

**Study 40: Habakkuk**

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**Introduction.** Habakkuk, the prophet with the unusual name, is too often overlooked, seemingly lost among the more notable of the prophets. (For example, the other day, when I mentioned I intended to write about Habakkuk, someone said, “Well, I’ve heard of him, but know nothing about him.”) I suspect that’s probably true of many Christians.

Habakkuk’s book of prophecy, although consisting of only three chapters, is really a wonderful book for our study and contemplation, a book that strives to answer some of life’s more challenging spiritual questions. The Book of Habakkuk presents us with a dialogue between the prophet and God, an attempt by Habakkuk to understand the ways and the will of God in the midst of the evils that surrounded him during those difficult times. Habakkuk dares to ask God these questions, the same questions humanity has been asking for millennia and continue to ask today.

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**Reading. Open your Bible and read the Book of the Prophet Habakkuk.** As you read the text, keep in mind that Habakkuk, indeed all the prophets, speak the Word of God. This is among our core beliefs, one we express whenever we pray the words of the Nicene Creed: “*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life...who has spoken through the prophets.*” The Holy Spirit, then, proclaims God’s Word to us through the prophet Habakkuk, a Word both prophet and Spirit considered so important it was put in writing for the benefit of the generations that followed. Interestingly, as a prophet whose written work was so brief, Habakkuk is actually encountered rather frequently in the New Testament, another sign of his enduring importance. More on this below.

Don’t fret if at first you find this brief book a bit challenging. The prophet and his words need to be placed in their historical context, something we’ll deal with soon enough. In this first reading just try to get a feel for how Habakkuk and the Lord converse with each other. If you pay particular attention to Habakkuk’s questions, you will learn to appreciate the depth of God’s responses.

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**Habakkuk, the Man and Prophet.** As a man Habakkuk remains pretty much an unknown because he tells us almost nothing about himself:

*The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet received in a vision [Hab 1:1]*

...and that’s about it. He is a prophet.

Habakkuk’s name, which sounds so unusual to our modern, Western ears, could have been derived from a Hebrew root that means “embraced” or “embraced by love.” Another possible source is the name of a particular plant that grew in the region, but I’ve always preferred the idea of Habakkuk being one who is “embraced.”

A person named Habakkuk is encountered in only one other place in Scripture: in the deuterocanonical portion of the Book of Prophet Daniel [Dan 14:33-39]. Timing and other concerns, however, make it unlikely that the prophet named in Daniel is the same as the prophet of the Book of Habakkuk. We must remember that during the centuries between Moses and the Incarnation, Israel was blessed with dozens of prophets, many

of them unmentioned in Sacred Scripture, so there certainly could have been another less known Habakkuk. Remember, too, many of the prophets, even many of the greatest – e.g., Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha – never wrote a word, and only 16 actually have books named after them, written either by the prophet himself or by his disciples.

Habakkuk was likely written after the Assyrians had already destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and taken its people captive, but before Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem in 597 B.C. and then exiled the people of Judah in 587 B.C. It is estimated that Habakkuk prophesied sometime during the last years of the seventh century (c. 605-597 B.C.). It was at this time that the Babylonians were growing in power and posed a serious threat to Judah and the rest of the Middle East. Indeed, near the start of Habakkuk's dialogue with God, the Lord makes particular mention of the rising of the Chaldeans (another name for the Babylonians):

*For now I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and impulsive people, who march the breadth of the land to take dwellings not their own" [Hab 1:6].*

According to some early traditions, Habakkuk came from the town of Beth-Sakariyeh, located about ten miles southwest of Jerusalem. Because of the musical notation and direction mentioned in Chapter 3, it's possible he might have been a musician or singer who assisted priests during worship. It is also widely agreed that Habakkuk probably lived in Jerusalem during these final years before Judah was conquered by Babylon.

**The Book of Habakkuk and its Message.** The Book of Habakkuk is unique in its open and honest questioning of God. Habakkuk is disturbed by the violence, the injustice, and the evil he sees before him, and in two dialogues with God asks the Lord why He doesn't act. He questioned the Lord because he could not understand why God's chosen ones should suffer at the hands of foreign powers, those more wicked than God's unfaithful people. Habakkuk is perhaps the first who turns to God and asks, "Why?" And as we shall see, God answers His prophet.

