

God's Message to Us in Habakkuk

Halifax, NS

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Introduction

This afternoon, we will take a look at this unique little book—the fifth from the last book in the Old Testament.

Hebrews 1:1 reminds us that God **“at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets.”**

- Various times and various ways...
 - What was the time of Habakkuk and what was the way in which God spoke through him?
- The time of Habakkuk was the time when Babylon began to rise as the dominate world power in place of Assyria.
 - Last week, we saw how Babylon defeated Nineveh in 612 BC, and then went on to conquer a coalition of Assyria and Egypt at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC.
 - It is generally supposed that Habakkuk wrote around 605—
 - definitely before 600 BC when Babylon began to invade Jerusalem... because that is something that Habakkuk speaks of as yet future.
- So that is the *time* in which this prophet spoke to the fathers—but what is the way in which He spoke through him?
 - Habakkuk is unique because, unlike the other prophets, there is no direct address here, with him saying things like, “The LORD says, ‘Repent of your sins,’ ” or “Thus says the LORD, ‘You will be restored in mercy.’ ”
 - Instead, you have a conversation between the prophet and the LORD, with Habakkuk working through one of the greatest questions people have about God and the way He does things.
 - In short, it is the question of how God can allow injustice to go on for so long.
 - How often do we hear this question in our day, even as an objection!
 - The atheist says that he cannot believe in God because if God is good, how can He allow evil in the world?
 - Whenever famous atheists like Richard Dawkins (author of *The God Delusion*) are pushed, you find that the reason they reject God is because of the evil and suffering that is in the world.
 - That is how they can justify, in their own mind, holding such an irrational view of how the world came into being.
 - To them, it is even more irrational to say that there is an all-powerful Creator when the world has so much injustice.
 - And we Christians struggle with this same question.
 - Why doesn't God do something about all the injustice in the world?

How would you like it if you could ask God this question and have Him answer you?

- Well, in Habakkuk we have an opportunity to listen in when he asks God this question.

I. In Habakkuk 1:1 – 2:4, the prophet Habakkuk asks God how He can allow injustice to go and we get to hear the conversation that follows.

- Think of it—here we have a dialogue between a godly man and God about this great question that concerns us all.

A. Habakkuk begins the conversation in verses 2-4.

1. Like many of us, he is distressed to see the injustice in Judah—among the people of God—within the great church of God.

- They were so few in number—and Habakkuk was ministering to them, but they continued to be so ungodly.
- There had been a revival 100 years before under King Hezekiah, then a falling away again under his son, Manasseh, then revival again with Josiah, and now after his death in 609 BC, there was great wickedness again.
 - Instead of the strong people among them using their superior strength to serve others, they were using their strength to oppress and take advantage of the weak.
 - And God seemed to be doing nothing to stop them, even as Habakkuk continued in prayer.

2. Look at the text and you can see his struggle... Habakkuk 1:2-4:

- **O LORD, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, “Violence!” And You will not save. ³ Why do You show me iniquity, and cause *me* to see trouble? For plundering and violence *are* before me; there is strife, and contention arises. ⁴ Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds.**
- It is so distressing when God’s people who are supposed to lay down their lives for one another are indistinguishable from the world...
 - Even in the courtroom, the law was not upheld—judges were bribed and justice was turned upside down.
 - And these were the people—the only people—who were called to be God’s people in all the world.
 - Habakkuk is asking why the LORD does not answer his prayers and rescue His true servants from the wicked in the church.

B. God’s answer is remarkable.

1. He more or less says, “Habakkuk, if you think I am tolerating a lot of injustice now, just wait until you see the injustice that is coming!”

- “You won’t believe what I am going to do next.”
- Ver 5 says: **Look among the nations and watch—be utterly astounded! For *I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you.***

2. And then God tells him what it is that He is going to do.

- He is going to raise up people that are even more wicked than the oppressors in Judah—and they will oppress the oppressors.
- He is going to raise up the wicked, ruthless, Chaldeans (that is, the Babylonians) against His people, the church.

- Look at verse 6 and following: **For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs.** [Just as the Israelites were plundering each other, now they will be plundered... He continues in v. 7, describing the character of the Babylonians:] **They are terrible and dreadful; their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves.** [And then He tells how strong they will be—how unstoppable] **8 Their horses also are swifter than leopards, and more fierce than evening wolves. Their chargers charge ahead; their cavalry comes from afar; they fly as the eagle that hastens to eat. 9 They all come for violence; their faces are set like the east wind. They gather captives like sand.** [they just scope them up] **10 They scoff at kings, and princes are scorned by them. They deride every stronghold, for they heap up earthen mounds and seize it.** [Nothing can stop them—and to make matters even worse, they will give credit to their gods for defeating God and His people—v. 11:] **Then his mind changes, and he transgresses; he commits offense, ascribing this power to his god.”**
- So God’s answer to the injustice is that He is going to bring forth even more injustice—note well that verse 6 says that He is raising up this wicked nation.

