

Be Astonished! Wonder!

Expositions of Habakkuk

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Bible Text: Habakkuk 1:5; Acts 13:41

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Please turn in your Bibles to the 13th chapter of the book of Acts, Acts chapter 13 and beginning with verse 13. The bulk of this passage is Paul's sermon at Pisidian Antioch as he preached in the synagogue there. Acts chapter 13 beginning with verse 13.

Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath Day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance— all of which took about four hundred and fifty years. After these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.' From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'

"Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning

Him. And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead; and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.’ As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: ‘I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY and SURE blessings OF DAVID.’ Therefore He also says in another Psalm, ‘YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.’ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; but He whom God raised did not undergo decay. Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses. “Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you: ‘BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.’”

As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God.¹

May God be pleased to bless this reading of his Word and may he give us grace through Jesus Christ who is, indeed, the only Savior. Then, if you turn back in the Old Testament to Habakkuk, the little prophet Habakkuk, just one verse in the first chapter of Habakkuk, Habakkuk chapter one and verse five.

Look among the nations! Observe!
Be astonished! Wonder!
Because I am doing something in your days—
You would not believe if you were told.²

Let’s pray together.

¹ Acts 13:13-43.

² Habakkuk 1:5.

Father, thank you once again for Jesus Christ. Thank you for grace that comes to us through him. Thank you that in him there is salvation and there is forgiveness of sins. Thank you that as we ply the pages of Scriptures and look at the gospel you are pleased to speak to us the good things of Jesus Christ and draw us to yourself. Be pleased to do this now as we look into this your Word we pray in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

On December 7, 1941 the nation of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. President Roosevelt said, "This is a day that will live in infamy." It was a day that changed the landscape of the world. On June 6, 1944 the Allied forces landed at Normandy. It was a great invasion that changed the course of history in the Second World War. Both of these events stand as landmarks. But in actuality they pale in significance compared to the work of Jesus Christ. When you think of Jesus Christ and his work on the cross and of his resurrection and of the preaching of the gospel that followed, history was not only changed by this work of Christ, it was changed forever. It was changed for you and it was changed for me.

And because this is the case, as the Scripture tells us this morning,

Look among the nations! Observe!
Be astonished! Wonder!
Because I am doing something in your days—
You would not believe if you were told.³

The Scripture this morning calls you and it calls me to stand in awe of Jesus Christ, to stand in awe of the work of Jesus Christ because this work changed world history forever. It changed your history forever. Stand in awe of Jesus Christ; he forever changed history for your benefit. Yes, stand in awe of Jesus Christ; he forever changed history for your benefit.

When we look at this text this morning in Habakkuk chapter one and verse five, it calls for us to wonder in astonishment at what would take place. It also calls for Habakkuk to wonder in astonishment at what would take place. Habakkuk is in a quandary. As you remember, the people of Judah and Jerusalem were in great sin. There was much violence in Judah and Jerusalem.

Look at verses two and following.

How long, O LORD, will I call for help,
And You will not hear?
I cry out to You, "Violence!"
Yet You do not save.
Why do You make me see iniquity,
And cause me to look on wickedness?
Yes, destruction and violence are before me;

³ Habakkuk 1:5.

Strife exists and contention arises.
Therefore the law is ignored
And justice is never upheld.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
Therefore justice comes out perverted.⁴

Yes, there was much wickedness in Judah and in Jerusalem. Some of you will remember when we talked about Ezekiel and one of the visions that Ezekiel had. God took him back to Jerusalem in a vision and showed him a dark chamber in the temple. And on the wall in that dark chamber there were all manner of beasts and insects and unspeakable images. The 70 elders, the Sanhedrin of God's people, were standing before those images in that darkness with censers of incense. The vision indicates that they were praying to the objects inscribed on the wall. Deep idolatry had penetrated the culture. And because of this deep idolatry there was violence and there was murder. The leaders were defrauding the people. There was theft and fraud.

Habakkuk sees this and wonders about God. "Why don't you answer my complaint?" And God responds by saying, "I am going to send the Babylonians, the Chaldeans against my people." Verse six.

Behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,
That fierce and impetuous people
Who march throughout the earth
To seize dwelling places which are not theirs.⁵

Yes, the Babylonians will come and plunder Jerusalem. And these Babylonians, as you look at verse seven, were people who were dreaded and feared. Verse seven goes on to say, "Their justice and authority originate with themselves."⁶ Their sense of justice and their authority originate with themselves. They were in a contest with God. This is the kind of picture the text presents, this contest with God. God is the God of justice and judgment. God is the God of authority. Jesus Christ is the King. But these Babylonians saw themselves as ones who had ultimate authority and justice within themselves.

I fear our country is going in this same direction. Do you share this fear? Those who are in public office sense that they have authority within themselves. As a result, we are coming to the place in our own country where the government is to be feared. Many people in government think that they are the ones with authority. They have authority to mete justice as they see fit. There is a reason for this.

Look at the end of verse 11. The Babylonians are those "whose strength is their god."⁷ They worship themselves rather than the Creator. They worship the creature rather than the Creator. They look at themselves as the ones who have supreme authority. It reminds

⁴ Habakkuk 1:2-4.

⁵ Habakkuk 1:6.

⁶ Habakkuk 1:7.

⁷ Habakkuk 1:11.

me of sitting in a barber's chair two or three years ago. The barber spun me around to look in the mirror and said, "There, you look just like a senator." I said, "I hope not." It was very quiet in the barber shop after that. You understand my thinking. Some of these men in government think, in their arrogance, that they have ultimate authority and power. This is because they reject the authority and power of God and of Jesus Christ. This was the Babylonian culture at the time. There is this contest, therefore, with God.

At the same time, Habakkuk is wrestling with the whole matter of justice. Look at verse four again.

Therefore the law is ignored
And justice is never upheld.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
Therefore justice comes out perverted.⁸

Men and women arrogate power to themselves because they ignore the law of God. We see this matter of justice once again in verse seven. "They are dreaded,"⁹ that is, the Babylonians, "And feared. Their justice and authority originates with themselves."¹⁰

But God is reminding Habakkuk that justice and righteousness do not come from men. Justice and righteousness do not spring up from the earth. Righteousness does not come out of the hearts of men. It comes down from God.

Look at chapter two and verse four. "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him."¹¹ The proud one is the one whose authority and justice springs from himself. He thinks he himself is the end all and be all. It is a great aggravation to see arrogant political leaders sit up behind the dais and belittle generals for completing the work in the field these same leaders sent them to accomplish.

But real justice and righteousness comes from above. This is what Habakkuk is learning. "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him."¹² This is a little word of discernment, friends. "As for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith."¹³

And what is faith? Years ago J. Gresham Machen wrote a little book and titled it *What is Faith?* In that book he essentially says that faith is an expression of the fact that we have nothing to offer to God. We are empty. We have nothing to offer to God. We have no merit within ourselves. There is no true justice and the authority within us. True righteousness comes from God. And if we are going to receive righteousness, it has to come as a free gift from above. It must come from God. And so this righteousness comes

⁸ Habakkuk 1:4.

⁹ Habakkuk 1:7.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Habakkuk 2:4.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

to you and to me by faith in Jesus Christ. We are right with God through faith, not on the basis of anything we can offer to God. This faith is, in itself, a testimony that you have nothing to offer to God and I have nothing to offer to God.

And so Habakkuk wrestles with the matter of justice and righteousness as he sees violence and hatred and idolatry among his own brethren in Judah and Jerusalem. At the same time he questions the justice of God in sending Babylon as the hand of his judgment. But God's word is clear.

Look among the nations! Observe!
Be astonished! Wonder!
Because I am doing something in your days—
You would not believe if you were told.¹⁴

Look! Observe! Carefully perceive what is taking place on the geopolitical landscape. Be astonished at what you see. When the gondola grinds to the high point of the roller coaster ride you are astonished by the sudden drop, the acceleration, the speed, and you let out an emotional scream. Once at the bottom, you are in wonder and amazement at what just took place. Now God tells Habakkuk he will act. He will cause men, women, young people and children to be seized with amazement and wonder.

If you turn to Acts chapter 13, you will see, in verse 41, the apostle Paul quotes this same text, Habakkuk 1:5. Look at Acts chapter 13 and verse 41. "BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU."¹⁵ The translation here is slightly different than that in Habakkuk. The reason is that the apostle Paul is quoting from the Greek Old Testament rather than from the Hebrew Old Testament. His quotation comes at the conclusion of his sermon.

