

Habakkuk

*Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
(Habakkuk 3:17-18 ESV)*

Yet I Will Rejoice in the Lord

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Habakkuk

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Introduction:

Good morning! I want to invite you to turn with me in your bibles to the book of Habakkuk. You'll find that on page 1456 of your pew bibles.

This brief book has never cracked the top-ten-favourite-books-of-the-Bible list. It is rarely quoted, rarely memorized and rarely discussed at the dinner table. And that's a shame.

I am overjoyed by the opportunity I have been afforded this morning to help you to see and enjoy this wonderful book! It is remarkably relevant, and my prayer for us is that we will be shaped and transformed by the message of Habakkuk.

There is one detail in Habakkuk that sets it apart from nearly every other prophetic book. While most other prophets in Israel addressed their prophecies to their fellow man, Habakkuk turned away from the people and addressed God Himself. This book is wonderfully unique because it expresses the honest and heart-felt prayer of a discouraged prophet. More than that, it recounts God's RESPONSE to that prayer!

Are you discouraged this morning? Are you looking around at your life and wondering what God could possibly be up to? Are your present circumstances threatening to undermine your faith? If that's you, you need to lean in closely this morning and to listen to God's message for you. Here in this sweet book of prophecy we are taught that our God is a God who hears, a God who cares and a God who answers!

Structurally, the book of Habakkuk is laid out very simply. Habakkuk puts forward two questions, and God, in turn responds with two answers. Upon hearing God's answers, Habakkuk concludes in chapter three with a song of praise and prayer.

We'll begin this morning by considering Habakkuk's questions and God's answers. We will see that his questions were not particularly unique— in fact, I think I've heard the same complaints come out of my own mouth and the mouths of many of you who are sitting here this morning. These are common questions, but they are met with extraordinary answers.

Common Questions and Extraordinary Answers

We find his first question in the beginning of chapter one. Look with me there at verses 1-4:

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

² O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?

Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?

³ Why do you make me see iniquity,
and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

⁴ So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted. (Habakkuk 1:1-4 ESV)

We can summarize Habakkuk's first question like this:

1. Why does God ignore the hypocrisy of His people?

Habakkuk's first complaint comes after he sees the wickedness **INSIDE** the church, and then his second complaint comes as he looks **OUTSIDE** at the wickedness of the world. So here, in this first complaint, Habakkuk is looking around at the nation of Israel and he is not liking what he sees. He essentially says to God: "We are a MESS in here! Our religious leaders are corrupt!

Lawlessness abounds and your reputation is being soiled. How long are you going to let this carry on?”

I don't know about you, but I find myself feeling more and more like Habakkuk lately. How many famous pastors have been exposed in the past five years? How many sexual scandals have rocked the church? Let's narrow our focus: How many of us who are sitting in this room are living in consistent, rebellious sin? Our lives are supposed to provide a compelling witness for the goodness of God, but instead it feels like we need to apologize for our two-faced living before we can even begin to preach! When is God going to “right the ship”?

Habakkuk was living in a very different world than we are today, and we need to understand his context if we are to hear him as we are meant to. He lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, amongst the Israelites – the people of God. But as he looked around at the nation that was supposed to be a living testimony to the wisdom and glory of God, all he could see was lawlessness. He was surrounded by hypocrites.

Habakkuk hated that. And he wondered if God hated it too.

Habakkuk wasn't simply upset because someone in church had failed to meet his expectations – he was upset because the people of God as a whole were living in a way that made God look bad to the nations! His anger wasn't a self-righteous anger. It was an anger that was longing for God to be glorified in and through the lives of his people. So, he cried out: “How long will you tolerate the wicked hypocrisy of your people?”

And beginning in verse 5 we find God's response. Look there with me now:

Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe if told.
⁶ For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,
that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth,
to seize dwellings not their own. (Habakkuk 1:5-6 ESV)

“The Chaldeans” is another name for the Babylonians. They were the powerhouse nation that briefly ascended the Assyrians as the most formidable force in the Ancient Near East.

This was not the answer that Habakkuk was expecting. To put this into our modern context, this is as if a pastor Paul prayed for the purification of the North American church and God responded by sending ISIS! Unsurprisingly, Habakkuk was shocked and dumbfounded by God’s response!

It appeared to him to be too extreme.

But Habakkuk’s first question was essentially to ask if God was as serious about the holiness of Israel as Habakkuk was. In God’s answer, He showed that He was actually FAR more invested in the holiness of His people than Habakkuk ever could be. God cared so much about the holiness of His people that He was willing to use extreme measures to root out the sin and corruption in the camp.

