

Chapter 2, verse 1, is essential to understanding the book of Habakkuk.

*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.*

All of us, at one point or other, have stood on Habakkuk’s tower.

We see how things are not as they should be.

We see that things are not as *God* says they should be.

And we start to wonder:

is God really there?

and if he is there, is the sort of being that I would like to be around?

The image of the watchman is often used in the scriptures to speak of the prophet.

In Isaiah 21:6-9, the LORD said to Isaiah,

“Go, set a watchman; let him announce what he sees.

When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels,
let him listen diligently, very diligently.’

Then he who saw cried out,

‘Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day,
and at my post I am stationed whole nights.

And behold, here come riders, horsemen in pairs!’

And he answered,

‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon;

and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground.’”

Perhaps Habakkuk remembers that.

Isaiah’s watchman was called to see the *fall* of Babylon
and the destruction of idolatry.

As one commentator put it:

Imagine the anguish that weighs on Habakkuk as he stands alone on the ramparts
watching the horizon as the people sleep,
watching for the rising cloud of dust, the glint of steel,
listening for the thunder of hooves—

for the judgment that is sure to come like vultures swooping to devour,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.

He alone stands watch; he sees what must be, while the people sleep below.

Imagine his anguish,

the anguish of knowing that judgment must come,
and yet remembering God’s promise to his father Abraham.

God had said to Abraham,

“I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans

to give you this land to take possession of it.”
And now Habakkuk waits for a judgment that is to come
at the hands of the ancient race out of whom his father Abraham was called—
the Chaldeans are to dispossess us of the land promised to Abraham?
How can this be?
How can it have come to this after so many promises and so many deliverances?

And so we can imagine Habakkuk crying out as he stands vigil on the ramparts.
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?”
(Andy Deliyannides, “Habakkuk on the Watchtower”)

We don’t know *exactly* when Habakkuk lived –
but it is pretty clear that it was some time in the 7th century B.C.
Isaiah and Micah had prophesied at the end of the 8th century.
Habakkuk probably prophesied either the long, idolatrous reign of Manasseh
(the first half of the 7th century),
or during the reforming reign of Josiah
(the second half of the 7th century).

But either way, it would have been within living memory of Isaiah.
Isaiah’s watchman beheld the sign of Babylon’s fall.
As Habakkuk stands at his watchpost,
all he can see are the signs of Babylon’s triumph.
And indeed, God’s response to his first complaint is not encouraging!
The Chaldeans (the Babylonians) are coming to destroy Jerusalem.

Andy Deliyannides has noted that Habakkuk moves from complaint (chapter 1)
to silence (end of chapter 2), to worship (chapter 3).

I would add one qualification.
Even the psalm at the end of the book retains the tone of the complaint.
Yes, Habakkuk rejoices in the LORD –
but he rejoices in a future hope;
he rejoices that God *will* deliver his people –
but the mighty deeds of the LORD are still only a distant memory –
and a future hope.
In the present day, we are not seeing the mighty deeds of God.

Sound familiar?
Because today we do not see God’s mighty deeds.
God’s mighty deeds – as described in Habakkuk 3 –
include things like the Exodus – bringing Israel out of Egypt,
or the sun standing still in Joshua’s day,
or the triumphs of David in establishing God’s kingdom.
Some people want to say that we see God’s “mighty deeds” today.
Perhaps we talk about the “miracle of birth.”
But birth is not a miracle.

It's a very ordinary and natural thing.
It happens every day.
Beautiful – perhaps, in its own way! – but not miraculous.

Or we say that God's mighty deeds are seen in people coming to faith in Jesus.
But again, those are God's *ordinary* deeds.
Habakkuk says that *he* believes God's promises –
and yet he says that God's mighty deeds are but a memory.
Conversions – even mass conversions – are *not* God's mighty deeds!

Why do I start here?
Because when we call God's ordinary deeds “his mighty deeds,”
we cheapen the power of his mighty deeds!
And worse, we practically eliminate the power of his *ordinary* deeds!

After all, if you can have mighty deeds every day,
then who wants ordinary deeds?!

Habakkuk *longs* for God's mighty deeds to be revealed once again –
but by the end of Habakkuk, the prophet is content with God's ordinary deeds *for now*,
because he knows that God *will* reveal his mighty deeds in the end.

In this way, Habakkuk is very useful for us,
who live in a time when we see God's *ordinary* deeds.

Yes God has done *wonderful deeds* – mighty deeds – in Jesus Christ.
The triumph of Jesus over sin and death is the glorious deed that Habakkuk longed for –
and we proclaim.
It's interesting that the gospels frequently speak of the “wonderful deeds”
that Jesus did on earth.
But when the epistles talk about wonderful deeds, mighty deeds,
they regularly emphasize what *Jesus* did in his life, death, and resurrection.

It's certainly true that the “ordinary” got a whole lot better now that Jesus has come!
The mighty power of Jesus' resurrection now suffuses the “ordinary” –
and makes us partakers of his resurrection life –
so the *power* of God's mighty deeds is made known in the ordinary deeds,
but we still long for the day when God will once more
make known his mighty deeds.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”
is all about our longing for that day.
But so also is, “give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”
Because we live in the ordinary deeds of God.

Introduction (v1)

1 The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

And so we need to hear the oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

Once again we see the connection between seeing and hearing.

Habakkuk did not *hear* this oracle.

He saw it.

If all you do is *hear* what Habakkuk said,
then you will not *see* what he saw!

What do I mean?

Think of how Hebrews 2 says it,

“We do not yet see everything under his feet,
but we see Jesus.”

How do you see Jesus?

By faith.

By faith we see the oracle that Habakkuk saw –
this oracle of how to complain,
how to be silent,
how to worship
in the midst of an unpleasant “ordinary.”

Tonight we are going to focus on Habakkuk’s complaints,
together with God’s answer to the first complaint.

This will leave us hanging a bit –
but that’s okay, because God leaves Habakkuk hanging!

Who was Habakkuk?

He is one of the few prophets who is actually identified as *a prophet!*

Given the liturgical notations in Habakkuk 3,
many have surmised that Habakkuk was a temple prophet
who wrote his hymn for use in the temple service.

This oracle consists of two complaints, two responses by God, and a final hymn in chapter 3.

1. Habakkuk’s First Complaint (v2-4)

Habakkuk’s first complaint consists of three questions for God,
and three statements of the problem.

a. Three Questions for God (v2-3a)

- i. How long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?**
- ii. How long shall I cry “Violence” and you will not save?**

iii. Why do you make me see iniquity that you ignore?

² *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?*

These three questions make clear that Habakkuk is bringing a complaint to God.

When we went through the book of Job,

I pointed out that God *wants* you to be a good complainer!

A good complaint is when you bring your concern to the right person in the right way.

If you teach your children that it is *wrong* to complain,
then they will either pretend to be cheerful when they are not,
or else they will turn to grumbling and griping.

But when do you do when things are *not* as they should be?

Habakkuk says that violence and iniquity are winning in Judah.

He is crying out for help, and God is simply standing by idly,
gazing at wrong.

There are lots of echoes and verbal parallels with Job here.

The difference is that whereas Job was concerned primarily for his own situation,

Habakkuk sees the problem as it pertains to all Israel.

(Of course, Job is portrayed as being all that Israel was supposed to be –
so you could see Job a sort of type of Israel/Christ).

But what are the problems that Habakkuk identifies?

We see this in his three statements:

b. Three Statements of the Problem (v3b-4)

i. The presence of violence and contention

ii. The paralysis of the law

iii. The perversion of justice

*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.*

Israel is *not* doing what Israel is supposed to do.

Micah had seen this back in the days of Hezekiah.

Now, a generation or two later,

Habakkuk sees that things haven't really changed.

The paralysis of the law is an interesting image.

The word means to be “numb” – or “faint” –

it is used of Jacob when he heard that Joseph was still alive in Gen 45:26 –

“his heart fainted” – some have thought that he had a heart attack!

In Psalms 38 and 77 it is used to speak of the numbing effects of suffering.

But here in Habakkuk it is used to speak of numbing of the law by sin and violence.

I think the translation “the law is paralyzed” communicates the idea brilliantly.

This is not a matter of human statutes that are rendered ineffective.

God’s *torah* – the good and holy law of God is rendered impotent.

(Think of how Paul says in Romans 8:3 –

“God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.”)

When the wicked surround the righteous, justice will invariably be perverted.

Micah had said that we are to *do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.*

But as we saw in Micah, it is *awfully hard* to do this by yourself.

A community that is characterized by hypocrisy and wickedness

will render God’s law inert.

Sigmund Freud is rarely quoted with approval in Reformed sermons,

but he understood this in a way that that we need to hear.

He objected that the education of the young:

“conceals from them the part which sexuality will play in their lives” –

but also,

“Its other sin is that it does not prepare them for the aggressiveness
of which they are destined to become the objects.”

Freud thought that sex and violence (both physical and emotional) were being ignored.

He added that

“In sending the young out into life with such a false psychological orientation,

education is behaving as though one were to equip people

starting on a Polar expedition

with summer clothing and maps of the Italian Lakes.

In this it becomes evident that a certain misuse is being made of ethical demands.

The strictness of those demands would not do so much harm if education were to say,

‘This is how men ought to be, in order to be happy and to make others happy;

but you have to reckon on their not being like that.’

Instead of this the young are made to believe

that everyone else fulfils those ethical demands –

that is, that everyone else is virtuous.”

(Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p98-99).

We don’t have to agree with Freud’s particular beliefs about sex and violence

in order to agree with his objection to the way children are raised.

We need to recognize that the world is *not* the way it should be.

People are *not* virtuous.

And, what is more,

we are not the way we should be!

We are not virtuous.

Yes, God has given us a standard that shows us what we *should be*.

But our problem – everyone’s problem –

is that we don’t measure up!

The law – weakened by the flesh – cannot produce righteousness.

Habakkuk starts by saying that Jerusalem is not what she should be.

Notice how this works.

Habakkuk starts at home.

We are not what we should be.

Micah had said what God requires:

“But to do justice, and love *hesed* (kindness), and walk humbly with God.” (6:8)

Habakkuk now looks around him and says,

nothing has changed.

The law is paralyzed.

Justice is perverted.

The wicked surround the righteous.

We are not what we should be.

Again, Paul summarizes Habakkuk’s point:

“God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.”

But think of what Paul is doing here.

God has done – through his Son – through Jesus – what the law could not do.

After all, the nouns for “wicked” and “righteous” are singular.

Like we saw last week in Micah 7, they are collective singulars –

so most people would take them to refer to “the wicked” as a class

and “the righteous” as a class.

But the Qumran commentary on Habakkuk interpreted this

as the “wicked priest” who would persecute the “teacher of righteousness.”

The law was perverted and corrupted by the wicked priests and leaders of Jerusalem

in order to put to death the Son of God.

And so God replies:

2. God’s Answer (v5-11)

a. I Am Doing an Astonishing and Unbelievable Work (v5)

⁵ *“Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe if told.*

God says that he will do a wonderful work in their day –
an astonishing work – a truly unbelievable work!

You might be tempted to think on the basis of verse 5,
that this is going to be a work on the level of the Exodus!
And it is.

Do you remember what happened in the Exodus?
The wicked nation was devastated by God’s wrath.

Habakkuk has confessed that Judah is characterized by violence and injustice.
Therefore Judah will be devastated by God’s wrath!

b. I Am Raising up the Chaldeans against You (v6-11)

i. They are powerful and fearsome (v6-7)

⁶ *For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,*

Why does God call them the Chaldeans?

Sometimes they are called the Chaldeans – sometimes the Babylonians.
The Chaldeans were the tribe that restored the rule of Babylon
versus the Assyrian empire.
Nebuchadnezzar and his father, Nabopolassar, were Chaldeans.

But also remember that Abraham was from “Ur of the Chaldeans.”

There is a certain poetic justice in using the Chaldeans to judge Abraham’s seed.
Abraham had been called to leave Ur of the Chaldeans
in order to receive God’s promise –
and do you remember the three parts of God’s promise to Abraham?

Land, Seed, blessing to the nations

Those who bless you will be blessed.
Those who curse you will be cursed.

God will use the Chaldeans to curse Israel – to judge Israel for their sins.
But in so doing, the Chaldeans will themselves bring his curse upon their heads.

Now it would be easy to say that what Habakkuk prophesied
happened in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, so this is only of historical interest.

In the first century BC, the Qumran community interpreted the book of Habakkuk

to refer to the Roman occupation of Israel.
In the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is a commentary on the first two chapters of Habakkuk that applies the whole prophesy not to the Babylonians, but to the Romans.

Paul may well have been aware of this interpretation,
because in Acts 13:41, he insists that we take a different view.
After preaching to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch of the resurrection of Jesus,
Paul said,
“Let it be known to you therefore, brothers,
that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,
and by him everyone who believes is freed
from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.
Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:
‘Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish;
for I am doing a work in your days,
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.’”

I would assume that Paul and his hearers knew full well what “work” Habakkuk meant:
God’s alien work of destroying the scoffers!
If you will not see Habakkuk’s vision –
if you will not hear his warning –
then you will share in this dreadful work.

And sure enough, in 70 AD,
the Romans (the new Babylon) destroyed Jerusalem and its temple –
and a generation later they drove all the Jews out of Jerusalem.

Of course, God’s description of the Chaldeans could apply to many nations:

*that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth,
to seize dwellings not their own.
7 They are dreaded and fearsome;
their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.*

God is saying:
Since you have rejected my justice,
I’ll let you have the Chaldean’s justice.
Since you have not feared me,
I’ll let you fear the Babylonians!

But think of how well this description fits the empires of Europe in the 19th century.
The sun never sets on the British Empire –
but only because they were dreaded and fearsome.
Their justice and dignity went forth from themselves.

Today there is only one nation in the world that can claim to be a law and authority to itself.
Who else but the United States can march through the breadth of the earth
to seize dwellings not their own?
If we think that another nation is doing something against our national self-interest,
then that nation will feel our wrath.
(Incidentally, if you think in terms of the principle,
“Do unto others as you would have them do to you,”
then our nation is storing up a wretched harvest!
When the day comes that the United States is no longer top dog,
we will discover what it feels like to be on the receiving end
of a nation that is a law to itself!)

Revelation 20, verse 9, speaks of the hosts of Satan going forth over the broad plain of the earth,
following very closely the LXX of verse 6.

The image is that in the final day,
Satan and his hosts will once more go forth to destroy God’s people,
but this time – finally! – fire will come down from heaven and destroy them
before they are able to attack “the beloved city.”

ii. They are like animals (v8)

⁸ *Their horses are swifter than leopards,
more fierce than the evening wolves;
their horsemen press proudly on.
Their horsemen come from afar;
they fly like an eagle swift to devour.*

They are like the wild beasts of the earth,
devouring whatever they can find.

iii. They are devastating (v9-11)

⁹ *They all come for violence,
all their faces forward.
They gather captives like sand.*
¹⁰ *At kings they scoff,
and at rulers they laugh.
They laugh at every fortress,
for they pile up earth and take it.*
¹¹ *Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god!”*

God had promised Abraham that his children would be as the sand of sea.
But the Chaldeans will gather Abraham’s descendents like sand –
and take them into captivity.

Habakkuk had complained of violence.
So God says that the Chaldeans will bring violence to Jerusalem.

Their justice is their own.
So also their might is their god.

Not everyone has the ability (or the desire) to be physically violent.
But we are quite capable of using emotional violence to get our way.
You can use tears to manipulate and control.
You can use promises that you have no intention of keeping.
You can intimidate by always having an answer for everything
(I really have to watch out for that one!).

You can even use admissions of your own weakness to bolster your position!
(Oh, wait, I just did that – which means I just did that again –
how do you get out of this cycle?)

Freud thought you could talk your way out of it.
Psychotherapists are still talking – but they're no closer to the way out.
The self is curved in upon itself –
and no amount of therapy can talk you out of it!

Habakkuk recognizes that the solution requires the mighty deeds of God.
God must do *something* to break the cycle.

3. Habakkuk's Second Complaint (v12-2:1)

a. First Question: Why Do You Remain Silent in the Face of Wrong? (v12-13)

In the first complaint, Habakkuk had objected to the fact
that God wasn't doing anything about Jerusalem's wickedness.

Now, he has heard that God *will* do something about Jerusalem's wickedness!
God will bring Babylon to destroy Jerusalem.

Okay, Lord, I suppose I should be glad to hear that you are going to do something?!
But how can you use such violent and wicked means!
If the Chaldeans own might is their god,
then they are gross idolaters –
how can you use such people?

¹² *Are you not from everlasting,
O LORD my God, my Holy One?
We shall not die.*

Or it may be translated, "shall we not die?"

After all, it was only a few years ago that the northern kingdom, Israel,
was obliterated by the Assyrians.

Israel, in the glory days of David and Solomon, had controlled a region larger than Indiana.
But now, Judah has shrunk into the size of LaPorte and St. Joseph Counties.

We shall not die, right?

Habakkuk understands that the Chaldeans have been ordained to reprove Judah for their sins.

*O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment,
and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.*

But Habakkuk cannot help thinking that this goes too far:

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?*

Habakkuk comes back to his question in verse 3 –

“Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?”
The problem is not just “why are bad things happening” –
but why are *you* looking idly at traitors?
“You, who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong...”

If this is so,

then how can God justify using the *Babylonians* to judge Israel.

It would make sense if God used a righteous nation to bring judgment on a wicked nation,
but Babylon is *worse* than Israel!

The cure is worse than the disease!

How can this be right?

You’ve encountered this:

how can we say that all the evil in the world is a fair judgment
on the bad things that people have done?

So often the wicked swallows up a man more righteous than he!

How can God remain silent?

And so Habakkuk turns to his final question:

b. Second Question: Will Man Keep Killing Nations Forever? (v14-17)

The “man” here is the king of Babylon.

God is the “you” who made mankind like fish.

But the king of Babylon is the “he” who goes fishing and gathers the nations in his net.

¹⁴ *You make mankind like the fish of the sea,
like crawling things that have no ruler.*

¹⁵ *He^[a] 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,^[b]
and his food is rich.*

The fishing metaphor is especially appropriate, given the culture in view.

The Babylonian deity, Marduk, was supposed to have slain Tiamat with the aid of a net. So Habakkuk describes the aggression of Babylon in the language of fishing, and points out that Babylonian worship is intimately related:

“he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet”

After all, his own might is his god (v11) –
and so it is fitting that he should worship that which gives him victory!
But of course, Habakkuk also reveals the absurdity of the situation:
why would you worship a net?

And remember that Habakkuk is saying all this *to God* –
the God whose eyes are too pure to see iniquity –
the God who is jealous of his own glory.

Would you, O God, *really* favor these terrible idolaters over your own people?

And then,
¹⁷ *Is he then to keep on emptying his net
and mercilessly killing nations forever?*

If you hand your people over to the Babylonians, where will it stop?
If Babylon triumphs over Jerusalem,
that is the same thing as saying that the gates of hell will prevail against the church!

c. Conclusion: I Will Look to See What He Will Say (2:1)

*2 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.*

As my favorite commentator has put it,

If the question of wisdom poetry is “Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?”
the answer comes to Habakkuk:

“As surely as the wicked one is the instrument of God’s wrath,
he will be the object of God’s wrath; but the righteous—
the righteous shall live by faith.”

A hard answer to a hard question.

Hard and unsatisfying.
Tell it to the widow starving to death,
 and the orphan freezing because no one will take them in....
When you see the wicked thundering towards you in a whirling dust cloud,
 only faith lays hold of this wisdom.
When you see the cavalry swooping down
 to burn your house and rape your daughters,
when you are hewn by sword and gored by spear and crushed by hooves,
 only faith lays hold of this wisdom.
Faith—that expectation of God’s eschatological vindication of the righteous.
What a terrible wisdom to lay hold of.
Death is coming swift and sure; it will not be delayed.
And yet faith says that this is not the end.
 Faith sees beyond.
 Faith understands that even death—
 the one terrifying, inescapable brute fact that all men must face—
 even death can be turned to good.
And so we leave Habakkuk again and find ourselves in Gethsemane,
 where Jesus stands watch and His disciples sleep as He sweats drops of blood.
He bears the burden of their unrighteousness beyond their knowing.
And He is about to become the victim of their unbelief.
 (Andy Deliyannides, Habakkuk on the Watchtower)

In the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, we see the mighty deeds of God renewed –
 as our Savior falls under the judgment of Rome and Jerusalem together! –
 so that he might also bear the weight of the wrath of God.

Truly, in Jesus, we see once again the mighty deeds of God!