

## Habakkuk 1:1-11

The prophet Habakkuk belongs to the period prior to the fall of Jerusalem (587BC). King Josiah was killed in battle in 609BC and from that time the nation of Judah were in steady decline. This is the context for Habakkuk's ministry. The prophecy though is unusual. The prophet is never heard to speak to the people. His book is a record of his encounter with God.

God's ways are often mysterious.

In the first four verses Habakkuk lays out his 'complaint' to God. The issues are violence, injustice, strife and conflict. Justice never prevails rather it's perverted. In short, crime pays and no one can lay a finger on the lawless. These are situations over which the prophet has prayed. But the silence is deafening. *How long Lord must I call for help but you do not listen? Or cry out to you 'Violence' but you do not save?*

But the silence is broken at v5. God is about to act but not in the way Habakkuk would have expected. The Lord is about to send the ruthless Babylonians to invade the country. If God's silence is mysterious this development is even harder to understand.

God's sovereignty is not in question.

The emergence of the Babylonians onto the world stage (they defeated the Assyrians, the previous super-power at the battle of Carchemish in 605BC) is not the result of superior military strategy or weaponry. This is God's doing. *I am raising up the Babylonians... (6)*. And God is under no illusions about these people. He has not switched his affections. They are...*guilty people, whose own strength is there god. (11)*

Two lessons:

- "It is a fundamental principle in the life of faith that we must always be prepared for the unexpected when we are dealing with God" (Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

John Newton wrote a poem describing a similar experience to Habakkuk. He felt he wanted something better in his spiritual life and asked God for a deeper knowledge of himself. Instead he had an experience in which for months God seemed to abandon him to Satan. He was tempted and tried beyond his comprehension. Yet he came to see this was God's way of answering his prayer. He emerged with a new dependence on God.

- True faith hangs on and perseveres with God in the silence and the confusion.

Habakkuk may be mystified by God's silence but he refuses to give up and walk away. As we will see in chapter 2 he positions himself to engage with God over this matter. (2:1)

## Habakkuk 1:12-2:1

It is reassuring, when we open the Bible, to find that godly people in the past have struggled with the same sort of questions that trouble us. We are listening in as a prophet contemplates a future that raises huge questions about God's character and purposes. Habakkuk has been informed the Babylonians are poised to invade Israel. Imagine the questions going through his mind. Is God unable to prevent this? Does God not care about evil? Has he rejected Israel once and for all? When trouble 'calls' on our lives these are the questions it raises.

Habakkuk begins by restating what he knows to be true of God. He is '*from everlasting...he will never die*' (12) Whatever lies behind these events it's not God's inability. The Lord is sovereign and remains firmly in control of all that goes on. *You Lord have appointed them to execute judgment; you My Rock have ordained them to punish* (12)

From God's eternal nature Habakkuk turns to his holy character. *Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing (13)*. God can't look on evil complacently. Politicians tip toe around human rights issues in certain regimes because they know there is nothing they can do about them. Not so the Lord. He never shrugs his shoulders over evil. And Babylon is an evil nation. They are pictured like a factory trawler dredging the seas of their fish stocks and worshipping their skilful system that allows them to exploit weaker nations and enjoy a life of luxury. (14-17) So how can a holy God allow this evil nation to destroy a people less wicked than itself?

Sometimes this will be how things seem in the life of faith. Habakkuk helps us to see that however this dilemma is resolved it won't be by limiting God's power or questioning his holiness. The first verse of chapter 2 pictures the prophet taking himself out the situation, looking to God and waiting for him to answer his question. Ours is the day of the 'instant'. The Bible invites us to slow down, to find some space and to wait on God.

- Habakkuk suggests an approach to our painful questions that begins by restating what we know of God's character. What characteristics would you highlight?
- It's easy to regard God's holiness as a forbidding feature of his nature. How does knowing that the Lord is '*My God, my Holy One (12)*' help here?
- Is there any sense in which we need to '*stand at my watch....I will look and see what he will say to me*'

## **Habakkuk 2:2-20**

Chapter 2 comprises God's answer to Habakkuk's complaint. The prophet is given a message that is to be shared with his people and that will sustain them through the difficult days ahead. (2,3)

The Babylon Way.

Babylon's success is based on its might. He has plundered many nations and *set his nest on high. (9)* It has behaved ruthlessly, destroying animals and shedding human blood. Babylon's security is in its military power and his geographical position. In our secular age these are the things that we are tempted to look to for comfort and hope.

God's way.

But here is the alternative. *But the righteous person will live by his faithfulness / faith. (4)* To live by faith is to trust God's promises and live under his rule. The way of faith is set out in v2,3. Faith centres on revelation (what God's word discloses) rather than reason (what I can discover for my self). It concerns itself with ultimate things. *It speaks of the end (3)*. Faith meets the message with trust and looks to God to do what he has promised.

The Babylon destination.

V4 describes this people as '*puffed up*'. This nation has something of the unreality of a drunk man about it. *wine betrays him (5)*. Their military successes and huge wealth (6) will turn out to be their downfall. *You will be filled with shame instead of glory*. They who have dished out humiliation and exploitation will now find it's their turn. *Now it's your turn! Drink and let your nakedness be exposed! (16)*

The Lord's conclusion.

*14 The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

This is the OT way of saying every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus

Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2: 10,11) There is much that we don't know about the process of arriving at this destination but its reality is not in doubt.

The chapter ends with the statement: *The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him. (20)* Not only must the nations be silent but Christians too must be quiet. Faith invites us to still our querying and complaining about God's goodness and holiness. We who live this side of the cross have been given sufficient evidence to know that God really is for us and he is working all things together for those who love him.

- Are we inclined to pursue the way of reason or the way of faith?
- Take a moment to consider what it would be like to live in a world 'filled with the knowledge of the glory of God' See Rev 21:2-4
- Despite the impending upheaval facing Israel God invites Habakkuk to be aware of his presence and rule and to respond in silence. *The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him. (20)* Is there a lesson here for us in our lesser struggles?

### **Habakkuk 3: 1-7**

The problem at the heart of this book is God's mysterious way. Habakkuk has prayed over the injustice and corruption of his own nation but has been met by silence. And when God does speak it is to inform him of imminent invasion. "Why does God allow such things", is the obvious question. And we will have our own difficulties with God's ways. Why are ungodly people so successful? Why doesn't God intervene? Why doesn't God revive his church?

*...the righteous shall live by his faith (2:4)*

In chapter 3 Habakkuk shows us what it means to live by faith. This is not faith in faith. The prophet is not looking to his own internal resolve to tough this situation out. He is looking to God.

God reveals himself by his actions. In v3-7 Habakkuk deliberately brings to mind God's 'track record'. The images are taken from the time of the Exodus. Mount Paran is in the vicinity of Sinai and the place from which the spies were sent out to survey the land of Canaan. V5 recalls the ten plagues. V6 God's descent on Mt Sinai. Rahab's testimony (Joshua 2:9-11) of the fear that had fallen on the Canaanite nations bears out the words of v7.

Habakkuk has moved from a position of complaint and confusion at God's ways to one of faith. It is marked by a spirit of humility. *Lord I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord.* There is no longer any arguing with God or questioning his ways. He does not even protest at what God has told him. Instead he worships God as one who is completely trustworthy. His past deeds show him to be utterly faithful. It prompts him to pray, *'in wrath remember mercy' (2)*

Habakkuk's attention has shifted from the plight of his own people. Even the terrifying Babylonians have been excluded from the picture. He allows the Lord and his ways to fill his mind. This is what it looks like to live by faith.

- What deeds of God come to mind when we reflect like Habakkuk?
- What tends to preoccupy our minds, the problems we see around us or the character and ability of God?
- Are we learning to pray like this man?

### Habakkuk 3:8-19

Remembering is a key component of our faith and this section of the prophecy recalls past events when God intervened on behalf of his people.

V8-10 *Were you angry with the rivers Lord?*

God can make nature a potent force. The victory of Deborah and Barak over Sisera (Judges 4,5) owed something to the River Kishon. *From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The River Kishon swept them away, the age old river, the River Kishon. March on my soul; be strong!*

V11,12 *Sun and moon stood still in the heavens....*

God commands the natural order for the sake of his people. Habakkuk is likely recalling the victory of Joshua over the five Amorite kings at Gibeon. The orbits of the sun and the moon are answerable to Habakkuk's God.

V13-15 *You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness.*

These verses recall the Egyptian army bearing down on defenceless Israel. They failed to reckon with the presence of the Lord Almighty who had come out to deliver his people. The message is clear, if God determines to save no power on earth can thwart that plan.

Habakkuk still trembles at the prospect of invasion but there is a new steadiness. Note the language he uses to describe himself: *my heart pounded....my lips quivered... my legs trembled.* But this is accompanied by something else. *I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.* And this goes beyond quiet resolve. The prophet considers the possibility that all sources of sustenance will be removed (17) but ends with a powerful testimony of trust in God. (18) *yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.*

We are not to think that Habakkuk is simply a man of extraordinary faith. He tells us in the final verse where his help comes from: *The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer. (19)* And all these years later this remains true.

- The prophet moves from questioning and doubting to quiet trust. In the Bible God reveals his ability and competence. Pray that as we read it our faith would be enriched.
- Habakkuk helps us to have right expectations. Trusting God doesn't mean we won't face distress and anxiety. He encourages though to realize we can wait patiently for God to act.
- The prophet's confidence is not in the availability of supplies or the ability to trade. We are tempted to place our trust in human agency. He would direct us elsewhere: *Some trust in chariots and some in horses but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. (Psalm 20:7)*