

Habakkuk: The Just Shall Live By Faith

(Sermon #1)

The Prophet With A Problem

Habakkuk 1:1

Lord's Day * 7/23/17 * Christ Reformed Community Church * St. John's, FL

Intro

- This morning we begin a study in the OT book of Habakkuk. An easy way to find Habakkuk is to go to Matthew flip through the OT backward until you come to the 5th book from the back, which is Habakkuk. I'm going to ask you to turn to Habakkuk 2:4 and place your finger there while turning back to 1:1-4. I'm going to read the first 4 verses of the first chapter before then turning to 2:2-4 to read that. This will set the stage since this sermon will serve only as an introduction to this oft neglected, yet profoundly rich book of sacred Scripture.

1:1-4

1The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. 2O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, "Violence!" and you will not save. 3Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. 4So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

2:2-4

2And the Lord answered me; Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. 3For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end- it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. 4Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.

- The book of Habakkuk is considered a minor prophet, but we only call it this do to its length. The Major Prophets are much longer. The Minor Prophets are often neglected, and especially Habakkuk because people see the word *Minor* and people think “insignificant”. I thought it would be good to go to the OT since we have been in the NT almost exclusively during our church’s young life. And I confess to you that I initially chose Habakkuk somewhat arbitrarily and somewhat practically. Practically I chose it because it’s a short book that will only take about 6 weeks to work through and I needed a short book since my dissertation series on union with Christ has been scheduled for this Fall more than 2 years ago and I only have a few weeks before I have to begin that series.

- But though I selected this book somewhat arbitrarily and mostly for practical purposes, I have discovered that it wasn’t by accident. I haven’t been able to get enough of this little book as I’ve been studying its contents all week. The Lord has taught me much and so I trust that He’ll also teach us much together. Apparently, I needed to hear it’s message, and you do too since God orders our every decision and He certainly governed my selection of this book. So in His sovereignty we will learn together.

Proposition: In introducing this book, I just want to lay before you 5 *points* that open up the purpose, content, and application in a summary way for us before we really begin to dig through it next week. So we will look at:

- The prophecy
- The prophet
- The period (in which the book was written)
- The problem (facing the prophet and God's people)
- The practical (lessons generally speaking that can be drawn)

Trans: First note with me...

I. The Biblical Prophecy Revealed (1, 1c)

- How did Habakkuk receive his prophecy and in what form did it come? V1 speaks of the **oracle** that Habakkuk **saw**. The word **oracle** describes the message from the Lord brought by the prophet, in this case Habakkuk. This message of divine revelation is one that, as the end of v1 says, he **saw**. This is the verb form of the noun used by Nahum translated (1:1) as "vision". So Habakkuk likely received this vision in the temple in Jerusalem.ⁱ

- Habakkuk's prophecy was the result of a prophetic vision in which he saw God and directly heard from Him. The word

oracle derives from a Hebrew verb meaning “to lift up”.ⁱⁱ Much like Isaiah found himself lifted up in the presence of the Lord and was told to go and preach what he heard from God to the people, so too did Habakkuk preach the **oracle** of divine revelation He received to the people of God.

- In fact, the word **oracle** is translated in the KJV as “burden”. Indeed, the Hebrew word carries the idea of a load or burden.ⁱⁱⁱ This is what prophets and preachers do. They are burdened with a message from God and deliver it to the people of God. Now we’ll see what exactly the burden of this prophet Habakkuk was in a moment.

- The only other thing I would say about the prophecy of this book is that Habakkuk doesn’t record his sermons like we are used to seeing prophets do in their books. Rather, Habakkuk only records the dialogue he has with God. In chapter 3 he also records a psalm or hymn that he composed, but this was not a sermon, nor was it prophetic in the sense that it foretells future events. It is a hymn that remembers the past dealings of God with His people.

Trans: Let’s move from *the Biblical prophecy revealed* next to...

II. The Faithful Prophet Identified (1b)

- As v1 indicates, the author of the book is **Habakkuk the prophet**. His name means “embrace”. This may have no significance, but we see at the end of the book that he lives up to his name since he in faith *embraces* God as his joy, salvation, and strength (cf. 3:16-19). In 2:4, God told him that the just shall live by faith and by the end of the book we see the faith of Habakkuk as he perseveres in his trust of God though the circumstances of God’s people are grim.

