
When Faith is Perplexed

Habakkuk 1:12-2:1²

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Does God ever just not make sense to you?

The great problem for Habakkuk and for God's people...

Wicked people continue without being judged...

God's people are denied justice....

When God does act, He brings the wicked to punish the "good" ...

God has announced that He will judge His people through the instrumentality of a wicked nation. So we have the shocked response that a less righteous will be used to administer justice on a "more" righteous. How can a nation known for its pride and ferocity be used by God?

We will think about structure based on the three questions Habakkuk poses. That will help guide us through this text.

Habakkuk has a perplexed faith - he believes but with dissonance. He can't make sense of it all.

The Protest with God's Character

(v.12-14)

Habakkuk's response is nothing short of shock that leads to presumption. He believes what God has said; he just can't believe God said it.

¹²Are you not from everlasting,
O Lord my God, my Holy One?
We shall not die.

O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment,
and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.

¹³ who are of purer eyes than to see evil
and cannot look at wrong,
why do you idly look at traitors
and are silent when the wicked swallows up
the man more righteous than he?

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14 You make mankind like the fish of the sea,
like crawling things that have no ruler.

Now, let me remind you that this conversation is not merely a dialog between a presumptuous prophet and an unexpected God. This conversation is meant to show how God's people tend to respond when God doesn't make sense. I wish I could say that the prophet is going to appeal to God. But he doesn't. So God's people sometimes respond to God in a way:

That Corrects God

(v.12)

The prophet says in essence, "You are the unchanging God who has covenanted with Israel. So we cannot be destroyed."

The protest is grounded in *the character* of God. God has always existed. His character cannot and does not change. He is the Holy One. Holiness is His character and His reputation. Since God is like this, then what God has just said cannot possibly happen. He is the unchanging, settled, steadfast Rock in the blowing winds and storms of time, change and sin.

The protest is supported by *the covenant* between God and His people. Three names for God here denote an unchanging covenantal relationship with God. The people of God recognize Him as the one and only God. The people of God bow to Him as Sovereign Lord, their King. The people of God accept God's revelation of Himself as being essentially Holy, thrice Holy.

The protest is impassioned by *the connection* between God and His people. This is signaled by the twice repeated, "my". The assumption is that God would not treat people who owned Him this way. God punishes people who refuse to say, "My God, my Holy One".

The protest is finalized by *the condemnation* God has purposed for the wicked. God has ordained judgment for *them*, not for *us*. Yet the language here also recognizes what God has said. God has ordained them to be... judged. But God has also ordained them to be a judgment and a reproof? So which is it, God?

So, of course, God isn't going to do this. "We are not going to die." Oh really? Why should we believe in God's character, covenant, connection and condemnation then turn right around and contradict God? How do we have a "faith" that is higher than what God says? I understand that sometimes we come to God and have perplexities and questions. God is so gracious to care for us and to explain Himself to us. But this is presumption.

That Challenges God

(v.13)

This question challenges God because of faith's perplexity. How can you do this, God? If you cannot look at evil, how to look idly on the traitors? How can you possibly approve the wicked and be silent when the wicked eat up those who are less wicked? Or as Habakkuk puts it, who are more righteous?

One write has summarized the problem here. “The theological problem facing Habakkuk is how a holy God, one who is *pure* in all things and completely separate from sin, can *tolerate wrong* and treachery as practiced by the Babylonian instruments of his punishment (13). While the sinful in Israel are wicked (4), in comparison they are eclipsed by the even greater perversity of Babylon. Beside Babylon, sinful Israel can be called *righteous*, here a relative rather than an absolute term. They are so far removed from the standards expected of God that the prophet can only express wonder that he can even *look* at them.” (Carson, 843)

But this challenge has built into it a self-correction and condemnation. Habakkuk hears the tension. So do we. Is the prophet and God’s people more righteous than God? Aren’t we saying that we know better than God? Aren’t we trying to put God in His own theological box?

That Charges God¹

(v. 14)

Habakkuk carries the logic even further. This is still speaking to God but is transitioning to what follows. He is accusing God of reducing mankind to being beasts. In other words, there is no Law or justice for fish or insects. Why? They have no ruler. If God acts in this way, He is not treating them as humans. God is treating them like insects. God is not honoring humanity with the justice He requires of human beings.

This is a serious charge. It is a serious thing to charge God like this. It reverses the standing between man and God. It brings God into the courtroom and makes the prophet the prosecution and judge. Now of course, Habakkuk fully expects, since this is so, that God will reverse or revise what He is saying.

Is this so different for us? How often do you read the Bible and say to yourself, “I can’t believe the Bible says that! If God is... then how can He....”

This raises several important considerations.

- Human reason is limited. Our logic can be flawless when it works from what we know to be true to what we think are the implications. Yet, we can arrive at very wrong conclusions. Human reason and logic is a useful tool but it is still subject to fallenness and to sinfulness.
- Partial truths can lead to great perplexities. We totally believe what God has said. But we only have a portion of what He has said. Now God declares what He will or will not do that does not line up with our partial truth – now what? No truth stands alone. Each truth stands in its revealed relationship with other truths.

Does your praying ever sound like this?

God you have revealed that You are like this...

God you are doing this to me...

God you shouldn’t be doing this...

So either stop doing this or you had better explain yourself...

After all, I am one of yours so you wouldn't do this, would you?

The Problem in Babylon's Conduct

(v.15-17)

So what does this lead us to? Hopefully we begin to understand our need more revelation...

