

I. Habakkuk in Biblical Perspective
A Prophet and His Conversation with God
“Meet the Prophet Habakkuk”

Habakkuk 1:1–2

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If you're looking for further study on the book of Habakkuk I would suggest to you the commentary by John Blanchard titled Major Points From the Minor Prophets. This book is what I would call a 101 on Habakkuk. Then I would recommend James Montgomery Boice's commentary titled The Minor Prophets and it's a two volume set. This book is what I call a 201 on Habakkuk.

So let's get started in our study of Habakkuk and I'd like to start off with a question. Picture this scenario. There is a growing commitment and engagement in the worship of a cultic god out of Egypt, a sun god, was being carried on by a significant number of people and it was done with a sacrifice of horses? A significant number of people are engaged in worship with a god called Molech and they are actually sacrificing their firstborn children. There are rampant celebrations in the name of religion of sexual immorality both sexual acts of promiscuity and perversion and it's going on within a certain group of people. What if I were to tell you all this was taking place?

You're first question would probably be 'Really? Where is all this taking place?' This is all taking place in the professing church of God's people. This was happening with false prophets and God's people were there because of God's favor but because of God's favor God would not discipline His people if they engaged in high-handed sin. These false prophets were giving false promises resulting in the prevalence of sexual immorality, child sacrifices, heinous acts in the name of worship (religion) and it was being done among God's covenant people. That's what has moved Habakkuk to give us this prophecy.

These false prophets said the grace of God can be trusted to assure any and all for it doesn't matter what you do, God would never bring the consequences of your sins to His covenant people. So they were basically telling them it really doesn't matter how you live. This had been going on through the people of Israel through three different kings and then God had brought a short lived, gracious revival in the life of the young king Josiah where temple ministry had been restored. As it was being restored they found some of the Pentateuch and restored some of the Passover as well which had not been done for decades. His rule and reign did not last long since he was killed in a battle with Egypt. Two more ungodly kings followed him.

So there was this short-lived revival that was sandwiched between leaders that led God's covenant people into rampant immorality, false teaching, false worship and when we hear that we think there's a nation that's gone bad and we're thinking of that in terms of our nation. I understand why we may look at it that way but what we must remember is that Israel was not simply a nation for it was the only covenanted nation that has ever been established. It was declared to be God's covenant people so when you see what is going on in Israel and what was going on specifically in the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin (called the Kingdom of Judah at that time), our comparison is not simply to a nation but that is what is happening in the covenant community.

Habakkuk, a man who had a zeal for the Lord, was utterly baffled as to why God was allowing it. One commentator said Habakkuk could not understand why God 'sat on His hands'

while His covenant people were engaged in such heinous acts of rebellion against Him. It is out that dilemma and perplexity that Habakkuk begins to write what we will be studying from the book of Habakkuk. In this study I want to answer a series of questions like who is Habakkuk, where is Habakkuk, when is Habakkuk, why is Habakkuk and what are we going to find in Habakkuk. Let's start by looking in the first chapter of Habakkuk.

Habakkuk 1:1–11 says [1] *The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.* [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.*

[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.* [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.* [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.* [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!"*

I won't be expounding on all that I just read but I will draw out some things from this. I want to give you an outline of this book and then an identification of a key verse I want you to see. The salutation is Habakkuk 1:1. Then we have a dialogue in Habakkuk 1:2–11 which is Habakkuk's complaint (vs 2–4) and the beginning of the Lord's answer (vs 5–11). Then comes a second dialogue taking place in Habakkuk 1:12 through 2:20 with another complaint from Habakkuk (vs 1:12–2:1) and then again God answer (2:2–20). Then the third part of the book of Habakkuk is a psalm which is a prayer or a prayer that is a psalm. In other words it's something to be sung and or prayed. It is one of the most glorious descriptions of the life of faith in the Lord and that's where Habakkuk arrives. We see this in Habakkuk 3.

Now who is Habakkuk? He is unmentioned in the entire Bible. He is only found in this book of Habakkuk. For us Habakkuk is a little known Prophet but he might not have been little known. Notice in Habakkuk 1:1 which says [1] *The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw* that it doesn't say he was 'a' prophet. It says he was *the* prophet. Not only do none other parts of the Bible give us any information about Habakkuk but Habakkuk doesn't give us any information about himself other than what you read between the lines when you read what he writes.

You know something about him when you hear his burdens, his zeal, his requests and his questions. In and of itself is that not something that we don't know much about Habakkuk? Habakkuk 3 is one of the greatest prayers for revival and it comes from someone who doesn't come with a pedigree. Here is something you can pretty well count on. I know this flies in the face of our celebrity fascinated culture in which it is assumed you market, brand and promote yourself but Habakkuk doesn't do any of this for himself. He is a man of God. This may sound nonsensical but I can't say it any other way – a man of God is a man of God, not a man of publicity or a man of self-promotion. A man of God simply rests in being a man owned of and by God. That is this Prophet, Habakkuk.

