

# **HABAKKUK**

**Trusting God  
in Troubled Times**

Sculpture of the prophet Habakkuk  
by the Italian artist, Donatello  
Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence

---

# The Book of Habakkuk

---

## Habakkuk 1: The Prophet's Complaint

<sup>1</sup> The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

<sup>2</sup> O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?

<sup>3</sup> Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

<sup>4</sup> So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous — therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

---

<sup>5</sup> Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told.

<sup>6</sup> For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own.

<sup>7</sup> Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.

<sup>8</sup> Their horses are swifter than leopards, more menacing than wolves at dusk; their horses charge. Their horsemen come from far away; they fly like an eagle swift to devour.

<sup>9</sup> They all come for violence, with faces pressing forward; they gather captives like sand.

<sup>10</sup> At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport. They laugh at every fortress, and heap up earth to take it.

<sup>11</sup> Then they sweep by like the wind; they transgress and become guilty; their own might is their god!

---

<sup>12</sup> Are you not from of old, O LORD my God, my Holy One? You shall not die. O LORD, you have marked them for judgment; and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.

<sup>13</sup> Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?

<sup>14</sup> You have made people like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler.

<sup>15</sup> The enemy brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net, he gathers them in his seine; so he rejoices and exults.

<sup>16</sup> Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his seine; for by them his portion is lavish, and his food is rich.

<sup>17</sup> Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and destroying nations without mercy?

## Habakkuk 2: God's Reply to Habakkuk

<sup>1</sup> I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

---

<sup>2</sup> Then the LORD answered me and said:

Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.

<sup>3</sup> For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

<sup>4</sup> Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

<sup>5</sup> Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough. They gather all nations for themselves, and collect all peoples as their own.

<sup>6</sup> Shall not everyone taunt such people and, with mocking riddles, say about them, "Alas for you who heap up what is not your own!" How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?

<sup>7</sup> Will not your own creditors suddenly rise, and those who make you tremble wake up? Then you will be booty for them.

<sup>8</sup> Because you have plundered many nations, all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you — because of human bloodshed, and violence to the earth, to cities and all who live in them.

<sup>9</sup> "Alas for you who get evil gain for your house, setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm!"

<sup>10</sup> You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life.

<sup>11</sup> The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.

<sup>12</sup> "Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed, and found a city on iniquity!"

<sup>13</sup> Is it not from the LORD of hosts that peoples labor only to feed the flames, and nations weary themselves for nothing?

<sup>14</sup> But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

<sup>15</sup> "Alas for you who make your neighbors drink, pouring out your wrath until they are drunk, in order to gaze on their nakedness!"

<sup>16</sup> You will be sated with contempt instead of glory. Drink, you yourself, and stagger! The cup in the LORD's right hand will come around to you, and shame will come upon your glory!

<sup>17</sup> For the violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you; the destruction of the animals will terrify you — because of human bloodshed and violence to the earth, to cities and all who live in them.

<sup>18</sup> What use is an idol once its maker has shaped it — a cast image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in what has been made, though the product is only an idol that cannot speak!

<sup>19</sup> Alas for you who say to the wood, "Wake up!" to silent stone, "Rouse yourself!" Can it teach? See, it is gold and silver plated, and there is no breath in it at all.

<sup>20</sup> But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!

---

### Habakkuk 3: Habakkuk's Prayer

<sup>1</sup>A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth.

---

<sup>2</sup>O LORD, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy.

---

<sup>3</sup>God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.

<sup>4</sup>The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden.

<sup>5</sup>Before him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind.

<sup>6</sup>He stopped and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble. The eternal mountains were shattered; along his ancient pathways the everlasting hills sank low.

<sup>7</sup>I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction; the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled.

<sup>8</sup>Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD? Or your anger against the rivers, or your rage against the sea, when you drove your horses, your chariots to victory?

<sup>9</sup>You brandished your naked bow, sated were the arrows at your command. You split the earth with rivers.

<sup>10</sup>The mountains saw you, and writhed; a torrent of water swept by; the deep gave forth its voice. The sun raised high its hands;

<sup>11</sup>the moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear.

<sup>12</sup>In fury you trod the earth, in anger you trampled nations.

<sup>13</sup>You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. You crushed the head of the

wicked house, laying it bare from foundation to roof.

<sup>14</sup>You pierced with their own arrows the head of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter us, gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding.

<sup>15</sup>You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters.

---

<sup>16</sup>I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me. I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us.

---

<sup>17</sup>Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls,

<sup>18</sup>yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation.

<sup>19</sup>GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

To the leader: with stringed instruments.

---

# Background

---

## Habakkuk in Ten Words or Less

Trust God, even if God seems unresponsive or unfair.

## Who was Habakkuk?

Habakkuk means “love’s embrace.” Martin Luther gave this definition of the name:

“Habakkuk signifies an embracer, or one who embraces another, takes him into his arms. He embraces his people and takes them to his arms, i.e., he comforts them and holds them up, as one embraces a weeping child, to quiet it with the assurance that, if God wills, it shall soon be better.” (quoted by McGee)

The historian Jerome saw Habakkuk as *embracing* the problem of divine justice in a wicked world. Others see Habakkuk as being *embraced* by God in his questioning.

Some scholars believe Habakkuk’s name means “to wrestle.” The book opens with Habakkuk wrestling with difficult questions, and wrongly accusing God of indifference toward the world.

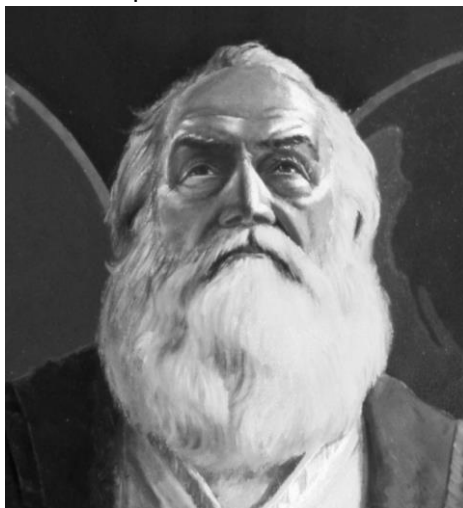
Habakkuk likely lived during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (r. 640-609 BC), the great reformer of Israel’s southern kingdom, and his successor Jehoiakim (r. 609-586 BC), an evil king who led the people away from God.

Habakkuk likely witnessed the destruction of Nineveh (612 BC) and the invasion of Judah by King Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605-562 BC) who rose to power after routing the Egyptians at the Battle of Carchemish (605 BC).

So it is that Habakkuk appears in Israel’s twilight, just before the darkness of the Israel’s captivity in Babylon (597-538 BC).

Habakkuk is the eighth of the 12 minor prophets in the Old Testament (“minor” refers to the short length of the prophecy, not the import of the message), between Nahum and Zephaniah.

Little is known about Habakkuk. He was a contemporary of the prophets Jeremiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah, and may have known Daniel and Ezekiel before they were taken captive to Babylon.



Habakkuk was a man of vigorous faith rooted deeply in the religious traditions of Israel. He was also a musician (see Habakkuk 3:19).

Among the prophetic writings, Habakkuk is unique in that it includes no prophecy for Israel, but is rather, a conversation (“oracle,” 1:1) between the prophet and God.

## A Little Context

The book opens in gloom and closes in glory. It begins with a question mark and closes with an exclamation point! Habakkuk begins by questioning God but ends by trusting God. He begins by worrying about the world but ends by worshipping God. He begins discouraged by all the gloom and doom but ends by being overwhelmed by the glory of God.

Judah was a nation spiraling faster and faster out of control and into wickedness. The people embraced pagan religions, engaged in pagan worship (including witchcraft and child sacrifice), rejected God and God’s prophets, permitted injustice, and practiced violence.

Habakkuk continually asks "WHY? "

Why does God permit evil?

Why is there no justice?

Why does God seem so indifferent to what is going on in the world?

Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?

Why doesn't God do something to correct the suffering and violence?

From Judah, Habakkuk complains that God allows violence and injustice among God's people. But Habakkuk is shocked to learn the Lord's plan for dealing with the problem: sending the "fierce and impetuous" Chaldeans to punish Judah (1:6).