C. You have to love Habakkuk’s response to this.

1. He doesn’t just say, “Oh, okay.”

- He knows that God has made promises to preserve His people and to bring salvation to them and to the whole world through a Son born to them...
 - even the Son of David who was first promised to Eve, then more fully to Abraham, and even more fully to David.
- Habakkuk also knows that God is holy and just and has no pleasure in wickedness.
 - And he knows that He has all power and authority to raise up nations and to bring nations down whenever He pleases.

2. So look at his response to God in verse 12-17

- a. In verse 12 (Hab 1:12) he affirms the things that he knows are true about God: **Are You not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction.**
 - You see how he expresses his certainty that God will not wipe out His people—*we shall not die*—
 - He is sure that it is God’s way of correcting them... but still...
- b. He questions how God can tolerate such injustice—he knows how much God hates it... look at verse 13: **You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?**
- c. He objects that it looks as if there is no ruler over men—as if God does not reign... v. 14: **Why do You make men like fish of the sea, like creeping things that have no ruler over them? 15 They take up all of them with a hook, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their dragnet. Therefore they rejoice and are glad.**
- d. And yes, to make it even worse, the Babylonians will not acknowledge that God has raised them up—they will give all the glory to themselves and their gods... v.

16: **“Therefore they sacrifice to their net, and burn incense to their dragnet; because by them their share is sumptuous and their food plentiful. 17 Shall they therefore empty their net, and continue to slay nations without pity?”**

- In other words, “Are You going to let them keep on fishing like this—taking more and more, filling their net and emptying it again and again?”

➤ He wonders how God can tolerate such injustice—

3. But Habakkuk determines that he will wait for God to answer.

- Rather than jumping to wicked conclusions that God is not just or that God is not powerful the way so many people do,
 - he will wait for God to respond to him... look at chapter 2, v. 1: **I will stand my watch and set myself on the rampart, and watch to see what He will say to me, and what I will answer when I am corrected.**
- If you really want to know the truth, you will wait for God to answer.
 - Many people raise question just to make excuses for not serving God, but if you really want to serve Him, you will wait to hear what He says... or in our case, pay attention to what He has said to us in Habakkuk.

D. And look... the LORD does answer.

1. It is an answer that God wants everyone to hear.

- Habakkuk is to write it so everyone can easily see it. Hab. 2:2 says: **Then the LORD answered me and said: “Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it.”**

➤ And what does God tell everyone?

2. He tells us all to be patient—to wait for Him to bring His justice.

- **Hab 2:3: For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.**
- We want to see justice now, but God has appointed a day when He will judge, and it will come at the appropriate time.

3. In Habakkuk 2:4 the LORD tells us who is not right with Him and who is right with Him...He tells us who will live and who will perish...

- Habakkuk 2:4 is one of the key verses in the Bible—it is the theme of Paul’s epistle to the Romans: **Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith.**
- You see what is contrasted here—the man of pride and the man of faith.
 - The proud is the one who lives by his own resources—without God—by his own standard and by his own strength.
 - He is not upright. People were never meant to live without dependence upon the LORD.
 - Such a person’s soul is not upright—it is twisted and corrupt—it is self centered and self-serving.
 - The one who lives by his faith, on the other hand is said to be just or righteous.
 - He relies on the LORD to live.

- He looks to the LORD's promises—especially to the promise of salvation through the Son that He promised to His people.
- This man realises that in himself, he has no resources to be upright—to be decent—to be what a man ought to be.
- He is enlivened by God's promise in Christ—of forgiveness and eternal life—of righteousness through Him as his priest and king.
 - He lives by trusting in God, but depending on Him.
 - He believes that God is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him—even of sinners such as we all are...
 - He believes God's promise of forgiveness and eternal life to all who come to Christ, the Son that He sent for that very purpose—that we might not perish, but live.
- This is the emphasis of the whole Bible.
 - Abraham was justified by faith.
 - And so are all others who are justified or righteous—we live by faith.

TRANS> And remember, this message is for everyone! Habakkuk was to make it plain.

