

9. Habakkuk 606-604 B.C.

The book of Habakkuk has three chapters. It is a Pre-Exilic Southern Kingdom book.

Author

Unlike other prophets who declared God's message to people, Habakkuk dialogued with God about people. Little is known of Habakkuk except he is named a "prophet" in verse 1. Of his temperament and personal situation, we know only what may be inferred from the book. His literary style resembles the Psalms. The last phrase of the book, *For the choir director, on my stringed instruments*, suggests that Habakkuk may have been a musician of the Levitical office.

Date and Background

The prophecy is set against a background of the decline and fall of the Judean Southern Kingdom (about 626-586 B.C.). During this period, Judah enjoyed its last bit of prosperity under King Josiah (died 609 B.C.). The Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria in 722 B.C. Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria, fell to the Babylonians in 612, and the Babylonian Empire would conquer Judah, taking its people into exile in 586. Conditions during the life of the prophet would have progressed from excellent (with material prosperity and even the promise of spiritual revival under King Josiah) to the height of desperation as Babylon drew closer and closer to Jerusalem. Habakkuk was written during the ministry of Jeremiah, 627-585 B.C and Daniel 606-536 B.C. Jeremiah taught that because of wickedness, God's people were doomed. Habakkuk taught the wickedness of the Babylonians means they are also doomed. There is no direct evidence from the book that Habakkuk lived past the destruction of Jerusalem.

Purpose

In the dark days just before the Babylonian Captivity, the Prophet Habakkuk's purpose was to write an unusual message of hope and encouragement for the people of Judah. The book begins with an interrogation of God but ends as an intercession to God. Worry is transformed into worship. Fear turns to faith. Terror becomes trust. Hang-ups are resolved with hope. Anguish melts into adoration. What begins with a question mark, ends in an exclamation point. The answer to Habakkuk's "Why?" is "Who!" His confusion, "Why all the conflict?" is resolved with his comprehension of who is in control: God!!

Key Verse

Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith (Habakkuk 2:4)

Theme

Subject: The righteous people

Complement: shall live by faith

Habakkuk asked some of the most penetrating questions in all literature. God's first answer announced judgment for Judah. But His second reply was positive, in that all history was hastening to a conclusion that was certain. Habakkuk was not told when the end would come, but the righteous ones are to live by faith, awaiting that day when God will have His victory.

Outline

A Dialogue with God: Habakkuk Previewed God’s Discipline of Judah (chapter 1)

An Answer from God: The Judgment of Babylon (chapter 2)

A Doxology to God: Habakkuk Praises God’s Design of Creation (chapter 3)

Commentary

A Dialogue with God: Habakkuk Previewed God’s Discipline of Judah (Chapter 1)

Verse 1, *The oracle* [“burden,” “heavy message”] *which Habakkuk the prophet saw*—common for prophets (see Isaiah 1:1; 2:1; 13:1; Ezekiel 12:27; Amos 1:1; Micah 1:1).

Verse 2, *“How long, O LORD, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, ‘Violence!’ Yet You do not save.”* Habakkuk asks for deliverance (as in Psalm 10:1-13; 13:1-4; 22:1-21; 74:1-11; 80; 88). He wants to know why God seems indifferent to his pleas. Does God not hear his prayer? Not hearing is equated to not helping. The word for *violence* occurs 6 times in Habakkuk (1:2, 3, 9; 2:8, 17). Is God insensitive to the violence in Judah? God seemed to do nothing. The tone of chapter 1 is the tension of unanswered prayer.

Verse 3, *“Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises.”* Sin abounded in Judah, and (to Habakkuk) God seemed both indifferent and idle. It was bad enough that a sinner (Habakkuk) had to see wickedness, but God Himself was tolerating the same wickedness (v. 13). The result was unchecked evil (verse 4). Notice: This is not a person answering back to God in unbelief. Rather, Habakkuk’s words are the expression of his faith and loyalty to God. This prayer would only be made by one whose trust is in God.

Verses 5-6, *“Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days—you would not believe if you were told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people who march throughout the earth to seize dwelling places which are not theirs.”* God answered Habakkuk by telling him that He was the One raising up the Chaldeans. Habakkuk needed to develop a worldview of the sovereignty of God over all the nations. *“From ancient times I planned it. Now I have brought it to pass”* (2 Kings 19:25; Isaiah 14:24; 22:11; 37:26; 46:11). The Chaldeans were the ruling class who lived in southern Mesopotamia and took leadership in the Babylonian Empire. So “Chaldean” is almost a synonym for “Babylonian.” Some modern Iraqis from southern Iraq still identify themselves as Chaldeans. The Babylonians would be the rod of God’s punishment of Judah (the Southern Kingdom) as Assyria had been His instrument of punishment of Israel (the Northern Kingdom).

An Application: People today ask, “Why doesn’t God do something about sin?” But God has done something about sin. Paul told the Jews in Pisidian Antioch *...that through Him [Jesus Christ] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is free from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses* (Acts 13:38-39). Then Paul quoted Habakkuk 1:5.