The Chaldeans hailed from Mesopotamia, in modern day Iraq. Chaldean kings briefly ruled in Babylon (6<sup>th</sup> century BC). Scripture uses *Chaldeans* and *Babylonians* interchangeably, as the Chaldeans were a tribe based in southern Babylon by the Persian Gulf, who assimilated into the Babylonian Empire.

The impetus for this dialogue was Habakkuk's realization that God intended to use the Babylonian military machine to bring judgement on God's own people. The idea of a godless nation punishing a godly nation outraged Habakkuk and he told God so.

In chapters 1-2, Habakkuk argues with God over God's seemingly unfathomable, if not outright unjust, ways. Habakkuk argues that the Chaldeans are far worse than the disobedient Jews, chastising God, "*why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?*" (1:13).

God responds, saying that God is only using the Chaldeans to accomplish God's purpose, and in time, God will punish the Chaldeans for their own sins. Habakkuk will see this happen, "in your days" (1:5).

It is not Habakkuk's job to question God's ways: "*The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him*" (2:20). When he receives God's reply, Habakkuk submits to God's authority and responds with a beautiful confession of faith (chapter 3).

Habakkuk, like Jeremiah, probably lived to see the initial fulfilment of his prophecy when the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem in 597 BC.



Eugene Peterson, in his introduction to Habakkuk in *The Message*, characterizes the prophet as a companion who stands at our side and waits and listens:

"It is in his waiting and listening - which then turns into his praying - that he found himself inhabiting the large world of God's sovereignty. Only there did he eventually realize that that the believing-in-God life, the steady trusting-in-God life, is the full life, the only real life. Habakkuk started out exactly where we start out with our puzzled complaints and God-accusations, but he did not stay there. He ended up in a world, along with us, where every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good." (quoted by Baxter)



## The Purpose of Habakkuk

The oracle serves to correct and comfort Habakkuk regarding his view of God's justice in a day of evil and injustice. This is a warning to the southern kingdom (Judah) that God will not overlook their wickedness but will bring judgment upon them. It displays God's sovereignty over all things, including the evil of God's people and the unbelieving nations.

Elizabeth Achtemeier writes that Habakkuk is *not* a book about God's justice or about human doubt.

"Rather, Habakkuk is above all else a book about the purposes of God and about the realization of his will for his world.

It is a book about a God who has promised to Abraham that he will make a new community of Abraham's descendants and that he will bring blessing on all the families of the earth through that community.

It is a book about a God whose will for humankind is that they have life and have it more abundantly.

It is a book about God's desire that human beings live together in joy and security and righteousness, in a community ordered by his divine will and faithful to his divine lordship.

It asks after the accomplishment of that goal and strains toward its fulfillment. In short, Habakkuk is a book about the providence of God; that is, it is primarily concerned with how God is keeping his promises to his chosen people Israel, and through them, to humankind."

## Habakkuk in the New Testament

The apostle Paul quotes Habakkuk 1:5 when he preaches in Antioch, saying:

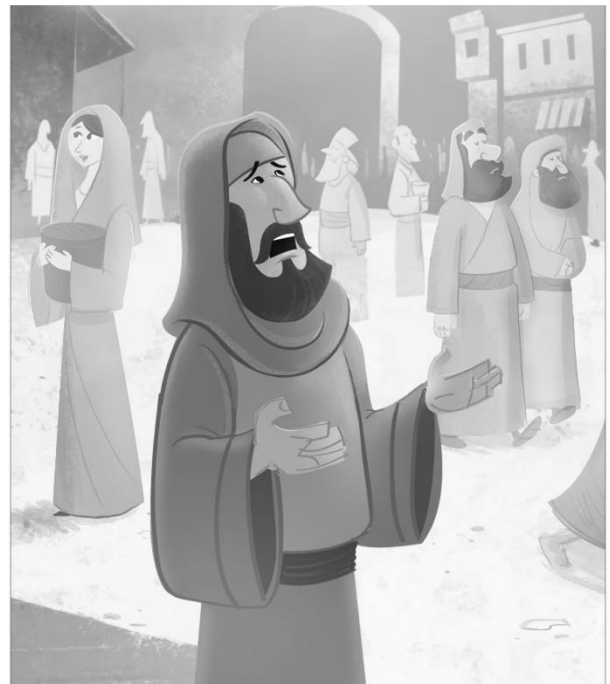
*"Look, you scoffers! Be amazed and perish, for in your days I am doing a work, a work that you will never believe, even if someone tells you."* (Acts 13:41)

Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 ("the righteous live by faith") in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11. Hebrews 10:38 also quotes Habakkuk 2:4.

## Why Habakkuk Matters Today...

Our world is much like Habakkuk's, full of violence and injustice, but God is still in control. Whether we sense it or not, God is working out God's own purpose.

Habakkuk tackles the thorny issues of having faith while asking questions that seem to doubt. We should not be afraid to be honest with God about who we are and what concerns us. It is essential to our spiritual life that we keep the lines of communication open with God as we learn to trust God.



---

# Habakkuk's Burden (1:1-4)

---

## Key Verse

*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,*

*And you will not listen?*

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

Habakkuk 1:2



## Introduction (1:1)

*v. 1 - The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.* In the Bible, an *oracle* is a command or a revelation from God.

Habakkuk had a complaint: he saw injustice, violence and evil in his own country, yet God remained silent and invisible.

So, Habakkuk took his complaint to God in prayer and God answered, although not in the way Habakkuk imagined.

The King James Bible renders this verse: "The *burden* which the prophet Habakkuk did see."

The heavy "burden" that Habakkuk feels is the weight of sin committed by God's people: destruction and violence, strife and disputes; slackness regarding the law; a lack of justice; the flourishing of the wicked while the righteous suffer (vv. 3-4).

Dr. J. Vernon McGee says that the "burden" is the judgment of God upon God's people and upon the Chaldeans.

Sometimes it feels like a burden to be one of God's chosen people. There are certain expectations placed upon those whom God calls. Abide by the Ten Commandments. Love God and neighbor. Pray for your enemies.

Even Jesus found it difficult to bear this burden at times. In Gethsemane, on the night before his death, Jesus asked God to remove the cup of

suffering from him (Matthew 26:39). But Jesus ultimately prayed for God's will to be done.

Habakkuk is considered a righteous and a pious man, a believer in God and possibly a temple priest (see 3:19).

Habakkuk does not pray just for himself; his responsibility for his community rests heavily upon him. He bears the burden with and for his people (see 2:1).



## Habakkuk's First Question (1:2-4)

"God, why don't you do something?"

*v. 2 - O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?* Habakkuk feels that God is refusing to answer his prayer. He complains that God knows there is violence but does nothing to stop it or correct it.

*v. 3 - Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?* This is an excellent question! Why does God allow us to see iniquity and trouble, in our self and in others?

Habakkuk saw trouble and sin everywhere. His major complaint is that God allows this to continue: God's people continue in their wicked ways, increasing their iniquity, injustice, strife, contention, and violence. Habakkuk asks why God does nothing to stop the evil.



v. 4 – *The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted.* Habakkuk appeals to God's sense of righteousness, pointing out that God's law is ignored. There is no justice. The wicked are in control and the righteous are in trouble.

The key to this initial complaint is the Hebrew word *mishpat* (justice) which appears twice in this verse. It signifies the order ordained by God for the society of the covenant people (see Isaiah 42:1-4; Jeremiah 5:1-9).

Habakkuk's complaint is that the people of Judah have abandoned the righteous order intended by God. The result is chaos.

There are moral evils of all kinds which bring the misery of disrupted human relationships, oppression of the weak by the strong, endless litigations, quarrels, and deceitful dealing (v. 3). God's intended order for the communities of Judah is totally missing (v. 4) [literally: *paralyzed* in Hebrew].

When the righteous – those who cling to God's ways – try to set things right, their intentions and actions are so distorted by the evil around them that the result is only a perverted version of God's justice.

Habakkuk complains about King Jehoiakim's evil and the complicity of Judah's ruling class. His complaints (burdens) are heartfelt and heart-wrenching, coming from one who saw the wicked prospering, and wondered if the Lord had forgotten the faithful.

