

WRESTLING WITH GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

(SUNDAY, AUGUST 18, 2019)

Scripture Reading: Habakkuk 1:12-2:4; Romans 1:16-17

INTRODUCTION

This is our fifth and final week focused on the subject of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility and the reality of evil and suffering.

Part of my focus has been on what is called the Problem of Evil.

If God is all good and all powerful, then why does evil exist?

If God is sovereign, how can man be responsible for his own actions?

In our first sermon on this subject I shared three points of response from John Frame for the Problem of Evil.

First, we must always keep in mind that as God's creation we have no right to bring any accusation against our Creator.

Rom. 9:19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" **20** But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed *it*, "Why have you made me like this?" **21** Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

Second, we do believe that God is always able to bring good even in the midst of evil.

Third, closely related to this point are the many promises in Scripture that God does comfort us so that our hearts are always fully assured of the justice of God and the righteousness of His ways.¹

What is also significant is that the Bible deals with this subject many times and in different ways in the OT and NT.

¹ Frame, 301.

Just looking at the OT, we have the book of Job, many chapters in the book of Psalms, and also the book of Habakkuk.

All of these books and chapters deal in various ways with what we can call the **Problem of Evil and Suffering** in light of God's sovereignty and goodness.

Today we are going to focus on the book of Habakkuk considering this issue.

The book of Habakkuk is easy to miss in our Bibles being only three chapters in length.

The name Habakkuk is interesting.

The most common definition is that the name comes from Akkadian, a very old language spoken in Babylon, and means a garden plant.²

It is also possible that the name Habakkuk comes from the verb which means to **embrace** or even to **wrestle**.

Pastor Walt Chantry writes:

“The idea is of a wrestler in an embrace with the opponent with whom he is contending. This book is about a man who lived out his name by **wrestling with God in prayer.**”³

I can't prove this is the better definition, but it certainly fits what we see in this book.

What we do know more clearly is that this book was written during the final days of the kingdom of Judah.

It was a time of incredible violence and lack of justice.

It was during this time that God was raising up the cruel and powerful Babylonian empire.

There are two key questions that Habakkuk asks in the book.

Why are you not bringing justice?

² See HALOT and other standard lexicons.

³ Walt Chantry, *Habakkuk*, 1.

God, how can you possibly use such a wicked empire to accomplish your purposes?

There are a number of answers and words of encouragement found in the book of Habakkuk.

We are going to consider five.

1) The LORD is sovereign. We don't always like how this works out, but we must acknowledge it.

2) The just shall live by his faith (2:4)

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

4) But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him (2:20).

5) I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.... (3:17-19).

We are going to consider these answers and words of encouragement.

Let's begin with a brief outline of Habakkuk.

1) BRIEF OUTLINE OF HABAKKUK

There are some challenges in reading and understanding the book of Habakkuk, but the basic outline of the book is quite easy to understand.

Verse 1 is the introduction to the book. The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw.

Then 1:2-4 is Habakkuk's first question.

Why are you not bringing justice?

In 1:5-11, God gives an answer. **Look and be astounded.** I am raising up the Babylonian empire.

This leads to Habakkuk's second question in 1:12-2:1. LORD, given your holiness, why do you look on those who deal treacherously, and hold your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?

The LORD gives a second answer in 2:2-20.

Then the book of Habakkuk ends with a prayer of praise and faith in chapter 3.

Let us consider briefly the answers and encouragements in the book of Habakkuk.

2) ANSWERS AND ENCOURAGEMENTS

We begin with the first answer that we see in 1:5-11.

1) The LORD is sovereign. We don't always like how this works out, but we must acknowledge it.

Habakkuk in chapter 1 was rightfully concerned with the violence and lack of justice that he witnessed in Judah.

We don't know exactly when Habakkuk was written, but very possibly it was written after the godly king Josiah died in 609 B.C.

Josiah was one of the best kings of Judah. During his reign, the Law was rediscovered. He helped bring about much needed reformation.

His death in 609 B.C. is one way of marking the start of 70 years of captivity which ended in about 539 B.C.

All the work of Josiah was undone by his three sons and one grandson.

Twenty-five years after his death, Jerusalem was overthrown, the temple was burned and many in Judah were carried off into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar. Habakkuk rightfully cried out to God concerning the lack of justice.

The LORD's answer was frightening.

Habakkuk is told in 1:5:

5 "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*.

The NET Bible reads:

“Look at the nations and pay attention! You will be shocked and amazed!
For I will do something in your lifetime that you will not believe even
though you are forewarned.

God’s answer was to raise up the Chaldeans.

The Babylonian Empire would bring the punishment that Judah rightfully
deserved.

There is much we can say here, but God’s sovereignty is the clear truth of
Scripture.

In our own understanding we don’t always like how this works out.

The suffering that some of God’s people have to endure is almost beyond
comprehension.

We have been praying for Dr. Kiflu Gebremeskel who has been in a prison in
Eritrea for over 15 years now, over 5563 days.

How long, O Lord?

In the recent Richard Wurmbrand movie, there is a mention of others who
suffered in prison for as long as 30 years.

How could anyone endure this?

So, the message that God is sovereign does not mean that we will always
understand His ways or purposes or that we will escape difficulty and suffering.

But a message that God is not sovereign or incapable of doing all that He
determines is hardly a message of comfort. No, we must hold to God’s
sovereignty.

We move next to the most well-known passage in Habakkuk found in chapter 2.

2) The just shall live by his faith (2:4)

The LORD’s response to Habakkuk’s second question begins with 2:2.

Verse 2 speaks about how God wanted the message that He was going to share
to be very clear so that it could be understood and shared and with others.

Verse 3 deals with the timing of God's works. God's purposes will be fulfilled; God will not be late in doing what He has promised.

Then we get to verse 4.

We are most familiar with the second half of verse 4. The first part of the verse is a contrast with the second half.

There is some difficulty in translating this verse especially the first part.

The NKJV and some other versions use the word **proud** in the first part of the verse.⁴

Behold the proud!

Some suggest that word proud is a reference to the arrogant Babylonians.⁵

Certainly, the mighty Babylonian empire was a proud empire.

John Calvin and John MacArthur both suggest that the contrast more broadly is between those who glory in their own strength and righteousness and those who rest in God alone.⁶

Then we come to the second half of verse 4.

The just shall live by his faith.

This is not only a key verse for the book of Habakkuk, but we can say it is at the heart of Scripture.

Three times this verse is quoted in the NT - Romans 1:17; Gal. 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38.

Now I should mention that this important and precious verse is used both to speak of **justification** and **sanctification** in the NT.

The just shall live by faith.

⁴ NRSV is similar to the NKJV here.

⁵ *New Bible Commentary*.

⁶ John Calvin: "but if we consider that the Prophet, as it were, in these two tablets, shows what it is to glory in our own powers or in earthly aids, then what it is to repose on God alone will appear much more clear, and this truth will with more force penetrate into our minds;" See his commentary on Hab. 2:4. See also the comments in the John MacArthur Study Bible.

How could we ever be considered as just or righteous before a holy and righteous God?

We know the only way is that the righteousness of Jesus Christ is accounted to us and received through faith.

And Scripture also speaks that this same faith becomes the basis for the entire Christian life.

John MacArthur notes:

The emphasis in both Habakkuk and the NT references goes **beyond the act of faith to include the continuity of faith**. Faith is not a one-time act, but a way of life. The true believer, declared righteous by God, will persevere in faith as the pattern of his life.

There is much more that could be said of this precious truth.

But here let us consider how important this verse is in the context of Habakkuk and our subject for today.

As I stressed in the first point, we often may not understand how God's sovereign purposes are being fulfilled.

What if God calls you to endure a life of great hardship and suffering?

What if you are placed in a situation like Job?

How are we called to live in the midst of a wicked and lawless nation?

We are called to live a life of faith in God, trust in Word, and recognition of His sovereignty.

The righteous [who, like father Abraham, is justified by faith] shall live by faith.⁷

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

⁷ George J. Zemek, Jr. Interpretive Challenges Relating to Habakkuk 2:4b "Issue 1: Spring 1980." *Grace Journal* 1, no. 1 (Spr 1980): 50.

Much of the rest of chapter 2 is a series of woes, expressions of God's judgment that will come upon the Babylonians and all who are like them.

The first woe is found in verses 6-8.

The second woe is in verses 9-11.

And then the third woe is found in verses 12-14.

Each of these sections has a structure.

First, the sin is described.

Second, the judgment is then given.

Third, the reason for the judgment is given.

One commentary writes:

This series of woes is designed to show that ultimately sin, evil, crime, greed, oppression, debauchery, and idolatry are doomed to destruction. Often people look at the power and structures of evil and become depressed. Is this really God's world? Has it gotten away from him? Does he still have control over the world and its inhabitants? Habakkuk says, "Yes."⁸

Verse 14 shines brightly in this section of Habakkuk's book.

Yes, God determined to use the Babylonians as His instrument to bring punishment.

But the Babylonians are not in ultimate control. Their glory will end in futility. In place, the LORD's glory will fill the earth.

O. Palmer Robertson wrote here:

As Habakkuk's announcement that the just shall live by faith travels among the nations, the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. **The words of Habakkuk must await the consummation for their final fulfillment.** Yet the events contemporary with Habakkuk's day must not be discounted. Babylon's

⁸ *Word Biblical Commentary*, 111.

destruction gave great relief to a troubled world, just as God's continual exercise of his righteous judgments serves to advance his glory.⁹

As we study the subject of God's sovereignty we have to be careful to always keep in mind that although God does give to us precious promises, the purposes of God are far bigger than just ourselves.

Last week we saw from Romans 8, the direction in which all of history is moving is the revelation of the full glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is so important to keep this in mind.

In 50-100 years, all of us here will essentially be forgotten.

But our labor, if it is in the Lord and truly for His glory, is not in vain.

That which man builds endures for a season.

Local churches as important as they are not promised to last forever.

God uses families. But even faithful families cannot boast of what they have done or think they will endure forever.

That which the LORD builds endures for eternity! Christ will have dominion! His kingdom is that which crushes the others (Dan. 2).

And this is why we then can say with Paul.

Rom. 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

Let's now move to the final verse of chapter 2.

4) But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him. (2:20).

These words are the final words spoken by the LORD to Habakkuk.

The immediate context of the previous verses is a contrast with those who make and turn to idols.

⁹ O. Palmer Robertson, 198-199.

Why do people make idols?

It makes no sense as Scripture repeatedly shows.

But we can say this. Men and women want to invent or control their own salvation and destiny, and idols are one expression of this.

Verse 20 in bold contrast declares, do not look to yourself, do not look to others, do not look for deliverance in anyone but the LORD.

John Calvin wrote here:

But there is another kind of silence, and that is, when we willingly submit to God; for silence in this respect is nothing else but submission: and we submit to God, when we bring not our own inventions and imaginations, but suffer ourselves to be taught by his word. We also submit to him, when we murmur not against his power or his judgements, when we humble ourselves under his powerful hand, and do not fiercely resist him, as those do who indulge their own lusts.

Let's now turn to the final verses of this book in Habakkuk 3.

5) I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.... (3:17-19).

As we consider these final verses we have to do our best to understand their historical context.

Verse 17 is about a very dark and difficult situation in an economy that mainly depended on agriculture.

The mighty armies of Nebuchadnezzar would consume all that supports life and leave behind a hungry and broken economy and a barren landscape.¹⁰

What does true faith look like?

The gift which God gives of true faith is that which does not depend on the circumstances of life.

¹⁰ Walt Chantry, 87.

True faith may wrestle with God in prayer as we see in this book, but it does not end there.

It also rejoices in God.

And in God alone it finds true strength and victory!

CONCLUSION

As we conclude our brief study from Habakkuk let me help us see how all of this points to the cross of our Lord and Savior.

Let me share five points in connection with the five points that I have emphasized.

1) The LORD is sovereign. And we rejoice that in His sovereign purposes though He punished His people He would bring them back to the land. The Messiah would come.

God's sovereignty most powerfully is displayed in the cross and the mighty resurrection of our Lord.

2) The just shall live by his faith.

We rejoice in the gift of faith that God gives so that our entire hope for salvation and God's mercy is found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

3) For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

We continue to pray for and work for the glorious spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ and His rule over all the earth.

4) But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him.

We must continue to look to our great God in great humility before Him.

5) I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.... (3:17-19).

None of this is our boasting. We do not in the end celebrate our own faith or faithfulness but that we have a faithful God. We have a Savior who loves us despite our many failures.

May all the praise and glory be given to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Prayer

Closing Hymn: 420

Benediction: 1 Cor. 15:57-58

But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.