

The Just Shall Live By His Faith

A Study of the Book of Habakkuk

The Book of Habakkuk is a dialogue between the prophet and God. We know very little about the prophet Habakkuk from the Bible or history, except what we can glean from his own prophecy. In Scripture, there is often a correlation between a prophet's *name* and his *calling*. Habakkuk's name means "to embrace." As we study the Book of Habakkuk, we begin to get a picture of what God is calling the prophet to accept, and then to *embrace*, as the will of God for His people.

The Book of Habakkuk describes Habakkuk's struggle to understand God's methods of dealing with sin. He begins by crying out to God in frustration at God's seeming silence and tolerance of the injustice in the land of Judah where God's chosen people lived. The righteous were overwhelmed by the wickedness around them. It seemed to Habakkuk that God was oblivious to their plight.

"Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth" (Habakkuk 1:4). That is, the law was without power, and no justice was given in the courts of the land.

This prophecy came shortly before Judah was taken into captivity in Babylon. Habakkuk told the people that God was going to bring about the invasion of the Chaldeans "in your days," during the lifetime of his audience (Habakkuk 1:5). The people of Judah found this impossible to believe for several reasons. It seemed absurd that the Chaldean army would take them into captivity and deport them to Babylon, the Chaldean's capital city. At that time Egypt and Assyria were the world powers, not Babylon. The Chaldeans could not enter the land of Judah directly because the great Syrian Desert lay between Judah and Babylon. It was nearly impossible for an army to cross the Syrian Desert and survive, let alone be prepared for battle on the other side. To attack Judah, the Chaldeans would have to march north, through the land of Assyria, and follow the Fertile Crescent. They would then approach the land of Judah from the north, taking the path of a large inverted "U." The people of Judah would not believe Habakkuk's prophecy, because at that time Assyria stood in Babylon's way. Assyria was more powerful than Babylon, and had Egypt as an ally.

Jeremiah also prophesied (most likely after Habakkuk), identifying Carchemish as the city where Egypt and Assyria would be defeated by the advancing Babylonian armies (Jeremiah 46). This came to pass a few years later. As the Egyptians marched north against the Chaldeans, they passed through Judah. King Josiah (of Judah) went out to battle against Pharaoh Necho and was killed on the battlefield in the valley of Megiddo. Judah lost its last righteous king. The Egyptians marched on with the Assyrians to suffer defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, captain of the Babylonian army.

Many might have wondered why God had seemingly deserted His people and allowed Egypt to defeat Judah. God's plan was that the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho would move north and be defeated by the Babylonians. In this way, Habakkuk's incredible prophecy would be fulfilled. This would pave the way for the Babylonians to attack Judah. In the lifetime of Habakkuk's audience, God

completely shifted world powers in order to fulfill His Word. We can learn from the death of Josiah that God is still in control and fulfilling His Word even when His people experience tragedies.

Habakkuk most likely prophesied during the reign of King Manasseh, because the prophecy took place when the wicked were in power, before the reign of Josiah. This was before it was even reasonable to expect Babylon to become a world power. Yet it was near enough to the time of captivity that some of those in the audience would live to see the fulfillment of Habakkuk's prophecy. Second Chronicles 33:10 and 2 Kings 21:10-12 indicate that God spoke during Manasseh's reign against the sins of the times through prophets, who were saying things so incredible that both ears of anyone listening would tingle. One of these prophets was most likely Habakkuk.

Why was God about to bring judgment upon Judah by the relatively obscure Chaldeans? Some of the sins of King Manasseh are recorded in 2 Kings 21. He promoted idol worship, even in the Temple, and polluted the true worship of the Lord. He worshipped different gods and observed their religious practices, as well as delved into the occult and astrology. King Manasseh introduced abominations even worse than those of the Canaanites whom Israel had driven out of the land. He shed innocent blood, even killing children. He protected and promoted the homosexual lifestyle, both by civil rights and by inclusion in worship in the Temple. Later, Josiah's reforms involved destroying the houses of the Sodomites (homosexuals) near the Temple where the lesbians wove hangings for the wooden image of a Phoenician goddess that was placed in the Temple (2 Kings 23:7). We learn more details of Manasseh's pollutions from the account of Josiah's reforms than from the sins listed during the reign of Manasseh (2 Kings 22, 23).

Habakkuk lived in a time of pluralistic pagan worship, suppression of the one true faith, violence in society, shedding of the innocent blood of babies, apostasy among God's people, immorality, homosexuality, occult worship, astrology, and **unbelief** that the Word of God was relevant and credible.

The question for the reader to ponder is this: Can we identify with Habakkuk when we look around and see the sins of our time? Are we frustrated, like Habakkuk, when it appears that God is not doing anything to restrain evil? If so, then Habakkuk's message may contain special relevance for us today.