Verse 7, *They are dreaded and feared; their justice and authority originate with themselves.* This is followed by an elaborate description of the Babylonians (verses 8-11). But their basic evil is as it usually is for evil people, *their justice and authority originate with themselves.*

Verse 12, *“Are You not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge; and You, O Rock, have established them to correct.”* Here Habakkuk acknowledges that God is *everlasting, holy*, a *judge*, and a *rock* of morality and justice. We are reminded of Jesus’ story about the man who built his house upon a rock (Matthew 7:24). This is the difference between the people of God and the rest of the world. We have a rock, *their justice and authority originate with themselves* (verse 7).

Verse 16, *“Therefore they offer a sacrifice to their net and burn incense to their fishing net; because through these things their catch is large, and their food is plentiful.”* In the remainder of chapter 1, Habakkuk refers to Babylon’s idols as fishing nets. They worship idols and engage in conquests which sweep up people like a fishing net, then they credit their idols for their immoral victories.

An Answer from God: The Judgment of Babylon (Chapter 2)

Verses 2-4, *Then the LORD answered me and said, “Record the vision and inscribe it on tablets, that the one who reads it may run. For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay. Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith.”* Rather than speculate, Habakkuk waited for a word from the Lord (verse 1). And when the Lord answered, He told Habakkuk to write it on tablets. Several suggestions have been made for the phrase, *that the one who reads it may run*: run their eyes over the tablets, read and run away, read on the run, read and run to spread the new to everyone. At any rate, it means to read and apply the Word of God. God assures Habakkuk that the prophecy given by God will indeed all be fulfilled. Then the theme of the book, in contrast to the proud (those who see their value as independent from God), *the righteous* [or just or lawful] *will live by his faith* [or *faithfulness*]. Faith is always what we understand to be true, and biblical faith is always in the truth itself (the way things actually are).

An Application: If revelation is given by God, it should be written down (*inscribe it on tablets*) so everyone can learn about God. Common today is for people to say they have had a word from God, but they do not usually claim that it should be added to the Bible. If it is a feeling or inclination, then there is no biblical precedent for it. But if it is a revelation from God in words, then it should be part of the Bible. But then there is the problem that the Apostles Paul and John indicated that revelation from God ended until the future coming of Christ (1 Corinthians 13:8; Revelation 22:18-20).

Verse 9, *“Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house to put his nest on high, to be delivered from the hand of calamity!”* The rest of chapter 2 is a condemnation for various sins, from financial fraud, to bloodshed, to idolatry. It is often not clear if the culprit is Judah or Babylon, but that is the point. Whoever is committing the evil will be judged for it.

Verse 14, “*For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.*” This is a reference to the future Millennial Kingdom. The knowledge of God covering all the earth is mentioned five times in the Bible (Numbers 14:21; Psalm 72:19; Isaiah 6:3; 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14). Besides this being a prediction of the future, it is also a revelation of the heart of God. His desire as well as His goal is for knowledge of His glory to cover the earth.

Verse 20, “*But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him.*” The reference is to a heavenly temple (Psalm 11:4; 18:6, 9; Micah 1:2-3; Revelation 7:15). The point is that the whole earth is subject to Him, and He owes no one an explanation for anything He does or does not do. The only acceptable response to the work of a holy sovereign God is to *be silent before Him*.

An Application: The purpose of history is not the salvation of man but the glory of God (not soteriological but doxological).

A Doxology to God: Habakkuk Praised God’s Design of Creation (Chapter 3)

Verses 1-2, *A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth. “LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear. O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.”* All of chapter 3 is a song (a *Shigionoth* probably refers to its liturgical use—Psalm 7:0), poetry put to music (3:19). The chapter is full of metaphors of what God did throughout history, which is the foundation of Habakkuk’s faith. Teman is in Edom, Mount Paran is between Edom and Sinai (verse 3) and Cushan is part of Midian (verse 7). These are all locations south of Judah. The knowledge of the reality of God’s work in history gave Habakkuk the faith to make the fantastic concluding statement in 3:17-19.

Verses 9c-10, “*You cleaved the earth with rivers. The mountains saw You and quaked; the downpour of waters swept by. The deep uttered forth its voice, it lifted high its hands.*” Verses 8-15 use multiple metaphors to express God’s sovereignty over creation. This passage may refer to the Genesis Flood with the rivers and mountains formed as the flood subsided and ran into the newly formed oceans.

Verses 17-18, “*Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.*” The conditions described are what Habakkuk expected would be the case when the Babylonians conquered Judah. His conclusion is that he will *exult* (literally, be joyful as if triumphant) and *rejoice* (common word for *rejoice* but literally, to spin around with glee). All this was because Habakkuk knew the Lord was a God of salvation.

An Application: Our physical condition does not need to dominate our spiritual condition. We can rejoice knowing our salvation is in God.

An Application

The righteous shall live by faith. But it is not a blind leap into superstition. The faith the righteous live by is an understanding of the truth of God, revealed in nature (Romans 1), revealed in our conscience (Romans 2) but most significantly revealed in the inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 1:20-21), because it is true undeniably.