- We also know he was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Israel known as Judah and that he ministered at the same time as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Nahum, and Zephaniah. But apart from this not much is known about him. A non-inspired apocryphal book says Habakkuk was of the tribe of Levi and that an angel carried him by his hair from Judah to Babylon in order to provide food for Daniel in the Lion’s Den. This account is obviously fictional.

- It is tempting, however, to believe that the postscript of the book reveals that he was a temple musician-prophet. If you look at the very end of v19 it reads: “*To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.*” This might mean that he was part of the priestly office and perhaps even musically inclined. Can a prophet function in the priestly office? David was a king, and

was musically inclined, installed much of the music in the temple (I Chron 25 and Amos 6:5), and wrote most of the Psalms which served as the hymnbook of Israel. Since Habakkuk records a psalm (or hymn) in chapter 3, and as the postscript says for the choirmaster, it is at least possible that he was both a prophet and a poet; a songwriter and a preacher. But this is still somewhat speculative.

- I like the fact that he doesn't reveal much about himself because the role of the prophet is not to emphasize himself or his own opinions, but God and His revelation. The message of the prophecy itself, not the messenger, should receive emphasis. This should still be true of preachers today.

I remember someone telling me one time several years ago that my sermons might be more interesting if I told more stories about myself. Wrong. God's people should want to hear God's prophetic word, not information about the prophet himself.

- Of course, we learn much about ourselves by studying the prophet Habakkuk. He serves as a mirror of God's people and how they think and view God at times, which we will see in a moment. But Habakkuk is focused on getting God's message across so he avoids any sort of lengthy biographical sketch. As a result, we don't know much about him at all.

Trans: But this takes us now to the 3rd point. We've seen the *Biblical prophecy revealed* and *the faithful prophet identified*. But note with me thirdly...

III. The Historical Period Explained

- Before the message of Habakkuk becomes relevant to contemporary North Florida, we need to understand what it meant for the ancient near east. Social chaos, political upheaval, and spiritual decline mark the period Habakkuk ministered. His prophecy took place in the last period of Israel in the OT era between the years Babylon became the dominant world power in 605 B.C. to Nebuchadnezzar's first invasion of Jerusalem in 597. B.C. Like the prophet Jeremiah, Habakkuk predicted this invasion to the people of Israel. But the events described in the book itself cover a much larger period of some 66 years in 56 verses.

- Each section of the book uncovers a different period in Israel's history. 1:1-4 roughly covers the period that David's wicked son Jehoiakim ruled. But in 1:5-17 we see references to Babylon's final attacks on Jerusalem in 597/586. In chapter 2 we see God promising the defeat of the Babylonians (who would turn out to be the Persians though not mentioned by name in the book), which results in Jews beginning to return to Jerusalem, which took place beginning in 538.^{iv}

- Habakkuk lived during sad days because he saw the rapid decline of Israel spiritually, socially, and politically. He was likely alive to witness what one commentator has called the two most monumental events in the history of the ancient near east. This reminds us that God sovereignly places godly leaders in the midst of the worst of times to lead God's people through safely. What were the events? The first was the fall of Nineveh, the capitol city of Assyrian Empire. The Empire, you remember, that invaded and plundered the NK of Israel in 721 B.C. Assyria was the world's superpower. But when Nineveh fell, the second most important thing occurred- Babylon (one of the invaders of Nineveh along with the Medes) became the world's superpower to replace Assyria.

- Prior to the fall of wicked Assyria, Judah (the SK) had a king named Manasseh who ruled for over 50 years and is judged by God in Scripture as more wicked than a pagan (2 Kgs 21). Manasseh introduced the gods of the Canaanites into temple worship and even offered his own son as a burnt offering to the Ammonite false god Molech (2 Kgs 21:6). After he died, his son Amon didn't do much better. But the tide turned when Manasseh's grandson Josiah became king. Habakkuk was likely alive to experience the great revival that took place under Josiah who has been considered the best king since David. Habakkuk would have been alive during Josiah's reign.