When God revealed to Habakkuk the extent of His judgment upon sin, the severity of the judgment overwhelmed the prophet. The statement, **"the just shall live by his faith"** (Habakkuk 2:4), summarizes God's response to Habakkuk's concerns. This phrase is quoted three times in the New Testament as a foundational principle of the Christian life (Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38). By this, we know that Habakkuk's message is always relevant to the Christian! We will look at this key phrase in a three-part outline, emphasizing first "the just," then "shall live," and finally, "by his faith."

1. THE JUST shall live by his faith

"The just" in both the Old and New Testaments refers to those who stand in a right relationship with God. The just have accepted God's view of righteousness and sin, and have embraced His way of redemption. They believe in the natural depravity of the human heart, moral absolutes of right

and wrong, and salvation through faith in Christ alone. The Old Testament saints looked *forward* to Christ as their Redeemer, while the New Testament saints look *back* to Christ's work of redemption. Therefore, Christ is always the object of true faith. Being justified by faith, the saints find peace with God.

The just have an awakened conscience that sees righteousness and sin in a new light. Their hearts begin to grieve over the things that grieve the heart of God. Though they have godly hearts, they do not always know or understand the will or purposes of God when He does not visibly restrain or punish sin. They ask, "Why does God allow evil to seemingly triumph over the righteous?" This was also the dilemma of Asaph as recorded in Psalm 73. God's response to Habakkuk was that He would judge the evil both swiftly and unexpectedly. This has been God's pattern throughout Scripture.

*"How are they brought into desolation, as in a **moment**!" (Psalm 73:19).*

*"He that being often reproved [and] hardeneth his neck, shall **suddenly** be destroyed, and that without remedy" (Proverbs 29:1).*

*"For when they shall say peace and safety; then **sudden** destruction cometh upon them . . ." (1 Thessalonians 5:3).*

God gives sinning people the warning of His Word. When they do not believe it or repent, then in accordance with His own will and timing, He sends swift and unexpected judgment. When judgment did come upon Judah, it came as quickly as the Chaldeans' thundering horsemen.

As Habakkuk saw this vision of impending destruction, he asked God why He would punish the land using a people even more wicked than Judah (Habakkuk 1:13). The Chaldeans, he said, would not recognize this as God's judgment, but rather ascribe it to the greater power of their own gods over Jehovah (Habakkuk 1:11).

Habakkuk had some further questions. Would the Chaldeans destroy all the righteous along with the wicked? Why does God not destroy the wicked before they bring down God's judgment upon the whole land? Why does God seemingly do nothing to stop sin, and then pour out His wrath in severe judgment upon it?

Only those who are justified by faith can be at peace with God during times of calamity when these questions come to mind.

2. The Just SHALL LIVE by his faith

Habakkuk could have feared that the righteous seed would be destroyed along with the wicked. Instead, he proclaims in faith: "We shall not die" (Habakkuk 1:12).

God also affirms to Habakkuk that the just *shall live*. The righteous may suffer calamity when God's judgment falls upon the surrounding wicked. Some of the just may exchange their time for eternity. But the righteous seed will never be destroyed from the earth. God's promise to His people is that they will live—and live by faith. The same hand that judges the wicked will purify, sustain, and strengthen the righteous that live through these times. God's covenant is with His people eternally. *"I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).*

God controls the nations of this world in order that He might accomplish His divine purposes for His people. God used the Chaldeans to accomplish His eternal purposes for Israel. After God's purposes were completed, the Chaldeans were also brought into judgment for their own sin.

Sometimes it is difficult to see the purposes of God within the space of our short lives. We need to understand that God's purposes operate from the context of eternity. They will be fulfilled according to His timing (Habakkuk 2:3). God asks us to live in patient faith through the hard times. Rest assured that His eternal purposes are being fulfilled in our lives and the lives of His people.

God uses the hard times to separate those who are self-confident in their human ability from those who live by faith in divine sovereignty (Habakkuk 2:4). Instead of being self-confident, the just are broken before God and keep their confidence in Him.

When God pronounces *judgment* upon the wicked, He also promises *life* to the faithful. We can see the judgment of God coming upon us for the sin of our times, as those sins are similar to what Habakkuk saw in his day. God's message to Habakkuk is being repeated to us in the Church Age, so that each day we would learn to *live* by faith. God takes us through hard times, for in those times we learn that we have no other way of living, except by faith.

3. The Just shall live by HIS FAITH

Those who live by faith are those who have experienced a *personal* work of justification in their hearts. They were brought into a right and saving relationship with God by their *personal* faith. They *personally* know what it means to pass from death to life by faith.

The just can only live by *his* faith, not by another's faith. Habakkuk could not face the future with confidence in God based on Abraham's faith. Rather, he needed a *personal* faith by which to live. We can only be justified by personal faith—"thy faith hath saved thee, go in peace" (Luke 7:50). We can only "live" by a personal faith; the just shall live by *his* faith.

