun during the victory over the Amorites at Gibeon (recall Josh 10:12-14). Verses 12-14 depict God as marching through the earth in judgment on behalf of His covenant people. The prophet seems to speak of past situations and the present day at the same time. Just as He has done on past occasions, so He will (hopefully) do against Babylon. The reference to striking "the head of the house of the evil" (vs 13) may be a veiled reference to the king of Babylon (recall 2:9-11).

C. Habakkuk's Response of Trust in Face of National Discipline (3:16-19)

Habakkuk acknowledges he must wait for God's discipline to come in the form of the invasion by Babylon. That will be "the day of distress" which makes him fear and tremble. It is not a pleasant thought at all to ponder what is about to befall Judah. The references in vs 17 to the agricultural products and animals being affected pertains to the covenant curse forms that had been detailed in Deuteronomy (see Deut 28:31-34,49-51).

Though the Deuteronomic curses fall, Habakkuk says He will still exult in the LORD. He has indeed heeded God's exhortation in Hab 2:4, and he will not allow the unpleasantness of national discipline to turn his heart against the LORD or rob him of praising the LORD. He

ends by saying, "The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on my high places" (3:19). Chisholm writes, "Just as the deer travels through difficult terrain without stumbling or suffering injury, so Habakkuk would endure the hardships of the coming invasion, sustained by his trust in the sovereign Lord."²

THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK

God is completely trustworthy in all His ways of discipline and judgment, and (like Habakkuk) we should learn to praise and exalt Him as we go through circumstances we may not fully understand.

²Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1990), 197.