

GOD DOES NOT ALWAYS ANSWER AS WE DESIRE
(SUNDAY, AUGUST 16, 2020)

Scripture reading – Rev. 6:9-11; Habakkuk 1:1-11

INTRODUCTION

Are you familiar with Jeremiah 29:11?

Maybe you have seen a bumper sticker or picture connected with this verse.

Jer. 29:11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

This is a beautiful verse.

But what can be the problem with just citing this verse or using it kind of like a slogan?

The problem is that often verses are used without considering their context.

The basic way that must interpret and understand Scripture is what we call the **historical-grammatical method**.

We look at verse in terms of its grammar

We must understand what the passage around it is saying.

We try to appreciate the historical and cultural background.

When we do this, we can understand the meaning of a passage and make proper application from it.

So, for Jeremiah 29:11 the context is Jeremiah writing a letter to those taken away captive to Babylon.

There was going to be 70 years of exile and testing.

But through this God's purposes would be fulfilled.

God determined to work this for the good of His people.

And we see in the context that God's people were also called to turn to the Lord and seek him seriously.

So, I wouldn't advise getting a Jeremiah 29:11 tattoo unless you are planning on 70 years of captivity somewhere.

I say this as part of the introduction to the book of Habakkuk.

We first try to understand the Word of God as it was first given.

From this we seek to make application.

As we will see, I think Habakkuk, like all of Scripture, is a very relevant book for us today.

But we must consider that it is not prophetic for us today in the same way it was for God's people when it was first given.

There are certainly lessons and applications, but we have to be careful not to twist God's word.

The book of Habakkuk wrestles with what we can call the problem of evil.

Why doesn't God do more in the face of evil?

How can God use a wicked nation to punish His people?

The book of Habakkuk is a reminder that God does not answer to us.

And as a result, God does not always answer as we desire.

Now it is vital to see that this is not the basis for despair.

If you are trusting in the Lord, then there is always hope.

And if you are humbled before the Lord, that is never a bad thing.

The book of Habakkuk, especially as we look at the beginning, is like an anvil dropped on your toe!

Ouch and more we might say.

There is much more to this book, but this is where we begin.

We must cry to God. His answer may not be what we are wanting to hear.

We will look at Hab. 1:1-11 in three parts.

- 1) Verse 1 - Habakkuk
- 2) Verses 2-4 - Habakkuk's first prayer
- 3) Verses 5-11 - God's frightening answer

1) WHO WAS HABAKKUK, V. 1

What do you know about the 13 books we call the Minor Prophets?

Several are familiar - Daniel and Jonah

The other 11 books you might say, "I know very little or nothing about them at least from memory."

It is not that you can't be a "good" Christian unless you can pass a test on these books, but it is not good that we are generally ignorant about these passages in Scripture.

Part of the reason is that the language is often challenging and in some cases the books are short, so we don't often come across them.

On the other hand, the fact that the books are short means it doesn't take very long to read them.

They can be a challenge still to study them.

This is one reason why I am focusing on Habakkuk.

Lord willing, we will come to better appreciate Habakkuk and maybe this will be an incentive for you to study the other books in the same part of Scripture.

What does verse 1 tell us about Habakkuk?

Not a great deal.

We don't learn anything about his family.

We don't learn anything about where he lived.

Unlike some of the other minor prophets we are not given any king or kings that ruled when the prophet lived.

We can date the book as being focused on the time when Babylon was a growing power and would eventually be used by the Lord as a fearsome judgment on Jerusalem and Judah.

This is what we learn starting with verses 5 and following.

One of the most faithful kings of Judah, Josiah, died in the year 609 B.C.

The 70 years of exile can be dated from the time of his death to the return to the land.

There was a time of true reformation during his reign, but all this work was undone by his three sons and one grandson in the next 22 years or so.

Habakkuk probably was writing during this period of increasing rebellion and coming judgment.

Now we do observe from verse 1 that Habakkuk is identified as a **prophet**.

Habakkuk is one of only three prophets who are called prophets in the opening of their books. The other two are Haggai and Zechariah.

