

III. Habakkuk in Biblical Perspective
A Prophet and His Conversation with God
“God’s Answer to a Prophet’s 2nd Complaint”
Habakkuk 1:12–2:20
Dr. Harry L. Reeder III
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Habakkuk is three chapters long and is found in the section of the Bible among what is known as the Minor Prophets. The two books I have highly recommended for further study on the book of Habakkuk are by John Blanchard titled Major Points From the Minor Prophets and James Montgomery Boice’s commentary titled The Minor Prophets and it’s a two volume set. This is our third study in Habakkuk and I would like to start by looking at Habakkuk’s second complaint that starts in Habakkuk 1:12 and he addresses this Lord.

Habakkuk 1:12–2:1 says [12] *Are you not from everlasting,
O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die.
O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment,
and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.*
[13] *You who are of purer eyes than to see evil
and cannot look at wrong,
why do you idly look at traitors
and remain silent when the wicked swallows up
the man more righteous than he?*
[14] *You make mankind like the fish of the sea,
like crawling things that have no ruler.*
[15] *He brings all of them up with a hook;
he drags them out with his net;
he gathers them in his dragnet;
so he rejoices and is glad.*
[16] *Therefore he sacrifices to his net
and makes offerings to his dragnet;
for by them he lives in luxury,
and his food is rich.*
[17] *Is he then to keep on emptying his net
and mercilessly killing nations forever?*
[2:1] *I will take my stand at my watchpost
and station myself on the tower,
and look out to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.*

I want you to consider Habakkuk as a mirror image of the Old Testament of the last Prophet who is in the New Testament and that is John the Baptist. The point is not where they come from but their ministry and Habakkuk, like John the Baptist is a voice. We don’t know much about him. We don’t hear about him before or even afterwards but he has this voice that cries out to God.

The difference is that John the Baptist was the voice in the wilderness crying out from God to God’s people. One way to look at the prophetic role of John the Baptist is very much like a lawyer bringing a lawsuit against the people of God. This is who God is, this is who you

are, God calls you to repentance, now be baptized with a baptism of repentance. When people try to get in on the show John will say things like ‘who commanded you, you vipers for this command is one of repentance.’

Habakkuk’s prophecy is a voice from the people to God. He is in a conundrum. He has spent consistent time in prayer, deeply convicted and concerned as to the condition of God’s covenant people. Sexual immorality has now crept into worship. There is a journey now back into Molech and that means child sacrifices. There are false prophets who are telling people they don’t need to worry about the way they walk before the Lord for God will love them by His mercy and grace and not bring retribution upon them for their sins, so they need not worry about repenting of them.

Habakkuk has had the blessing of living through a short lived revival in the days of King Josiah. Most of his years of life and ministry now under King Jehoiakim, have been through three kings and two of them have plunged Israel into abject depravity to the point that Habakkuk cries out to God saying ‘Will You not bring discipline upon Your people?’ According to Habakkuk’s time table and request, when God delays then he assumes that God’s delay is denial, disconnection or disinterest. So he complains to God and brings this lament to God.

He brings his first lament and God answers that lament. In God’s answer He tells Habakkuk that His delay is not denial disinterest or disconnected. In fact, what you think is a delay is not even a delay. I am the God of history – past history, present history and future history which He gives with prophecy. Present history is a record of His providence throughout all of His creation. God is the One who sent His people into Egypt for multiple reasons of maturing them and developing them as a nation. I brought them through the suffering of Egypt that I might deliver them out by My strong hand and take them through a wilderness to bring them to a Promised Land. I raised up Egypt for that purpose and then raised up a judgment for Egypt because of what they had done to My people. Then I used My people in that Promised Land as a feather in that land to tickle the throat and vomit out the Canaanite tribe, whose wickedness had now come to fulfillment. God raised up Assyria a century before this. You have already heard I have now raised up the Babylonians in judgment upon the Assyrians.

This was not new because He had already prophesied this in the days of Naham. In those days a prophecy spoke out to the Ninevites that God had visited them with a revival in the days of Jonah and now look what you have done 80 years later. God then brought judgment upon them through the Babylonians. Then He tells Habakkuk that He is raising up the Babylonians as His instrument and He is about to do something so astounding that you won’t believe it and you won’t like it. God is answering Habakkuk’s complaint but His answer will create another complaint. We can’t understand Habakkuk’s second complaint without first understanding God’s answer to his first complaint and God answered and Habakkuk understood.