Habakkuk wrestled with how to stay faithful to God when all around him there is evil. He wondered how to remain true to God's Word and God's purpose when the world was going a different way.

Habakkuk typifies the faithful person who must live in the world as it is and who is weary with the world's wickedness.

What is the word coming to?

Where will it end?

When will the wicked be defeated and God's order established?

Has God's purpose for humankind finally failed?

These questions arise, not from doubt, but out of dynamic faith in God, for the person who trusts in God and clings to God's ways knows what God's order can mean for human society.

Faithful persons know the blessing of God and yearn mightily for that blessing to come to all families of the earth. But those who trust God also sometimes wonder, as Habakkuk wonders, how such blessing can be realized on earth in the face of such overwhelming human sin and evil.

---

## DISCUSSION (1:1-4)

How would you describe Habakkuk's state of mind? What is he feeling? How does he feel about his own people?

What questions does Habakkuk ask of God? What is his primary concern?

How would you feel about asking God questions like this? What kind of attitude does Habakkuk have towards God?

What sort of situation makes you want to cry out, "That's not fair, Lord!"?

If you had God's power, where in our local community or in the world would you intervene to stop violence and injustice?

What events have you witnessed or experienced that caused you, however briefly, to wonder how God can possibly be in control?

---

---

# Habakkuk's Answer (1:5-11)

---

## Key Verse

*Look at the nations and see!*

*Be astonished! Be astounded!*

*For a work is being done in your days  
that you would not believe if you were told.*

Habakkuk 1:5



## God's Reply (1:5-11)

God tells Habakkuk, "I am doing something about evil." But what God proposes is not what Habakkuk wants or expects. In fact, God's plan will surprise Habakkuk.

God will use Chaldeans (AKA the Babylonians – scripture uses the terms interchangeably) as an instrument to discipline God's people Judah!

*Look at the nations and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told. (v. 5)*

God hears faithful Habakkuk's prayer and answers in a way that is both comforting and confounding.

God reassures Habakkuk that God is at work. In an age and society where sinful human beings seem to rule and God seems totally absent, God is at work to realize God's will for the world.

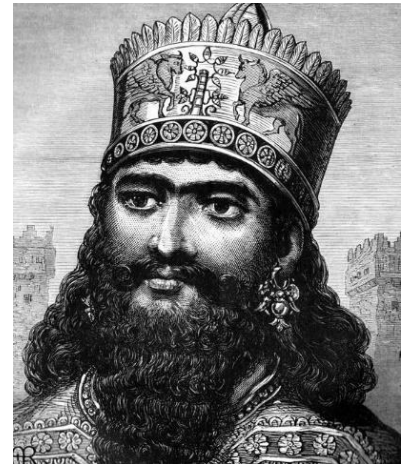
God is not absent from the prophet's world. God is not writing humanity off as a bad experiment. God is not ignorant of what is happening in Judah. Everything is under God's watchful eye. God is at work amid these events to fulfill God's good purpose.

Later, Jesus says: "My Father is working still, and I am working" (John 5:17). This is a word of comfort to anyone who despairs of society's evil. God's working leads finally to good for all creation.

The nature of God's work, as revealed to Habakkuk, seems to fly in the face of that assurance.

*For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwelling not their own. (v. 6)*

Under King Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605-562 BC), the Babylonians will march through the Middle East to capture nations (v. 6), to inflict violence on all in their path (v. 9), to take prisoners of war (v. 9), and to overrun every fortified city (v. 10).



Their march will be swift (v. 6), dreadful and terrible (v. 7), sweeping through Palestine like the wind (v. 11), and no one will escape them or turn them aside.

The scythe of Babylon will cut down all in its path; and swinging the scythe as an instrument of divine purpose is Judah's God, the Lord over all nations and history.

God makes it very clear to Habakkuk just why God is doing this:

Judah rejected God's order (*mishpat*, v. 4), therefore Babylon's order (*mishpat*, v. 7) will be imposed on Judah.

Judah opted for violence among its inhabitants (v. 2), therefore Babylon's violence will be her punishment (v. 9).

Judah rejected God's ways (vv. 2-4), therefore she will serve the god of Babylon's might (v. 11).

This is an astounding description of the way a good God works out the divine purpose in the world.

Instead of pressing forward toward the realization of a Peaceable Kingdom (Isaiah 11:1-9), God seems to be going in the opposite direction, sowing chaos, and destruction.



The apostle Paul takes up this theme in Romans 1:15-32: God gives us up to our sins as punishment for them.

The implications of such a revelation are staggering: the turmoil, violence and death in our world may not be the witness of God's absence but instead may be the witness of God's actual working in judgment as God pursues God's ultimate purpose.

If that is true, writes Elizabeth Achtemeier:

"No event in human history, therefore, is to be understood as completely divorced from his lordly action and will. God is always at work, always involved, always pressing forward toward his Kingdom. But how he chooses to pursue that goal may be as astounding as the destruction of a nation or as incomprehensible as the blood dripping from the figure of a man on a cross" (pp. 38-39)

---

## DISCUSSION (1:5-11)

What does God tell Habakkuk to do (v. 5)? What is God's overall answer to Habakkuk?

Note the words for "see," "look," and "behold" in vv. 1-11. Where is Habakkuk's attention? Where is God's attention?

What is God's answer to Habakkuk's complaint about injustice in his nation?

Can you think of a time when God did not seem to be answering your prayers, only to discover later that God was already working towards God's answer at the time you prayed?

The cross of Jesus is the best example of God using the actions of evil people to achieve God's own ends. Like Habakkuk's experience, some people find God's work at the cross offensive. What do people find offensive about the judgment of sin in the cross of Christ?

Do you think human beings have a right to question the way that God punishes sin or provides atonement for it?

What do we, as Christians, know about God's character that Habakkuk did not?

How does understanding God's response to Habakkuk's complaint help us as we see and experience aspects of life that seem unfair or unjust to us?

**Read Acts 13:13-41.** The climax of Paul's speech in Pisidian Antioch is a quote from Habakkuk 1:5. What are the things done "in your days that you would never believe"?

What are the situations facing our church, local community, or world in which we need to remember that God is sovereign?

---

# Habakkuk's Complaint (1:12-2:1)

---

## Key Verse

*I will stand at my watchpost,  
and station myself on the rampart;  
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, what  
he will answer concerning my complaint.*

Habakkuk 2:1



## Habakkuk's Second Question (1:12-17)

*God, how can you use evil to judge the righteous?*

Habakkuk, as a man of faith, accepts the words of God given in vv. 5-11; an acceptance shown by Habakkuk's confirmation of that word in 1:12. He acknowledges that Babylonia's coming conquest of Judah is ordained by God as the punishment for Judah's sin. (Note: the word *mishpat* has a different meaning than before and is properly translated as "judgment" and is parallel to "chastisement.")

The role of Babylon as the instrument of God's judgment is proclaimed not only by Habakkuk, but also by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah.

In the Bible, international affairs are understood to be always under the sovereignty of God. World history does not take place by chance, nor are human beings ever the sole effectors of it. Human actions result in events, to be sure, but human actions are always also accompanied by God's effective actions as God works our God's purpose. Thus, Habakkuk, in verse 12, acknowledges that purposeful working by God.

Moreover, Habakkuk makes a profession of faith about the nature of God. Habakkuk's God ("my God," v. 12) is deliberately contrasted with the false god of might of the

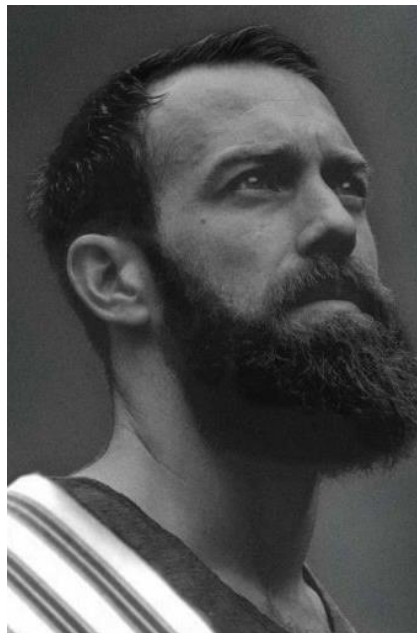
Babylonians (v. 11). Habakkuk's God, unlike the fleeting deity of the Babylonians, is everlasting, the Alpha and Omega, the One who was there in the beginning and who will be there after heaven and earth pass away; the One who stands above the flux of human history and who is the unchanging, sure rock of the faithful amid all the transient aspect of life in the world.

