

II. Habakkuk in Biblical Perspective
A Prophet and His Conversation with God
“God’s Answer to a Prophet’s Complaint”

Habakkuk 1:1–11

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This is our second study in the book of Habakkuk. As a brief review we know that Habakkuk wrote this prophecy because he tells us that but we don’t know much else about him. This is a very unique prophecy because most prophets get a word from the Lord to deliver to God’s people. This book of prophecy is a word from the prophet to the Lord as he brings to the Lord two complaints. God gives two answers and it results in a psalm of praise and prayer that is absolutely astounding in its impact. In fact from the book of Habakkuk there is a verse that is lifted up for us that says the righteous shall live by faith and it’s the verse Paul clings to and repeats three times to affirm that we are saved by the righteousness that is given to us from Christ by faith. It is not our righteousness that saves us but His perfect righteousness. It is at the core of the Gospel.

For instance Paul quotes from Habakkuk in Romans 1:16–17 which says [16] *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. [17] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”* Even more than that, it is that verse from Habakkuk that fueled the Reformation and they constantly quoted from this to reclaim the Gospel from superstition, ritualism, notions of penance and the ideas that men can save other men. In contrast the Gospel says what you can’t do God has done for you. He not only eradicates your righteousness with His shed blood but He gives you a perfect righteousness to take you to glory.

This book also gives us a glorious prayer for revival which is in a psalm. Habakkuk ends up writing a psalm to be prayed and sung in Habakkuk 3 which is the last chapter in this book and where we will conclude our study of the book of Habakkuk in a couple of more studies. This book all comes from Habakkuk’s interaction with the Lord. So instead of a prophetic word from the Lord through a Prophet to us but it’s a prophetic word that originates from the Prophet’s complaints to God and God’s answers to the Prophet.

I also want you to notice that Habakkuk doesn’t do any branding or marketing of himself but just refers to himself. For me, Habakkuk, as an Old Testament Prophet becomes very much like the last Old Testament Prophet who becomes the bridge to the New Testament and that was John the Baptist. So how is John the Baptist identified? He is identified as a voice crying in the wilderness and that’s the way I see Habakkuk. We don’t get consumed with Habakkuk but we do get consumed with the voice of Habakkuk. His voice of honesty and passion cries out to the Lord with lament and complaint. We also hear his voice of surrender and embracing of the Lord and His answer, not immediately but ultimately as we see the exchange between the Prophet and God Himself.

In the last study I shared my opinion that I think Habakkuk was written in Jerusalem as Habakkuk’s ministry was clearly in the context of Judah, the Southern Tribes (Judah and Benjamin). We will see in this study around the time it was probably written which would have been between 605 B.C. when the Babylonians defeat the Assyrians and 586 B.C. by the

prophetic word that is given of the destruction of Jerusalem which happened then. There is about a 25 year window where this prophecy takes place in the time table of the Lord.

In this study we will look at Habakkuk's first complaint as he raises it to the Lord.

Habakkuk 1:2-4 says [2] *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,*

and you will not hear?

Or cry to you "Violence!"

and you will not save?

[3] *Why do you make me see iniquity,*

and why do you idly look at wrong?

Destruction and violence are before me;

strife and contention arise.

[4] *So the law is paralyzed,*

and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous;

so justice goes forth perverted.

In this complaint there are some giveaways. Giveaway number one is that Habakkuk has been praying for some time for why would he say 'how long will I cry for help and you will not hear'? The 'how long' also shows us Habakkuk has been making intervention to God in the affairs of His people because of the wickedness, injustice, contention, strife and false prophets. If you look in II Kings 23 we will see what has been going on during this time and that is there is even the return of child sacrifices under Molech. There is pagan worship, the lifting up of idols and the false prophets are giving false assurance. The false assurance is that if God's love is upon His people then He won't discipline you if you high handedly disobey Him. Another thing that occurred was that while they had a short lived revival under a king named Josiah there had been four regimes of kings that had led the people to apostasy and even the promotion of sexual immorality in the name of religion.

Habakkuk is not calling out to God to ask Him to see what's happening in a non-covenant nation but he is saying 'God, look what is happening to Your people.' Put in our language, he is saying this is going on in the (Old Testament) church. The two tribes that had remained faithful initially to the Lord continuing under the seed of David, had now abandoned any and all of God's Word to the point that Habakkuk has made this analysis in verse 4 – the law is paralyzed. What is he referring to here?

When a Prophet talks about the law he would have been referring to the first five books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. So when Habakkuk said the law is paralyzed he was basically saying it is not being used. It is not having its Divine effect and not being used as it has Divinely been designed. It is not being applied to the people and not being preached. It is not being taught and it is absent from the public discourse, public policy and the life of God's people. And the result is no justice or perverted justice. Put in our language today, Habakkuk is telling God that His church has apostatized. His covenant people have left His Word and I, Habakkuk, have cried out and pointed out the violence, the perverted justice, the false teaching and the immorality that has all taken place and You Lord are not answering.

So what is it that Habakkuk has decided? Either God doesn't care, He has disconnected, disregarding or He is intentionally sitting on His hands. Habakkuk says in verse 3, 'why are You sitting by idly? Why have You not responded?' That phrase 'how long' is not only telling us the chronology of his prayers but it's also a technical phrase. You will find this phrase in the psalms

of lament. It is an accepted manor of how you communicate the lament of your passion of what would honor the Lord in its absence but your lament for God to intervene. You will also find it in some of the books of the Prophets as well. It is not only a statement of lament but of distress.

What do we see pretty clearly here? Habakkuk is upset about what is being taught falsely, what is being done and the dishonoring of the glory of God and therefore He knows only God can intervene. There is a hidden message here. He is calling out to God because he knows that he can't correct it and no one else can correct it. He knows he needs God to intervene and revive His work. God needs to interpose Himself in the lives of His people. So Habakkuk is God-focused – he is calling out to the Lord persistently but he is perplexed as to why God has not “answered” his prayers. That is his deduction.

He assumes this is an unanswered prayer that has been persistently prayed and there seems to be a Divine indifference, distraction, disregard and disconnect. As the law is paralyzed the people become a law unto themselves. Habakkuk is tired of looking at all this that is happening among God's people as God's people have decided to go their own way. God, Your silence is emboldening them and it's perplexing and demoralizing me, the Prophet. Your inactivity seems to me (Habakkuk) to be inexplicable.

There are some very positive things here. Number one is that Habakkuk has a passion for the holiness of God's people for the glory of their God. Secondly, he is using a means of grace which is prayer and he is using it persistently. Thirdly, Habakkuk has passion. Fourthly, he knows that only God can change this. This is not a cosmetic change. He has also made a deduction, because God has not answered the prayer according to his time table (what he has requested) then he is assuming that God is either incapable, distracted, disconnected or that God is indifferent. As I pointed out Habakkuk says to God ‘why are You sitting idly by?’ So this is Habakkuk's complaint.

Does Habakkuk's complaint to God remind you of anybody? It reminds me a lot of Job and Moses. I can't say I would do it but I love the way Moses talks with God. God will say to Moses ‘Here is what I'm going to do’ and Moses will say ‘You can't do that.’ That is an amazingly boldness in prayer. There is some boldness here with Habakkuk but there is also some serious corrections that God is about to do in his life, starting in His answer to his first complaint. I love to see such a passion for holiness and the glory of God. There is this desire to have this serious calling and interaction with God.

If you have complaints, doubts or concerns God is big enough to handle those. You're not going to hurt His feelings but you better be ready for the way He may answer you. God calls upon us to deal honestly with Him and here are the honest laments and complaints of this Prophet. So what does God do? God answers him in Habakkuk 1:5–11.

I want to start first by looking at the first verse in God's answer. Habakkuk 1:5 says [5] *“Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.”* I know some of you listen to Fox News every so often. Every one of their programs start off by saying ‘Fox Alert!’ It's amazing what they call an alert now but they are going to do what they can to get your attention because they don't want you to turn to another station. So they start off with something to grab your attention. Well, God now says to Habakkuk ‘Alert!’ and He says it with four different heart catching, and mind catching statements.

The first one is ‘look’ and look is directed – ‘look among the nations.’ You are only looking at Israel. I am the Lord of all the nations. Secondly, He uses ‘see’ for when you look among the nations don't just look but see what I'm doing. Thirdly, He uses ‘wonder’ for if you

look and see what I'm doing it will create wonder. Fourthly He says 'be astounded.' I'm going to tell you just how astounding this is. This is so astounding that when you find out what I'm actually doing you won't believe it. There will be a lot of evidence that shows I am not indifferent but that I'm at work but you won't believe it. This is a little bit of a prophetic statement of the Lord for when He answers his complaint he will have another complaint because he won't believe the Lord's answer. So he tells him to look.

There was a time in Christian education that we used to put departments in schools called historical theology because we knew that God reveals Himself three ways. God reveals Himself in general revelation. The creation reveals the majesty, power and attributes of God. Secondly, God reveals Himself savingly in special revelation and this is inerrant as well as it is in creation also. We don't interpret it inherently but we need His special revelation in order to understand His general revelation. Thirdly, He reveals Himself in providence which is the unfolding of history. As one person rightly said, history is His Story.

