

THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

THE MINOR PROPHETS:

THE PROPHECY OF HABAKKUK

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Ever had this conversation with God: “Where are you, O God?” “Why will you not answer my prayers?” “Please, O Lord, help me and your people at this time.” “O LORD, vindicate me and your cause so that the whole world will know that I am your own.”

Silence.

“O Lord, I know you’re there, please help me in this situation.

Silence.

Yet God’s purposes are truly being worked out according to God’s sovereign decree; His will is being accomplished according to His great wisdom and divine insight; we cannot see clearly from our finite perspective- -but He surely can- -and the LORD knows what is right; he knows the end from the beginning; he knows the difference between right and wrong; **and he *is* answering our prayers.**

But it sometimes seems like silence- -yet we should be assured that God is answering the prayers of His people!

No matter how things may seem from our perspective, we should continue to pray by God’s grace and enter into dialogue with the living God. This is what Habakkuk is doing in his prophecy. Habakkuk is showing forth righteousness particularly in its manifestation of walking by faith and not by sight and full understanding. As the LORD says to Habakkuk (2:4):

“...The righteous shall live by his faith.”

Although God’s timetable seems “slow” to impatient sinners with a finite focus and vision, God’s vision is sovereign and will be accomplished:

“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” (2:3).

What is the Summary of Habakkuk’s message? (1): *Mature believers trust God by faith, knowing that God’s sovereign design for establishing righteousness upon the earth will be accomplished.*

Many years before Habakkuk in redemptive-history, during Abraham's time, the question was asked: *"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just (or right)?"*-Gen. 18:25. Habakkuk's prophecy asks this question again.

As God has promised, although wickedness and injustice seems to prevail in a world of sin and misery, God's Kingdom will be fully manifested over the entire earth; although God's people are under chastisement and discipline by God during Habakkuk's time, God's glory will be established over all wicked and evil kingdoms that do not know the LORD:

"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (2:14).

In fact, though from man's finite perspective nothing seems to be going right in this world of sin and misery, the truth is that God is still on His holy throne- -and he rules and reigns in His Holy temple:

"...the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him."

Let all the earth revere, worship, and honor the LORD as lord and king- -not idols of man's making (2:18-19).

If you have looked around yourself in the church today honestly and you have asked God: Focused on culture: "Why do the evil seem to prosper?" Focused on the Church: Why do fake and false prophets seem to prevail and grow in popularity in Christ's Church?" Why do faithful congregations of Christ's people sometimes divide because of sin?" "Why do some churches full of idolatry grow in number and faithful congregations struggle to stay afloat and "in business" in a postmodern world of psychobabble and self-centered, seeker-friendly focused worship and silliness?" "Why is there injustice and idolatry in the Church, O Lord, why would you allow this?"

How are God's people to live before Him even in difficult times? (2) Come what may, God's people are to worship the LORD because He is God, and know that he is sovereignly in control of all events; as we praise and worship the LORD in the midst of a sinful world, we acknowledge that God's way here is to walk by faith.

If trees no longer blossom, if there is no food to be eaten, no wine and meat to be enjoyed (3:17), God's people must still rejoice in the LORD- *-in Him* we shall take joy and rejoice in His salvation (3:18-19).

Background to Habakkuk's Prophetic Oracle

Habakkuk was a prophet who preached the LORD's message to Judah, the Southern Kingdom. Habakkuk is the 8th of *The Twelve* "Minor Prophets". Nahum, Habakkuk and

Zephaniah share similar concerns and were contemporaries in their respective prophetic ministries.

Habakkuk literally delivers a “burden-oracle” to the people (1:1). Habakkuk through the prophetic word carries a burden on behalf of the people as he prophetically engages in dialogue with God.

What does Habakkuk’s name mean? (3) Habakkuk’s name means “**embrace**” in Hebrew [qWQib;x)]; Luther referred to Habakkuk as “the embracer” from the Hebrew verb “to embrace”; ancient rabbis connected his name with the Hebrew word “embrace” in 2 Kings 4:16.

