

Shepherding Notes

Habakkuk

By Caleb Bunch

Today we begin a journey through the Minor Prophet Habakkuk. The book of Habakkuk is unique among the prophets — it is the only prophetic book that exclusively shows us a conversation between God and a prophet. Habakkuk and Jonah are the only two prophetic books which never use the phrase "Thus says the Lord." Jonah doesn't use that phrase because it is a narrative about Jonah's temporary rebellion. Habakkuk never uses that phrase because he is never talking to anyone except God. We have the immense privilege of a front-row seat to this prophetic dialogue.

God did not send Habakkuk out as a preacher or a herald. His ministry was unusual, yet as we will see, incredibly insightful. One commentator refers to Habakkuk's place amongst the saints as the Old Testament philosopher of religion. The book has a very simple outline that we are going to follow over the next few days:

- Habakkuk asks God a question.
- God answers.
- Habakkuk asks God a second question.
- God answers again.
- Finally, Habakkuk's understanding of God is transformed, and he writes a hymn of praise to God for His wonderful work.

The First Exchange

Today we simply examine the first question of Habakkuk and the first answer of God. Here is a simple summary of the conversation:

"Habakkuk: God, how long will you let such evil go on without intervening? God: I will intervene, but not like you want. Things are going to get much worse before they get better. I am going to send the wicked Babylonians to attack your nation."

It could be easy for Habakkuk to see the great evil taking place in the world around him and be filled with deep-seated bitterness. But instead, Habakkuk bowed himself low and said, "I don't understand. Please help me understand." God's answer continued to bow Habakkuk even lower. In verse 5 God says: "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."

Our view of the world is parochial and localized to our own minuscule vantage point. God is simultaneously intertwining trillions of events and circumstances, both good and evil — but He is taking those threads and weaving them together in such a way that it produces our maximum good and gives Him maximum glory.

So God says to Habakkuk, "Look among the nations and see. Wonder and be astounded." Habakkuk's perspective was too small. He was seeing the tapestry of God's grand design through a pinhole — only able to get a glimpse of the majesty of God's plan, and he didn't like the part that he saw. Through this conversation, God was revealing that His plan was much bigger than Habakkuk's life. And indeed it was. God was bringing the nation of Judah to its knees. He was in the process of raising up a wicked nation and an evil king who would be unwitting agents of sanctification.

"I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told." God is weaving together trillions of events to produce our maximum good and give Him maximum glory. Habakkuk's perspective was simply too small.

Yesterday we considered Habakkuk's first question and God's first answer. The last six verses of chapter 1 and the first verse of chapter 2 contain Habakkuk's second question. It could be summarized this way: "God, I know we are evil. But how could you 'fix' us with someone more evil than we are? Those Babylonians are far more detestable than us!" God's answer could be summarized: "I am going to judge you, but I will also judge the Babylonians for what they do to you."

However, tucked away in verse 4 is an incredibly important little line that will function as a theological seed that would take root and sprout through the rest of redemptive history: "the righteous shall live by his faith." Habakkuk would have most likely focused his attention on the word "live." How were they going to survive the Babylonian invasion? The answer? By faith.

Romans 1:16–17

Consider how this seed blossomed in the New Testament as the Holy Spirit revealed to Paul its deeper meaning. This tiny verse becomes the thesis statement of the entire book of Romans:

"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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" — Romans 1:16–17

The entire book of Romans is an argument explaining what it looks like for the righteous to live by faith. In chapters 1–3 Paul explains that there is an enemy coming far worse than the Babylonians — it is the wrath of God that is going to be revealed against all mankind. How are we to live? By faith. Romans 3:21–24 says: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it — the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." The righteous (those people who were given righteousness by Jesus) shall live by faith.