The reality is he may not have been little known since he is referred to as the prophet even though he doesn't promote himself but it is likely he may have been well-known to others.

This is speculation on my part. He did live during a time where he had some significant contemporaries. He lived during the ministries of Daniel, Ezekiel, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah. As you work his name Habakkuk through its roots and exegete it from the original language, means clasp or tightly embraced. His calling was a prophet because he has embraced it and shared it with us in this book and has interestingly put the definite article the in front of that calling. He doesn't promote himself in any way but he has much to say.

The second question is where is Habakkuk speaking from? This is an interesting question because he never identifies the location of his ministry. In the language he uses and the things he surfaces in his book tells us that his prophetic ministry was likely located in what had become known as the divided kingdom which was Judah. The northern kingdom called Israel which consisted of ten tribes have already been invaded by an empire known as the Assyrians, assimilated and have capitulated. Some were taken away into slavery, some were dispersed, some have intermarried, some have syncretized the religion and they have by in large abandoned the faith under the Assyrian conquest. This conquest has gone on for about 100 years. Now Habakkuk is doing his ministry but the focus of his ministry is clearly in the two southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin.

As we begin to work through these three chapters of Habakkuk we will see him saying things that reveal he is ministering in what had been known as a faithful group and now have also descended into apostasy as the ten northern tribes did, but he is ministering during the reigns of a number of their kings, including the one who will be captured and taken into Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. We can also see in his language that he is very much aware of what is happening and what is going to happen in Jerusalem itself.

I was recently in Jerusalem and was thinking through some of these texts realizing that Habakkuk had likely walked through the same city where I was. As he walked through the city he would be aware of how God was answering his complaint of is God disinterested, is God sitting on His hands? Jerusalem becomes a focal point which is likely where Habakkuk is as he ministers in this place of Judah. All the evidence seems to show he is ministering under King Josiah and eventually Jehoiakim.

I just want to remind you that there had been an utter devolution of apostasy in the two kings before Josiah. Josiah had been used of God for a short lived revival. This must have been one of those revivals that was mostly up at the top because as soon as King Josiah died in the battle with Egypt immediately the southern kingdom descended into apostasy and all of those signal sins against God and one another were resumed with relish.

When is Habakkuk ministering? He is ministering sometime between 609 B.C. for that's when Josiah would have been killed but prior to the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans was the place this empire originated. Abraham was from Ur of the Chaldeans and was also taken from among them and that same area has produced this fierce conquering empire. The Chaldeans are soon to be known as the Babylonians. It is likely that the battle of Nineveh as already been fought and the Babylonians have defeated the Assyrians. So Habakkuk minister prior to the Babylonian three fold invasion of Jerusalem and Judah.

After the three-fold invasion the Babylonians will make Judah a vassal territory after the battle of Carchemish where they will begin to take over piece by piece the areas the Assyrians once controlled. This will include the southern kingdom because of God's providence and intervention Assyria never got control of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah but with this the Babylonians are now going to take it. One of their attacks will be in 605 B.C. in which they will take away much of the temple furnishings, gold, silver and start the destruction of the Solomonic

temple. They will also take away some of the greatest young leaders like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They will come back again in 597 B.C. and take more into captivity as they take more tributes. They will come again in 586 B.C. and here is where they utterly destroy Jerusalem and the temple.

The two tribes of the southern kingdom will be whisked away into the Babylonian captivity and Jeremiah will prophesy that it will last for 70 years. God will raise up Cyrus and use him for them to be set free 70 years later. So the time Habakkuk is ministering is somewhere between 609 B.C. and 586 B.C. and it is prior to the destruction of Jerusalem but after the defeat of the Assyrians by the Babylonians because they are being referred to as this empire that is swiftly starting to take over all the lands. It's about a 25 year period that we can narrow it down to. So we have gone over what we know about Habakkuk, where he is writing this and around the time he is writing this.

Now why is Habakkuk writing this? I have been utterly convicted in my time of study and preparation of this. Habakkuk has a white hot passion for the glory of God. He loves his people but he tells God that what His people are doing to His glory is so horrendous that God needs to bring judgment on them right now. Habakkuk doesn't understand why God hasn't already brought judgment upon them. Habakkuk tells God how the Old Testament church has been engaged in the worship of Molech as they sacrifice their children, Egyptian paganism, Assyrian paganism, increasing in Babylonian paganism, sexual immorality in the name of religion as they have put Baal in the high places where God ought to be worshiped, embracing false prophets and false promises. So Habakkuk is calling on God's justice for and upon His people.

As Habakkuk sees God's glory and a God who by no means leaves the guilty unpunished, there are jagged edges looking at the unfolding of history in front of him and it doesn't make sense to Habakkuk. So this becomes a prophetic book that is utterly unique for us, why? Prophets are spokesmen for God. The books that the Prophets write are written because God's Word comes to them to be spoken to God's people. That is not how this book comes about. This book is not the result of God calling upon Habakkuk to speak a prophetic word to His people.