Not much is known about this prophet’s life. Like many of the “Minor Prophets” or authors of *The Twelve* the prophetic words are well known, but not much the prophets themselves. The Apocryphal Greek Book entitled *Bel and the Dragon* (an addition to Daniel’s prophecy) claims that Habakkuk is the son of Joshua of the tribe of Levi. In other apocryphal book *Lives of the Prophets* Habakkuk is said to have belonged to the tribe of Simeon.

No one really knows much more than this and we dare not trust apocryphal works for historical accuracy. It is worthy to note that Habakkuk’s prophetic oracles were obviously very influential in the Jewish world as Holy Scripture *just because he appears in apocryphal books and texts as a hero figure.*

What is the date of Habakkuk’s prophetic oracles? (4) Habakkuk’s message comes during the time of the fall of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria (612 BC- as Nahum prophesied; see last sermon). The Chaldeans (1:6) or *Babylon* is growing in power and the great kingdom of man is expanding at this time in history over the Ancient Near East (known in history as the Neo-Babylonian Kingdom of the Chaldeans, ca. 605 BC; this kingdom or dynasty of the Chaldeans was founded by Nabopolassar, ca. 626 BC).

By 605 BC the great super powers of Assyria and Egypt had been defeated by Babylon at Carchemish on the Euphrates River (see Jeremiah 46:2)- it would only be a short time before Judah is also conquered and Jerusalem will fall as part of the judgment of God (ca. 587 BC). From a mere human perspective the Kingdom of God has failed to come to God’s people as God promised.

The situation in Judah during Habakkuk’s time is that there is much injustice and law-breaking in the land:

^{ESV} **Habakkuk 1:2-4:** 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.

At first glance, what we see Habakkuk doing in his prophetic laments (particularly in 1:2-4, 12-17) is questioning God's righteousness.

God will raise up the Babylonians, enable and allow them to grow strong militarily, in order to chastise and discipline his people of Judah, and Habakkuk is questioning God for doing such a thing. One of the truths revealed in the Book of Habakkuk is that God uses "crooked sticks" to strike the earth in order to accomplish His will.

The Babylonians would be God's instruments of his righteousness—although it appeared to sinful man as a sort of unrighteousness. God can chastise his people through temporal earthly rulers and kingdoms of man.

His people can only observe and worship the LORD for his glorious ways of salvation (that are very mysterious)- *but they must walk by faith* (2:4).

Here is where our faith in God must begin. Many folks look around and say: "Where is your God?" "Where is the coming in judgment that you speak about?" "When will justice and righteousness be accomplished in this world?" "When will that 'perfect society' that the Bible speaks about where God will dwell peacefully with his people come to pass?"

Habakkuk's prophetic-oracle-burden is then a kind of *Theodicy*. **What is a Theodicy? (5)** Milton defined it as a seeking "to justify the ways of God to man" showing that God is in the right and is glorious and worthy of praise despite contrary appearances. *Theodicy* is a form of apologetic, or defense of the faith whereby God is "vindicated" and acknowledged as righteous, even though it appears that he is not concerned.

Theodicy asks the questions, primarily of unbelievers (but also of believers as *The Book of Habakkuk* makes known to us) that ask: "How can God be just and allow injustice?" "How can God be a good God when he allows evil?"

"How long, O LORD?" asked the Psalmist. *How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?* -Psalm 13:1

Although Judah was evil and acting unrighteous, Babylon's evil and unrighteousness far outweighed Judah on the scales of justice and righteousness. For Habakkuk, the cure for sins in Judah was far worse than the disease (F.F. Bruce, *The Minor Prophets*, pg. 834). However, God would use the more evil and unrighteous people to make Judah more righteous through cleansing, purification, discipline, judgment beginning at the Household of God (cf. 1 Peter 4:16ff).

ESV Habakkuk 1:12-14: 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 are 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.

In the midst of this painful situation, Habakkuk's prophecy would be a written vision that would stand as a testimony to God's faithfulness and promises (2:2-3). No matter how things might seem, God is faithful.

Not much righteousness in Judah, and certainly no righteousness in Babylon, but the righteousness, the justice, the hope that Habakkuk longed for, God would provide in the most unexpected way. In fact, the righteous and justice that mankind longs for is not found within mankind, even in the best societies; rather, the righteousness that God requires, God will provide! All mankind is rather like the LORD describes then in Habakkuk 2:4-5:

Puffed up before God in his soul; all that is found within sinful man is unrighteousness (v. 4); greedy for more money and power, but no longing or seeking after God (v. 5; cf. Rom. 3:10ff).