Habakkuk understands that the Babylonian onslaught against Judah will be God's judgment and chastisement on God's people. He also knows that this destruction will not do Judah to death. "We shall not die," he states in faith (v. 12). God did not ordain the Babylonians for vengeance or to make a full end of Judah or because God takes pleasure in the death of the wicked.

God judges the people for a reason: God wishes to correct them, to refine and purify their lives, so that they walk in God's ways and obey God's will and serve God's purpose. Thus, God's judgment is always an act along the way toward God's salvation of the world.

But that does not solve Habakkuk's principal problem. He yearns for the fulfillment of God's good purpose for the earth. He longs for God's Kingdom to come among human beings and in Judah's society (see 1:2-4). God is bringing the Babylonian Empire against Judah to wipe out Judah's wicked ways.

But that does not hasten the coming of God's order. It simply replaces a chaotic society with one that is totally godless, with the rule of a foreign people that makes its own might its god (1:11) and that worships that might as the source of its life (1:16).





Thus, Habakkuk's searching question in 1:13 is not a question about God's justice, not a question about the just desserts of the wicked and the righteous. Habakkuk's question voices his perplexity about the *fulfillment* of God's purpose.

Habakkuk knows that God is just, morally pure, the enemy of all evil. He knows that there is a basic contradiction between God and all unholiness. Yet, by introducing the Babylonians, God is not moving forward toward the establishment of that holiness. Rather, God seems to move even further away from the goal of establishment of God's right order in the world, and Habakkuk cannot understand that.

Elizabeth Achtemeier writes:

"That a God of righteousness replaces one society with another even more idolatrous and evil, that a God of overflowing life may will first that there be destruction and death before he grants abundant living – those are enigmas in the working of God that defy human understanding. It is as if God has abandoned his righteous rule over the earth – as if human society now proceeds on its evil course with no divine ruler over it (1:14)."  
(p. 40)



But Habakkuk knows that God rules history; he knows that God's order will be its outcome. The prophet never abandons God and faith in God's purpose.

He therefore asks this further question: How long, my God, are you going to allow this reversal of your purpose? How long are you going to seem to move away from your goal? (1:17). This is *not* the same question that Habakkuk asked in the beginning (1:2). That was a question of how long God would put up with Judah's wickedness. This is a question of how long God will intensify that wickedness by replacing it with a greater evil.

Habakkuk longed for the end of Judah's evil, in 1:2-4. God's answer, in 1:5-11, promised Babylonia's greater evil. The prophet's principal questions there still are: When is it all going to end? Are you, O God, going to fulfill your purpose on the earth?

### **The Fish Metaphor (1:14-17)**

Habakkuk wondered how long God would allow the Babylonians to continue their cruel conquest of nations. It seemed as if God's people were to be conquered like fish in a net, easily captured and destroyed. They had no power and no leader to defend them (1:14).

King Nebuchadnezzar is represented as a fisherman who is constantly casting nets into the sea and captures multitudes of fishes (nations). His success makes him greedy, though, and he "*sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his seine*" (1:16).

---

SEINE: a fishing net which hangs vertically in the water with floats at the top and weights at the bottom edge, the ends being drawn together to encircle the fish.

---

Nebuchadnezzar, drunk on his own success, worships his own power. He "makes offerings" to his nets by devoting his nation's wealth and industry to maintaining the Babylonian military machine.

Habakkuk wonders aloud: "*Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and destroying nations without mercy?*" (1:17).

## Habakkuk Awaits God's Answer (2:1)

Habakkuk raised two important questions to God, yet he asked both with a proper attitude. He now stops his questioning and waits for God to answer him.

John Calvin wrote:

"As long...as we judge according to our own perceptions, we walk on the earth; and while we do so, many clouds arise, and Satan scatters ashes in our eyes, and wholly darkens our judgment, and thus it happens, that we lie down altogether confounded. It is hence wholly necessary...that we should tread our reason under foot, and come right to God himself...let the word of God become our ladder..." (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, 59. Quoted in Achtemeier, pp. 41-42).

Habakkuk, the prophet who is to be the bearer of God's word to God's people, himself turns to God to wait for the interpreting word. Prophets have no independent wisdom of their own; they are dependent on the word of God as we, too, are dependent for a true understanding of what God is doing and must ever search the word now given us in the Scriptures.

Habakkuk speaks of his waiting for the word in a statement of the utmost resoluteness. There is no abandoning his faith in the face of perplexity, no despairing cessation of a lifetime habit of prayer, no shadow of suspicion that God has proved untrue; but there is only the firm confidence that God has yet more to speak and do, and the persistent, patient waiting and watching for that divine speech and action.

The "watchtower" signifies the custom of ascending high places to scrutinize the terrain. The "rampart," another high place, calls to mind a soldier on watch, alert to any sign of movement or sound. The watchtower and rampart indicate the concentrated openness, the unwearied waiting of the prophet for the divine word.

Faith is living with expectation  
that God will act ...

and the faith that when God does,  
it will be just.

---

## DISCUSSION (1:12-2:1)

How does Habakkuk respond to God's answer?  
What questions does he ask now?

What is Habakkuk's concern with God's plan for God's people? What is it about God's plan that Habakkuk struggles to understand and accept?

What is Habakkuk's concern with God's plan for the Babylonians?

How good are you at waiting for something that you really want?

Have you ever had to take medicine or undergo a medical procedure that seemed worse than the illness it treated?

How would you describe the difference between a "good" person and an "evil" person?

Despite his difficulty in accepting God's plan to bring judgment, what is Habakkuk still convinced of regarding God's character and actions?

What seeds of hope can you find in Habakkuk's complaints and God's answers?

---



---

# Habakkuk's Vision (2:2-3)

---

## Key Verse

*For there is still a vision  
for the appointed time;  
it speaks of the end and does not lie.  
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;  
it will surely come, it will not delay.*

Habakkuk 2:3



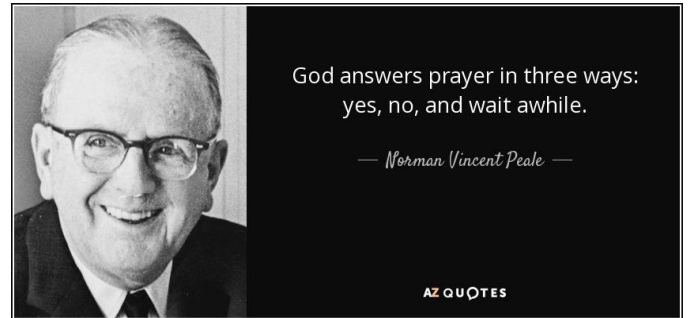
## God's Second Reply (2:2-4)

The divine word comes to Habakkuk and gives him the answer to his questions (v. 3). In reply to his query of whether God is going to fulfill God's purpose and bring God's divinely ordered Kingdom on earth, Habakkuk is told that the divine order "surely comes."

God's vision for the earth – to restore creation to the goodness God intended for it in the beginning, and to bring blessing on all the families through the descendants of Abraham – is still in effect. This is not an idle dream or a lie (v. 3), or a vain hope. The world is not as God intended it, but God will set things right.

God has appointed a time when God will fulfill this purpose – THE appointed time – the time fixed by God and not by human beings. It is God who determines when God's promises will be delayed and when they will be fulfilled. No one can reckon that time. Habakkuk hears only that already in the plan of God the time is "appointed." From the beginning of God's work, the goal and completion are foreseen.

Habakkuk is given the assurance, however, that the time "will surely come." Other translations say the time "hastens" (literally: "puffs" or "pants") toward its end, almost as if the personification of God's fulfillment is a runner speeding toward the finish line.



Therefore, that which may seem delayed or halted by our reckoning is not impeded at all. God's purpose cannot be thwarted. Indeed, those actions of God that seem to reverse this march toward the goal – as the Babylonians conquest of Judah seemed to Habakkuk – may not be reversals at all but integral parts of God's plan and purpose to save the earth.