Let's go back to verse 13 and following and pick up the context.

Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.¹⁶

Traveling into Asia minor, into the southern regions of Asia Minor north of the island of Cypress, on the east end of the Mediterranean Sea, Paul and Barnabas make their way to Pisidian Antioch. There they find a synagogue. On the Sabbath Day they enter and they sit down just as you have come today and taken your places to worship God.

Verse 15.

¹⁴ Habakkuk 1:5.

¹⁵ Acts 13:41.

¹⁶ Acts 13:13-14.

After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, “Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.” Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen...”¹⁷

The practice in the ancient synagogue was to have two Scripture readings. There was a reading from Moses, from the law. Then followed a reading from one of the prophets. It could be that on this day the prophet read was the prophet Habakkuk. The practice was that someone would then give a word of exhortation or preach in the synagogue. In this exhortation, the preacher would expound Moses, he would look at Moses through the eyes of the prophet, through the lens of the reading of the prophet.

We do much the same thing today. We read from the Old Testament and then we read from the New Testament. And what do we do? We look at the Old testament through the eyes of the New Testament. This is the procedure. And so we are following the ancient Jewish tradition in doing so. And so on this day the apostle Paul, being invited from the congregation, recognized as a rabbi, recognized as one trained in the law, is invited to give a word of exhortation.

Let’s drop down into the sermon to verse 26. The apostle Paul has now rehearsed the history of the Jewish people from Moses and from Samuel. And we break in at verse 26.

Brethren, sons of Abraham’s family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him.¹⁸

You notice again that the prophets were being read every Sabbath in accordance with the custom. And Paul points out that when the prophets were read in Jerusalem that the people didn’t understand the message of the prophets and that the scribes and the Pharisees did not properly teach the people. And so they condemned Jesus.

Verse 28.

And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb.¹⁹

And so they surmised that they were disposing of this man Jesus who had come preaching, who had gathered such a multitude, and who had gathered such a crowd and

¹⁷ Acts 13:15-16.

¹⁸ Acts 13:26:27.

¹⁹ Acts 13:28-29.

such a following. The scribes and the Pharisees and the Jewish leaders resented this Jesus. They were glad to be able to put him to death.

Jumping down to verse 32. “And we preach...” Paul says.²⁰

And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.’²¹

“Yes, this Christ whom you have put to death...” Now, you have to remember the situation in which Paul is preaching. He is preaching in a Jewish synagogue. He is preaching to those who are related to the folks back there in Jerusalem. He is preaching about Christ who had been condemned. His is preaching about Christ who had been put to death. And I wonder. I wonder if he has Habakkuk in the back of his mind. Does he have in mind the violence that Habakkuk was thinking about when he asks. God, How long? How long will it be before you come and answer this violence, neighbor against neighbor, brother against brother? And Paul is pointing out to these Jews in Pisidian Antioch that there in Jerusalem there is presently this same kind of violence, Jewish brother against Jewish brother. This violence is epitomized in the crucifixion of Christ.

But God raised up this Jesus. Reading on, verse 36.

For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.²²

Jesus did not undergo decay because he was raised from the dead.

Then Paul exhorts these people in the synagogue to turn to this Christ, verse 38.

Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.²³

From where does true righteousness and justice come? It comes from above. It comes from heaven. It comes to you, friends, through Jesus Christ. You see, Paul is imploring the congregation there in Pisidian Antioch to turn to Christ. Yes, they are associated with the injustices perpetrated against Christ in Jerusalem. But from where does true justice come? It comes from above. From where does righteousness come? It comes from

²⁰ Acts 13:32.

²¹ Acts 13:32-33.

²² Acts 13:36-37.

²³ Acts 13:38-39.

above. It comes from Christ. You need to turn to Christ. This is Paul's plea. And this is Paul's plea to you and to me.

And then, interestingly enough, Paul issues a warning to this Jewish congregation. Verse 40. "Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you."²⁴ The English Standard Version reads a little bit differently. And I think it has a better reading of the text. "Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets *should come about*."²⁵ Then Paul quotes Habakkuk. What happened in the time of Habakkuk? What happened in the time of Jeremiah? What happened in the time of Ezekiel? Be amazed and wonder says the prophet because something is going to take place if you would ask me and I would tell you, you would hardly believe it.²⁶ God is going to destroy his own city. God is going to destroy Jerusalem. God is going to destroy the city he has chosen for his own dwelling place. God is going to wipe the Jewish kingdom off the map.