Now the name Habakkuk is interesting.

It is not a typical Hebrew word.

There is a Hebrew word that is similar that means to embrace or hug someone.

Walter Chantry understands the name to mean someone is in a wrestling match, where you have to grab and hold your opponent.

This is a book about someone who wrestled with God in prayer.¹

I love this interpretation and even if we cannot be certain about the meaning of the name, the book of Habakkuk we can say is certainly the book of someone who did cry earnestly to the Lord and then was given a powerful response.

Verse 1 uses the word **burden**. Other translations have oracle.

Burden (NKJV) is a word used about 20 times in the OT.

The translation of oracle makes sense, but burden carries the meaning of something that one has been given to carry.

The end of verse 1 also testifies that Habakkuk was given a special revelation by God.

Habakkuk saw.

One lexicon gives this meaning for the word **saw**.

The emphasis in the revelatory vision was on the revelation of the divine word, which endowed the prophet with special knowledge of divine things, which he had to proclaim.²

Habakkuk a prophet was given a message by the Lord. It was a burden. It was not an easy message.

But Habakkuk was called to share this message with God's people of old.

And we must receive this message and its truth today.

2) HABAKKUK'S FIRST PRAYER, VERSES 2-4

The beginning of this book is not the first time that Habakkuk was praying and crying to the Lord.

¹ Chantry, 1.

² NIDOTTE

How long shall I cry is the question of verse 2.³

The same opening words of this verse are found also in Psalm 13:1.

Psa. 13:1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

Habakkuk's crying out to the Lord is motivated because of the **violence** that was taking place in Judah.

We often think of the rebellion of God's people in terms of idolatry, the worship of false gods. God's people also expressed their rebellion through violence, the use of force to steal life and property from others.

Gen. 6:11 The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.

I noted recently that as of July 26, 2020 there were six weeks in a row where more than 100 people were shot in Chicago.

In 2016, more than 4,360 people were shot in Chicago. And this year could surpass that grim total.⁴

Of course, every time we consider violence, we must consider the taking of human life through abortion.

In Illinois on average that is over 100 babies killed every day!

It is an absolute duty that God's people today are to cry out to the Lord.

But we must not think that prayer is some quick fix.

Yes, prayerless is sin.

But it is not that if we should all pray, all our problems go away.

³ This is Chantry's excellent observation.

⁴ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/data/ct-shooting-victims-map-charts-htlmstory.html>

In verse 3, Habakkuk says to God, why do you show me iniquity?

Habakkuk was in the midst of a horrible situation and it seemed to him that God was not bringing the needed response.

Verse 4 is another powerful description.

The law is powerless or paralyzed.

True justice was not going forth.

The righteous were surrounded by the wicked.

Perverse justice was taking place instead.

Was this written just recently or over 2600 years ago?

David Baker in his short commentary on Habakkuk wrote:

In Habakkuk's day, as also today, great problems of injustice can be found among God's people. Rather than condoning sin, or asking that it be ignored, the prophet calls for punishment as required by God's own covenant. While the evil of pagan neighbors needs to be confronted, God's people today, as in Habakkuk's time, are too tolerant of things among themselves which are explicitly contrary to God's will as revealed in Scripture and creation. While seeking to restore the sinner, too often we condone the sin, or at least seek to reduce the severity of its negative consequences. A lack of confrontation, rather than restoring the wrongdoer, tacitly gives permission to continue in the sin (*cf.* 1 Cor. 5). A child of God is called to withstand public wrongdoing, whether corporate, social or political, but the confrontation is hollow if evil is unchecked within the believing community. There is even now a need for prophets who do not espouse 'safe sin,' but insist rather that sin be eradicated.⁵

Verses 2-4 are the opening prayer or cry of Habakkuk.

Verses 5-11 contain the Lord's response.

⁵ David Baker, *New Bible Commentary*.

3) GOD'S FRIGHTENING ANSWER, VERSES 5-11

God's people were living in such rebellion that the righteous, those who did believe and seek to obey God, were surrounded by the wicked.

What would the sovereign God of Israel do to bring deliverance?