Luke, the apostle Paul, and the author of Second Peter thought this was true:

*They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*

Luke 21:24

*What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory — even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?*

Romans 9:22-24

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

2 Peter 3:9

God's envisioned Kingdom for the earth surely comes and will not be late. Such is the word Habakkuk is to pass along to those who live "in the meantime" and who, wearied and dismayed by evil, cry out, "How long, O Lord?" Habakkuk's words bid us still wait in hope for the fulfillment that will not be tardy.

To wait for the fulfillment of God's purposes for the world is not a passive resignation or a stoic acceptance of whatever comes along.

Elizabeth Achtemeier:

"The end of human history is already foreseen by God, but the route by which that goal is reached...are still undecided in the ongoing dialogue between God and his creatures.

The God of the Bible takes human activity and human decisions seriously and responds to them, as he works toward his goal, just as human beings also variously respond to his on-going activity.

The history of earth is constructed of a continual dialogue between humankind and its Creator in which every action of even the commonest of persons is of utmost importance for shaping the manner and method by which God realizes his goal." (p. 44)

We do not delay the Kingdom's coming; but scripture suggests we can hasten it: *...as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming* (2 Peter 3:12).

We *can* decide whether we will inherit its life (see Matthew 25:31-46 and Revelation 22:12-21).

*"I tell you, [God] will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"* (Luke 18:8)

We may also decide whether we will live under God's curse or under God's blessing. In short, we can decide how we will live "in the meantime," for God reckons with us not only at the end, but day-by-day as we accept or reject God's lordship.

God's answer to Habakkuk's perplexity is made up of two parts: [1] the assurance that the vision comes and will not be late (vv. 2-3); [2] God's instructions as to how to live "in the meantime," how to inherit already that life of the Kingdom which comes in its fullness at the end (v. 4).

The faithful can have a foretaste of the Kingdom's abundant blessings. The "not yet" can already partly become their "now."

*...and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.* (Romans 8:23).

---

## DISCUSSION (2:2-3)

Habakkuk asks why God would use such brutal people to punish the sins of Israel. What is God's response?

What did the Babylonians worship and trust? What does God say about their worship?

Why were the people tempted to worship another god during times of peace?

Why might they turn to another god in times of trouble?

Where are you tempted to find comfort and security?

---

---

# Habakkuk's Faith (2:4)

---

## Key Verse

*Look at the proud!  
Their spirit is not right in them,  
but the righteous live by their faith.*

Habakkuk 2:4



## The Just Shall Live by Faith (2:4)

Habakkuk 2:4 is one of the central affirmations of the biblical faith because it summarizes the manner of the faithful life.

First, 2:4 tells what the faithful person is not. He or she is not proud, puffed up, or lifted up. There is no reliance on one's own self or personal resources to secure and sustain one's life.

This divine word contrasts the life of faith with that of the Babylonians who make their own might their god (1:1) and who rely on their merciless plunder to furnish them with the good life (1:16-17).

Wherever human beings rely on something of this earth – intellectual achievement or wealth or military might or athletic ability and appreciation or pride of birth and status or the ability to cope and solve problems and master the complexities of modern life – wherever confidence is placed in human

prowess and not in God for the achievement of satisfying and secure manner of living, there true life cannot be had.

Rather, such false reliance makes one's life crooked or curved or distorted in some way; not upright or straight or true to the divine intention for it. True life can only be had by relying on God daily to give it. God is the Creator and Giver and Sustainer of all life.

On our own, our lives are indeed curved and bent and distorted images of what they were intended to be, because they were meant to have their base and sustenance in an on-going fellowship with God.

Then Habakkuk's vision turns to a positive description of the faithful person (2:4b). Those who will have true life, those who will fully live, those who will blossom and flourish and bring forth their fruit in due season are those "righteous" who live in faithfulness to God.

---

RIGHTEOUS: in the biblical sense, means to fulfill the demands of a relationship,

---

To be *righteous* means to fulfill the demands of a relationship. Since the relationship here is the relationship with God, Habakkuk further makes the affirmation that the relationship with God is fulfilled by "faithfulness." That does not mean moral steadfastness, goodness, and solemnity. It does not signify the proper performance of religious rites and duties.

*The JUST*   
*shall live*  
 *by FAITH*

Elizabeth Achtemeier:

"Rather, faithfulness means trust, dependence, clinging to God; it means living and moving and having one's being in God alone; it means relying on God for the breath one draws, for the direction one takes, for the decisions one makes, for the goals one sets, and for the outcome of one's living." (p. 46)

---

FAITHFULNESS: placing one's whole life in God's hands and trusting God to fulfill it.

---

Charles Spurgeon:

"The faith which saves is not one single act done and ended on a certain day: it is an act continued and persevered in throughout the entire life of man.

The just not only commences to live by his faith, but he continues to live by his faith: he does not begin in the spirit and end in the flesh, nor go so far by grace, and the rest of the way by works of the law...Faith is essential all along; every day and all the day, in all things.

Our natural life begins by breathing, and it must be continued by breathing; what the breath is to the body, that is faith to the soul." ("A Luther Sermon at the Tabernacle," quoted in Achtemeier, p. 46)

*Faithfulness* means placing one's whole life in God's hands and trusting God to fulfill it, despite all outward and inward circumstances; despite all personal sin and guilt; despite all psychological and social and physical distortions.

Faithfulness is life by God's power rather than by one's own; and therefore, it is truly

life, because it draws its vitality from the living God who is the source of life.



This is what the apostle Paul means when he quotes Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17. Paul is explaining why he is eager to preach to the gentile Romans, and he says that he preaches to them because salvation (life) is offered by God to all – to both Jews and Gentiles.

The Jews have no privilege of birth. Life is not given as the reward of what we are or because of our status or for anything we possess in ourselves. Rather, life is given to faith – to those who rely on God through Christ Jesus to give it.

In the same manner, in Galatians 3:11, Paul states that life is not given to those who do the works of the law. As in Habakkuk, nothing we do on our own suffices to give us life. Indeed, reliance on doing the works of the law for our salvation leads us further from reliance on God. Once again, life is given to those of faith, "that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles" (Galatians 3:14).

Apart from reliance on God we live under God's wrath and curse and God gives us over to the chaos we create for ourselves. But in sole reliance on God's lordship, we inherit God's blessing, God's abundant vitality, God's never-failing life.

The “life” referred to in these New Testament passages is eternal life, the resurrected life after death, which is equivalent to salvation for Paul. This eschatological (end times) dimension is evident in Hebrews 10:37-38, where a persecuted church is urged to await “the coming one,” namely Christ, who is identified with the coming “vision” or Kingdom of Habakkuk 2:3.

If the faithful do not relinquish their trust in God in Christ, they will have eternal life or they will enter the place of “the land of promise,” with its “city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11).

Thus, the New Testament use of 2:4 extends the latter’s meaning beyond that found in Habakkuk’s prophecy to compass the full sense given to the term “life” by God’s act in Christ.

**“Life with God is not immunity from difficulties, but peace in difficulties.”**

**— C.S. Lewis**

But the New Testament also includes Habakkuk’s sense of “life” as a gift of God given to the faithful in the immediate present. We can find joy and certainty even amid this turbulent and evil world when we cling to God in faith.

From his prison cell, Paul wrote: *“Rejoice always, and again I will say, Rejoice!”...I am not*

*saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.* (Philippians 4:4, 11)

To the Corinthians, Paul wrote: *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

To the church at Rome, Paul wondered: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?* (Romans 8:35)

The life given by God to the faithful righteous was for Paul also an immediate gift – that same foretaste of the future Kingdom’s blessings that Habakkuk knew – and that same foretaste that every faithful person knows who clings to God, come what may.

By such faithfulness, God tells Habakkuk, the prophet can live an abundant life in his time and place.

---

#### **DISCUSSION (2:4)**

To whom in Habakkuk’s day could the label “righteous” be applied? What will it look like for them to live by faith?

What does God tell Habakkuk to do with his answer?

How do you respond when you are told, or it is made clear, that you must wait?