Galatians 3:10–14

The next place in the New Testament where Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted is Galatians 3:10–14, where Paul addresses the question of how Law and Grace intersect:

"For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'" — Galatians 3:10

If we are justified by the law, it would be necessary for us to keep every single law, every single time. Even the most self-righteous person will tell you, "Nobody's perfect." But perfection is what God requires. Paul continues in verse 11: "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" There is Habakkuk 2:4 again! Here, Paul uses this phrase to contrast the gospel with legalism. Legalism says there is a way to salvation through works. But God does not require an outward surgery — He requires holiness. Even our best attempts at righteousness are stained by sin like filthy rags. Thank God that our salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

But don't miss Paul's point. We were all once under the curse of the law. Consider what he says in verses 13–14:

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree' — so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." — Galatians 3:13–14

We were all once under the law and the curse that comes from not following it fully. But Christ, the perfect One, the only person who ever actually obeyed the Law fully, became a curse for us. We are set free from judgment and the curse of sin and death through faith in the substitutionary work of Jesus our Savior. The righteous shall live (be given life) through faith.

Hebrews 10:36–39

Finally, the last place this verse shows up in the New Testament:

"For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, 'Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.' But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." — Hebrews 10:36–39

The point being made in Hebrews is that those who truly know the Lord will persevere to the end. The righteous one shall live by faith.

The tiny seed of truth given to Habakkuk sprouted into the greatest tree of theology in our Bibles. To summarize:

Habakkuk: The righteous shall LIVE (have life, be made alive) through faith. Romans: The RIGHTEOUS (those given righteousness by Jesus) shall live by faith. Galatians: The righteous shall live through FAITH (not by works). Hebrews: The righteous one SHALL (definitely, perseveringly) live by FAITH (trusting Jesus to carry them to the finish line).

"The righteous shall live by faith." This tiny seed of truth given to Habakkuk sprouted into the greatest tree of theology in our Bibles – quoted in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews.

Here in Habakkuk 3, we see that the prophet is going to take what he has garnered from his personal conversations with God and make a musical response for the entire nation to join in. He writes a song so that all those who are affected by the coming suffering might join him in placing their trust in the Lord. There are times that the Bible teaches us by imperative commands. But there are other times when it teaches us by example. In Habakkuk, there are no imperative commands — yet there is much to glean from how this great prophet responds to God's promises.

It is amazing to see that Habakkuk's response to this whole situation was to sit down and write a Holy Spirit-inspired song — but not just any kind of song. This is written in the style and format of a Psalm. You could even call Habakkuk 3 "Psalm 151." In the middle of verse 3 and in verses 9 and 13, you will notice the familiar word "Selah." This is a mysterious word that no living scholar or reader is certain of its meaning. However, most believe it probably speaks to the need to repeat, slow down, or contemplate the phrase that has just been spoken. This is the only time Selah is used outside of the book of Psalms.

Rejoice Regardless

Regardless of the circumstances, Habakkuk closes out his book with a commitment to rejoice in God. He literally turns his mourning into singing:

"Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places." — Habakkuk 3:17–19

God is immensely invested in giving us joy. Notice that in the Bible, joy is never tied to our circumstances — and thank God. For if joy were chained to our wealth, or health, or comfort, or ease, or relationships, or reputation, or possessions, then it would be like a passenger being chained to the deck of the Titanic. At first it would seem like a great vacation, a wonderful ride. But all too soon it would be a devastating disaster of epic proportions.

God is the only true source of joy, and He has made a way for us to have it by abiding in Him. John 15:9–11 says: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

We can abide, remain, hold fast to, and revel in the love of God. And when we do, the circumstances of our lives are minor in comparison to the fullness of joy that God has given to us. Habakkuk began this book asking anguished questions. He ends it singing. The transformation came not from his circumstances changing — they were about to get far worse — but from his understanding of the God who holds all circumstances in His hands.

*"Yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation."
Habakkuk began with anguished questions and ended with a song. The transformation came not from circumstances changing, but from knowing the God who holds all circumstances in His hands.*