

Living by Faith *in* *Troubled Times*

Studies in the book of Habakkuk

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INTRODUCTION

“But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him that formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, 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?”
(Romans 9:20-23)

Doesn't that kind of shut down any questioning of God? Or does it? Questions are the creatures' way of trying to understand the Creator, but questions can also be one of the Creator's ways of revealing himself to his creation and of helping his creatures see themselves for whom they really are.

We have come to be a people that believe we deserve ease and comfort in life, so we ask “Why me?” when troubled times arrive. We believe we deserve a predictable world, so we ask “Why this?” when it isn't. We believe we deserve a fair world and cry out “Why now?” when fairness can't be found.

“What did I do to deserve this? How long will this pain continue? Why didn't God stop this from happening to me? Where do I go from here? How can I make it through this? What possible good can come from this mess?” (Gary Habermas and John Thomas, *What's Good About Feeling Bad?*, 2008, pgs. 15-57; Check out these pages for a well thought out theology of suffering.)

Perhaps it's not as much about not asking questions as it is about the spirit and intent behind the questions. **Luke 1** tells the story of Elizabeth, Zechariah and Mary who were promised impossible pregnancies in the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. Elizabeth was too old and Mary was a virgin. Zachariah and Mary asked God similar questions about the plan but with different spirits.

Zachariah asked, “How can I be sure of this?” in a spirit of disbelief. Mary asked, “How will this be?” wondering how it could happen but asking in a spirit of faith and trust, believing it would. Zachariah was made mute unable to respond to God until John's birth. Mary gained courage and commitment and a voice to glorify God right up to Jesus' birth and after.

Have there been times in your life when you have had some questions for God? What were they? In what spirit did you ask? Did you find any answers?

Habakkuk is a book about questions and answers and how to live with both of them.

Habakkuk's message is not a "Thus says the Lord" kind of prophecy. Instead, he has a question for God, and God's answer leads to another question, and that answer leads to a call for faith in troubled times.

Honest questions should be asked and uncomfortable answers must not be ignored. Faith keeps both the questions and answers from overwhelming us.

Little is known about the prophet Habakkuk. His writing is classed as one of the minor prophets tucked away in your Bible between Nahum and Zephaniah. He is prophesying probably toward the end of the reign of king Josiah. (640 - 609 B.C.) Even though there was a short-lived revival under Josiah, Judah was morally and spiritually weak. Politically, Assyria's control over them was coming to an end to be replaced by the Babylonians. Habakkuk may have lived long enough to see all of these predicted changes come about.

Habakkuk is only three short chapters. Before jumping into the lessons take time to read through the book in one sitting at least three or four times. Spend time in prayer asking the Spirit of God to speak loudly and clearly what he wants you to hear and do in response to the message of the prophet Habakkuk.

LESSON ONE

Why Does God Do Nothing?

Habakkuk 1:1-17

What kind of questions were they asking of God six centuries before Jesus Christ appeared on the scene and some 2600 years before we did? Their questions sound strikingly similar to the questions we continue to ask today.

Questions About God's Seeming Indifference (vs. 1-12)

"How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?"
(Habakkuk 1:2)

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"
(Psalm 13:1-2)

Read **verses 1-4** and summarize what Judah was like in Habakkuk's day. Who was responsible for this situation?

"To be guilty of something and get one's 'just deserts' is one thing. Yet all around us, the guilty prosper and the innocent suffer. Crime, all too often, pays handsomely. And virtue seems to be, indeed, its only reward. This is hardly an observation unique to our times, of course. In the Hebrew Scriptures believers cried out to a God who, they believed, hated injustice and took the side of the oppressed." (John G. Stackhouse, *Can God Be Trusted?*, Second Edition, 2009, page 56)

What does God think about justice and injustice? See **Psalm 11:5-7; Isaiah 30:18; 61:8; Jeremiah 9:23-24; Micah 6:8.**

So now do you understand why Habakkuk was asking his question? Why wasn't God doing something about the injustice? Why wasn't he judging the oppressors both inside and outside Judah? Doesn't he care?

Just because you can't see what God is doing doesn't mean he isn't doing something! Invisibility does not equal indifference!

Read **verses 5-11**. First, summarize what the Babylonians are like. What is at the core of what makes them tick?

Why would God expect Habakkuk to be amazed at what he is doing? Besides amazement, what else might he be thinking and feeling?

Questions About God's Seeming Inconsistency

(vs. 12-17)

What do **verses 12-13a** tell you about God?