When Habakkuk contrasts the proud soul of the Babylonians with his people, how does he describe the righteous person? How is this connected with waiting?

What does it mean for a Christian to live by faith today?

---



---

# Habakkuk's Warning (2:5-20)

---

## Key Verse

*But the LORD is in his holy temple;  
let all the earth keep silence before him!*

Habakkuk 2:20



## A Warning to the Babylonians (2:5-19)

Everything that follows in Habakkuk's book is confirmation of the vision given to him in 2:3-4. Specifically, the series of "woes" ("alas...") is intended to reinforce the promise given in 2:4 by showing that those who rely on their own powers and not on God cannot sustain their self-contained life or find permanent satisfaction in it.

Verses 5-6a serve as a transition into the woes. The "arrogant" people are the Babylonians, whose insatiable appetite for wealth comes at great cost. They cannot endure (live), reflecting 2:4.

The Babylonians (like *Sheol*, death) do not discriminate, they bring destruction and death on all nations and peoples in their quest for power and glory and wealth.

---

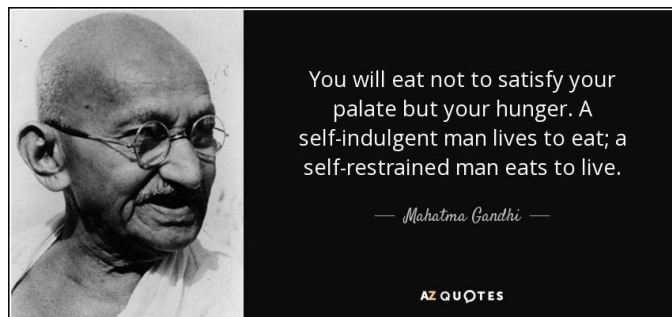
**SHEOL:** in the Hebrew Bible, is a place of darkness to which the dead go.

---

God is at work in the world fulfilling God's purpose, and part of that working is God's active judgment, described in these woes, on all who are proud and mighty.

## Woe upon Imperialism (2:6-8)<sup>1</sup>

The first woe is against the greedy. The tyrants who oppress their subjects and their captives with heavy debts and taxation will find their debtors rising against them to plunder their wealth. The spoils of war will become the spoils of revolt by the peoples against their captors.



## Woe Upon Indulgence (2:9-11)

The second woe is against the self-indulgent, those who satisfy their own base desires. That family or dynasty ("house") which gains power and wealth and status for itself by robbing and deceiving and oppressing the populace, and which thinks itself safe from every challenge has not understood the limits set by God on its sovereignty. Habakkuk's image is of the very stones rising in judgment against the "house" and the beams bearing witness to the guilt of the house.

---

<sup>1</sup> Commentary on the "woes" from Achtemeier, pp. 48-52.





### **Woe Upon Injustice (2:12-14)**

The third woe is against those who commit violence against others. That government which thinks to glorify itself by its own achievements – by establishing a city or putting up public buildings or instituting laws or providing services – and which does so by forced and unjust measures is making its subjects labor for that which cannot last, that which is for “nothing,” and which will be burned up in the fire of God’s wrath. The attempts of human beings to gain glory for themselves by public works built on injustice are empty and vain and will fall before God’s universal sovereignty.



### **Woe Upon Immorality (2:15-17)**

The fourth woe is against the immoral, those who are wicked and debased. That military power which thinks to gain respect and admiration (“glory,” v. 16) for itself by lording it over its neighbors and by subjecting them to humiliation will find the cup of wrath that it has made its neighbors drink forced back upon itself. But this time the cup will be in the hands of the Lord who will make the mighty conqueror ashamed instead of glorious, staggering instead of powerful.



### **Woe Upon Idolatry (2:18-19)**

The final woe is against those who seek after other gods. The false gods of the tyrants and oppressors and military powers will be unable to save their people from the curse of the One, True God. The Lord is not some false god made of stone or wood, and God stirs to bring about the curses pronounced in these woes.

There is a limit set on human wickedness by the lordship of God. Those who practice violence and oppression and injustice in the earth have fallen victim to the primary sin of pride. They think themselves gods who can legislate over human life and use it as they will for their own selfish purposes of greed and might and glory.

They think others’ lives belong to them, that they themselves are no longer creatures but lords, who can take to themselves the absolute right over who will live and who will die.

But, no, Habakkuk is told. The earth is subject to God’s will, and God is working out God’s purpose: *for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea* (v. 14).

The phrase “the glory of” is significant because it encompasses the goal of human history as told to Habakkuk: the establishment of God’s glory – of esteem for God as the One, True God – over all the earth, the establishment of an order in the world over which God alone reigns, the promised coming of the Kingdom of God.

Since this is God’s goal for the world, and because God is the One, True Lord, God brings judgment upon those who challenge God’s lordship “in the meantime.” There are judgments that occur now

– tyrants who are given their due – not because there is a moral order in the world that works automatically, but because the Lord of all so decrees and acts. The proud challengers of God’s rule cannot rest or abide or live (2:4a, 5).

On an individual scale that puzzles us, because the wicked in the world who have made themselves or their own might their gods do not always seem to get their due. On the contrary, they often seem to be highly successful. Where, then, are God’s judgments to be found “in the meantime”?

In the rise and fall of rulers and nations, these woes in Habakkuk are telling us, the Lord of all history is actively at work, sustaining the faithful and returning the evil of the wicked on their own heads. And that work is not postponed until some final judgment but also takes place now, in this “meantime” in which we live.

The answer to our perplexities about the ambiguities of human history is the word of God – God’s promise that God rules in every age and that evil receives its just reward.

---

## DISCUSSION (2:6-19)

Think back to what we know of the context of Habakkuk. Against whom are the woes (“Alas...”) of verses 6-20 being prophesied?

In what ways are these woes described?

What do we learn about God from these woes and the promised outcomes?

When people trust in their own creation (2:18) today, how is that expressed?

Are there any lessons or warnings for our nation in Habakkuk 2?

How ought we to respond?

Why do you think this section ends as it does, with a call to worship in verse 20?

---

## A Call to Worship (2:20)

The final verse of Habakkuk 2 is a call to worship God. It is not for us to know God’s plans or timetables. It is for us to trust that God is in control and faithfully working out God’s purpose.

*But the LORD is in his holy temple;*

*let all the earth keep silence before him! (2:20)*

Psalm 73 has something to say about the end of the wicked (“their,” v. 17):

*<sup>16</sup>When I tried to understand all this,  
it troubled me deeply*

*<sup>17</sup>till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny.*

*<sup>18</sup>Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
you cast them down to ruin.*

*<sup>19</sup>How suddenly are they destroyed,  
completely swept away by terrors!*

*<sup>20</sup>They are like a dream when one awakes;  
when you arise, Lord,  
you will despise them as fantasies.*

Habakkuk’s message here in 2:6-20 calls us to that wide-awake faith which endures the ups and downs of human life.

---

## Read Isaiah 11:1-9

When will the earth be filled with the knowledge of the Lord?

How does God’s similar promise through Isaiah help us understand the prophecy against the Babylonians in Habakkuk 2?

How do the authors make use of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:16-17, Galatians 3:6-14, and Hebrews 10:32-29?

How did the understanding of what makes a person righteous developed in the 600 years between Habakkuk and the New Testament authors?

---

---

# Habakkuk's Prayer (3:1-16)

---

## Key Verse

*O LORD, I have heard of your renown,  
and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work.*

*In our own time revive it;  
in our own time make it known;  
in wrath may you remember mercy.*

Habakkuk 3:2



## An Overview of Habakkuk's Prayer

The autobiographical framework of 3:2 and 3:16, which surrounds Habakkuk's hymn of 3:3-15, connects the hymn directly with the woes of 2:6-20 and with the promise of 2:4.

Habakkuk has heard that the proud, who do not rely on God, cannot rest or abide or live (2:4-5) and that the Lord will return their sins on their own heads to destroy them (2:6-20).

*O LORD, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy. (3:2)*

*I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me. I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us. (3:16)*

The fearful judgment of God against the faithless has a physical effect on Habakkuk. He trembles in awe and terror at their fate.