Habakkuk basically says ‘You’re telling me that You’re going to discipline Your people with the wicked Babylonians who are even worse than the Assyrians?’ That astounded Habakkuk so much he could not believe it and it confused him. So this is now the reason for Habakkuk’s second complaint. In this second complaint Habakkuk goes into issues that still confront us to this day. God, how can you take more wicked people to deal with the wickedness of Your people and be the God that I think that I know?

What God will do will happen in about the next 20 years and this is prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. This is sometime between 605 B.C. and 585 B.C. when Habakkuk writes this. He is a contemporary with Jeremiah. Israel is in abject depravity and

God has answered Habakkuk's complaint. God's answer has become the occasion for Habakkuk's second complaint.

In Habakkuk's second complaint he does something that is great model for us which I read in one of the commentaries on this. Habakkuk hears the Word of the Lord, is confused about it so he begins to address it. How do you address difficult passages of Scripture? The term for this is known as *antologia del fida* which means the analogy of faith. It is a theological commitment that we have by faith which is that God's Word is true. God can't err and God can't contradict Himself. So whenever you come to something that seems contradictory you interpret difficult passages from plainer passages. This is what Habakkuk does and what we should do in this situation. You go to what you are assured or affirmed as true.

We see Habakkuk do this in Habakkuk 1:12 when he says that God is everlasting and holy. God is eternal, sovereign and holy. That is how we know we're not going to die because our eternal God has given us eternal life. Because He is eternal then the life He gives us is eternal. So Habakkuk is reasoning from what he knows. He knows that those who belong to God are saved by God and therefore are saved for everlasting and shall not ultimately die (have eternal life). Habakkuk then says 'Lord, You have ordained the Babylonians as a judgment' acknowledging God's sovereignty. He declares God as our Rock in which we are utterly dependent upon Him. So Habakkuk acknowledges what He knows about the Lord and about what He has said to him.

In Habakkuk 1:13 he acknowledges God's purity and the fact that He can't embrace evil. He knows God can't do wrong or look upon wrong. In Habakkuk's first complaint he didn't want to have to look at the wickedness of God's people either. He acknowledges God's righteousness. So the first thing Habakkuk does is he works through this affirmation of what he knows is true about who God is and what He says He does and will do.

Secondly, then you assess what you know from truth concerning what you're dealing with that is confusing or seemingly contradictory. Once Habakkuk assesses what he sees in terms of what he affirms he then arrives at a bigger question than his first question. So his first question was asking God why He delays and God has answered that. Habakkuk's bigger question to God is 'Given all that I know about You and what You have said You will do, how can You give the answer You gave as a holy God that is sovereign and everlasting?' God had already told Habakkuk that he would respond this way.

Habakkuk believes in God and in who He says He is and He believes God will do what He says He will do but he can't understand God's response. So now we see in his second complaint how He contemplates how God will use even more wicked people to discipline His people, less wicked people. Look at what Habakkuk says in Habakkuk 1:13b, *[13b] why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?* He is basically saying God's people are wicked but they are nothing compared to these uncovenanted people. God has already told Habakkuk He is raising these people up to use them.

Then Habakkuk feels the need to tell God how wicked these uncovenanted people are. It is like the sovereign self. Once you are saved then God is sovereign and you work through the institutions that God has ordained sacredly by being submissive but those who are lost are not like this for the one who is lost has no ruler other than himself. Every man does what is right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). They are the worst of the worst at this. You can't get any worse in sovereign rebellion against the God of glory than the Babylonians who now come to mankind that are like the fish of the sea. They are bent on world dominion with their empire. They have a hook to draw in individuals and nations. They will drag them out with their net and they will

rejoice and be glad over what they have done as they engage in man-stealing and the tyranny of dominion over other nations. They do all this with oppression, intimidation and violence that is unspeakable.

I will not begin to describe this kind of violence but there is a reason this language is used. I will just use one part of it. They will make three invasions of Judah, the two southern tribes. The last time they come they will just destroy Jerusalem and the Solomonic temple. The first time they come they literally put hooks in the mouths of the king and leaders, tie it to a chariot and take them back to Babylon. They will sweep up the people in violence and take them into Babylonian captivity. This had horrendous effects and consequences and they not only rejoice in all this but they worship themselves by worshipping their strategies and tactics. They engage in pagan idolatry by worshipping their own violence (Habakkuk 1:16). Then they keep filling the net and killing not only people but destroying nations who will forever be removed from the face of the earth.

