

Habakkuk: A Chapter-by-Chapter Study

Introduction

There is not much known about the author other than that he appeared in the same period as other prominent prophets such as Daniel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The Apocryphal book “Bel and the Dragon” states that Habakkuk brought comfort and aid to Daniel while he was in the lion’s den in Babylon, but this is more a traditional story than historical fact. However, it is most likely that Habakkuk lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar. The date of this book is unclear, but some scholars believe it to be written around 612-588 BC while Babylon was destroying Nineveh and preparing to conquer Jerusalem.

The name Habakkuk is a derivative of the Hebrew word for “embrace.” The name is roughly translated as “he who embraces” or even “he who clings.”

Even though the book of Habakkuk is written as an account of a conversation between the author and God, the intended audience is the few remaining righteous Jews in Jerusalem who will suffer the same fate as the unrighteous at the hand of an ungodly empire.

For reading purposes, the New American Standard Bible and the New King James have been used as references for the notes of this study, but the Message translation lends an artfully respectful rendition of this metaphor-filled book.

Chapter 1

V1-4

The opening sentence of this recount is brief and blunt. Some translations use the word “pronouncement” while others use the word “burden.” Both indicate that whatever Habakkuk witnessed was not pleasing. Some scholars think that Habakkuk was around during the time of King Josiah during a brief period of revival for the Jews, but then they fell into worldly ways once again. This would be part of Habakkuk’s “burden” as he watched his fellow Jews turn away from God.

Why does it seem to us as Christians that God lets terrible things happen to good people?

It is easy for modern Christians to relate to these words of Habakkuk as he struggles to understand why evil is allowed to endure unchecked. Yet God is patient and loving far more so than any human. Our human judgment can be skewed and impatient while God allows plenty of time for redemption. However, God’s judgement will come, as God reminds Habakkuk in the next section.

V5-11

This section, usually denoted in quotes by most translations, is God’s reply to the cries of Habakkuk.

Instead of offering the prophet good news, God tells Habakkuk to look to foreign nations for an unbelievable response. We know now that God meant for the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and the temple.

God informs Habakkuk that a fierce nation of Chaldeans (the Babylonians) will be the instrument of His judgment. God also informs the prophet that this nation will claim the victory in the name of their own

gods. This is what makes this prophecy and the prophecy of Habakkuk's contemporaries so potent. God called it accurately before it happened.

V12-17

Why does God allow an unholy nation to conquer the "chosen people?"

In this closing section of the chapter, Habakkuk does an about-face. His first lament was that God wasn't executing judgment. Here, he questions the methods of God's judgment! Habakkuk even questions why the evil Babylonians are allowed to thrive while the Jews suffer the wrath of God. Why would a holy and pure God use such an unholy and unscrupulous people as the Babylonians to impose justice?

Sometimes, we can become judgmental. It is simply human nature. Events such as this can be used to humble us as we let our pride overtake our obedience to God.

Chapter 2

Although the book of Habakkuk is written as a conversational exchange between Habakkuk and God, chapter 2 is almost entirely God providing a prophecy to Habakkuk.

V1-3

Although there is a chapter break here, verse 1 is a continuous train of thought from Habakkuk at the end of the previous chapter. Many studies and commentaries break the previous chapter at the end of this verse.

Verse 2 is the beginning of God giving the prophet the vision of things yet to come. God instructs Habakkuk to carve this in stone, giving the prophecy a sense of urgency and importance. This prophecy was yet another warning to the Jews joining the likes of Jeremiah to repent and prepare for judgement.

V4-8

What is this section describing?

Directly, Habakkuk is describing the pride of the Babylonians as he ponders why God would use a people that he considered more sinful than the Jews to be the instrument of discipline for the Jews. Indirectly, this passage depicts pride in ourselves as humans and is a reminder that we are not and cannot be bigger than God. Pride is often considered the most common sin. Living by faith is a counter to being prideful. By putting our trust in God, we often must remove the trust in ourselves. Habakkuk would have to trust that God knew what He was doing by sending the Babylonians to plunder Jerusalem.

V9-11

Who is God addressing in this passage?

These three verses call out the greedy for putting money and/or material possessions before God and their fellow man. The greedy collect these things at the expense of their own soul.

V12-14

Who is being addressed in this section?

Here, God calls out the violent for their crimes against their fellow humans. The Babylonians were experts in violence and what they didn't already know, they learned from the nations they had

conquered. All this knowledge of violence would be used against the Jews as they laid siege to Jerusalem.

V15-17

Who does God call out in this passage?

The obvious answer is that God is addressing the drunkards. But God is also including those who encourage drunkenness. A drunk is responsible for their own actions, even while intoxicated. But those who promote inebriation also bear some of the blame.

Drunkenness causes a loss of senses and judgement, allowing sin to easily find its way into the hearts of those holding the bottle. Although this does not excuse poor behavior, the knowledge of what could happen while intoxicated should be enough to warn people off becoming intoxicated. It should be noted that this passage does not discourage the use of alcohol as beer was the prominent drink in the Old Testament and beyond. Due to the lack of clean water, the fermentation process often provided the best source of clean water, but this fact made this passage all the more necessary. Since alcohol was not only readily available but one of the few accessible beverages, alcoholism was likely more prevalent than it is today.

V18-20

Finally, who does this passage call out?

Here, God delivers a rebuke to the idolators. Of the Ten Commandments given to the Jews via Moses, idolatry is a direct violation of the first commandment and what is often considered the most important commandment. God will use the Babylonian empire to inflict His judgement upon the Jews for allowing this practice to occur repeatedly. With this prophecy being fulfilled right before their eyes, the Jewish idolators would know they were wrong to worship something, anything before God.

Chapter 3

Like chapter 2 is dedicated to God's response to Habakkuk, chapter 3 is Habakkuk's final prayer to God and the book closes on this note.

V1-2

Habakkuk opens his prayer with a call for revival. Not just for the people to repent, but for God to make Himself known to the people. Habakkuk knows the Jews have turned away from God as is evident by the opening in chapter 1, but Habakkuk asks for mercy amid God's anger.

V3-16

Although the evil of the Jews is what stirred God to action, Habakkuk finds a way to put a positive spin on God's wrath. The entire earth will take notice when God is angry. And these prophesies from Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel of using Babylon as a tool to upset the world order of the time all came true. Habakkuk uses his skill as a poet to praise God.

V17-19

Habakkuk knew that there were a small few Jews left that still worshipped the One True God and that their suffering was not warranted like those of their corrupt and evil brethren. But God's plan is true, and His will is just. There will be suffering in this world, whether we deserve it or not. Habakkuk praises

God regardless of his own circumstances and comfort. The eternal reward is far more important than the comfort of the “now.”

Conclusion

The answers to Habakkuk’s questions may not sit well with non-Christians and even some believers. Our tendency as human beings is to believe we are in control and we know best. Habakkuk asks God, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” and “Why do the evil flourish while the righteous suffer?” The answer to both questions is, “We’re not God.” Whatever happens to us may be from our own poor choices or worse, someone else’s poor choices. God has never promised to protect us from that. He has promised to walk through it with us. And that is enough. Eternity with God is far more important than the fate we have as humans on earth.

References

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