The hymn, verses 3:3-15, then elaborates on that judgment, and is characterized as a word whose "sound" the prophet has heard (3:16). Habakkuk therefore waits in confidence for God's judgment to overtake those who invade Judah, a specific reference to Babylon.

The hymn, however, is not just an auditory revelation. It is a vision, in which the prophet is given to see not only God's judgment on the Babylonians but also on all the nations of the earth (3:12).

The hymn is about God's final reckoning with the wicked and the establishment of God's order in all the earth. Thus, it is confirmation not of 2:4 but of 2:3; of the time when God brings God's purpose for the earth to completion.



## The Prophet's "Amen" (3:1-2, 16)

This prayer forms Habakkuk's "amen" to God's revelation, his faithful response to the words of the Lord granted to him. It is as if the prophet were praying, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done...Yes, O Lord, do it!"

Habakkuk prays, "Lord, renew Thy work." Habakkuk wants God's purpose to be fulfilled, God's work on earth to be done, God's actions to be seen clearly by faith in the passages of history. Habakkuk seeks nothing earthly, but only the emergence of the Kingdom of God.

Elizabeth Achtemeier:

"This should be the church's focus...the kingship of God...when studying Habakkuk. What does it matter if some cause is defeated, if some nations totters, if some suffering is borne? The question in the midst of it all is, Has the time of the Kingdom drawn near? Has God's purpose been advanced?" (p 55)

The church's goal is every knee bent and every tongue confessing Christ's lordship. The church's concern is the glory of God known all over the world. The church's cause is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, in all and through all (Ephesians 4:5).

We cannot achieve that goal on our own. There is the delusion in our time that the achievement of liberation for the oppressed in society, or the sharing of wealth with the poor, or the attainment of nuclear disarmament will usher in the Kingdom of God. But noble and necessary as they may be, human causes are always marred by creaturely pride and selfishness that war against the Creator.

God will have to establish God's reign in the hearts and societies of sinful human beings, transformed to accord with God's lordship. In the power of the Spirit, we can work in accord with God's purpose; we can choose to promote it and not oppose it, but we cannot finally achieve that salvation that only God can give.

The coming of God's Kingdom will mean salvation (3:13), God's abundant life. On the way to that goal, God puts down the wicked and rids the earth of the proud evil that opposes God's rule.

Seeing this as God's goal, Habakkuk's prayer is appropriate for God's faithful people: renew your work, O God, make it know to us.



**The Prophet's Hymn (3:3-15)**

As final answer to the prophet's prayer in 3:2 and as final confirmation of the word of 2:3, Habakkuk is given to see in a vision that which God promises: God's victory over all the earth and the establishment of God's Kingdom.

Habakkuk is granted a foresight of God's purpose accomplished (3:3-15), much as other biblical figures receive similar insights:

Moses atop Mount Pisgah looks down and into the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 34:1-4).

Jeremiah inherits property as the first fruit of the restoration (Jeremiah 32).

Peter, James, and John are given the vision of the resurrected Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8).

Christians are given a foretaste of the heavenly banquet at the Lord's Table (Mark 14:25).

Elizabeth Achtemeier claims that this hymn is the most extensive and elaborate *theophany* to be found in the Old Testament.

---

**THEOPHANY:** a visible manifestation of God to humankind.

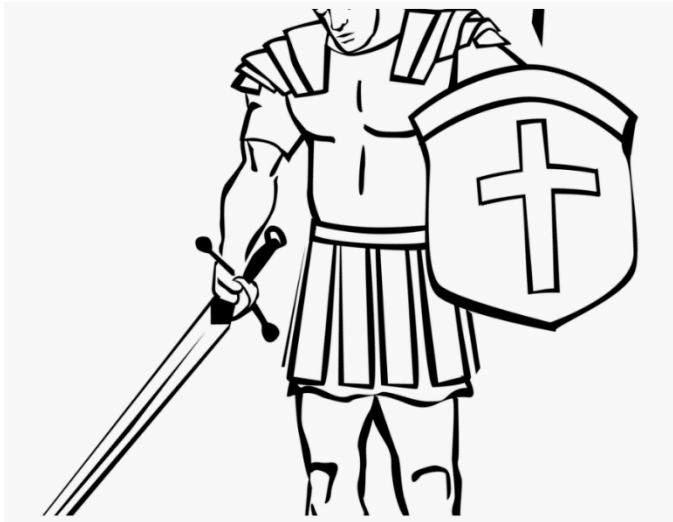
---

As in the days of old, when God first began God's work with Israel in the Exodus and at Mount Sinai, when God became King in Israel (Deuteronomy 33:2-5) and Israel became God's holy nation set apart as an instrument of God's purpose (Exodus 19:4-6), God in this vision comes once more from the southern desert [Teman, "south"] of the Sinai peninsula (3:3). [Mount Paran is believed to refer to Mount Sinai or the southern region of the Sinai Peninsula.]

Now, God comes as King over all the earth: God's glorious manifestation so illumines the heavens that all the earth responds in praise. Light dominates the sight of God. Rays, like those of the sun, come from God's hands. It is only this light that veils God's power (3:4).

God comes with such power that God's enemies fall as if struck by pestilence and plague (3:5).

God stands, the one calm figure amid all the tumult of the nations, measuring and sizing up the peoples for judgment until they tremble before God's gaze (3:6). Even the mountains and hills are laid low by God's gaze. Cushan and Midian, remembering past judgments, tremble in their tents (3:7).



But why has God come forth (v. 8)? Is it to turn the river to blood once again, as the Nile turned to blood (Exodus 7:17-24)? Is it to divide the Red Sea as it divided when God's people passed through (Exodus 14:16, 22, 29)? Is it to stop up the Jordan River, as it stopped when Israel entered the Promised Land (Joshua 3:16)?

These questions are rhetorical because those rivers and that sea are already subdued; the natural world already serves its Creator. Why, then, does God appear with horses and chariots of salvation?

God comes once again to conquer the chaos, as God did at creation (Genesis 1; Psalm 74:12-13; Psalm 89:9-10; Isaiah 51:9). This time, the chaos is the evil of the nations, and God is portrayed as the Warrior-King who sets things right.

### **The Final Battle (3:9-15)**

v. 9-10: God removes the cover from God's battle bow and calls forth the elements of creation (rivers, torrents, deep) to assist God. The picture

tempts us to see God taking up that battle bow which God laid aside after the Great Flood (Genesis 9:13) and using the great deep once again to defeat the wicked.

---

The rainbow may be described as a battle bow turned away from the earth.

---

v. 11: the only lights visible are the lightnings of God's arrows and the flashing of God's spears.

v. 12: God tramples God's enemies underfoot like a man treading grain.

v. 13: As in the original defeat of evil (the serpent), God crushes the head of the wicked, laying it bare from thigh to neck (foundation to roof).

v. 14: God sends panic among God's enemies, so they turn their arrows against their own leaders.

v. 15: Thus, does God defeat the chaos of the nations, the wicked who oppose God's rule, symbolized by the churning of the sea.

God's whole battle is fought to bring salvation to those who trust God and who therefore are God's people (v. 13), to give life to the "poor" (v. 14) who depend on God for help.

The vision of victory gained, when evil is no more and those faithful, who relied on God, inherit God's Kingdom.

Habakkuk's vision foresees something like Armageddon (Revelation 16-19) with evil fallen and God triumphant.

There is even a reference to the salvation gained for God's anointed (v. 13), a reference to the Davidic king who is "saved" along with God's people (Zechariah 9:9), or possibly Jesus who came to save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).



---

## **DISCUSSION (3:1-16)**

What is Habakkuk's attitude, having heard God's response to his questions? How else could he have responded if he did not put his trust in God? How is your attitude similar or different?

Habakkuk does not ask God to suspend God's judgment, but to remember mercy. What does this look like? How has God done this for you in Christ?

How does God show God's power and glory in judging the nations?

How does God show God's power and glory throughout the world?

What do we learn about God through these astonishing actions?

What images are used to show us God's power and wrath against sin? What is God's goal in "going out" to war?

Why does God act so fiercely? How does Habakkuk respond to this fierce judgment?

---

---

What is Habakkuk hoping for amid God's judgment of Israel?

Have you ever been "struck dumb" in the presence of someone or something amazing or famous or awe-inspiring?