We can divide Habakkuk's book into four sections, although this division includes the one-verse introduction mentioned above [Hab 1:1] as a separate section. Let's look, then, at the three major divisions of the book.

**1<sup>st</sup> Dialogue [Hab 1:2-12]:** Habakkuk began this dialogue by asking God why He didn't intervene to stop the great evils that plagued Judah and the world. Habakkuk didn't hesitate to confront God and bravely asked Him to explain Himself. He began with a personal plea, questioning God's apparent silence and inaction:

*How long, O Lord, must I cry for help and you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" and you do not intervene? [Hab 1:2]*

He continued by briefly decrying being surrounded by destruction, strife, and discord, and then asserted that although the Law calls for justice, he saw nothing but the absence and perversion of justice:

*This is why the Law is numb and justice never comes. For the wicked surround the just; this is why justice comes forth perverted [Hab 1:4]*

It's very human, of course, to question God when we're confronted by that which we don't understand, especially when we witness the seeming triumph of evil over goodness. Habakkuk was no different. Like you and I, he felt compelled to tell God that which God already knows. What he really wanted from God was assurance that at some point the God who created and ordered the entire universe would act in ways that reaffirm His people's faith in Him. Above all Habakkuk desired justice from God. The destruction of Israel by the godless Assyrians, as well the apparent rise of an equally corrupt and violent Babylonian empire, seemed remarkably unjust. So, too, did the injustice he encountered in Judah itself. To Habakkuk, God provided a cure that was worse than the disease.

Habakkuk was certainly not expecting the response he received from God, a response that ultimately led to more questions. God told the prophet to "*Look over the nations and see!*" and then let him know that God is always at work in the world:

*Be utterly amazed! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe, were it told [Hab 1:5].*

Here God lets Habakkuk (and us) know that His ways are so far beyond the ways of man that we could never fully comprehend them, or even believe them if He revealed them to us. God has a plan for the world and asks only that we accept this and come to Him in faith. To give Habakkuk a taste of what is to come, God revealed only the bare details, in effect, the first phase of His plan. He went on to tell Habakkuk that the Chaldeans (the Babylonians) would do His work (or, perhaps, had already done it) by destroying the Assyrians. But in describing the violent capabilities of this rising empire, He created in the prophet a new concern. The Babylonians were not only fierce warriors, but also looked with disdain on all other nations. God continues:

*They scoff at kings, ridicule princes; they laugh at any fortress, heap up an earthen ramp, and conquer it. Then they sweep through like the wind and vanish – they make their own strength their god [Hab 1:10-11].*

Hearing this, Habakkuk turned to God with another set of questions, thus beginning the second dialogue.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Dialogue [Hab 1:13-2:20]:** Habakkuk had seen Assyria destroy Israel and seems to be asking why God would use such evil to destroy a far less evil nation. Would Judah, steeped as it was in its own infidelity and idolatry, be next?

*Why, then, do you gaze on the faithless in silence while the wicked devour those more just than themselves? [Hab 1:13]*

He went on to charge the Assyrians, or perhaps the Babylonians, of godlessness, as men who, instead of worshipping God, worshiped their weapons of war. Why doesn't God stop them?

*Shall they, then, keep on drawing his sword to slaughter nations without mercy? [Hab 1:17]*

One senses that Habakkuk realized that for Judah the end was near, that the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar would destroy not only the Assyrians, but also the Judeans. The people of Israel who survived the Assyrian onslaught had already been

carried off into captivity, but if the Judeans were also exiled, what would happen? God is present among His people, present in the Temple. But if they no longer live in the land God gave them, if the Temple were no more, would he still be with them?

Once again Habakkuk was confronted by that which he could not understand. He seemed to want God to reveal the “big picture” – to give him a private look into the will of God. He concluded his questioning by placing himself on high in a metaphoric guard post atop the ramparts of the Holy City, where he awaited God’s response:

*I will stand at my guard post, and station myself upon the rampart, I will keep watch to see what He will say to me, and what answer He will give to my complaint. [Hab 2:1].*

Once again, God’s answer likely took Habakkuk by surprise. The prophet was told to write down all that he had heard and seen, but to write it on clay tablets. In other words, a permanent record must be made of God’s Word:

*Write down the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so that the one who reads it may run [Hab 2:2].*

We know, therefore, that this prophecy transcends time. It is intended for all generations, much as the Law of Moses, also inscribed on tablets, was to be a permanent record of God’s Word. This same thought is repeated by Isaiah:

*Now come, write it on a tablet they can keep, inscribe it on a scroll; that in time to come it may be an eternal witness [Is 30:8].*

Inspired as he was by the Holy Spirit, Habakkuk knew his vision was real and true. God’s response calls His people to patience. He will indeed act, but according to God’s timing, not theirs:

*For the vision is a witness for the appointed time, a testimony to the end; it will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late [Hab 2:3].*

This plea for patience is followed by another call, a call to faith. Those who accept God’s Word in faith, those who trust in Him, will live. This becomes clear with God’s response:

*See the rash have no integrity; but the just one who is righteous because of faith shall live [Hab 2:4].*

The just man, then, has no reason to fear for the righteous shall live. Faith alone promises ultimate survival during this time of near universal collapse. The message proclaimed in this one verse continues to echo throughout Sacred Scripture. For example, in Isaiah we read:

*If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all [Is 7:9].*

Similar messages of faith are also encountered in the Psalms, particularly as faith relates to God’s faithfulness toward His people:

*For the Lord is good; His steadfast love endures forever; and His faithfulness to all generations [Ps 100:5].*

But Habakkuk was not concerned only with his personal survival or that of individual Jews, not at all. His real concern was for the community of God's chosen people, the People of God. Their survival as a people was at stake, and their deep historical relationship with God must somehow ensure they would make it through whatever evils they were to face. Habakkuk would learn that tyrants and the evil they bring always disappear. The Psalmist made this clear in words that surely struck a chord with Habakkuk who foresaw the armies of Babylon attacking Judah:

*Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright [Ps 20:7-8].*

St. Paul, though, took these words of Habakkuk and injected them with far deeper meaning. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul stressed "*the power of God for the salvation of everyone,*" as he recalled those words of God by Habakkuk:

*For in it is revealed the righteousness of God from faith to faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous by faith will live" [Rom 1:17].*

Paul understood these words of Habakkuk not in the national or historical sense of the Jew, but in the universal and spiritual sense of the Christian. The former looks at shared faith as a human virtue necessary to strengthen the community, while the latter sees faith as a theological virtue that leads us to eternal life. Habakkuk, therefore, prefigured the teachings of Jesus on the critical role faith plays in our salvation. Paul cited these words of Habakkuk again in his Letter to the Galatians [Gal 3:11] and they are quoted once more in the Letter to the Hebrews [Heb 10:38].

The remainder of Chapter 2 contains a series of condemnations against the sinfulness and cynicism of tyrants, against avarice, luxury, the exploitation of the poor, and against the idolatry that had spread to Judah from other nations. God uses very plain but harsh words as He makes these condemnations to Habakkuk. Some examples:

Against the wealthy and greedy: *Indeed, wealth is treacherous...* [Hab 2:5]

Against those despots who do violence: *Because you plundered many nations the remaining peoples shall plunder you;* [Hab 2:8]

Against exploitation: *You who built a city by bloodshed, and who establish a town with injustice!* [Hab 2:12]

Against the destruction of God's creation, of men, and their homes: *For the violence done to Lebanon shall cover you, and the destruction of the animals shall terrify you; because of the shedding of human blood, and violence done to the land, to the city and to all who live in it* [Hab 2:17].

Against idolatry: *Of what use is a carved image...or the molten image...that its very maker should trust in it, and make mute idols?* [Hab 2:18]

The chapter concludes with a proclamation of the One God, the God of history, who directs the entire world:

*But the Lord is in His holy temple; silence before Him, all the earth!* [Hab 2:20]

**Habakkuk's Hymn of Praise [Hab 3].** The final chapter is aptly considered by some scholars as a continuation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> discourse. But I've long believed this psalm-like prayer should stand on its own as a summation of the two dialogues. The beauty of this song is among the reasons many scholars believe the prophet perhaps served the priests of the Temple as a musician, a singer of psalms.

Here Habakkuk sings a song of victorious faith in the God of the world, and of the prophet's acceptance and submission to the will of the God of history. It begins with a personal claim and a musical notation:

*Prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet. According to Shigyonot [Hab 3:1].*

*Shigyonot* is thought to represent a musical format, indicating this hymn and others like it were sung during worship. The hymn also concludes with a musical direction [Hab 3:19].

The hymn continues using lavish imagery to describe the greatness of the Lord, the God who has revealed Himself to His chosen ones. The images offer a poetic reflection of the history of God's people and are reminiscent of the Exodus and the theophany at Sinai. As in the days of Exodus, the Lord comes up out of the desert (Taman and Paran) and arrives as a warrior who will overcome His people's enemies. Similar in theme to several of the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 68), the song extols the victorious faith in the God of the world and of history. Some examples...

*O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and am in awe, O Lord, of your work [Hab 3:2].*

*His glory covered the heavens, and His praise filled the earth; His splendor spread like the light [Hab 3:3-4].*

*He stood and shook the earth; He looked and made the nations tremble [Hab 3:6].*

*You split the earth with rivers; at the sight of You the mountains trembled [Hab 3:9-10].*

*In wrath you marched on the earth, in fury you resampled the nations [Hab 3:12].*

In a sense Habakkuk is both thanking God, and also "reminding" Him, of how He has saved His people throughout their history, particularly during the Exodus event. And yet, the prophet accepts all that God plans and turns to Him in total faith. It is in the book's final verses that Habakkuk proclaims a beautiful expression of his deep, abiding faith:

*For though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit appears on the vine, though the yield of the olive fails and the terraces produce no nourishment, though the flocks disappear from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord and exult in my saving God. God, my Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet swift as those of the deer and enables me to tread upon the heights [Hab 3:17-19].*

Here Habakkuk tells God that despite the future disaster that God has revealed to him, he can face it directly and, through the lens of his faith, see it as a blessing from God. It reminds us of St. Paul's consoling words to the Romans:

*We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose [Rom 8:28].*

**Note:** Coincidentally, in this morning's newspaper, in the obituary of a 101-year-old Jewish woman named Nora, I read the following comment: "She taught her family 'Nora-isms,' instilling in them her philosophy on life... 'from bad things, good things happen.'" One suspects she had read and appreciated the prophet Habakkuk. May God bless her and keep her.

Through Habakkuk, then, we are given a prefiguring glimpse into the Good News of Jesus Christ and the salvation promised to all who trust in God, to all who believe and live their faith by loving God and neighbor. For those who are faithful, God will, indeed, bring good things from the bad.

**Habakkuk and Prayer.** Over the years I have often turned to Habakkuk when my own prayer life seemed empty and needed a shot of reality. Much of our prayer is really just a dialogue with our God, and, in this sense, Habakkuk shows us the way. Such dialogue, a give-and-take in which the human soul expresses its deepest concerns to our Lord, is probably the best way to overcome the solitude that so plagues men and women of today. Too often, we cope by immersing ourselves in the noise of life or in the pressures and anxieties of human work. But even then, wrapped up in our own egos, we find ourselves alone in the world, even though surrounded by others. My father, noting the isolation so many suffer, once told me, "You can be alone in a crowd." But today, living as we are in the midst of an actual plague, so many find themselves truly alone. Unable to cope with the separation forced on them, they fall prey to a form of solipsism that drives them inward and further separates them from others.

Prayer, the honest, open dialogue with God of the kind we encounter in Habakkuk, will liberate us from this self-absorption and lead us to truth, freedom, and love. We need others, especially the Other of God Himself, to be truly human. Martin Buber, the Austrian Jewish existentialist philosopher, described it well when he wrote:

*"I and thou exist in this world because man exists, and in particular the I exists only due to its relationship with the thou."*

But there is something far greater, and far more necessary, than the human I-thou relationship, and that is the divine I-Thou relationship. Indeed, the Thou of our God constantly calls to each of us and waits for, even demands, an open and free response. It is this dialogue that defines man's spiritual life. It is through this dialogue that you and I, like Habakkuk, can come to a deeper understanding of our relationship with God, and come to an acceptance of His will in our lives.