Josiah was only 8 when he came to the throne, but he grew into a heroic and courageous young man because unlike his wicked grandfather Manasseh he began to seek the God of David his father (2 Chron 34:3).

- If you've ever seen a chart of the kings of Israel, both the NK and SK, you may find a description after each one. The most common description is "did evil". You go through the list and one right after another "did evil". Then you come to some that say, "did right in youth, but wrong in old age". Only a few, like Jehosaphat, Uzziah, and Hezekiah, are described as "did right". Josiah "did right" up into adulthood! He boldly purged idolatrous worship practices. In righteous anger he tore down the high places of false idols. He reformed worship in the temple in Jerusalem to be God honoring, Biblical, and reverent. He completely renounced the false gods of Assyria, removing their false gods from the sanctuary of the one true God, Yahweh, effectively shaking his fist at Assyria, the world superpower. Thankfully, he did not follow in the footsteps of his wicked grandfather Manasseh. And in 621 B.C. while the temple was under repairs, the Book of the Law was found. This added to his reform of faith and practice among God's people.

- Josiah even made all of this official by calling God's people together at the temple for a ceremony of covenant renewal to Yahweh to follow Him and obey His commands! But the revival would be short lived. The people began to grow apathetic and began taking God's blessings for granted. God's people, as they always tend to do, began thinking that God's blessings would continue coming regardless of their obedience.

- Meanwhile, after the death of their king, Ashurbanipal, Assyria's dynasty began to crumble. Soon Babylon began fighting them for dominance as the world's superpower. Pharaoh Necho then got Egypt involved by joining forces with Assyria. This shifting of world powers made Josiah very nervous since he saw a strengthened Assyria with Egypt's help as a major threat to his reformation of Israel. So in what has been described as the beginning of the end for Israel, Josiah - whether boldly or foolishly or both - died on the battlefield at Megiddo (2 Kgs 23:29). His army took his body back to Jerusalem in a chariot in a march that can only be described as great lamentation (2 Chr 35:20-24).

- And thus was the beginning of Habakkuk's lamentation along with the righteous remnant of the faithful (cf. 2:4) because Josiah's son Jehoahaz was named king. Pharaoh

Necho, Egypt's king, summoned Jehoahaz to his headquarters and imprisoned him until his death (2 Kgs 23:33-34).^v The Pharaoh placed Jehoahaz's brother (Josiah's oldest son) Eliakim on the throne and changed his name to Jehoiakim. He was a vassal servant to Pharaoh. Unlike his warrior-father who stood up to wicked super powers by taking a stand on the Book of the Law, Jehoiakim was a compromiser. 2 Kgs 24:4 tells us that he wickedly shed innocent blood in Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah boldly described him as an unjust, brutal tyrant who was thoroughly materialistic and wanted nothing more than to serve himself by adding spacious rooms to his palace complete with elaborate decorations (Jer 22:13-19). The SK of Judah was once again fraught with violence and injustice and wickedness. It was also a kingdom that was subservient to Egypt, now the world power of the day just as their forefathers had been long ago before God delivered them through Moses.

- But soon enough, Babylon attacked the Egyptian army at Carchemish by Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar ran off the Egyptians past the Euphrates River (2 Kgs 24:7). This resulted in Babylon becoming the dominant world power. And what does Jehoikam do? Rather than stand up to Babylon like his father Josiah would have done, he cowers and changes his

submission to Pharaoh of Egypt to Nabopolassar, king of Babylon.

- This was the period in which Habakkuk lived. He witnessed the rapid exchange of world superpowers, international chaos, wars and rumors of wars, weak leaders, growing rebellion among God's people who violated God's covenant in their wickedness and idolatrous worship. But most of all, he saw the spiritual decline of the SK of Judah. How could it go from bad to good to bad again? Why was God allowing all of this? If God was in control, then why would he allow a good king like Josiah to finally come along and establish spiritual reformation only to see God's people decline even more? Indeed, this period in Israel's history saw prophetic activity at a fever pitch. Prophet after prophet including the likes of Nahum, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zephaniah, were reminding God's people of God's covenant promises. Why would the kings not listen? God's people had more preachers than ever before all at one time. If God was really faithful, then why was all this turmoil in the world going on.

- Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever question God? Do you affirm His sovereignty, but then ask why He allows certain things in your life, in the church, in our country, in the world to occur? I mean you may even look at the larger church

and see all the great preachers and wonder how why a true Reformation can't occur. If so, this is the book for you.

- I've called Habakkuk a prophet with a problem, but really his problem is our problem. And speaking of problems, this takes us to the 4th point of this book by way of introduction.

Trans: We've seen the Biblical prophecy revealed, the faithful prophet identified, the historical period explained, and now note...

IV. The Universal Problem Uncovered

- We won't look at it in any sort of detail until next week, but note with me again how the book opens in v2:

2O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, "Violence!" and you will not save. 3Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. 4So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

- And then after God tells Habakkuk in vss 5-11 that Babylon is going to be sent to judge Israel, effectively making the situation even worse, Habakkuk asks more questions in vss 12-13:

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 as 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?

- You see, Habakkuk is not only a prophet with a problem; we are a people with a problem. He is speaking on behalf of God's people and he's dialoguing with God complaining, lamenting, questioning: "Why, O Lord, if you are just and sovereign, and all powerful, why do you allow what's happening with your people? You are holy, you are pure, but you are allowing injustice and violence and wickedness to run rampant. Your people are hurting. And your getting ready to make it worse. The unrighteous are successful and oppressing the righteous. Why don't you hear our prayers for deliverance."

- And if we are honest this is often the cry of our hearts: "Why, O Lord, do you allow what you do in this world? Injustice, wickedness, idolatry, sin, political turmoil, terrorism, crime. Why do you allow what you do in the church? False teachers, wicked leaders, false shepherds, backsliding saints. And why do you allow what you do in my life? Sickness, pain, divorce, cancer, heartache, trials and death."

- The problem of the prophet is a problem of the people-God's people. Habakkuk is wrestling with God. He needs an answer to give the beleaguered and discouraged people of God. He's grappling with the justice of God in light of the wickedness of God's professed people and the surrounding world, isn't he? He's trying to reconcile God's sovereignty and justice with the problem of evil. There is a name for this in theological terms. It's called theodicy. There's also a name for it in practical terms. It's called spiritual confusion.

- His central questions are: 1) How can God permit evil (1:2-11), and 2) How can He appear to endorse it by allowing more wicked people to hurt God's people? But God's main answer is found in the main verse (2:4) where God says: "*but the righteous shall live by his faith.*" The idea is that the righteous ones will not only demonstrate a faith that leads to salvation, but they will demonstrate a lifestyle of faithfulness in persevering trust of a good God in a world that has gone all wrong because of sin. God tells Habakkuk in the rest of chapter 2 that Babylon itself will be defeated someday. God will not lose the battle and therefore His people will not lose the battle in the final analysis. Habakkuk is a book that calls God's people to have faith to carry on; to continue trusting in God's goodness in spite of unwelcome circumstances.

- And Habakkuk, whose name means “embrace”, gets to the end of his dialogue with God and responds by writing a hymn that is submitted to the choirmaster to be sung in worship in the temple. It’s called a prayer in 3:1. But singing is a form of prayer. It’s our hearts expressing ourselves before God. And in this ancient hymn is a recounting of God’s might acts of faithfulness in the past in delivering Israel and remaining faithful to His covenant. So that when you get to the end of the book, Habakkuk has embraced God in renewed faith. Notice what he says in v17:

*17*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. *19*God, the Lord, is my strength: He makes my feet like the deer’s; He makes me tread on my high places.

- The proper response to God when we don’t understand His providential ordering of things is to remember His covenant faithfulness. It is to in faith trust His Word, His goodness, His sovereign plan and to express it in prayer, confession, and song. And ultimately, for a Christian in the new covenant it is to trust in Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all His covenant promises. There is a veiled reference to Jesus even in this book. In 3:13:

You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked.

This is language reminiscent of Gen 3:15, which encapsulates the whole course of God's sovereign redemptive plan in dealing a fateful and final blow to the head of the serpent, the devil. History is indeed "His Story". The serpent has attempted to thwart the coming of the Messiah at every turn. He tried to destroy Israel, but over and over again God preserved a righteous remnant from whose line the Messiah eventually came.^{vi} Though the battles of life don't seem to be compatible with God's justice and sovereignty, Habakkuk teaches us to walk by faith, not by sight.