How do you react when you witness people rejoicing amid adversity?

What works of God in history do you find most encouraging or inspiring?

Where would you turn in the Bible (OT and NT) for a demonstration of God's Power? Wrath? Mercy?

What Old Testament events are alluded to in Habakkuk 3?

Why does Habakkuk draw these parallels?

If you had to choose a summary verse or sentence from Habakkuk 3, what would it be?

---



---

# Habakkuk's Praise (3:17-19)

---

## Key Verse

*Yet I will rejoice in the LORD;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
GOD the LORD is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and makes me tread upon the heights.*

Habakkuk 3:18-19



## The Prophet's Profession (3:17-19)

When the vision fades and its battle sounds die and the prophet returns to his present, no questions remain. Habakkuk's outward circumstances are unchanged, but he is at peace.

Destruction and violence still mar his community, strife and contention still arise (1:3).

Nations still rage and devour those weaker than they (1:13).

The arrogant still rule (2:5), the poor still suffer (2:6-7), the enslaved still labor for emptiness (2:13).

False gods are still worshipped in the earth (1:11; 2:18-19).

But Habakkuk knows that God is working God's purpose out, unseen, behind the turmoil. And Habakkuk knows what the end of it all will be. He therefore sings the magnificent song of trust we find in 3:17-19.



## The Fig Tree (v. 17)

There are three possible interpretations of the fig tree in verse 17, according to Elizabeth Achtemeier (pp 58-59):

- 1) It may be the failure of the fig tree and vine, of field and flock are due to the invasion of the Babylonians (see Jeremiah 5:17), and that Habakkuk is expressing his confidence in God's salvation in the face of the enemy.
- 2) Such deprivations may be the effect of God's covenant curse upon the land (see Amos 4:9; Micah 6:15; Haggai 2:16-17). In this case, Habakkuk would be expressing his confidence that God will save the faithful while judging the unfaithful.
- 3) These dire conditions exist at the Day of the Lord, and Habakkuk's song would be an expression of deliverance at the time of final judgment (see Joel 1:10-12).

The first interpretation is to be preferred because Habakkuk is setting forth the faith that knows how to live "in the meantime" (2:4), and the primary threat is Babylon.

In summary, Habakkuk is saying that come what may – injustice and violence in the community, desolating foreign invasion, God's destruction of the wicked – the faithful can rejoice and even exult because God is their salvation (1:2; 3:13).

The Lord is their strength (the Hebrew word can also mean “army”) who not only sets them in the heights where no harm can reach them, but who also sustains their lives.

This is Habakkuk’s final “Amen!” to the promise that the righteous shall live by their faithfulness (2:4), his final affirmation that nothing can separate him from the love of God, and that therefore nothing can diminish his joy in the God of his salvation.

Can we live with that?

Can we affirm Habakkuk’s faith and know with certain joy that God is working God’s purpose out and will bring it to completion?

Can we join Habakkuk’s song of trust and confess that nothing can wrest us from the protection and sustenance of such a sovereign God?

Can we, amid an evil world – on a bed of pain, or when enemies confront us, or when friends or family prove untrue, or when facing death – can we join Habakkuk’s song of praise?

Countless faithful souls have shared Habakkuk’s faith and therefore also found his joy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer from his Nazi prison cell, wrote: “By good powers wonderfully hidden, we await cheerfully, come what may.”

Charles Haddon Spurgeon:

“...We have been assured by people who think they know a great deal about the future that awful times are coming. Be it so; it need not alarm us, for the Lord reigneth.

Stay yourself on the Lord...and you can rejoice in His name. If the worst comes to the worst, our refuge is in God; if the heavens shall fall the God of heaven will stand; when God cannot take care of His

people under heaven He will take them above the heavens, and there they shall dwell with Him.

Therefore, as far as you are concerned, rest; for you shall stand...at the end of the days” (*The Middle Passage*, quoted in Achtemeier, p. 60).

I will REJOICE  
IN the Lord.  
I will REJOICE in  
the GOD OF my  
DELIVERANCE.

H A B A K K U K 3 : 1 8

---

## DISCUSSION (3:16-19)

What disasters does Habakkuk consider? What are you afraid may happen in your life?

How can you live by faith amid suffering and injustice? What does it look like to trust in God when God's grace does not seem clear to you?

Why does Habakkuk choose to rejoice? Where does he find reason to be happy during such a devastating situation?

What are God's intentions for you and the church when you suffer? How would meditating on this change your response to painful trials?

How does Habakkuk describe the ways God cares for him amid troubles?

What are some of the ways God helped you in the past?

What can you expect God to do for you in painful circumstances? What hope does God give you for the future?

How can Habakkuk rejoice in his experiences of verse 18?

What kind of future deliverance by God's hand do you think Habakkuk expects for Judah?

How is Habakkuk demonstrating faith despite his difficult time?

What do we learn in this section about the way God brings salvation?

How does God's promise of salvation here help us understand the salvation won for us by Jesus?

---

What common misconception about God are corrected by this passage?

How is this section an answer to the questions raised in earlier chapters?

How has Habakkuk's perspective changed since chapter 1?

If you asked Habakkuk his questions of 1:1-2 after he had written chapter 3, how do you think he would answer them?

Have you ever had an experience like Habakkuk's: initially wanting to tell God how to run the world better, only to come to a deeper trust of God and God's ways?

If you wanted to stir your local Christian community to greater reliance upon God and deeper trust in God to move forward in faith, what acts of God would you point out to people?

How is a Christian person's understanding of the twin ideas of God's wrath and mercy different to Habakkuk's?

How does Habakkuk 3 help you care for someone who is finding the trials of life overwhelming?

In which difficult times is it most difficult for you to live by faith?

## Resources:

Achtemeier, Elizabeth. *Nahum-Malachi*. Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1986.) Pgs. 31-360.

Baxter, Christina. "Introducing Habakkuk." <https://www.downanddromore.org/news/2010/08/introducing-habakkuk> (Retrieved August 4, 2020)

Fopp, Clayton. "Living by Faith in Difficult Times: 3 Studies in Habakkuk." ([www.claytonfopp.com](http://www.claytonfopp.com)) <https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/claytonfopp.com/storage/documents/bible-study-guides/Habakkuk-Living-by-Faith-in-Difficult-Times.pdf> (Retrieved August 5, 2020)

Guzik, David. "Habakkuk 1 – The Prophet's Problem." Enduring Word. © 2018. (Retrieved August 5, 2020) <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/habakkuk-1/>

Guzik, David. "Habakkuk 2 – God Justifies His Judgment." Enduring Word. © 2018. (Retrieved August 5, 2020) <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/habakkuk-2/>

Guzik, David. "Habakkuk 3 – The Prophet's Prayer." Enduring Word. © 2018. (Retrieved August 5, 2020) <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/habakkuk-3/>

"Habakkuk: Is This My Father's World? Living by Faith in an Unjust World." Christ Redeemer Church. Hanover, NH. 2020. (Retrieved August 5, 2020) <http://christredeemerchurch.org/home/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Habakkuk-Study-Guide.pdf>

"Habakkuk: Trusting the Sovereignty of God in a Broken World." Logos Community Church: Harlingen, TX. (Retrieved August 5, 2020) <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58ac54b92994caba1a75103f/t/5a834fc54192025475d00959/1518555078107/Habakkuk+Study+Guide.pdf>

"Introducing Habakkuk." August 10, 2010. <https://www.downanddromore.org/news/2010/08/introducing-habakkuk> (Retrieved August 4, 2020)

McGee, J. Vernon. "Notes & Outlines: Nahum-Habakkuk." [https://www.ttb.org/docs/default-source/notes-outlines/no24\\_nahum-amp-habakkuk.pdf?sfvrsn=4d791c16\\_2](https://www.ttb.org/docs/default-source/notes-outlines/no24_nahum-amp-habakkuk.pdf?sfvrsn=4d791c16_2) (Retrieved August 5, 2020)

Swindoll, Chuck. "Habakkuk." (Retrieved August 5, 2020) <https://www.insight.org/resources/bible/the-minor-prophets/habakkuk>

Wikipedia: "Chaldea." (Retrieved August 4, 2020) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaldea>