

Habakkuk Study 1: 'Why God?'

Glory International by Ps. Paul Kim

It is a short book – Only 3 chapters. So, it is called a *minor prophet*. But the message is not minor: (a) *'Just shall live by faith.'* (2:4 c.f. Rom 1:17); (b) *'For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as waters cover the sea.'* (2:14); *'In wrath, remember mercy.'* (3:3); *'Through the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit on the vines... Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.'* (3:17-18)

Name: *Habakkuk means in Hebrew 'habaq' – 'to fold the hands'; 'to embrace'; 'to hug'; or 'to cling.'* 'He embraced the problem of divine justice in the world.' (Jerome) Or 'one who embraced and wrestled with God until he got the answer.' What was his job? Nobody knows. Very little is known about Habakkuk as NT writers throw no further light on the man. [Apocryphal Daniel (LXX) mentions Habakkuk as the son of Jeshua, Levi, who delivered food to Daniel in the den. According to rabbinic sources, Habakkuk was the son of a Shunammite woman raised by Elisha. Who knows?] *He is one of God's nobodies who took hold of God and God's message for generations to come! 'Just shall live by faith.'* (Rom 1:17)

Uniqueness: A prophet is someone who has heard a message from God. (a) Habakkuk carried a deep 'burden' (Heb. 'massa') in his heart (1:1), which caused him to press into God for an answer; (b) Habakkuk's message was the result of his personal 'exchange with God', rather than speaking God's direct message to the people. *Other prophets were God's voice to the people, but Habakkuk was the people's mouthpiece to God;* (c) Habakkuk delivered His message by writing the message in big letters on a signboard so that the passers-by could read it. *'Chaldeans are coming!'* Then he composed his prophetic vision in a song; (d) Habakkuk clung to God in *'interrogative prayer'* until he got the answer from God. The book shows not so much *how the prophet got hold of the message, but how God took hold of the prophet.*

Outline of the Book

1. **Complaining prayer (1:2-2:20)** [Habakkuk is impatient, asking for justice]
 - (a) God is doing too little (1:2-11)

Q: 'Why don't bad people suffer?' A: Bad people will suffer through Babylonians.
 - (b) God is doing too much (1:12-2:20)

Q: Why use the worse people to punish the bad? Why do good people suffer? A: Good people will survive. The worse people will suffer.
2. **Composed Praise (3:1-19)** [Habakkuk is patient, asking for mercy]
 - (a) Trembles at God's past action (3:1-16)
 - (b) Trusts in God's future protection (3:17-19)

Time: We can work out when this prophet prophesied. Approximately around 600 BC (+/- 10) – i.e. *contemporary of Nahum, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah.* (~20 years after Zephaniah). As far as we know there is no known contact between them. *Prophets are lonely people.*

Background: *What was happening in 600 BC?* Internationally the world was divided into two superpowers for a long time – i.e. Egypt (West) and Assyria (East). They had been in a tremendous power struggle between them which is now settling down as a new superpower is emerging in the east – i.e. Babylon (612 BC). [It is like a struggle between Western capitalism and Eastern communism, and how 3rd power is rising in the Middle East – i.e. Islam.] Nationally, Josiah (640-609 BC) was a good king who rediscovered the book of the law and reformed Judah with political power. However, when Josiah was killed in the battle of Megiddo (609 BC) the reform collapsed (2 Kings 23:28-30). Now the throne is filled by Jehoiakim (609-598 BC) who was only concerned with his status. He increased taxes and built a bigger palace for himself (2 King 23:35-37). An age of materialism set in – more pleasure, more comfort, etc. As material blessing rose the moral decline accelerated to the point the 'law and order' broke down. Now crime pays. The gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider as landless people increases, and violence ('Hamas' was filling the streets. Assyrians who have taken away the 10 tribes in the north (722 BC) have been in decline for some time. There is a power vacuum and Assyrians cannot discipline Judah as they did to Israel. Apparently, God was doing nothing about this at all as the same pattern preceding destruction is repeated in Judah. How can this be? *Is this even the city of God? It is unrecognisable from the days of Josiah!* The violence (x6), the bribery, the corruption, the deceit, the fear, etc. Whenever people forget God, violence takes over that city. It is God's presence (fear of God) that restrains such vices in any society. The violence goes hand in hand with sexual sins – both abuse the other party. In this situation, Habakkuk cried out, 'How long?' (1:2) God's own reputation is at stake as the last tribe of Israel is about to get snuffed out!

Habakkuk's Complaints (1:1-4): (a) God does not answer prayer (1:2); (b) God tolerates evil to the point evil is winning and righteous are oppressed (1:4); (c) You opened my eyes to see too much evil, but I cannot hear an answer to get some relief (1:3). Does it reflect our heart? *Habakkuk was complaining to God for up to 20 years.* Habakkuk wanted God to restrain evil in society, clean up the corruption & the violence on the streets, and restore the law and order in Judah – i.e. *'God revive our dying society.'* Habakkuk felt deeply, so he cried out, not to the people, but to God. If there is one virtue, Habakkuk was honest with God. He dared to argue with God. *'How long? How come? Why me?'* – i.e. Here is an angry & frustrated man crying out to God for an answer! This is how his prophetic ministry was born. Habakkuk persisted in *'interrogatory prayer'* until he got a reply from God. An *'intercessory prayer'* pleads for results (mercy). C.f. Luke 18:1-8 – *'Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?'*

God's Reply (1:5-1:6a): (a) Open your eyes and look wider. Habakkuk complained that God opened his eyes to see too much evil, but God said, *'Your problem is tunnel vision!' – 'Look among the nations and watch.'* (1:5a); (b) You are in for a very big surprise – *'Be utterly astounded!'* (1:5b); (c) I have planned something in your lifetime – *'For I will work a work in your days.'* (1:5c); (d) I haven't told you what I am doing, because you wouldn't believe it – *'Which you would not believe, though it were told you.'* (1:5d) Destruction on Judah will come suddenly and quickly (586 BC); (e) I have already begun to do something, and you have missed it – *'For Indeed, I am raising up the Chaldeans (Semites, Abraham's origin & modern Iraq. Gen 22:22), a bitter and hasty nation.'* (1:6a) C.f. Acts 13:41 – *Paul quotes this verse about taking the gospel to the nations as Israel comes under judgment for rejecting the gospel.*

'I am raising up Babylonians to deal with Judah.' – Babylon was a small city near the Tigris River. When Hezekiah was sick, two Babylonian soldiers came with a get-well card. Hezekiah was so pleased that he showed all the treasures of the temple. Isaiah came to the palace the next day and told Hezekiah, *'Babylon will take away everything you have shown these two men from your palace and the temple of the Lord.'* Babylon is now growing in power in the Middle East already earning a reputation of being ruthless and cruel. This is what God is doing! *'All you can see is what is happening in Jerusalem, but open your eyes, I will bring Babylonians to bring justice to Judah and deal with their violence, immorality, and corruption.'* It was a shocking answer! What seemed like a light at the end of the tunnel was an express train coming at you at full speed. This was too much to swallow. Habakkuk begins to argue with God. *'You are doing way too much.'* So, Habakkuk stood on the rampart to hear from God – see if God will really send Babylonians.

What Babylonians are like (1:6b-11):

1. *Babylonian Pride:* (a) bitter & hasty (1:6); (b) marches into the lands to take over the dwelling places that are not theirs (1:6); (c) cruel, dreadful, and proud people – the embodiment of pride (1:7)
2. *Babylonian Military Might:* (a) horses are swift, fierce, & deadly as leopards, wolves & eagles (1:8)
3. *Babylonian Diplomacy:* (a) policy is for violence (1:9); (b) irresistible as the east wind that scorches vegetation & causes shipwreck (1:9; c.f. Ps 48:7); (c) vast captives after military conquest (1:9); (d) they scoff at kings and princes (1:10); (e) build mounds to seize it (c.f. Tyre); (f) impetuous & moody (1:11)
4. *Babylonian Religion:* thorough pagan idolatry! *'...Ascribing this power to his god.'* (1:11)

Habakkuk says that is too much! Assyrians were cruel people who practiced impalement – i.e. Pushing a man through a spike between his legs. That was nothing for Babylonians who practiced total warfare of 'Scorched Earth Policy' – i.e. killing all the living things including animals and plants, forests and trees. P.O.W. would get captured, deported, eyes gauged out, and executed (C.f. Zedekiah. 2 Kings 24:7). They removed every trace of life from the earth. There was nothing living left after the Babylonians had swept through. This is the meaning of the word, *'Though the fig tree does not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines...no food...no flock...no herd... nothing left of the people, yet I will rejoice in God.'*

Questions:

1. How deeply troubled are you as you see the trends in our society on a global and local level? Have you felt like Habakkuk, *'Why are you doing nothing?' 'Why aren't you listening to our prayers?' 'Why did you open my eyes to see such evil?'*
2. Do you have earnest prayer in your life that has gone unanswered? What is God saying to us?
3. Do you think there is something that God is doing in our day that may be so shocking that we might find it difficult to accept? If so, what would that be? (C.f. Acts 13:41)