Hear that, church. God cares deeply about your holiness, and we should not be surprised when He sends trials and tribulations to purify His church. This is the consistent message of the Bible – Old Testament and New. We were saved to live holy lives, and God will not allow us to play with sin.

God is so invested in our holiness that He will take drastic, even unbelievable measures to bring us back to obedience. Sure, sometimes He sends a friend to rebuke us. Perhaps He might even send a sermon to convict us. But sometimes – and this is the piece that Habakkuk struggled with – sometimes He sends unrighteous nations to strip us of our wealth and pride and to bring us to our knees. That’s who our God is and that’s how our God works.

This inspires Habakkuk’s second question which we find beginning in verse 12. Habakkuk exclaims:

Are 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 You who are of purer eyes than to see evil
and cannot look at wrong,
why do you idly look at traitors
and remain silent when the wicked swallows up
the man more righteous than he? (Habakkuk 1:12-13 ESV)

I worry that I might offer up something of a similar response if I were in this brother's situation. Habakkuk says: "God, you are so big and so wise – I don't dare suggest that you are in the wrong here – but how could You discipline us with those guys?? They're SO MUCH WORSE than we are!!"

Now Habakkuk's argument has taken a familiar turn. We hear arguments just like it all the time, don't we? Habakkuk asks:

2. Is God truly just?

Have you ever asked that question before? Why is it that the bad guys seem to win more often than not? Why doesn't the world operate with a strict, unwavering balance of justice? How can a good God allow the wicked to triumph over the innocent? That's the question Habakkuk is asking here, and after voicing his concern to God he says in verse 1 of chapter 2:

I will take my stand at my watchpost
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. (Habakkuk 2:1 ESV)

There is so much wisdom in this one verse. Habakkuk has poured his heart out to God, but he hasn't allowed himself to go any farther. He doesn't retreat into bitterness as we so often do. He doesn't run away from the church and hide himself from the world. He says: "God, this doesn't seem to fit with what I know about your character. So, I am going to stand here, and I am not going to move until I hear an answer from you." One commentator noted:

It is a wise man who takes his questions about God to God for the answers.¹

¹ Carl E. Amerding, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Daniel – Minor Prophets)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 7, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 509.

Habakkuk wasn't going to waste any time speculating or hypothesizing. I wonder if Habakkuk had read the book of Job. Job's friends were rebuked by God for trying to reason their way through the mysteries of God. They tried to explain things that were beyond their understanding and they wound up speaking falsely, foolishly and harmfully. Habakkuk says: "No, I'm not going to try to explain this one away. I need You, God, to show me what You're up to."

And that's exactly what God does! Beginning in verse 2 of chapter 2, God pulls back the veil and explains to Habakkuk that the Babylonians are going to give an account for all of their sins. But before God gives Habakkuk a brief glimpse into His ultimate purposes, he tells him in verse 4:

but the righteous shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4b ESV)

This brief verse presents the heart of the book of Habakkuk. I want to take a moment to examine it closely with you. When we think of the word "faith" we think of our faith in Jesus Christ. But the faith that Habakkuk wrote about could not have been faith in Jesus Christ, because Jesus would not arrive on the scene for another 700ish years. So, what kind of faith is God calling for here?

We find the answer to that question in the book of Hebrews where the author defines faith this way:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1 ESV)

That's faith. We don't always see what God is up to, do we? Some of you this morning are going through trials and there doesn't seem to be a positive outcome in sight. You've heard the promise in Romans 8:28:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

But you're feeling like this particular challenge is too horrific to be redeemable. You can't see how that promise could possibly be true today. Can I tell you something? God has given the book of Habakkuk to the church for people just like you. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. And, God says to Habakkuk: "The righteous shall live by FAITH."

Sitting where we are, so far removed from Habakkuk's historical context, it is nearly impossible to comprehend how enormously Habakkuk's faith was about to be stretched. We suspect our circumstances are far more despairing than his, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

Here are Habakkuk's circumstances: The Babylonians are going to burn the temple to the ground. The temple represented the presence of God with His people. The destruction of the temple would have felt like the destruction of all of God's promises! It would have left every Israelite wondering if the faith that shaped their families for generations was a sham.

But that's not all. Habakkuk's people – his family and friends – would be ripped away from their homeland and carried off into Babylon. The Babylonian captors would mock the Israelites by forcing them to sing the songs of ascent – the songs that the Israelites would sing as they walked to the temple – as they walked away from the temple and towards a land of captivity.