What does **verse 12b** tell you about Judah? Why did they need the Babylonians to do this to them? Add **Hebrews 12:7-12** to your thinking.

What do **verses 14-17** further reveal about Babylon?

Do you see the inconsistency? Even though Judah deserved and needed the judgment and punishment that Babylon would bring upon them, it doesn't seem consistent that God would use Babylon to do it.

“Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? (13b)

What is evil anyway? Where does it come from? Is God responsible for it? Read and respond to the following.

“Why did God create evil? There are respects in which this is a perfectly sensible question. But lurking within it, I believe, is a fallacy of what philosophers call *reification* – that is, a making real of what is actually only an abstraction. For evil is not a *something* that God could *create* Nor has evil been eternally existent as some sort of dualistic counterpart to God. There is, I maintain, no such thing as evil. Evil is primarily an adjective, and it becomes a noun only in the abstract. An action can be evil, an event can be evil or a being can be evil.” (Stackhouse, *Can God Be Trusted?*, page 41)

“The line between good and evil runs through each one of us *Evil* may be a four-letter word. But so, thank God is *love* Evil is really the absence or deprivation of good, and yet this doesn’t mean it’s in any way nebulous or vague or not to be worried about Evil is then the moral and spiritual equivalent of a black hole.” (N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 2006, pages 38, 40, 113)

A Personal Response

1. Have you at times found God to be seemingly indifferent to what’s happening in the world globally or in your world personally? Has his response or lack of it been seemingly inconsistent with your picture of God? What have you done with that? How did you get through it? Has there been some resolution or is it still festering?

2. Read through **Psalm 37**. Does king David’s reasoning about evil and the wicked help? What other questions remain?

3. Think through **Romans 11:33-36**. How does Paul’s teaching help in seeking resolution to these issues? What other questions remain?

LESSON TWO

Waiting and Living by Faith

Habakkuk 2:1-4

Waiting and living; neither come easily and are seldom without their challenges. Living does come naturally but living right is another thing. Waiting, well few like to wait and even fewer do it well.

Mark 5:21-43 tells the story of Jairus and his deathly ill daughter. He seeks out Jesus to persuade him to come and heal her. Along the way to Jairus' house Jesus stops to deal with a woman who had a longstanding illness that wasn't threatening her life. Can't you imagine his impatience at having to wait while Jesus did this? His daughter might die. Let this woman suffer with her twelve year sickness for a few more minutes! In verse 36 Jesus said to Jairus, "**Don't be afraid; just believe.**" There can be both pain and panic in waiting!

Waiting in Faith (vs. 1-3)

Habakkuk is waiting, like a guard standing on the walls of a city watching for the enemy. He is waiting in two ways.

First, he is waiting to see what God will say to him and what he will say in response. The "complaint" at the end of verse one can refer to either the complaint the prophet had previously made to God or to a rebuke that God might bring back to the prophet. The faith needed is that God *will* speak.

God tells Habakkuk to write down what he says so that either heralds can run to the people with the message or people can run with the message into life.

Second, he and the people will have to wait for the promised action to actually take place. The faith needed is that it *will* happen. "**Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.**"

Read and think through **Joshua 1:6-9; Psalm 1:1-6; 119:9-11, 103-105; Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Timothy 3:16-17**. What role should God's written word have in our living and waiting?

Read through **Isaiah 40:25-31**. The word that the NIV translates "hope" in verse 31 is most often translated "wait". What do you learn about waiting in these verses?

Now back to Jairus and Jesus.

"In essence, Jesus says to Jairus, *Trust me. Be patient. There's no need to hurry.* Every culture has a different sense of time And everybody has a sense of '*this* is the right time but not *this*.' God's sense of timing will confound ours, no matter what culture we're from. His grace rarely operates according to our schedule It's not 'I will not be hurried even though I love you'; it's 'I will not be hurried *because* I love you. I know what I'm doing.'" (Timothy Keller, *King's Cross*, 2011, page 63)

Living by Faith (v. 4)

Habakkuk now draws a contrast between the self-righteous/focused, typified in Babylon and its king, and the God-righteous. We will focus on Babylon and sin in Lesson Three.

"The righteous will live by his faith." (Habakkuk 2:4)

"Faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted in spite of your changing moods."

C. S. Lewis

"Faith is a deliberate confidence in the character of God whose ways you may not understand at the time."

Oswald Chambers

"I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish he didn't trust me so much."

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Habakkuk was discovering that faith involves waiting in patient assurance that God will act as he promised. That's a lesson that all God-followers must learn. Three places in the New Testament quote this verse in arguing their point.

1. Read **Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-26**. The emphasis here is on “the righteous” part of the verse.

“Justification is the gracious act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous and gives that believing sinner a perfect standing in Jesus Christ.” (Warren Wiersbe, *Habakkuk in The Bible Exposition Commentary: Prophets*, 2002, page 416)

What do these verses teach us about our standing with God? How does that help us live by faith?

2. Read **Galatians 3:10-14**. The emphasis here is on the “will live” part of the verse. How shouldn’t we live? How should we live? How can we live?

3. Read **Hebrews 10:32-38**. The emphasis here is on the “by his faith” part of the verse. Faith is a major theme of *Hebrews*. These verses lead to the great faith section, chapter eleven. What is the connection between faith and persecution/hardship? What should keep us going?

“To live by faith means to believe God’s Word and obey it no matter how we feel, what we see, or what the consequences may be.” (Wiersbe, page 416)

A Personal Response

1. What’s harder for you, waiting in faith or living by faith, or both? Why do you say that? Note some illustrations.

2. Why do you think its so hard for us to wait? What can we do to help make it easier?

3. What are your greatest barriers to living by faith? What saps your faith? What strengthens it?

“The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. The will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”
(Isaiah 40:28-31)

LESSON THREE
Pride and Destruction
Habakkuk 2:5-20

The seriousness of pride and sin can only be appreciated if there is some standard to measure them against. A holy God is that standard.

Holiness

“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.”
Habakkuk 1:13

Two times Habakkuk names God, “Holy One”. (1:12; 3:3) Another time he places God in his “holy temple”. God’s holiness is at the root of his questioning of God.

“The primary meaning of *holy* is ‘separate.’ It comes from an ancient word that meant, ‘to cut,’ or ‘to separate’ The word *transcendence* means literally ‘to climb across.’ It is defined as ‘exceeding usual limits.’ To transcend is to rise above something, to go above and beyond a certain limit. When we speak of the transcendence of God we are talking about that sense in which God is above and beyond us. It tries to get at His supreme and absolute greatness When the Bible calls God holy it means primarily that God is transcendentally separate. He is so far above and beyond us that He seems almost totally foreign to us Purity is not excluded from the idea of the holy; it is contained within it It includes purity but is much more than that. It is purity and transcendence. It is transcendent purity.” (R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 1988, pages 54-57)

“We cannot grasp the true meaning of the divine holiness by thinking of someone or something very pure and then raising the concept to the highest degree we are capable of. God’s holiness is not simply the best we know infinitely bettered. We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible and unattainable.” (A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 1961, page 111)

Another prophet, Isaiah, records how he responded when confronted with God’s holiness. Read **Isaiah 6:1-8**. Do you think Habakkuk would agree with Isaiah’s response? If not, why? If so, what then is his problem with God’s holiness?

Pride

“. . . guilty men, whose strength is their god See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright . . .”
(Habakkuk 1:11a; 2:4a)

The focus is on the Babylonians as having a pride issue. Think through **Habakkuk 1:9-11; 2:4-5**. What do you learn here about pride?

Habakkuk 2:6-19 shows how the Babylonians lived out that pride. Describe the ways they visited their pride on the peoples around them.

What does **James 3:13-16; 4:4-10** reveal about pride?

Destruction

“Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”
(Proverbs 16:18)

God is not hiding his eyes and holding his nose in regards to the pride and actions of the Babylonians. Neither is he ignoring or denying his holy character. The five “woes” found in these verses can be viewed as either a judicial indictment or a funeral dirge against them.

“When one sins something concrete happens: one’s hands may become stained, one’s back may become burdened, or one may fall into debt. And the verbal expressions that render the idea of forgiveness follow suit: stained hands are *cleansed*, burdens are *lifted*, and debts are either *paid off* or *remitted*. It is as though a stain, weight, or bond of indebtedness is created ex nihilo when one offends against God. And that thing that sin has created will continue to haunt the offenders until it has been engaged and dealt with.” (Gary A. Anderson, *Sin*, 2009, page 4)

What resolution does **Habakkuk 2:7-8, 10-11, 16-17** bring to Habakkuk’s problem?

What do you further learn from **Genesis 6:5-7; Psalm 37:1-2, 7-9; Romans 3:23; 6:23; Hebrews 9:27-28**?

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”
(Verse 14)

Everything isn’t what it seems to be. What is now is not the way it will always be! Trust God!

Silence

... let all the earth be silent before him.”
(Habakkuk 2:20)

Other gods will always let you down. They are man-made and lifeless. They can’t

be trusted and can’t point you in the right way. They are born of lies and teach lies. What do you learn about them in **Genesis 3:4-5; Romans 1:20-25**?

“But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.”
(Verse 20)

It’s almost as if the Lord is saying, “Hush now. Quit complaining. Quit doubting. I am not indifferent. I am not inconsistent. I am in control. Worship me! See **Psalm 11:4-5**.

A Personal Response

1. When you think of God’s holiness, how do you respond? Is it just something to know about God or do you also learn something about yourself?

2. How much of yourself do you see reflected in the Babylonians? A lot? A little? Any at all?

3. In what ways does this lesson help you come to grips with our present-day world and what is happening in it?

4. Personally respond to this question from Gary Habermas. “Are you guilty of constructing your own false view of God and then getting angry at what you have invented?” (*Why Is God Ignoring Me?*, 2010, page 115)

LESSON FOUR
Singing a Song of Determined Faith
Habakkuk 3:1-19

Music and song can help you cope with life’s difficult realities. Chapter three is a prayer of Habakkuk that became a song, a psalm. The phrases “shigionoth; selah; for the director of music; on my stringed instruments” all speak to its musicality. It may have been chanted by Levites in the temple to the accompaniment of either the harp or lyre, or both. We don’t know what it sounded like but we know what it said.

If this song were written today, it might take shape something like this: verse one (3-16), verse two (17-18), verse three (19) with a chorus (2) to be sung at the beginning and after each verse. It would be a blend of petition and praise.

To survive troubled times, the plan is to immerse oneself back into the basics of living with God in mind, under his care and direction. Often when we think about basics we talk through the metaphor of the “3 R’s”: Readin’, Ritin’ and ‘Rithmetic. This psalm gives voice to the 3 R’s of surviving trouble.

The Chorus (3:2)

Over and over this psalm would ask God for this. Verse two voices that petition. What is being asked for? How would you define or explain it?

Verse One: Remember
“The Majesty of God”
(3:3-16)

These verses paint different images of God: a storm, a light, an earthquake, a warrior and perhaps others. Can you locate them in the passage?

These verses also look back to three works of God on behalf of his people: the Exodus, at Mount Sinai, the conquest of the land. Where do you see them in the passage?

In verse 16 we see that Habakkuk had both a physical and a volitional response to seeing God’s majesty: recalling God’s majesty gave him **PATIENCE**. Describe the connection between majesty and patience.

Verse Two: Rejoice
“The Salvation of God”
(3:17-18)

These verses put the circumstances of life in their place. What is that place? What role do they and should they play in troubled times?

Joy focuses on God as Savior. Perhaps Habakkuk is thinking back to verse 13 and God’s majestic deliverance. Remembering God’s salvation led to **JOY**. Describe the connection between salvation/deliverance and joy. See **Acts 16:19-34; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**.

Verse Three: Reaffirm
“The Sovereignty of God”
(3:19)

Perhaps Habakkuk is thinking back to verse 6. What does it mean that God is sovereign?

Add the image of the deer in this verse to the images of **Deuteronomy 32:10-13; Psalm 18:30-33; Isaiah 40:30-31**. What does God do for us?

Reaffirming God’s sovereignty provides **STRENGTH**. Describe the connection between sovereignty and strength.

A Personal Response

1. D. L. Moody once said, “I used to think that I should close my Bible and pray for faith, but I came to see that it was in studying the Word that I was to get faith.” (Warren Wiersbe, page 419)

Do you agree with Moody? Why or why not?

2. This faith expressed by Habakkuk was not a stoic, stiff-upper-lip type of faith. Nor was it a pollyanna-style optimism. It was a faith based on God and his work in our lives. See **Romans 5:1-5; Hebrews 5:7-9; 12:7-11**. What do hard times do in our lives?

3. What do you need most in your life right now: patience, joy or strength? Explain.

4. What about God do you find most difficult to believe/accept: his majesty, his salvation/deliverance, or his sovereignty? Why?

5. This book of Habakkuk has moved from questions to faith to worship. On such a continuum where would you currently place yourself? With that in mind, write out a personal prayer of response to God.