¹⁵ He brings all of them up with a hook;
he drags them out with his net;
he gathers them in his dragnet;
so he rejoices and is glad.

¹⁶ he sacrifices to his net
and makes offerings to his dragnet;
for by them he lives in luxury,
and his food is rich.

¹⁷ Is he then to keep on emptying his net
and mercilessly killing nations forever?

Their Exploitation of God's Work

The Babylonians are compared to fishermen. They set their hooks in the jaws of mankind. They gather peoples and nations up in their nets like fish. They take advantage of the weakness and wickedness of people and nations. They exploit where God has reduced the once mighty to being fish and insects.

This great dragnet of nations brings the Babylonians joy. Notice through this stanza the singular pronoun, "he". Habakkuk, speaking prophetically, is not just looking towards the nation but also towards a leader who would rise. The "he" will be Nebuchadnezzar. He will sweep across the Middle East and subdue the nations in his dragnet. He will take great delight in his conquests.

Their Exultation in their Work

So they worship their hooks and nets. They worship their power and the implements of their conquest. What one delights in is a sure indicator of what one worships. They offer pagan sacrifices to the idols of their own making. They are the over-gods who are god-makers. They not only make their own gods, but they conquer the gods of others. Their conquest brings them great wealth. It affirms the rightness of their wickedness. Babylon grew in power and wealth.

Habakkuk offers this as the reason God could not possibly use the Babylonians. If they conquer and plunder Israel, they will think they have conquered the God of Israel. It is no wonder then that when Babylon destroyed Israel and took Jerusalem that they took away into captivity the best of the young leaders and all the gold and silver utensils from the Temple.

So, is God going to allow this continue? Will Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon simply be allowed to continue their slaughter forever?

The Place of Habakkuk's Challenge

(2:1-2)

Think about the irony here: Habakkuk is on a tower yet he seemingly has a very limited perspective.

2 I will take my stand at my watch post 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.

There is some discussion about the apparent attitude and actions of Habakkuk here. Is Habakkuk is humbly and anxiously waiting for God to speak? Or is he still poised to challenge God? One of the leading Old Testament scholars of our day, Dr. Paul House, has presented strong evidence in the language and in the flow of the book. I think there is a middle way. Habakkuk himself as the prophet is poised to hear how God will explain His actions and what further questions he might have. However, he is also representing the people's attitude in the dialog itself. So the multiple layers here are intended to show the prophet wanting to resolve his perplexity and the people wanting to resist God's punishment.

His Action

(v.1)

Habakkuk climbs up into the watch tower and stations himself as a guard. Prophets often did actions that were a part of the prophecy itself. Habakkuk is speech-acting here. He is going to a watch tower on the city wall. He taking the place of guard or a lookout. As a prophet Habakkuk must stand ready to listen to God and to speak to the people. He is on the lookout for God and God's Word. But Habakkuk is also acting out what Israel thinks. The people of God are ready to defend themselves against God. God has become the danger here.

His Attitude

(v.2)

Listen to Habakkuk's attitude. This speech-act is representative of Israel, of God's people. Frankly, it is representative of many of you. "Ok, God. It is Your turn. What do You have to say about this? What do You have to say for Yourself?"

Habakkuk is preparing his own response to whatever God says. He is listening knowing that God will speak. At this point Habakkuk is prepared to hear and heed what God says. But, he is also doing so as the representative of the people of Israel. They may be listening to God, but their poise is to challenge and correct God if necessary.

It is important to note that Habakkuk does believe what God is saying. He hears and understands. The fact that Habakkuk understands what God is saying is jarring to his theological sensibilities. His perplexity is honest.

But not so the people of God. Their poise is not a submissive, humble, teachable spirit. Through Habakkuk's speech-act God is exposing the stiff-necked unyielding heart of Israel. Instead of repenting in the face of the wrath of God, they are prepared to say that God's wrath is wrong because God is using an illegitimate tool to express that wrath.

Thinking it through....

God will often perplex us. Get used to it. This is because He is not made by us. He is not accountable to us. He has not totally revealed Himself to us. He has given us all that we need for life and godliness, yes. But God's revelation of Himself in the Scriptures is not exhaustive. There is oh so much more, I am sure. But sometimes what God says He is and what God is doing seem to conflict. So what are we to do?

We may come humbly to God and express our perplexity and ask our questions.

We must look for the answers in God's Word and wise counselors. Perplexity often comes when our knowledge of, belief in or understanding of God's Word is faulty or incomplete.

We have a poise of heart to submit to God's providences even when we do not understand them or when they appear to contradict God's character.

We keep our eyes set on eternal things so that the mists, storms, darkness of this life's passing troubles do not blind us to the eternal truths and glories.

Oh how our hearts are like Israel's. We get caught up in sin. God uses people to convict us of our sin. We refuse to repent. God's chastening hand becomes strong on us. And we, instead of humbling ourselves under God's hand, try to deflect attention by accusing others and God.

How do we listen to God? We should listen to God in His Word. That is where He speaks. We should listen to God in preaching, teaching and counseling. God also helps us to understand His Word through people. We listen poised to hear and heed, but always checking it against the Word itself.

Faith may be perplexed. But faith must always be poised to humbly listen and lovingly obey.

¹ After quite a bit of wrestling with this text, I have come to the conclusion the verse 14 belongs with 11-13, not 15 and following. The change from "you" to "he" seems to be a grammatical structure marker. Making it a part of verses 11-13 makes this an accusation against God. It seems to fit better with the confrontation of God than the characterization of the Chaldeans.