This is just a glimpse into Habakkuk's circumstances. We can't even begin to scratch the surface of the emotions he would have been feeling as he wrote this book. How could he believe in a promise-keeping God when the temple He promised was going to be destroyed? How could he believe in a promise keeping God while marching in captivity away from the land of promise?

the righteous shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4b ESV)

That would have been difficult to hear in Habakkuk's day, and it is difficult for many of us today as well.

It's particularly difficult because God doesn't tell Habakkuk everything that Habakkuk wants to know. He doesn't allow him to see the end result of His plan, but He does allow Habakkuk to see just enough to get him through the storm. Habakkuk was concerned that perhaps God would allow the Babylonians to go unpunished. He was worried that God's justice would not prevail.

In verses 6 – 20, God explains to Habakkuk that the Babylonians will be held accountable for their sin. He lists their sins with five woes. The first two woes have to do with the way that Babylon has unjustly accumulated her wealth. The third woe rebukes the way that Babylon violently built her empire on the backs of slaves. The fourth woe rebukes her irresponsible

leaders and the fifth woe rebukes her idolatry. We could preach an entire sermon on this section, but for today's purposes here is what we need to see: God sees every wrong and He will ultimately do right.

He sees those who build their empires on the backs of the poor. He sees the slumlords of Orillia who charge far more for rent than they need to and who leave people trapped in a cycle of poverty. He sees those who use their positions of power to oppress those who are vulnerable. He sees the nations who spill the blood of the innocent – even the unborn – in pursuit of leisure and pleasure. He sees. And He will hold the wicked to account.

This was enough for Habakkuk.

It wasn't everything. God would eventually bring the Israelites back from Babylon. Not only would the temple be rebuilt, but the building project would be financed by the nation holding the Israelites captive! Oh, if God would have allowed Habakkuk to see all of THAT his fears would have all but disappeared! But God kept those details to Himself. In His wisdom, He determined that it would be better for Habakkuk NOT to know everything. Instead He told him just enough. He told him: I see you, I hear your prayer, and I am good.

That was enough for Habakkuk and it prompted a song of praise and prayer in chapter three. In this final chapter, Habakkuk teaches us a valuable lesson. I suspect that some of you feel as if you are in the dark today. You're buried so deep in your troubles that you can't see a thing. You hear God's promises, but you don't see any solutions. You know that God is light and that in Him there is no darkness at all, and yet you feel like you are living in the shadows. How do you pray in the dark? Let's learn this lesson from our brother Habakkuk.

How to Pray in the Dark

First, we need to:

1. **Recount what God has done**

In verses 1-15 of chapter 3, Habakkuk uses poetic language to recount the Exodus story. Upon

being reminded of God's sovereign control of the world, Habakkuk goes back to the stories of God's faithfulness in the Torah. He reminds himself that his is the God who rescued His people out of Egypt. He reminds himself of the Egyptian chariots and horses who were washed away by the Red Sea at a time when God's people appeared to be all but lost.

True faith – the kind of faith that weathers the storm – is a faith that remembers. This is why Peter's final letter commanded us not to let go of the Old Testament prophets or the New Testament Apostles! We must not let go of our history, because it is in our history that God has revealed His saving power and His covenant faithfulness to us! Our God is and has always been the God who acts in history on behalf of His people. We cannot forget that!

The Apostle John laid out the game plan for our warfare against the devil's schemes:

And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. (Revelation 12:11 ESV)

Do you hear that? One of the best ways to overcome the evil one – one of the best ways to escape seasons of darkness – is to relive your testimony! Remind yourself of your baptism. Remind yourself of those early days when your eyes were opened to the beauty of the gospel for the first time. Remember the way that God rescued you out of your former slavery to sin, because in doing so you will strengthen your faith. The God who saved you in the past is faithful to see you through to the end!

