

July 19, 2009

Habakkuk: Continuing to Trust

Purpose: To inspire us to trust in God even when circumstances seem to be hopeless

Key Bible reference: Habakkuk 1-3

Key Verse: Habakkuk 3.17-18

Biblical Interpretation

Habakkuk 1:1. We know virtually nothing about the writer's background. We are not even told who his father was. We are told that Habakkuk [huh-BAK-uhk] was a "prophet." This may mean he was one of the "professional" class of prophets who either served as advisors to the kings, as Nathan was to David, or in the Temple. Habakkuk probably served in the Temple; his book leaves the strong impression of having been written for, or at least used in, worship rituals in the Temple. The dialogue that dominates the first two chapters could easily have been sung or chanted by Temple singers (as could the psalm-like poem that is Habakkuk 3). Indeed, some scholars maintain that the book may have been used as a liturgy for national days of penitence.

The content of Habakkuk has a certain similarity to the Book of Job and some of the Psalms. Habakkuk is dominated by the question of theodicy—the issue of whether God really rules the world with justice. In the face of the overwhelming presence of evil in his own nation and the even greater evil in the nations around him, Habakkuk has many questions about God's justice. Indeed, this is a question many people have asked: "Why does evil seem to run rampant in a world we believe God created and rules?"

The book can be divided into three parts: 1:1-2:5 is a dialogue or conversation between the

prophet and God; 2:6-20 contains five woes or warnings concerning nations like Babylon who live for violence and destruction; Chapter 3 is a magnificent psalm or song extolling the coming of God to bring judgment on Judah's enemies (the Babylonians) and thus rescue the people. Until that day Habakkuk will praise and trust in God no matter how bad things look.

Verses 2-4. These verses record Habakkuk's first conversation with God. In Habakkuk's day, it seemed that God was not listening, that God had, in fact, withdrawn. Most modern scholars believe Habakkuk lived during the time when all that Jeremiah had spoken of was coming to pass (probably 608 B.C.-598 B.C.). The question that rings from his lips is, "Why? Why, Lord, are you letting this happen?" Injustice, violence, and suffering were everywhere. The people had abandoned the ways of Moses; the order God desired for them was gone. Chaos reigned. Even when righteous persons tried to make reforms or speak the truth, they were ignored, laughed at, or oppressed. Individuals did what seemed right in their own eyes. No one could get justice. Why did evil seem in control if God was good and in charge? Why didn't God act?

Verses 5-11. These verses contain God's response. God is indeed about to act, but not in the way Habakkuk anticipated or even desired. God wants Habakkuk to know so the people can be told that what is about to happen is not just a random event in history, a happenstance, but

something that comes from the sovereign hand of God.

What is it that Habakkuk sees when God tells him to "look"? Habakkuk sees a people, a mighty, fearsome people. He sees what Jeremiah described as a pot full of boiling liquid already turned over and flooding toward them. The pot is Babylon (called here the "Chaldeans"). The content of the pot is the might of Babylon's military which had already destroyed Assyria. This power is described in vivid phrases (1:6-11)—a people more fierce than wolves, swooping down like eagles on prey, riding horses faster than leopards, with no law but their own and showing no mercy. So God is at work, Habakkuk is told. God is about to act. God will use the Babylonians to punish the Judeans for disobeying God's laws.

Verses 12-17. Here we find Habakkuk's response to this startling word from God. Although Habakkuk accepts this as God's word, God's response raises more questions than answers for Habakkuk. He is absolutely certain that God is moral, holy, and just; but he does not understand how letting the Babylonians do all this will promote the kind of peace, order, and justice God ultimately desires. Habakkuk balks at God using the Babylonians—a people who are even more evil than the Judeans—as his instrument. Habakkuk seems to be saying, "Yes, Lord, your chosen people have done great evil. You are right to punish us. But how, being the holy God you are, can you allow the Babylonians to do all the evil things you say they will do? Surely they are even more evil than we are! You would not allow Judah's evil to last forever. How long will you allow this evil, which is even worse, to dominate? How does the replacing of one evil order by an even more evil one work toward the right order you

desire? When and how will your righteous order be realized?"