As the people of God wait upon the LORD, so they walk by faith. This kind of attitude is what characterizes true disciples of the LORD. This quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times in the New Testament because although Christ has come, we still await the full manifestation of the Kingdom of God and the righteousness and justice that all mankind longs for in a world of sin and misery (cf. Rom. 8:18-25):

ESV Romans 1:17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,¹ as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."²

ESV Galatians 3:11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."¹

ESV Hebrews 10:37-38: For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him."

God's Kingdom will come and be fully established soon:

ESV Habakkuk 2:14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Habakkuk's prophecy concludes in chapter 3 with a prayer that is set to music; this prayer should be sung by God's people (3:19c). In Old Testament Israel, it was common for prophecies to be sung; we read in 1 Chronicles 25:1 that men were to prophesy with lyres, harps, and cymbals:

^{ESV} **1 Chronicles 25:1** David and the chiefs of the service also set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who prophesied with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals. The list of those who did the work and of their duties was:

What is the content of Habakkuk's encouraging prayer-song? (6)

God's people show forth their faith in their lives as they reflect on God who is the Divine Warrior, who in the *past* has revealed his saving power and redemption (This is Exodus, redemptive-historical language of the history of God's salvation of His people, 3:3-8ff); reflect on God's faithfulness in the *present* no matter how dire the circumstances seem (3:17-19); longing for the *future* when God's Kingdom will be fully manifested and His glory will cover the earth as the waters of the seas (2:14). In summary, the past, present and future testify to God's faithfulness who does not change.

How is God revealed in Habakkuk's prayer-song? (7) God is revealed as the LORD with chariots of salvation to save and redeem his people from unrighteousness and sin (3:8); God saves and redeems His people and has defeated and will defeat all of their (and His) enemies (3:13; "anointed" here has the meaning of singular and plurality; God's Anointed One and those who are united to Him by faith).

^{ESV} **Habakkuk 3:13** You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck.¹ Selah

Notice here God's people and being united to the anointed one that God's saves. Jesus Christ is the Anointed One-Messiah of God, and in him God's people find salvation and hope, and are called to live by faith *in Him*.

Is the establishment of righteousness on the earth something that you long for? All mankind longs for justice to be done (although this is manifested in a sinfully self-centered way many times). But do you desire righteousness?

The establishment of righteousness upon the earth implies that only the righteous will be considered a part; the wicked will be punished and destroyed. What makes us righteous before God? To think of our sins before God (many times as the sins of Judah that are described in Habakkuk) is to be frightened by our great *unrighteousness*.

How is Christ revealed in Habakkuk's "burden for righteousness"? (8) This is the larger Gospel good news of redemptive-history. IN Jesus Christ, an unrighteous people are made

righteous by receiving the perfect righteousness that God requires *by faith*. By faith, we walk in this righteousness that God has given and provided for His people in Jesus Christ.

So we now walk by faith and not by fear; we do not fear a judgment day when righteousness will be fully and perfectly established in God's Kingdom. Rather, we long for the day, and know that we must continue to trust in the righteousness of Christ *alone*.

As Habakkuk's name means "embrace" so our hope is embracing the righteousness before God that is found in Christ alone; as we receive His righteousness, we become more like Jesus Christ, that is more righteous throughout our lives, as we continue to walk by faith and *embrace* the gospel promises of God found in Jesus.

The cure for our ills in this world of sin and misery is found on the cross of Jesus Christ. Here we have God's answer to suffering, injustice, sinfulness, oppression and every inhumane manner of mankind. On the cross we see the Righteous One for the unrighteous; on the cross we see God's righteousness and his justice appear when Christ is killed in place of His people, so that they might have a righteousness before God and be healed of their sins.

The Person and Work of Jesus Christ then is God's answer to our *Theodicy*. God is just and the justifier of those who believe in Christ Jesus!

ESV Romans 3:21-22: But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it- ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

ESV Romans 3:23-26: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Praise be to God for His Word! Praise be to God for His Christ!

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