This leads to our second instruction. If you find yourself praying in the dark, you need to:

2. Remember what God has promised to do

What comes next in the text is absolutely profound! I read this and I am reminded that Habakkuk was just an ordinary man like you or me. Look at verse 16 with me:

I hear, and my body trembles;
my lips quiver at the sound;
rottenness enters into my bones;
my legs tremble beneath me.
Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble
to come upon people who invade us. (Habakkuk 3:16 ESV)

Even though Habakkuk has recounted God's powerful actions in the past, there is still a part of him that is frightened about the approaching army. He says: "I see the enemy coming. I imagine the smell of smoke as our community goes up in flames. I hear that my loved ones will be dragged kicking and screaming from their homes by the murderous Babylonians. And my lips are quivering, God! And my bones are aching! And my legs are trembling!" And yet, amazingly, he goes on to say:

Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble
to come upon people who invade us. (Habakkuk 3:16 ESV)

God has never failed His people. He was faithful to Abraham. He was faithful to Isaac. He was faithful to Jacob. He was faithful to Moses, to David, and to Solomon. And now Habakkuk, filled with fear, sings: "And with a quivering lip and with trembling knees, I will wait for you to show your faithfulness to me as well!"

That is faith.

If you are a Christian today, then you have some incredible promises to hang onto. Promises that are true, even when you feel like your situation is too bleak. Promises like Romans 8:28:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

There will be times when you recite that promise with a quivering lip standing over the casket of your loved one. There will be times when you remember that promise with fear and trembling as you walk out of your boss's office having just lost your only source of income. But even with quivering lips and trembling knees we must train ourselves to wait patiently for the day of deliverance. Because it WILL come.

And finally, having expressed the concerns and the recommitment of his heart, Habakkuk teaches us one last lesson about praying in the dark. He teaches us that, after recounting what God has done in the past and after remembering what He has promised to do in the future we are to:

3. Rejoice in the meantime

I would encourage you to plant Habakkuk 3:17-18 in your heart, because you will need this prayer many times in your life. My wife and I memorized these verses five years ago, and they still help me in my prayer life on a weekly basis. Habakkuk says:

Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet **I will rejoice in the Lord;**
I will take **joy** in the God of my salvation. (Habakkuk 3:17-18 ESV)

One of the glories and the marvels of the Christian faith is that the book of Habakkuk can end with a call to joy! If you've been paying attention at all this morning, then you know that the book shouldn't end this way! Perhaps it could possibly end with a call to "grin and bear it", but certainly Habakkuk shouldn't be expected to respond with joy!

And yet, that is exactly what we find here. Joy. In the midst of the darkness of uncertainty and fear.

Now, let's be clear, joy is different than happiness. Happiness is a shallow, fleeting feeling. It is subject to our circumstances. You don't meet many happy Christians at funerals, and nor should you. Habakkuk is not simply mustering up an emotion – he is expressing a deep, conviction that exists in his soul.

I picture this joy like a pair of glasses that the Christian wears. These glasses enable us to see past our present circumstances to the future glory that awaits us. Now, we still SEE the challenges. We still GRIEVE the trials that we endure. But we have a deep-seated joy in our hearts in the midst of the sadness because we can see BEYOND our problems to the eternal bliss that God has laid out for us. It reminds of the Apostle Paul singing in his prison cell.

This is exactly what Peter was describing when he wrote in the first chapter of his first letter:

According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable,

undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. **6 In this you rejoice**, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, (1 Peter 1:3b-6 ESV)

In THIS you rejoice! Your inheritance is in heaven where it is being kept for you by the God of the universe! The same God, by the way, who is GAURDING YOU! He's holding fast to you and He's holding fast to your treasure so even in the midst of the worst storms you can have joy!

And sometimes, when the reality of our eternal joy is challenged by the reality of our present suffering, we will need to pray like our brother Habakkuk prays here. This is a prayer of faith.

When the stock market crashes, and the rent cheque bounces;
When my spouse rejects the gospel once again, and my children mock me in my own home;
When war is on the horizon, and the cancer has already arrived;
Yet, I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God, my Saviour.

The righteous will live by faith. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. The Apostle Paul teaches us about hope in Romans 8. After describing the present brokenness of the world, he says:

Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:24b-25 ESV)

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Things hoped for are by their very nature things that you cannot yet see.

As we conclude this morning, I know that many of you are staring in the face of a problem that seems to have no possible solution. You hate this season that God has you in. Can I encourage a response for you this morning? I want to encourage you to memorize Habakkuk 3:17-18 and to pray it to God each and every time you sense a wave of discouragement about to break on you.

The righteous will live by faith. And faith, in some miraculous, glorious way produces joy. So, ask God to help you to see beyond the present storm and into the coming glory!

It could be that God is using this season to purify your faith. It could be that He is going to miraculously bring you out of this present darkness tomorrow! We don't have all of the answers, but we know this: God sees you. God hears you. God is in control, and God will ultimately do good. He always has. He is a promise keeper. And if you are in Christ, all of the promises are yours.

This is the message of the prophet Habakkuk. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.