This book comes about because the Prophet is speaking to God and in his zeal for the glory of God he can't make sense of what God is doing so he brings to God a complaint. When God answers it Habakkuk still can't put it together so he brings a second complaint. When God answers his second complaint then comes some of the most glorious, literary, theologically, pregnant statements that are astounding. In fact, what Habakkuk learns and writes for us will become foundational to the Apostle Paul's theology. Paul will quote it in Romans 1:17, the book of Ephesians, in a sermon he gives in Acts 13 (verse 41), and in Galatians 3:11 which says *[11] Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4)."*

The verse in Galatians becomes a distillation of this conversation between a bewildered Prophet and the God of glory. It is a Prophet who is burning for the glory of God, doesn't understand and is speaking to God with his lament, his complaint and his question. From God's answers to Habakkuk will come a psalm with one of the most glorious pictures of what it means to be saved by faith and to live by faith but it will also become the go-to verse for the Reformation. It will become the watch cry of the Reformers. "The righteous shall live by faith."

From that verse will come the five-fold statement that will motivate the most powerful movement since Pentecost – the Reformation – because it will lead to you are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone, because the Scripture alone, not the reasoning of a Prophet, but the revelation of God, is our defining rule of faith (what we believe) and practice. (Sola scriptura ("by Scripture alone"), Sola fide ("by faith alone"), Sola gratia ("by grace alone"), Solus Christus ("through Christ alone"), Soli Deo gloria ("glory to God alone")). Because the Scripture is the rule of faith and practice, from Habakkuk it is repeated three times in the New Testament, embraced by the Reformers, that the righteous shall live by faith.

God's message comes to us not directly but indirectly. It comes through a passionate Prophet who is engaged in a lament and complaint to the Lord Himself. It comes from a man who is a man of God because he is man for God but he is a man who is engaged in dialogue and discourse. He is asking God 'why do You sit idly by' and he is about to find out that God is not sitting idly by. So what is Habakkuk going to learn? We will learn about the answer to this question in the next four or five studies but for now I will give you some in the form of some takeaways.

Here's what we are going to learn about our God in these five takeaways from Habakkuk. Number one is that we are going to find out that God is sovereign, in particular over history. History is His story. God is sovereign over all the nations. The heart of kings is in His hand and He turns it wherever He wills (Proverbs 21:1). God is absolutely and utterly sovereign.

Secondly, we are going to find out that God's wisdom is beyond our wisdom. Our wisdom can be astounded by His wisdom but our wisdom cannot comprehend His wisdom. Who of us can give Him counsel? Who of us will become His teacher? Who of us will inform Him? This man that is passionate for the glory of God is being humbled by the fact that God is sovereign and does as He pleases among the nations and does as He pleases in faithfulness to Himself among His covenant people.

Thirdly, Habakkuk will find out that God's ways are God's ways. They are not our ways.

Fourthly, he will find out that sin is always punished. His people are blessed, not because their sin is not punished, but because they have a Savior who took the punishment for them. He will find out that God's people experience the loving hand of God's discipline so that the God who delivered them from the punishment of sin will patiently, even though they fail Him, and persistently mold them and make them so that they will hate their sin and leave their sin. We have a Redeemer who took our punishment and a God who is eradicated our practice of sin in His grace and mercy, but He will ultimately bring judgment on every impenitent sinner. The soul that sins and doesn't come to repentance and trust in the God of glory will surely die under the judgment of God.

Fifthly, he will find out that God uses the nations to punish wicked nations and He also uses the nations to discipline and grow His people. He will make clear that this God who is God of all the nations will use the nations to bring judgment upon impenitent (wicked) nations and to discipline His people so that they will rely on Him alone and His grace and mercy and not rely on any nation.

I love my nation. I love what God has done in my nation but I do not worship it or rely on it. My reliance is upon the King of Kings and His Kingdom. I ask Him to revive the church in the nation, in the midst of the years revive it. Revive it so it becomes Your Gospel witness to this nation and all the nations. God's profile for that we are about to encounter in the next several studies, as we go through this book of Habakkuk. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You so much for the time we could be in Your Word and to look deeper into this wonderful, glorious, powerful book of Habakkuk that You have given to us. This is a book so powerful that Paul loved its content. It is a book so powerful that the Reformers were utterly and astoundingly impacted by it. I ask Lord that You would use this book to teach us. I thank You Lord, that we can go into Your Word and as we do get Your Word into us that we like Habakkuk will be men and women of God because we are men and women who belong to God, through Christ and His shed blood, nothing but the blood of Jesus, Amen.

Power Point

HABAKKUK

Who?

Where?

When?

Why?

What?

LIFE TAKEAWAY

I. God is Sovereign.

II. God's Wisdom is beyond our wisdom.

III. God's Ways are not our ways.

IV. Sin will be punished.

V. God uses the nations to punish wicked nations and discipline His people.