- Indeed, you could outline Habakkuk this way. Chapter 1 is about our *faith being attacked* (Why, O Lord? How long O Lord?). Chapter 2 is then about *faith being advised* ("the righteous shall live by faith" in God, 2:4). And so chapter 3 about *faith being affirmed* ("I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength", 3:18b-19a). At the end of the day, faith simply takes God at His word even when things don't look good, which is by the way why Scripture insists that faith is a gift from God.

Trans: So we have seen *the Biblical prophecy revealed, the faithful prophet identified, the historical period explained, the universal problem uncovered.* So now in closing let me leave you with...

V. The Practical Principles Discovered

- I don't want to spoil the next several weeks for you, so let me just mention a handful of principles gleaned from this study that you can chew on over the next week.

- *First, continue to trust God even when life hurts.* Earlier I spent time explaining to you how this Biblical prophecy came to Habakkuk. It came in a vision directly from God. It's important to acknowledge that the lesson to always have faith in God in spite of not understanding His mysterious ways does not come from some philosophical insight, sociological study, or psychological evaluation. Such a truth comes from divine revelation. You can trust it.

T: Not only continue to trust God when life hurts, but...

- *Second, honesty before God in reverently seeking answers is form Him in prayer is an acceptable way to approach Him.* God does not thunder down to Habakkuk, "How dare you question Me!" like an annoyed and abusive father, but rather

He responds with patience with gentleness and with helpfulness. *But*, and this is big, just remember that if you wrestle with God that you need to be willing to accept His answers as Habakkuk clearly did.

- *Third, true worship is rooted in recounting God's covenant faithfulness and as such is immensely God centered, not man-centered.* The hymn that Habakkuk composes tells of what God has done for His people. That sort of worship strengthens the faith of God's people. It's bold, clear, historical, and gives God glory.

T: So continue to trust God even when life hurts, realize that honesty before God in reverently seeking answers from Him in prayer is an acceptable way to approach Him, and true worship is rooted in recounting God's covenant faithfulness and as such is immensely God centered, not man-centered.

- *Fourth, passionate corporate singing is a mark of spiritual maturity and faith.* I'm not a video pastor. I'm not criticizing pastors who use video clips before their sermons as a point of illustration, but I personally won't engage in it. But as I was running this past week and contemplating this message, I wondered what it would be like to play a video clip of people passionately singing the national anthem or some other song

before my sermon. I imagined getting up at the end of the video and saying, “Isn’t that singing contagious? Doesn’t it make you want to sing along? Can’t you tell these people really believe the words they are singing? Can’t you tell they love our country?” Or the alternative would be showing a car full of teenagers or college students who filmed themselves singing at the top of their lungs. And then I would say, “Why don’t we do that in church? Where is the passion? Do we love God? Do we trust in God? Are we truly thankful for His rich salvation?”

- Passionate corporate singing is a mark of spiritual maturity and faith. Habakkuk wrote his psalm for the people of God to sing at the top of their lungs in the temple as an expression of their devotion and trust in God.

Con

- At the end of the day, Habakkuk helps us see that God is still on His throne. He never left His throne. Truths such as the ones we’ll learn from Habakkuk caused believers of a past era to pray the following prayer when they got up on a Monday morning before going to work:

*God is still on the throne,
And He will remember His own.
Though trials oppress us and burdens distress us,
He never will leave us alone.
God is still on the throne,*

*And He will remember His own.
And His promise is true, He will not forget you.
God is still on His throne.*

ⁱ Bruckner, *NIV Application*, 209.

ⁱⁱ Fentress, *Christ-centered Exposition: Hab*, 181.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barker and Bailey, *NAC*, 289.

^{iv} Bruckner, 202.

^v For a full treatment of the history, see Barker and Bailey, 246-251.

^{vi} See *Reformation Heritage Study Bible* introductory notes of Habakkuk.

Other References:

- *Holman OT Commentary, Habakkuk*, Anders
- *MacArthur Study Bible*
- *ESV Study Bible*
- *The History of Israel*, Bright