Habakkuk wants to know how God is going to use these violently wicked people but after making his assessments from his affirmations he then assumes a position to wait for the Lord. We see this in Habakkuk 2:1 which says *[1] I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.*

The classic issue has been raised. God, how is there evil and how can You use evil doers for righteous purposes? Do we not face that question today? Is God sovereign? Yes. Did God sovereignly author sin? Is God holy? Yes and that means He cannot sin. If He didn't bring the sin then He's not sovereign and if He did He's not holy. How is it that God can use evil doers to accomplish righteous purposes but why is there evil any way if He is from everlasting to everlasting, holy and sovereign? This is what is embedded in Habakkuk's second complaint as a result of God's answer from his first complaint.

How will God answer him? God's answer to Habakkuk's second complaint in Habakkuk 2:2–20. Habakkuk 2:2–3 says *[2] And the LORD answered me:*

*“Write the vision; make it plain on tablets,
so he may run who reads it.*

*[3] For still the vision awaits its appointed time;
it hastens to the end—it will not lie.*

If it seems slow, wait for it;

it will surely come; it will not delay.

I love the way one of the men I have studied in my life as a focus of leadership put it. He said ‘the providence of God in the lives of men is like the rising of a great wave – most of us either see the rising of the wave of God's providence rolling on humanity or the ebbing of that wave.’ Very seldom do we see also more than one wave. Seemingly God's providence is slow and that's why Peter will record the mockers who say ‘where is the promise of His comings for it's been hundreds of years since He promised that’ so they mock it. Here we also see that God is telling Habakkuk to write it down so here the Word of God comes through Habakkuk. God says delay is not denial or even delay. We think it's delay but His timing is perfect. Let's look further in God's response.

Habakkuk 2:4 says, *[4] “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.* The work of Habakkuk now becomes gloriously worthwhile. The last part of this verse is quoted in Romans 1:17 and it's referenced in Ephesians 2:8. It is

quoted in Hebrews 10:38 and Galatians 3:11. Aren't you glad Habakkuk wrote it down like God told him to do because many of the New Testament writers gravitate to this as well?

Even then 1500 years later a monk named Martin Luther who is a professor at the University at Wittenberg will go the pilgrimage he longed to go on to Rome. There he was overwhelmed with the superstition, corruption, immorality and false teaching. He was utterly disillusioned as he made his way back to Wittenberg, Germany. The one who was over him that sensed his need told him to go teach the book of Romans and when he got to the quote from Habakkuk in Romans 1:17 God began to set him free in 1515. By 1517 he will nail 95 theses declaring that salvation is not by our righteousness but by an alien righteousness away from us that is given to us and you access it by faith.

God is telling Habakkuk that He knows they are wicked and Habakkuk had now measured out who was more wicked than the other but God says that all have sinned and the only people right with Me are those who by faith have put their trust in Me and the righteousness I provide for them. No one stands beyond the consequences of their sins. Righteousness doesn't come by comparison of others or by grading on a curve. Righteousness has to be perfect in thought, word and deed. Righteousness means no sins of omission or commission. Righteousness means there is only One who is righteous and as far as humanity there is no who is righteous. The only way we are accepted is by faith in the Lord of glory.

In the Old Testament they believed in the promises of God that would be fulfilled in the Messiah. In the New Testament we believe in the Promised One in whom all the promises are yes and amen, but it's always by faith. Faith does not come because of our worthiness. Faith comes because of God's sovereign grace and mercy. Ephesians 2:8–9 says [8] *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* Habakkuk, if you're calling for justice all of you die. The righteous stand by grace through faith in Christ by their trust in the Lord of glory and that's why Romans 1:16–17 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."* That is at the core of the Gospel message.

Are God's people changed? Do they sin less? Yes but that is the result of the saving grace of God. It is not the reason for the saving grace of God. So He is calibrating Habakkuk. Let's look further at God's response.

Habakkuk 2:5 says [5] *"Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples."*

At the root of all humanity is this greed of self-reliance, self-exaltation, self-absorption and the destruction of anything, anyone and everything that's in the way. A man in his sin is like a drunkard that cannot get enough. He is addicted to his sin and it leads into a death spiral which is where sin goes.