Habakkuk 2:1. The answers to these questions were not forthcoming. So Habakkuk withdrew to wait for God to speak.

Where is Habakkuk's retreat? He calls it the "watchpost." A watchpost or watchtower was a high place, usually in a city wall, used by the military to watch and wait for enemies. From it a warning would then be conveyed. It is likely that Habakkuk did not literally go to a watchtower. He is simply saying that he will be patient and watch or wait for God to speak.

It is noteworthy that Habakkuk continues to respond with the utmost faith. He does not give up on God or in to despair. Habakkuk is confident that, in God's own good time and way, God will speak, God will act. Perhaps there is also in his heart the hope that in spite of the great suffering that is coming, Judah will survive. God will not punish Judah to destroy but to bring the people to repentance.

Verses 2-5. Here is God's answer to Habakkuk's questions. God surely is at work, but God's timetable is different from that of humans. God will act to bring about the "vision"—justice, the good purpose for which God intended the creation—in God's own good time. It might not come when Habakkuk and the people think it should or even in the way they think it should, but it will surely come.

Habakkuk is commanded to write down this message in large letters so that even a runner can read and understand it. Perhaps you have had the experience of driving in a car and trying to read a sign that had too much on it, while other signs had simple words in large, bold letters. God's message is that until God's justice

is fully seen, until God's plans are fully realized, the righteous must wait with patience and live in faithfulness. This is a theme picked up and expanded in the New Testament (Hebrews 10:32-39).

Living by faith thus involves refusing to give up on God or give in to circumstances that tell us God seems to have given up on us and the world. Yet, living by faith is even more than this. The first part of Habakkuk 2:4 can be translated, "He whose soul is puffed up [or lifted up] shall fail [not live]." This refers to the unrighteous, like the Babylonians and many of the Judeans, who were "puffed up" with reliance on themselves instead of relying on God. They sought life by trusting in things, in material possessions, in their own might or military power. Life, true life, cannot be found there. It is a by-product of faith in God. Faith is knowing this—that life can only be found in relying on the One who creates and sustains life—the Creator. It is the trust that my well-being ultimately depends, not on my own power, but on that of God. So I entrust myself and my world daily to God.

Paul uses this passage from Habakkuk to show that our relationship with God is not determined by our works or rewards but by faith. God gives life, abundant and eternal, to those of faith, to those who rely upon and trust in God's grace.

Verses 6-20. These verses contain the "five woes." They describe the lives and fates of those who do not live by faith or faithfulness: those whose greed drives them to plunder to get rich, who live by bloody violence, who make and worship idols. Habakkuk seems to have the Babylonians primarily in mind here. God's judgment will be seen in that they will reap what they have sown (see 2:6-8 especially).

Habakkuk 3:1-16. Verses 2-15 record a poetic psalm that describes God's appearances in the past on behalf of the people (especially the Exodus and the events at Mount Sinai and in the wilderness). Habakkuk does not just remember what God did in the past but presents a vision of trust in what God will do now and in the future.

The message and vision he has heard and seen are so awesome that Habakkuk trembles. His lips quiver, and he feels limp or faint. He barely has strength to walk (3:16).

Verses 17-19. In these verses we find one of the greatest expressions of faith in the entire Bible. In the face of all that Habakkuk has learned, he refuses to give up his faith. God's judgment is coming at the hands of the Babylonians. Invading armies would take all the food they wanted, leaving the people to starve. Habakkuk names in verse 17 every kind of food available—figs, grapes, olives, sheep, cattle. Even if these are all taken away, he will still be joyful and glad. Why? Because in spite of it all, he knows that he and his people are in God's hands. It does not matter how things appear; Habakkuk knows the deeper reality. He is confident that even though he is about to enter a deep and dark valley, God will give him the strength and sure-footedness of a mountain deer—that he might scale to the heights. And so what began with questions and complaints ends with praise and joy!