- The proud is not upright in his soul and will perish...
 - The just will live by his faith.
- The rest of the book of Habakkuk speaks of nothing else than this...
 - In the rest of chapter 2, the Lord describes the proud man who will perish—God's justice will catch up to him in time...
 - And then in chapter 3 we have the prayer of the man of faith who waits on God and lives.
 - Let's take a look at each.

II. Look at what the LORD says about the proud person who is not upright in Habakkuk 2:5-19.

A. Essentially what we see is that the man without God wants everything to conform to what he wants.

1. By rejecting God, he has put himself in the place of God.
 - And his desire to have everything he wants grows and grows...
 - That is why it is, that when he has power, he uses it selfishly.
 - Look at what it says about him in Habakkuk 2:5: **Indeed, because he transgresses by wine, he is a proud man, and he does not stay at home. Because he enlarges his desire as hell, and he is like death, and cannot be satisfied, he gathers to himself all nations and heaps up for himself all peoples.**
 - Once he gets control of others, he just keeps on going and going... like a wild animal who tastes blood.
2. In verse 6-8, the LORD shows that people will, of course, oppose such a one, and in the end that this one who plunders will be plundered...
 - Look at verse 8: **“Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the people shall plunder you, because of men's blood and the violence of the land and the city, and of all who dwell in it.”**
 - Justice *will* be done. Justice will catch up to the proud.

- B. Four examples are given to illustrate the way of and the demise of the proud.
1. In 2:9-11, the proud keeps adding to his house—at the expense of people.
 - **Heb 2:9: Woe to him who covets evil gain for his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of disaster!**
 - Instead of caring about people, he lives for his house to make it lovely and secure.
 - But God says in verse 11 that the very stones and timbers will cry out again him to condemn that—built at the expense of people...
 2. And in 2:12-14, you have the proud building cities by bloodshed—cities that they will labour to build in vain...
 - And why in vain? Because the day is coming when God will take His rightful place of dominion over those cities...
 - Verse 14 gives the wonderful news: **“For the earth will be filled With the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”**
 - That’s what we have to look forward to.
 - Justice will be done. The proud will not stand.
 3. In 2:15-17, it speaks of how the proud take advantage of people by getting them drunk so as to expose their shame... v. 15: **Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbor, pressing *him* to your bottle, even to make *him* drunk, that you may look on his nakedness!**
 - But the LORD will end up exposing them—making them drink so that all is brought to light about them and all the ugliness of their violence is seen: 2:16-17: **You are filled with shame instead of glory. You also—drink! And be exposed as uncircumcised! The cup of the LORD’s right hand *will be* turned against you, and utter shame will be on your glory. ¹⁷ For the violence *done to* Lebanon will cover you, and the plunder of beasts *which* made them afraid, because of men’s blood and the violence of the land *and* the city, and of all who dwell in it.”**
 - The LORD shows us that justice will be done. The proud will get a taste of their own medicine.
 4. And then those idols of their own making that they gave credit to will be seen to be worthless...
 - Hab 2:18-19: **“What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it, the molded image, a teacher of lies, that the maker of its mold should trust in it, to make mute idols? ¹⁹ Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Awake!’ To silent stone, ‘Arise! It shall teach!’ Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, yet in it there is no breath at all.”**
 - That is how the LORD is able to put up with people giving credit to their own net and to their own gods...
 - He is going to show how worthless those gods were.
- C. The proud and their gods will be brought down, but the LORD will be exalted!
1. Verse 20 tells us where He is while the proud are busy living without Him, living for themselves and trusting in worthless idols: **But the LORD is in His holy temple.**
 - Yes, there is much injustice...
 - but the LORD sees it all—He is in His temple.

- The temple revealed Christ in the Old Testament, and now the gospel reveals Him.
 - God is in His holy temple—where His true worshippers are who trust in Him for their salvation—who have given up on self and look to Christ to live by faith.
 - He is with His people as they cry out to Him of injustice... and the day is coming when the proud will be humbled.
- 2. And because God is in His holy temple, the whole earth is given some solid advice...
 - **The LORD is in His holy temple... Let all the earth keep silence before Him.**
 - Do you see?
 - He is God! He is in Christ.
 - Be hushed before Him—He is the LORD of all.
 - Come to Him in faith and live!

III. And now we have this beautiful response of faith from Habakkuk in chapter 3.

- **This testimony of faith is a model for us of true saving faith.**
- A. First, having seen that God is going to raise up the Chaldeans against His church, Habakkuk prays for God to remember His promised mercy to them.
 1. You remember at the start, when Habakkuk first raised the problem of the injustice that was going on in the church...
 - And the LORD told him that He was going to raise up the Chaldeans who would do worse things to His people...
 - Habakkuk knows that this is real—that judgment begins with the house of God—but he also knows that God will preserve His true people...
 - And so he expresses his fear of God and asks Him to remember His mercy to His flock... Hab 3:2: **O LORD, I have heard your speech and was afraid; O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years! In the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.**
 - As he said before—they will not die—they will live.
 2. Pray for the church!
 - Surely the church is under God’s chastening hand today.
 - We are not living as His people—may He revive us...
 - And in punishing us, may He remember His promise of mercy to us in Christ and not destroy us.