And this is exactly what took place. When Nebuchadnezzar came and destroyed Jerusalem and took the people into captivity the monarchy was never to arise again. The kingdom as it was known was gone.

And now Paul says, "Think, observe, because God is about something big here as I preach to you. Do you remember what happened in Habakkuk's time and Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jewish nation, as it was known, perished? Do you remember that? God is going to do something similar again. God is going to wipe away Jerusalem and destroy the temple, the place of his dwelling. If I would tell you this and talk to you about this, you would hardly believe that it was possible."

But in retrospect we know that it was possible. It did take place. And that city as it was known and that temple as it was known was wiped off the face of the map. And what stands in the place of that temple today? An Islamic monument, the Dome of the Rock. Verse 41. "BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU."²⁷

But why would God destroy that temple and, once again, remove the nation from its place? Let's read on a little bit. Verse 44.

The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.

²⁴ Acts 13:40.

²⁵ See Acts 13:40, ESV, Italics Added.

²⁶ See Habakkuk 1:5.

²⁷ Acts 13:41.

For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.'"²⁸

Why did Jesus Christ, having died, having been raised again from the dead, having ascended into heaven, having taken his place at the right hand of the throne of majesty on high, why did Jesus Christ who is the King and Lord of all, why did he superintend the destruction of that temple and to the destruction of the Jewish nation? The reason is simple. It was so that the gospel now would go to the Gentiles. It was so that the gospel would come to people like you and me. It was so that you could sit here this morning and hear the preaching of the Word of God. It was so that you would have the privilege of sitting under the reading of the gospel and hear the proclamation of the gospel.

Why did God alter history? Why did God change the calendar? Why did King Jesus, who is Lord of all, superintend all of these things? So that the Jewish nation for a time would be set aside and so that people like you and me would have the privilege of hearing the gospel Jesus Christ. In his plan and in his purposes Christ began to break natural branches off that natural olive tree and cast them aside. At the same time he began to take unnatural branches and graft them into that olive tree, people like you and me, so that you would be able to enjoy the things of eternal life. Contemplating this, the apostle Paul exclaims, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!"²⁹ Jesus Christ altered history for the benefit of people like us, friends. Stand in awe of Jesus Christ, the great king of all who altered history on behalf of you and me.

Do you remember what Christ said after his resurrection and before his ascension?

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always.³⁰

Jesus Christ the King altered history to bring you the gospel. Stand in awe of him, I say to you this morning.

On September 11, 2001 two jet planes filled with jet fuel crashed into the twin towers in New York City and for us in the United States and for many people around the world things were dramatically altered. We got a little glimpse of this this past week in an interesting little incident. A Boeing 747, part of the presidential fleet, flew at 1000 feet across Manhattan island, about the altitude of those jets that struck the twin towers. Many people fled the buildings in lower Manhattan remembering the devastation and the death that came about as a result of 9/11. What took place on 9/11 was not forgotten.

²⁸ Acts 13:44-47.

²⁹ Romans 11:33.

³⁰ Matthew 28:18-20.

This is a good reminder for you and for me that the work of Jesus Christ, which we are remembering this morning in the Lord's Supper, causes 9/11, causes D-day, June 6, 1944, causes December 7, 1941 to pale in insignificance. He profoundly altered history so that Gentiles, men and women like you and me, could hear his gospel. Realize the greatness of the work of Jesus Christ. King Jesus altered history for this purpose.

And I say to you this morning, friends, stand in awe of Jesus Christ, the great King of all; he forever altered altered history for your benefit. Look again Habakkuk 1:5.

Look among the nations! Observe!
Be astonished! Wonder!
Because I am doing something in your days—
You would not believe if you were told.³¹

God says, "I am doing a thing in your time you would hardly believe if I were to tell it to you."³² Stand in awe of Jesus Christ; he forever altered history for your benefit.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for your Word. Bless it to us we pray and grant, as we move forward in this service, you will be pleased to give us your grace in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

³¹ Habakkuk 1:5.

³² See Habakkuk 1:5.