Now we go from past history, present history to future history and He gives five woes that He is going to bring upon those who are responsible for their sin under His sovereign decree. This next section is what we call the Divine taunt song and I say this reverently and carefully – this is basically sanctified trash talking. This is the God of holiness that is making clear that if

you rebel against Him, not only can He sovereignly use you and your rebellion for His purposes but He will sovereignly bring an end to you because of your rebellion. This is comparable to what Jesus does in the Gospels with the seven woes He gives against the Pharisees.

The first of the five woes is in Habakkuk 2:6–8 which says

*[6] Shall not all these take up their taunt against him,
with scoffing and riddles for him, and say,*

*“Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own—
for how long?— and loads himself with pledges!”*

*[7] Will not your debtors suddenly arise,
and those awake who will make you tremble?
Then you will be spoil for them.*

*[8] Because you have plundered many nations,
all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you,
for the blood of man and violence to the earth,
to cities and all who dwell in them.*

Basically they are getting drunk in their dominion upon others, the kidnapping of people and the stealing of what is theirs that is not yours and in doing this you think you have dominion but I assure you that the people from whom you have taken it, I will rise up and they will take it back from you. Not many years hence the Babylonians will meet the Medo-Persians who will then meet the Greeks who then will meet the Romans who will then meet the barbarian hordes. Your own judgment and sins will come back upon you. Sin has its consequences. When I read that I could hear the echo of my mother when she would say to me ‘Son, your sins will find you out.’ Here is where it is in the Bible. Your sins will come back upon you from even those whom you have sinned against.

The second woe is in Habakkuk 2:9–11 which says,

*[9] “Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house,
to set his nest on high,
to be safe from the reach of harm!*

*[10] You have devised shame for your house
by cutting off many peoples;
you have forfeited your life.*

*[11] For the stone will cry out from the wall,
and the beam from the woodwork respond.*

In other words, the very thing you are putting your trust in will crash down upon you. Go read the book of Daniel to see how the Babylonians come to an end. The Medo-Persians bring their own fortress that comes crashing down upon them.

The third woe is in Habakkuk 2:12–14 which says,

*[12] “Woe to him who builds a town with blood
and founds a city on iniquity!*

*[13] Behold, is it not from the LORD of hosts
that peoples labor merely for fire,
and nations weary themselves for nothing?*

*[14] For the earth will be filled
with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

You think your glory is going to dominate the earth but the only glory that will dominate the earth will be the glory of the Lord even as the waters cover the sea.

The fourth woe is in Habakkuk 2:15–18 which says,

[15] *“Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink—
you pour out your wrath and make them drunk,
in order to gaze at their nakedness!*

[16] *You will have your fill of shame instead of glory.*

*Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision!
The cup in the LORD's right hand
will come around to you,
and utter shame will come upon your glory!*

[17] *The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you,
as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them,
for the blood of man and violence to the earth,
to cities and all who dwell in them.*

[18] *“What profit is an idol
when its maker has shaped it,
a metal image, a teacher of lies?
For its maker trusts in his own creation
when he makes speechless idols!*

Here He looks at the culture of sexual immorality. Here is this repetition of the culture of Sodom and Gomorrah that pervaded Babylon and He says it also will bring its own judgment upon you. You can't break God's law without God's law breaking you. The idolater puts his trust in the very thing that he has trusted – half of it he uses to warm his house, the other half he makes and worships. Is that lifeless idol able to deliver you? No, and that brings us to the last woe in Habakkuk 2:19–20 which says,

[19] *Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake;
to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach?
Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver,
and there is no breath at all in it.*

[20] *But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him.”*

At this point expositionally I may be on shaky ground. Here is what He is saying. When God shows up there is no frivolity. The Lord is in His temple. Who is ultimately the temple, not Solomon's temple or Zerubbabel's temple? It is Jesus. John 1:14 says [14] *And the Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled, temped) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* Be silent for the Lord is in His temple. Listen to His Son.

Remember Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration? Matthew 17:4–5 says [4] *And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”* [5] *He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; **listen to him.**”* Hear Him. Dare I go further?

You are His temple. In I Corinthians 3 His local church is called a temple of the Lord. His church universal in Ephesians 2 is called the dwelling place, the temple of the Lord. Here is where I feel shaky for it says ‘the Lord is in His temple let all the earth keep silent’ but I believe

His temple is not silent. Jesus speaks the truth and those whom Christ dwells within by His Spirit, we are the temple. We speak Jesus and His Word to the world even as they are silent. Let the earth keep silent but let the temple speak for the Lord and His glory has come among us.