The answer was not what Habakkuk and Judah would want to hear.

There are four commands in verse 5 that are all plural commands meaning God is not just speaking to Habakkuk but to all in Israel.

They were to **look** and **watch**; they were to **shock themselves** and **be shocked!**⁶

Israel's problems were incredible, but Yahweh promises that He is going to bring about something unbelievable in response.

We should note here that this is Lord's sovereign work, not just the forces of nature or evil conspiring together.

God's people were to be astounded because the LORD was raising up the Chaldeans.

We usually call the Chaldeans the Babylonians.

Listen to a description from one commentary.

The Chaldeans are first mentioned in Mesopotamian sources in the ninth century B.C. Although related ethnically to the other Aramean tribes of southern Babylonia, they had a distinct tribal structure. As the Assyrian empire began to weaken, Chaldean leaders, including Nabo-polassar and Nebuchadnezzar, eventually gained their independence and established the Neo-Babylonian dynasty after 625.

Nebuchadnezzar inherited this powerful state in 605, becoming its most famous king.

⁶ same verb but in two different forms – Shock yourselves and be shocked! (NET)

He literally rebuilt the city of Babylon, solidified Babylonian control throughout the Near East and even attacked Egypt (although unsuccessfully).⁷

What we have written here is a remarkable prophecy.

The Babylonian empire was growing in its power when Habakkuk was written.

Quite quickly the Babylonians became a massive empire controlling a huge portion of land.

What we are given in verses 6-11 is a powerful description of the Chaldeans or Babylonians.

I counted at least 14 descriptions given in these verses.

How could we summarize what we find here?

It is a powerful description.

Let me share a quick summary of what we have here.

The Babylonians were ruthless, greedy for taking more territory, fast moving, very powerful in terms of military might, extremely violent, driven, without fear, very successful, mocking their enemies, and driven by false gods.

They made their own laws.

They were used by God in terms of the promise of His Law-word to Israel to bring judgment.

We have an amazing description here of ancient warfare.

At times nations could move very quickly and we have reference to that.

Sometimes nations would conquer by building massive siege ramps.

For example, when the Assyrians sieged the city of Lachish, they built a ramp as part of the attack on the city.

It is estimated that its construction required about twenty-five thousand tons of soil and stone and would have taken a thousand workers three to four weeks to build.⁸

⁷ IVP OT Background Commentary, s.v. Chaldeans.

⁸ IVP OT Commentary.

A modern description of what we have described here could be the German army of World War 1 or in a slightly different way World War 2.

We should notice some points of connection between Habakkuk's cry to God and God's answer.

Habakkuk was troubled by violence, verse 3.

Verse 9 describes the Babylonians as violent, same word.

This was not the answer that Habakkuk was wanting to hear.

I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon:

This book is a reminder that God does not answer to us.

And as a result, God does not always answer as we desire.

I know that there are many people who would be offended by this.

I think have mentioned before that the religion that most people in America profess is that there is some sort of God, who mostly sits on the sidelines, but who wants us to be good and happy people.

This is a false, pagan religion.

Now as I also mentioned at the beginning, the book of Habakkuk does not teach us to despair.

Just the opposite.

There is more for us to see.

But we can't miss the opening message.

We also consider how much greater assurance we have as God's people today than what God's people of old enjoyed.

What is the same is that God's people are always called to live and walk by faith.

It is not what we see, it is what we know is true based on God's Word.

But we live on the other side of the cross.

No, it doesn't mean that we have it so much easier necessarily, but we have incredible assurance knowing that the greatest proof of God's love and care is found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

1Pet. 1:10 Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace *that would come* to you, **11** searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. **12** To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven— things which angels desire to look into.

What a blessing we have as God's people today even as we consider the difficult and dangerous times that are before us.

1Pet. 1:13 Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest *your* hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ;

We must cry to God. His answer may not be what we are wanting to hear.

We always have hope and assurance if we are looking to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Closing Hymn: 420

BENEDICTION - 1 PETER 5:8-11

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle *you*. To Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever.
Amen.