TRANS> From here, the prayer of faith goes to testifying that God will bring justice upon the church’s enemies... as He said in chapter 2...

- B. If you have faith, you will praise the LORD for His amazing power to bring down those who oppose His rule in Christ...
 1. Yes, speak of the glory of His power as in 3:3-12: **God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens, And the earth was full of His praise.** [He is going to be revealed at the appointed time as the judge of all... v. 4:] ***4 His brightness was like the light; He had rays flashing from His hand, and there His power was hidden. 5 Before Him went pestilence, and fever followed at His feet. 6***

He stood and measured the earth; He looked and startled the nations. And the everlasting mountains were scattered, the perpetual hills bowed. His ways *are* everlasting. ⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian trembled. ⁸ O LORD, were *You* displeased with the rivers, *was* Your anger against the rivers, *was* Your wrath against the sea, that You rode on Your horses, Your chariots of salvation? ⁹ Your bow was made quite ready; oaths were sworn over *Your* arrows. You divided the earth with rivers. ¹⁰ The mountains saw You *and* trembled; the overflowing of the water passed by. The deep uttered its voice, *and* lifted its hands on high. ¹¹ The sun and moon stood still in their habitation; at the light of Your arrows they went, at the shining of Your glittering spear. ¹² You marched through the land in indignation; You trampled the nations in anger.

- The man of faith believes that such power will be exhibited and He speaks to God about it.
 - It is a very awesome, fearful confidence that His anger will be unleashed against the nations.
- 2. And why will God come in such rage against the proud? For the salvation of His people!
 - Habakkuk (and all true believers with him) confess in verse 13 that: **You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for salvation with Your Anointed.**
 - God's anointed—that is, His Messiah!
 - God destroys the proud who oppose His reign to save His people united to Christ the Messiah—to save them from their oppression...
 - So that all may live in Christ in a world where we use our gifts to bless each other—where we truly love others even as Christ loved us.
 - Where we are such as would actually pour out our souls for others because we know that we are not God, but God's people.
 - The testimony of faith goes on from the middle of verse 13-15—
 - **You struck the head from the house of the wicked, by laying bare from foundation to neck. ¹⁴ You thrust through with his own arrows the head of his villages. They came out like a whirlwind to scatter me; their rejoicing was like feasting on the poor in secret. ¹⁵ You walked through the sea with Your horses, through the heap of great waters.**
 - Here you see the imagery of the crossing of the Red Sea—walking through the sea with the waters heaped up...
 - And why did God destroy Egypt?
 - To free His people from them so that they could serve Him.
 - Egypt was proud and did not acknowledge God—they took control of God's people for a time—but God set His people free...
 - That is what Habakkuk believed and that is what we believe if we are people of faith and not people of pride.
- 3. When you hear of God's judgment, as a believer, it makes you tremble.
 - But that is very good—
 - Because if you tremble at the thought of God's fiery wrath and judgment, you will be able to rest in the day of trouble.
 - You will know that He has full control and will bring justice at last.

- That is the idea in Hab 3:16 where it says: **When I heard, my body trembled; my lips quivered at *the* voice; rottenness entered my bones; and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble. When he comes up to the people, he will invade them with his troops.**
 - The Almighty will deal with all the injustice.
- If you want to be righteous before Him, then turn from your pride and self-sufficiency and trust in Him.
 - It is very foolish to reject God simply because He has not yet brought justice to the earth.
 - He is waiting for all of His people to repent—in mercy. Then, when the last one has come in, He will judge the world in righteousness.

C. So how does believing affect you and me now when justice prevails?

1. It means that even when things do not go well for us, we can still rejoice in God, knowing that He will establish us in His time.
 - We can express our faith through hard times when we see injustice in the church with these closing words of hope in Habakkuk 3:17-19:
 - Hab 3:17-19: **Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls—¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.
¹⁹ The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's *feet*, and He will make me walk on my high hills.**
2. Why is there so much injustice in the world?
 - Because He has appointed a day when He will bring justice.
 - And until then, He is gathering to Himself a people who turn from their pride to Him in faith, looking to Him to save them and to be their God.
 - The just shall live by faith.