I have three takeaways to leave you with. The first one is the classic question throughout the ages, is God sovereign, yes He is and is God holy, yes He is. That means He cannot sin, He cannot be tempted by sin nor is He the author of sin but He is sovereign and sin is only here because He has ordered it. Satan and humanity are the authors of sin and we have freely sinned. Now we are where we always end up in Christian doctrine. We are at these moments that are *seemingly* contradictions because if we think God is sovereign then man must be a robot. Or if man is a free moral agent and is doing what he is doing then God must not be sovereign, in fact, God in His sovereignty has ordained second causes and second causes is the free moral agency.

Notice that I didn't say the free will of man because our will is not free for it is in the bondage of sin. So we will sin but we sin freely. We are free moral agents. That's why He goes to the 'woes' because God is sovereignly using them but they are freely doing what they are doing in rebellion against Him and God sovereignly will judge them even as He uses their rebellion. So God has sovereignly ordered their presence, ordered the evil doer, sovereignly uses it for His purposes but He has not authored the sin and that's as far as I can bring you. I can only tell you that God can pull it off and after speaking to these matters in Romans 9, 10, 11 Paul says 'For God You are too much' for Your ways are not my ways and Your thoughts are not my thoughts. So I am responsible for what I do and I am not a robot but God is sovereign over all that exists.

So why didn't He stop us from freely sinning? This is my only answer to this. He didn't sovereignly stop us, though He had the power to stop us, because some inadequacy in Him or some superiority of us but He did it for His own glory. If God had not ordered the presence and sovereignly decreed it what we would author in rebellion against Him, there are whole attributes of God you would never know. If you hadn't been saved from sin you wouldn't have the slightest idea what you are singing when you sing hymns. You wouldn't think grace is amazing. You wouldn't say that He hides your soul in the cleft of the Rock. You wouldn't know that God is gracious, merciful, patient, holy, or just. In fact you wouldn't know all the attributes of God and you wouldn't know how holy He is that to save us it would cost Him His Son. You wouldn't know how much He loves you because He freely gave His Son.

So somehow the sovereignty of God by His decree works with the free moral agency of man, therefore God is the Orderer of all things and never the author of sin. While He is almighty and could have stopped it He would not stop it for it was His ordained sovereign plan so that we might see Him in all of His glory through His grace, mercy and in His justice. With all who stand in rebellion are thrown into the lake of fire on the heels we'll read 'to God be the glory, great things He has done' and He rescued me. He didn't rescue me because He needed me or because I wanted Him but because He loved me with an unmerited, unwanted, unsought yet relentless and unstoppable love.

Most history teachers are going to teach a circular view of history that is rooted in Marxism, Greek thought and they say things like, 'what goes around comes around.' Here is what I want you to know from this text. The second takeaway is the God who is sovereign over all things taught us that history is not circular but it is repetitive. According to Ecclesiastes there is nothing new under the sun. We keep repeating our rebellion against God and God sovereignly keeps working in this universe. History is actually linear. It has a Divine beginning and it will have a Divine end as He brings everything to a consummation.

The third takeaway is that Habakkuk is not a complainer. Habakkuk brings complaints or laments – how long O Lord, why? It is because he is Prophet who has a lament/complaint and it is because he is serious about three things. One is sin and he doesn't want it to be named and embraced among God's people. Two he is serious about holiness and thirdly he is serious about God's glory. He is about to learn God's answer to all three of those. We will look at what Habakkuk learns in the next study. There we will look at Habakkuk 3 which is one of the most glorious psalms in the Bible outside of the book of Psalms. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. We praise Your Name and thank You Father that You are not by any means frightened of our doubts and questions. Thank You for Your Word to Habakkuk that comes to us that we are righteous, not more righteous than others, but we are righteous by grace through faith in Christ and we give You praise, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

A PROPHET'S SECOND COMPLAINT AND A DIVINE ANSWER

LIFE TAKEAWAYS

1. Classic question throughout the ages.
2. History is not circular; repetitive but not circular. It is linear with a Divine beginning and end.
3. Habakkuk is not a complainer; He is a prophet with a complaint because he is serious about Sin, Holiness and God's Glory.