History past is telling you what God is, who God is and what God is doing. In the present God is making history. History future is what we call prophecy. Prophecy is prewritten history. So He tells Habakkuk to look at what He has done, what I am doing and see it which will create wonder because it will tell you something about Me and what you are about to learn about Me is so astounding that you won't even believe it. You won't believe it unless I enable you to believe it. Let's continue in God's answer to Habakkuk.

Habakkuk 1:6 says [6] *For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own.* The Chaldeans are bitter and with thoughtless abandon they are gobbling up everything they possibly can. They are not only capturing but they are capturing things expansively for he uses the word breadth to describe this. This nation is another empire. We have heard about the empire of the Assyrians and before them was the empire of the Egyptians. Now we are seeing the empire of the Chaldeans, also known as the Babylonians. In the same year this prince wins the battle against the Assyrians comes the king Nebuchadnezzar. God is raising him up. This bitter, hasty, marching, devouring, expansive empire is what God is raising up. And they are going to consume everything that is before them.

When they are marching their horses are like leopards according to Habakkuk 1:8. A horse can move pretty fast but a leopard moves faster. Here He is affirming what they are hearing. This hoard of Chaldeans (Babylonians) are not only conquering everything but their pace is overwhelming. They are literally gobbling up tribes and nations as they takeover cities. Let's continue in God's response to Habakkuk's first complaint.

Habakkuk 1:7-9 says [7] *They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.* [8] *Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour.* [9] *They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand.*

What's an evening wolf? The wolf that comes out in the evening is coming as a predator. They are rapidly absorbing and devouring everything. Their horsemen press with arrogance and pride as they attack. They use violence. I could tell you how the Chaldeans used violence but I would be at risk of overstepping my pulpit language for this violence is unbelievable. When they come in 605 B.C. to Jerusalem they come on a raid to capture people and they will eventually take the king. One of the ways they took their captors back was by making hooks and putting those hooks in their mouths through the cheek. Then they attacked ropes to the hooks as

the ropes were attached to their horses and chariots to lead them all the way back to Babylon. That is something I can say publically but if you read the accounts of this horrific nation their violence would be overwhelming.

When we read in verse 9, 'they gather captives like sand' this is an inbred prophetic word. Habakkuk is a child of Abraham and the promise to Abraham was that his offspring would be the like the sand of the sea. This is no accident that this metaphor is being used. The offspring that are in number like the sands by the sea are about to be captured by these Babylonians. Is God going to intervene for the children of Israel, from the tribe of Judah and Benjamin? I have raised up these people that you see coming and they are Mine to use not only for the judgment of the nations such as Assyria and Egypt but I'm using them for the discipline of My covenant nation, My people. They will even capture the seed of Abraham.

In the extra Biblical accounts of this nation, not only are there horrific tactics that they use but people wouldn't go to them for military strategies and tactics. They didn't put out people to guard their flanks because they could care less for they would just run over everything. They didn't have the wisdom of an Alexander the Great or the insight of some of the Roman Emperors. They didn't have any military strategies and tactics because they would just mount up and with violence, fierceness and intimidation they just ran over everything. Wait till you see what they do with the king of Judah. Let's continue in God's response.

Habakkuk 1:10–11 says *[10] At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. [11] Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!"*

When they come to a fortress they just build a ramp and come right on up and overtake the fortress. If you lived in the Middle East you would know what Habakkuk was referring to when he wrote 'then they sweep by like the wind' for he is referring to that Sirocco wind. I was there one time when an unmitigated, unmodified blast of the Sirocco wind that comes out of the desert of North Africa came through and it is utterly debilitating and decimating. You can't hardly do anything because it's so oppressive. This is how the Chaldeans will sweep by and go on. They are guilty men yet God has raised them up to use them. The Chaldeans put their trust in their strength which is their god.

So here are some takeaways between this initial exchange of Habakkuk and God. The first takeaway is am I like Habakkuk distressed and disturbed by apostasy and immorality embraced within the church of Jesus Christ? And am I utterly dependent on God's intervention to deal with it? So when I see false teaching I don't just turn a blind eye. You certainly need to know the difference between primary doctrine and secondary doctrine and essentials and non-essentials. Do I understand to remain faithful to the confession of God's Word in His church is crucial and false teaching and false prophets should not be enabled? They should be won, encouraged, challenged, equipped but they must not be enabled and encouraged in their false teaching/ways.

When I see sin accommodated through outright compromise does that distress my soul and does that send me like Habakkuk to God on my knees for persistent, intercessory prayer? In other words do I have the heart and passion of this Prophet for holiness, for faithfulness to the Word of God and that the Word of God would not be paralyzed but powerfully used from pulpits? I would like to not have the deductions of this Prophet because God's not answering the prayer the way I think He ought to and God must be indifferent or inactive. Am I distressed by injustice when I see men and women made in the image of God oppressed? So here is this

call upon Habakkuk that reveals his heart and there is so much in his heart that calls me to repentance.

Secondly, are you and I ready to know the God that is revealed in the answer that Habakkuk gives? This is not a God that is disengaged. This is a God that is fully and universally engaged, not just among His people but among all the peoples. Assyria is descending because God raised up an ascending nation to bring judgment upon them, just as He said. Do I see this God that is engaged and active as sovereign? He does as He pleases. In fact, there will be a Babylonian king that will be brought to his knees to affirm what God is teaching Habakkuk. This king will raise up an image to be worshipped, God will bring him low and send him for seven years to act like an animal in the fields.

Then in Daniel 4:34–35 this king will say, [34] *At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. [35] All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?”*

This is the lesson a Babylonian king will learn that is being declared to Habakkuk and through Habakkuk to us. The Lord is Lord of all the nations! God will raise up Babylonians and put them down as He did the Assyrians. God will raise up a Medo-Persian Empire to put them down and then He'll raise up a Greek Empire to put them down. During this whole time God is multi-tasking to accomplish His purposes. He will raise up a Roman Empire, a Pax Romana, to accomplish His purposes in the days of Jesus.

God's sovereignty is universal, among the nations, and it is not arbitrary. It is purposed. God does have a plan. Our job is not to tell God the plan that we think He ought to be on but find out what He's doing and hoist the sail. I want to tell God everything on my heart in bold, persistent, true, gut honest praying but the whole purpose of my prayer is not to get God lined up with my will but for me to get lined up with His will. I like the way George Mueller said it, “What a prayer warrior!” Habakkuk is going to make everything known to God and as he does that he realizes his ultimate job is not to make the motion but to second the motion that God makes. Hoist the sail to catch the wind of God's purposes.

Yes I do have a purpose. Yes I do have a plan. By the way Habakkuk, how long? I have a time table. Your time table and My time table are not the same. I'm not changing Mine. I do things at the right time, on time. At the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6). You can be confident that I'm engaged and sovereign. My sovereignty is universal. My ways are not your ways. In fact, the evidence is that when you hear of My ways you won't believe it.

Habakkuk doesn't believe it. In fact, this is no comfort to Habakkuk getting instructed because Habakkuk will come back to God and basically say ‘are you kidding me? How can You use a wicked nation on other wicked nations and how can You possibly use them on Your nation, Your people? God, that's not right!’ We will get to Habakkuk's second complaint in the next study and it's directly related to the information that he received to his first complaint – God, You can't do that! Then we'll find out how God answers that complaint.

I'd like to finish this study by looking at Acts 13. Here is one little segment of the sermon of the Apostle Paul. Acts 13:36–41 says [36] *For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption (David did not get raised up but Jesus did.), [37] but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. [38] Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man (Christ Jesus)*

forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, [39] and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. [40] Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about: (quote from Habakkuk)

*[41] “‘Look, you scoffers,
be astounded and perish;
for I am doing a work in your days,
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.’”*

What God is doing in Habakkuk is a trajectory of what God is doing in Jesus. So go proclaim the Gospel because God is doing something in His Son throughout all the nations. Realize that they won't believe it unless God goes before you to give them a heart to believe. It will be rejected unless God goes before you. You and I didn't believe it until God changed our hearts and our life, then we were astounding, not to unbelief, but to belief. Look what God did sovereignly throughout all the nations to bring a Redeemer, raise Him up and give us life so that we will escape a judgment much worse than the Chaldeans (Babylonians) for we will escape hell because Christ is our Savior. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You so much for this amazing Prophet and the privilege to walk through him, with him and with Your people. Spirit of the Living God please take this Your Word and begin to impress it. Bless the passion of Habakkuk, the honesty of Habakkuk but remove the perplexity of Habakkuk because we need to see a God sovereign among all the nations who is doing something so glorious and astounding that we would not believe it, yet His Spirit has moved upon us that we do believe it for we believe in Jesus, who has moved our sin away and given us His righteousness. I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

THE PROPHET'S COMPLAINT

THE DIVINE ANSWER

LIFE TAKEAWAYS

I. Are we also distressed by sin and injustice

II. Are we ready for the God revealed in His answer

- *Engaged/Active*
- *Sovereign*
- *Universal*
- *Purposed/Plan*
- *Ways are not ours*

III. God is right. Habakkuk does not believe and now has a new complaint.