Faith is the vital breath of the Christian's life on earth. It is through faith that God pours His grace and love into our lives. Faith is the human choice to believe in God's unconditional love for us even while He judges sin around us and in us. It is reaching out our hands to God for Him to lead us through the hard times, believing that even in our greatest trials, His love for us is strong and unwavering. Faith believes that God desires relationship with us and is willing to show Himself strong on our behalf when we are weak.

We briefly note a number of things Habakkuk mentioned in chapter 2 that characterize *faithless* people in troubled times (directed to both Babylon and Judah): strong drink, hoarding possessions, cheating for gain, personal protection strongholds, nakedness, violence, and false religions. In contrast, a marked characteristic of the saint is maintaining a close relationship with God through the prayers of faith. Habakkuk saw this vision while in dialogue with God (a form of prayer). Upon seeing the future calamity of his people, he specifically prayed in faith with relation to the prophetic vision.

4. The Transition to Triumphant Faith

Habakkuk 3 is the prophet's prayer of faith. This prayer concludes the Book of Habakkuk. Let us notice some elements of this prayer as Habakkuk prepared his heart for the hard times he saw coming to his nation.

Habakkuk opened his prayer by confessing his human fear of the coming events (Habakkuk 3:2). Yet he did not charge God with injustice even though he struggled to understand the purposes of God.

He prayed that God would send a revival to the people "in the *midst* of the years" (or, as the years approach), before judgment would fall (Habakkuk 3:2). It is always God's will to work through a faithful remnant that is standing for truth in the *midst* of the apostasy around them. The prophet knew that judgment could not be held back for the national sins, so he prayed for revival—that God would perform His work among his people before the land went into captivity. This prayer was answered in a powerful way. Not only was there a revival among the faithful, but a national revival took place during the reign of King Josiah such as was not seen before in Israel (2 Kings 23:21-25).

The prophet asked that God would mingle His *wrath* upon sin with *mercy* for His people (Habakkuk 3:2). This was a plea that God would preserve His faithful people while judging sin.

He recounted the *history* of the redemption of Israel, and thus strengthened his own faith for the *future* (Habakkuk 3:3-15). In this account, he acknowledged the sovereignty of God in all the events, and that His divine purposes are fulfilled in each one.

Habakkuk acknowledged that the entire history of Israel revolved around God's plan of salvation for His people (Habakkuk 3:13). Because of this, he could believe that future calamity would also bring the fulfillment of the plan of salvation, specifically through the coming Anointed One. Here Habakkuk linked the coming captivity of Israel to the coming of Christ and the Church Age where the plan of salvation would go into the entire world. The Jewish captivity in the East fulfilled this prayer by spreading the Jewish prophecies of the coming world Redeemer throughout the pagan eastern world. As a result, wise men came from the East to bring their gifts and worship the Messiah.

Habakkuk confessed his fears about being strong enough to rest in God in the day of trouble (Habakkuk 3:16). This correlates to the New Testament principle of examining ourselves to see whether we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5).

In Habakkuk 3:17-19, the prophet saw economic hardship coming, but by faith made a commitment to rejoice in poverty and praise God for salvation. By faith, Habakkuk determined to rise above the surrounding circumstances like a deer that escapes its predators by climbing on high crags of rock. He saw God's people not only escaping total destruction, but also coming through victoriously.

He expected this prayer to be sung as a hymn, not only privately, but also by the chief singer or chorister in public corporate worship (Habakkuk 3:19). The assembly of the saints was to speak to one another and strengthen one another by singing this hymn of faith. When the *prayer of faith* becomes a triumphant *song of faith*, it speaks faith into the hearts of other worshippers.

The central theme of the Book of Habakkuk is *living by faith*. It points forward to the Church Age and the New Covenant. As we look back at the life of Habakkuk, we can identify with his life by seeing similarities with our times and find strength for the future.

Let us briefly review again the elements of this book, and make it both our *prayer* and *song* in the times that are ahead of us. Habakkuk is a picture of a man of God who was struggling with human emotions of *frustration* at God for allowing evil to dominate a formerly righteous nation. Then he expressed *fear* of the future judgment against the national sins. However, he determined to *accept God's will and live by faith* through the circumstances God would send in punishment for national apostasy. He asked God to revive His work among the people. He extolled God's spiritual bounty in the face of poverty. He recognized that God's purposes in world events center on the plan of salvation through the Anointed One, Jesus Christ.

In the closing verses, we see the transformation of an earnest *prayer* of faith into the soaring triumph of a *song* of faith. The transition from the private prayer to the corporate song also speaks of the need for the just to live ***together*** by faith. Ultimately, Habakkuk sees God's people coming through the future hard times *together* and *victoriously by faith!*

-Paul Shirk

BIBLE HELPS

Robert Lehigh, Editor

PO Box 391

Hanover, PA 17331

United States of America